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New York teachers sue over ban on campaign buttons

By **LARRY NEUMEISTER** – 4 days ago

NEW YORK (AP) — The teachers' union for the nation's largest public school system accused the city on Friday of banning political campaign buttons and sued to reverse the policy, declaring that free speech rights were violated.

United Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten announced at a news conference that a lawsuit had been filed in U.S. District Court in Manhattan to challenge the enforcement of the policy.

"We couldn't believe it," said Weingarten, who wore a Barack Obama lapel button. The American Federation of Teachers, including its UFT delegates, voted over the summer to endorse Obama's presidential candidacy.

Weingarten said schools Chancellor Joel Klein urged principals more than two weeks ago to enforce a Department of Education policy requiring complete political neutrality.

City lawyer Paul Marks said officials were still evaluating the lawsuit.

"However, we're confident that when the court has had the opportunity to fully consider this matter, the city's position will be upheld," he said.

Last week, some University of Illinois faculty and students held an Obama rally on campus, claiming their right to support political candidates was under assault. Before the rally, the school released a statement saying state workers were prohibited by law from participating in political activities on university property. The school later said it never intended to enforce the law.

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education recently sent a letter of protest after the University of Oklahoma instructed students and faculty and staff members not to use university e-mail to endorse or oppose a candidate. The group said it also had received complaints about bans on campaign activities at Iowa Western Community College and Fresno Pacific University in California.

In New York, the UFT's lawsuit included a copy of a letter it received from the schools. It urged enforcement of a regulation restricting political activity in school buildings, saying it was necessary "in light of the upcoming presidential election."

The letter said failure to comply with the regulation could result in disciplinary action.

Norman Siegel, a lawyer for the union, said no student, teacher or parent had ever complained about buttons worn during political campaigns. He said the city would have to prove the buttons were disruptive.

The city also said teachers should not distribute political materials in employee mailboxes or hang posters and other materials on bulletin boards, according to the UFT.

Weingarten said teachers should have a right to express their political views, just like anyone else. Suppressing political expression sends the wrong educational message, she argued.

"Students can only benefit from being exposed to and engaged in a dialogue about current events, civic responsibilities and the political process," Weingarten said.

The UFT lists a membership of about 200,000, including 74,000 teachers. The city's public schools have about 1.1 million students.