

Rothman Declares Victory in Fight for Religious Tolerance

Long-time Goal Realized as National Mock Trial Board Agrees to End Discriminatory Practice

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(Washington, DC) — For several years Congressman Steve Rothman (D-Fair Lawn) has fought to have the Board of Directors of the National High School Mock Trial Championship alter its unjust scheduling policy and allow the competition's schedule to be modified, when necessary, to accommodate the religious beliefs of all participating students.

Rothman has been a champion for the cause since he advocated on behalf of a Teaneck school in 2005. He has made repeated public calls to change the discriminatory policy and even led the passage of a Congressional resolution condemning the practice. This week the Board of Directors finally reversed their prior rulings and adopted a formal procedure providing for a possible modification of the competition schedule due to religious beliefs and practices held by a team's student members.

"It's been a long fight and I'm glad justice has prevailed," said Rothman. "I am pleased that the National High School Mock Trial Board has finally seen the light. This was obviously the right decision all along. It is still unbelievable to me that an organization that is supposed to teach students about our justice system was so insensitive to fundamental questions of equal protection and the rights of minorities."

Rothman first became involved in this national dispute at the request of the Torah Academy of Teaneck, the team that represented New Jersey at the 2005 championship competition. The Torah Academy is a yeshiva, an orthodox Jewish high school, and its students cannot participate in any competition on the Saturday Sabbath. In April 2005, after Rothman pressured the Board and contacted the sponsor of the 2005 Championship, satisfactory accommodations were made to allow the Torah Academy to compete without violating the religious practices of the students. However, several months after the successful completion of this competition, the Board of Directors voted to refuse any future accommodations for students who observe a Saturday Sabbath.

"This is a victory for those who worked so hard to change this discriminatory policy and institute rules that will ensure that students of all faiths can participate fully in the competition. What a great lesson for our students: When justice is on your side, when you are willing to stand up for what you believe in, and if you refuse to give in, you can change the system — sometimes it just takes perseverance and persistence."

The new policy, which will be effective beginning with the 2010 competition, provides a procedure for a team to request an accommodation to modify the National Championship competition schedule for religious reasons. The policy and the required form to request an accommodation are posted on the National High School Mock Trial Championship website

and in the future will be included in the registration materials for the competition.

In September 2007 the U.S. House of Representatives unanimously approved a resolution authored by Congressman Rothman (H.Res.25) calling on the Board of Directors of the National High School Mock Trial Championships to accommodate students of all faiths to allow them participate in the annual competition without violating the practices of their religion.

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