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Strip-Search Case Could Redefine Student Privacy

By [Robert Barnes](#)
Washington Post Staff Writer
Saturday, April 11, 2009

SAFFORD, Ariz. -- April Redding was waiting in the parking lot of the middle school when she heard news she could hardly understand: Her 13-year-old daughter, Savana, had been strip-searched by school officials in a futile hunt for drugs.



Savana Redding, 19, said she "just couldn't go back" to Safford Middle School after school personnel strip-searched her six years ago. (By Joshua Lott For The Washington Post)

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It's a story that amazes and enrages her still, more than six years later, though she has relived it many times since.

Savana Redding was forced to strip to her underwear in the school nurse's office. She was made to expose her breasts and pubic area to prove she was not hiding pills. And the drugs being sought were prescription-strength ibuprofen, equivalent to two Advils.

"I guess it's the fact that they think they were not wrong, they're not remorseful, never said they were sorry," April Redding said this week, as she and Savana talked about the legal fight over that search, which has now reached the Supreme Court.

And even more: When, days later, the principal met with April Redding to discuss what had happened, she said he was dismissive of an event so humiliating that her daughter never returned to classes at Safford Middle School.

"He said, 'There was an incident with some pills, and we had to find out if Savana had them, but you should be happy because we didn't find any on her,' " Redding recalled. "I got really upset and was telling him, 'Why did you do this to her? How could you do this to her?'"

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mines to the Supreme Court, the lawsuit that April and Savana Redding brought carries the potential for redefining the privacy rights of students and the responsibility of teachers and school officials charged with keeping drugs off their campuses.

Matthew W. Wright, the school system's lawyer, declined to make his clients available for interviews. But in a statement, he said he regrets the news media's "reflexive reaction" to the case and underscored the dilemma

school officials face between privacy and protection.

"Unfortunately, this tension sometimes places school officials in the untenable position of either facing the threat of lawsuits for their attempts to enforce a drug-free policy or for their laxity in failing to interdict potentially harmful drugs," he wrote.

To which Savana Redding's lawyer, Adam Wolf of the American Civil Liberties Union, replied: "The school official here heard an accusation that Savana previously possessed ibuprofen at some unknown location at some unknown time and jumped to the conclusion that Savana was presently storing ibuprofen and that she was storing it against her genitalia.

"It should be self-evident that that search is wrong."

But the federal judges who have reviewed the case have not been so sure.

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