

OUR VIEW

May students in high school just say ‘no?’

November 22, 2015

OUR POSITION: *Were students manipulated for campaign purposes?*

There was good reason to celebrate the great turnout for Arcadia’s Veterans Day Parade: It indicated a deep respect for our servicemen and women.

One thing about the parade, though, seemed clearly inappropriate.

We’ve been told by people who either witnessed the event or spoke directly to individuals involved that several DeSoto County High School students were selected to march with School Superintendent Karyn Gary and U.S. Rep. Tom Rooney, R-District 17. The students received a memo indicating the level of honor. It read: “Congratulations! You have been chosen to walk in the Veterans Day Parade on November 11th with Dr. Karyn Gary and Congressman Thomas Rooney. Please report to the Presbyterian Church parking lot by 9:15 a.m. on November 11th. There will be a shirt handed out to you at that time to wear in the parade.”

When the students showed up, they were reportedly given T-shirts bearing Rooney’s name. Some of the students were given signs or banners to carry.

At the conclusion of the parade, as the students gathered by the courthouse, some started to remove their T-shirts, but an adult reportedly told them not to remove the shirts until after they posed for a photo with the congressman and Gary.

We asked the DeSoto County School District about the situation and haven’t received a response.

Rooney’s chief of staff, Pete Giambastiani, said Rooney’s goal in marching in Arcadia’s parade was to honor local veterans. He said the appearance was organized, in part, through school district offices.

We’re not aware that any student objected, at the time, to wearing the shirts or carrying the signs. We’ve been told the School District said afterward that, if any students had objected, they would not have been forced to wear Rooney T’s.

But we've also heard some students said they felt they would not have been allowed to object, or they felt intimidated about objecting in front of their congressman. Later, at least one student reportedly said she would rather not have worn a shirt with the Republican candidate's name on it.

Of course, it's an honor for any small town to have a U.S. congressman participate in your parade. And Rooney — an Army veteran himself — wanted to enlist a cadre of kids on his own and capitalize on a campaign opportunity, so be it. Tacky, at worst, but we'd give him a pass.

The problem is the pre-selection of public school students for what, unfortunately, took on the tint of a political appearance.

Should students have been told about the "Rooney" T-shirt and sign-toting responsibilities beforehand? Should they have been told they had every right to refuse to wear the uniform or carry a sign?

Of course.

Gary reportedly met with students when complaints were lodged later and told them they could have protested beforehand. One student said their concerns were addressed.

But these are kids, who might well have worried about being embarrassed or excluded.

Intimidating? No kidding.

And when their photo turns up later in campaign material?

No wonder they may feel used by adults in authority and adults who really should be more respectful of the rights of individual expression.