

Pa. school district takes street preacher to court

by [Matt Miller](#)

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HARRISBURG, Pa. (RNS) Should a street preacher be banned from approaching students at a bus stop?

Dauphin County, Pa., Judge Jeannine Turgeon is weighing that question regarding Stephen Garisto, who says he has a constitutional right to evangelize to the students.

Turgeon didn't make a final ruling after a hearing Thursday (Jan. 13) on a school district's plea for a permanent injunction to keep Garisto away from the children.

Yet she did tell Garisto that while his intentions might be pure, his actions eerily mimic those commonly associated with pedophiles and child abductors.

"Mr. Garisto, you're not Mr. Rogers," Turgeon said, invoking the children's television icon. "In our culture we tell children, 'Do not talk to strangers.'"

For the time being, she continued a temporary injunction requiring Garisto to stay away from the bus stop near his home in Penbrook, Pa.

Garisto was in court because school district officials and parents are concerned about his interactions with the middle and high schoolers who board buses near his home.

The district moved the bus stop in response to parent concerns, but officials claim Garisto still approached children several times.

In 2004, county Judge Scott A. Evans fined Garisto \$50 after finding him guilty of disorderly conduct for protesting at the prior year's PrideFest, Harrisburg's annual gay and lesbian festival.

Bus driver Carol Mihailoff reported repeated incidents with Garisto, including one in October when he approached some girls as they got off the bus.

"My concern is that the children need to get home and be safe, because I have no idea what (Garisto) has up his sleeve," Mihailoff testified.

Garisto said his only intent is to preach God's word.

When he took the witness stand, he asked to be sworn in on a Bible. None was available in the courtroom, so he provided his own.

"Being a street preacher and evangelist ... that is something that is common for me to do," he said. "I have been ministering to children since the '80s."

Questioned by Engle, he said he gave tracts to "unsaved children" without asking their parents' permission. "My intention is to get them

saved and to get them disciplined," Garisto said.

Engle conceded Garisto has a right to preach publicly, but argued that a bus stop isn't an appropriate pulpit. "These are kids. They don't have the wherewithal to say to Mr. Garisto, 'I don't want a Bible tract,'" Engle said.

"What he have here is a man who wants to be a good neighbor," countered Garisto's lawyer, Henry Sollenberger. "He wants to share his faith with those around him."