



NEWS

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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State Approves Alternate Testing Dates for Russian Old Believer Students
ACLU Praises Religious Freedom Accommodations in Administration of HSGQE

ANCHORAGE, AK, February 17, 2010 — The American Civil Liberties Union of Alaska (ACLU) today praised the Alaska State Department of Education and Early Development's decision to respect the religious freedom of Russian Old Believer families and arrange alternate testing dates and security procedures for administration of the High School Graduation Qualifying Exam (HSGQE) which, as currently scheduled, conflicts with Holy Week for Russian Old Believer students.

Rather than being forced to miss the testing on April 6 – 8, or violate their religious dictates which require that Russian Old Believers not work or attend school during Holy Week, students will now have the opportunity to take the test on March 29 to April 2, under special security procedures and agreements which protect the validity of the tests.

The ACLU had advised the Department of Education that the Alaska State Constitution's Free Exercise Clause guarantees the students the right to alternate testing dates. Families in the Voznesenka village area near Homer, had asked the ACLU to represent them to ensure that their children would not be penalized by the testing schedule. Jeffrey Mittman, Executive Director of the ACLU stated: "The Alaska Constitution guarantees all children the right to an education, and its Free Exercise Clause ensures that the sincere and deeply held religious beliefs of these families are protected from state rules that impinge on their religious freedom."

Stan White of Voznesenka stated: "We're a pretty small community out here, and sometimes it's hard to get agencies and the government to recognize our needs. I think the ACLU of Alaska made a big difference in how the State responded to this situation. The current plan should work for all the students attending the Head of the Bay schools; whether it will extend to those Old Believer students in more isolated situations remains to be seen."

The ACLU correspondence to the Department of Education is available at: www.akclu.org.

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