

Taylor Ziegler, et al. v. Martin County School District & Jensen Beach High School, et al.

2016 WL 4039667 (U.S. Ct. App. 11th Cir.)

October 2016

Background

Nine high school students brought an action against the Martin County Florida school district, Jensen Beach High School, several school officials, and a local sheriff for Constitutional violations. The students were detained outside their Junior/Senior prom for breathalyzer tests after a local sheriff's deputy searched the "party bus" in which they arrived and found an empty champagne bottle and 12 used plastic cups.

The nine students involved in the suit arrived at the prom in Port St. Lucie, Florida on a party bus as part of a group of 35-40 students. When this group of students arrived at the prom venue on the bus, the Dean of Students ordered the bus searched. Upon completion of the search and the discovery of an empty champagne bottle and plastic cups, the Dean told the entire group that they would be breathalyzed. One of the school officials had to leave the prom venue in order to get additional mouthpieces for the testing. All the students from the party bus had to wait for the school official to return with the mouthpieces. The sheriff and the school officials made all students from the party bus wait until every student in the group had received a breathalyzer test before they would be released. The students were detained for two hours, causing them to miss the prom. Some students asked to call their parents and to leave the venue after being breathalyzed, but they were not allowed. The entire group of students from the party bus passed the breathalyzer tests with 0.00 alcohol content.

The nine students alleged violations of the First, Fourth and Fourteenth Amendments. The individual school officials raised a qualified immunity defense. All defendants filed Motions for Summary Judgment, which the district court granted. The students appealed.

Holding

After determining that the search of the party bus was appropriate, the appellate court found that the school defendants did not violate the students' Fourth Amendment rights by virtue of detaining the students to test for alcohol consumption. The court reasoned that the school defendants has a reasonable belief that the students had violated the high school's prom rules and state law based on the discovery of the empty champagne bottle and used cups on the party bus. The court also found that the initial detention of the students while breathalyzer mouthpieces could be retrieved was reasonably related in scope. However, the court held that

detaining the students who had already passed the breathalyzer test was unjustified and the school defendants should have allowed those students to leave.

The court further held that qualified immunity applied to the individual school officials based on the fact that there was no “binding clearly established law” that would alert school officials that they violated the students’ Constitutional rights by detaining them after they passed the breathalyzer test.

Lastly, the court held that one student who spoke to the news media did not have her First Amendment rights violated. The court determined that high school officials simply speaking to this student after she gave an interview to a TV news station and expressing disapproval to the student was not a punishment for her speech. Therefore, the student was not a victim of retaliation.

Learning Point:

The key take away from this case is the inappropriate detention of the students after they had passed the breathalyzer test. Although the school defendants had good cause to make the students undergo screening for alcohol consumption, detaining the students who had passed the screening seemed to be a significant aggravating factor in this case. In this instance, releasing the students as each passed the breathalyzer test could have de-escalated the situation such that students and parents might have been disinclined to pursue this action as far as ultimately took place.