



**PRESS RELEASE from the  
LIBERTY JUSTICE CENTER**

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## **High school principal sues after being suspended for talking to students about free speech and tolerance**

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (Feb. 25, 2021) — A Memphis-area high school principal is suing his school district after he was placed on administrative leave for speaking with his students about the importance of free speech. The principal has retained legal counsel from the Liberty Justice Center, a national public interest law firm that defends constitutional rights.

Principal Barton Thorne was suspended in mid-January by administrators for Shelby County Schools, the school district that governs Cordova High School. District officials have refused to answer questions from Thorne or his attorneys about when he will be allowed to return to school, or why he is being punished for speaking about the First Amendment.

“Principal Thorne was suspended from his job for preaching the virtues of free speech and tolerance. He warned students that these days, anyone’s voice can be canceled for any reason at any time by a small group of people – and school administrators have proved him right,” said **Daniel Suhr, senior attorney at the Liberty Justice Center**. “Fortunately for Principal Thorne, the First Amendment is on his side and we will not rest until he is reinstated to his job and receives a full apology. Anything less would be a disservice not only to Principal Thorne, but also to his students who are watching a real-life civics life lesson unfold before their eyes.”

Shelby County Schools are the only public schools in Tennessee that have not resumed in-person learning. Since the start of the school year, Principal Thorne has spoken directly to students through a weekly video message.

In his remarks, Principal Thorne expressed concern about the ways social media companies are shutting down debate on critical issues of the day – and encouraged students to talk with their parents or teachers about the ramifications of these actions on the First Amendment and free speech. The comments he made endorsed no political or religious points of view, and are widely accepted in public education curriculum, including in Shelby County Schools. His comments in no way violated his responsibilities to the district under his contract.

“As a career educator in a very diverse community, I have prided myself on fostering a school environment that is open-minded, accepting and welcoming everyone who comes through our doors. It’s shocking and disappointing that I was removed from my job for speaking with students about the First Amendment,” **Principal Thorne** said. “I’m taking action because I meant what I said: Free speech is critically important and is under threat. I will not allow myself to be silenced any more than I would allow a student to be marginalized for sharing a perfectly reasonable point of view. The ‘cancel culture’ taking foot in America has now reached our schools, and I will not stand for it.”

Principal Thorne was placed on leave the day after his video was circulated. While Principal Thorne was instructed not to speak to the media or the community about his suspension, numerous district officials spoke publicly about him. The video was shared with news media, and a member of the school board criticized Thorne publicly in news coverage. An “equity officer” for the school also gave an interview to the news about Thorne.

Over the last month, attorneys from the Liberty Justice Center have reached out to school officials numerous times to rectify the situation with no success. Attorneys first sent a letter to the Superintendent, Director of Professional Standards and General Counsel, but there was no explanation for the continued leave or any movement to reinstate Principal Thorne. Now, Thorne’s attorneys have filed a federal lawsuit against the district for violating his First Amendment and contractual rights for placing him on administrative leave for discussing current events and free speech with students.

To read a [transcript of Principal Thorne’s remarks](#), read the Liberty Justice Center’s [letter to school officials](#), read the lawsuit and for ongoing information about this case, visit: <https://libertyjusticecenter.org/media/principal-thorne>.

### **Excerpts from Principal Thorne’s Jan. 11, 2021, message to students:**

- “...in democracies, we talk about the marketplace of ideas. Well, what happens when the marketplace of ideas becomes a forced monopoly? What happens when you do not have dissenting opinions, when you do not have an exchange on competing ideas—how do you know if your ideas can stand on their own if there is no marketplace of ideas?”
- “...Twitter, Facebook, Google, and Apple, are so powerful, and they have unilaterally made a decision of what you can and cannot see on their platforms, that’s a major issue and I want you to understand that. I want you to understand the problem that’s going to face you and your generation if there is no longer a marketplace, a free exchange of ideas.”
- “You may be in agreement with the people who are doing the filtering, but it’s just one moment away from somebody else being able to filter you. And so, if they can do that to a minority—or if they can do that to a powerful voice, it doesn’t have to be a minority—what will stop them one day from doing that to you?”
- “So, anyway, think about that. Talk to your parents about it. If you trust your teacher talk to your teacher about it. Be aware, be in the loop as far as what’s going on. And not whether or not you agree or disagree with the people being filtered, but can this happen to you one day?”

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The Liberty Justice Center is a nonprofit, nonpartisan public-interest litigation center that represents clients at no charge and was founded to fight against political privilege. The most recent example of the Liberty Justice Center’s national success in this arena is its 2018 U.S. Supreme Court victory in *Janus v. AFSCME*. Beyond its work in the *Janus* case, the Liberty Justice Center’s team of talented, liberty-minded attorneys also fight to protect economic liberty, private property rights, free speech, school choice and other fundamental rights. The Liberty Justice Center pursues its goals through strategic, precedent-setting litigation to revitalize constitutional restraints on government power and protections for individual rights. Learn more about the Liberty Justice Center at [LibertyJusticeCenter.org](https://libertyjusticecenter.org).