



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on June 11, 2010

The Pledge in Spanish Sparks Controversy

A school principal in Wrightstown, Wisconsin, has defended on constitutional grounds the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance in Spanish at the school. Responding to a letter of protest from the mother of a kindergarten student, Principal Lee Mierow of Wrightstown Elementary School said he wanted to ensure that Spanish-speaking students understood the importance of the Pledge. But he also seemed to suggest students have a constitutionally guaranteed right to recite the pledge in the language of their choice while participating in the ritual at school.



"It is my responsibility as a principal in a public school to give every student the opportunity to learn and grow as a student, no matter what their race or religion," Mierow wrote. While commending the mother for her patriotism, the principal said "the Constitution guarantees the fundamental rights and civil liberties of every person in this country."

The issue arose after the woman attended a school event in which students were invited to recite the pledge in either English or Spanish. She then contacted Fox News radio affiliate WTAQ in Green Bay. She also shared the text of the letter she wrote to the principal.

"Not only does reciting this in Spanish insult our family as American citizens, it is disrespectful to the veterans who have defended our country," she wrote. "English is the primary language in this country. The Pledge of Allegiance was written in English and should be recited in English. No similar accommodations were made for other immigrant patterns in history nor should they be as long as the American flag is flying."

The controversy got the attention of USA English, a Washington, D.C.-based organization whose goal is making English the official language of the United States. The group's CEO, Maurice E. Mujica, issued a statement calling on the school to recognize the importance of a common language.

"For generations, immigrants have migrated to Wisconsin," he wrote. "Over the years, these immigrants have contributed to the unique and vibrant culture of the state as they search for their version of the American dream. Many still read German language newspapers or listen to Spanish language radio, but they never forget that they are in the United States and the importance of learning and speaking English.

"Administrators in Wrightstown owe it to their students, especially those whom English is not their first language, to instill in them the value of speaking and understanding our common language. That includes reciting the Pledge of Allegiance in English," Mujica wrote.

Spanish recitation of the Pledge has been an issue of contention elsewhere in the state, as well as other parts of the country. Two years ago, Dr. Norman Fjelstad, the Superintendent of Schools in Edgerton, Wisconsin, said he'd received threatening phone calls over the practice of having the Pledge read in



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Spanish over the intercom once a year at Edgerton High School. He was also confronted by people over the practice wherever he went, he told *The Progressive* magazine at the time. Fjelstad said his father could not speak English until the third grade and recited the Pledge in Norwegian. The Wisconsin Constitution, he said, "was written in three languages: English, German, and Norwegian. The reason it was written in three languages is because it's important that people understand the words." President George W. Bush, he recalled, had the National Anthem sung in Spanish at his inauguration in 2001. "Government should never mandate that the Pledge or the National Anthem be said in one language," the Superintendent said.

But language isn't the only point of controversy surrounding flag ceremonies. It can even be an issue of what flag is saluted. In 2006, the principal of Velasco Elementary School in Clute, Texas found himself in hot water after instructing students to stand during a recitation of a pledge to the flag of Mexico.

"We absolutely refuse to stand up and pledge allegiance to another country's flag," a mother of one of the students said on radio talk show. "Where is the sensitivity to the country and to the troops and the men and women that have fought and died for this country?" The incident took place during a school assembly on Sept. 16th, a day on which Mexico celebrates its independence from Spain. It was also part of Hispanic Heritage Month and a school district spokesman described the assembly as a cultural education activity in a district that values diversity.

But school Principal Sam Williams described the reaction as "overwhelming" and issued an apology. "It's been a real trying ordeal and all I can say is I deeply apologize if anyone was offended by it — and I can see that they are," said Williams. "There's no way that we would repeat it," he said.

The Pledge of Allegiance has become embroiled in political and legal controversies a number of times since the 1940s, when a number Jehovah's Witness families, whose religion forbids flag salutes, challenged the constitutionality of a state Board of Education resolution in West Virginia requiring all teachers and students in public schools to salute the flag. Students who had refused to salute and recite the Pledge were expelled and state officials threatened to send them to reformatories and to have their parents prosecuted for their children's delinquency. In 1943, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *West Virginia Board of Education v. Barnette* that the state was violating the students' freedom of both religion and speech under the First and Fourteenth Amendment.

The flag and the Pledge became an issue in the 1988 presidential campaign after Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis, the Democratic nominee, had vetoed a bill requiring the recitation of the pledge by students and teachers in the Bay State. Dukakis claimed he was following the court's ruling in the West Virginia case, but the veto helped Republicans' campaign against Dukakis as a "card-carrying member of the American Civil Liberties Union."

In the 2002, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco, famous for its liberal rulings, held that the words "under God," added to the Pledge by Congress in 1954, constituted an endorsement of religion in violation of the establishment clause of the First Amendment. In 2010, the same court revisited the issue, however, and found the phrase to be "a recognition of our founders' political philosophy that a power greater than the government gives the people their inalienable rights." The Pledge is "an endorsement of our form of government, not of religion or any particular sect," the court said in a 2-1 decision.

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