

Student fights graduation dress code

(5/23/99) Graduation ceremonies are supposed to be a celebration of each student's individual achievements. Students are not graduated as a group; instead each student receives an individual diploma and a moment of individual recognition during the walk to the podium. It is brief moment but it is personal.

Yet at the same time, the government requires every student to wear the same outfit. The standard graduation attire is a black gown and a black hat. The men are then supposed to fit themselves with a tie while the women are often required to wear dresses. It is surprising that schools do not also require a certain hairstyle.

Andrea Byrd, a graduating senior at [Alameda High School](#), wanted to dispense with the government's graduation dress code by wearing a blue and silver ribbon on her graduation gown to memorialize the 12 students and one teacher who were murdered April 20th in Littleton, Colorado.

Upon hearing that she would not be allowed to wear the ribbon, she quickly fought back by contacting the ACLU on the Thursday before her graduation. She called Mark Silverstein, the legal director of the [American Civil Liberties Union](#) in Colorado, who faxed a letter of protest to Alameda Principle Deborah Williams.

Since the graduation was only days away, the ACLU filed a lawsuit on Friday seeking a preliminary [injunction](#). The court granted an emergency hearing but the judge ruled against Byrd and upheld a school policy that forbids adornment on graduation gowns.

The judge could have struck down the law as a violation of free speech but he obviously wanted to help the school censor students. At the trial, he asked, "What if a group of students wanted to demonstrate their support for the individuals that perpetrated this horrible crime?" and suggested some could show up sporting "miniature trench coats."

The judge's ruling seems to conflict with a [Supreme Court ruling](#) that allowed students to wear black arm bands to protest the Vietnam War. The court ruled that the armbands were protected speech because they were not disruptive. Perhaps the student should wear blue and white armbands, which might remind the local judge that she has Constitutional rights even at graduation ceremonies.

If you also disagree with your school's graduation dress code, you have the right to sue your school for violating your First Amendment right to free expression. If your graduation is only days away, your local court will probably grant an emergency hearing to quickly decide the case. Perhaps you'll even find a judge who will defend the Constitution.