

Gingrich Voucher Remark Is Called 'Nuts'

Mississippi Mother Rejects Criticism of Her Fight Against School Prayer

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ECRU, Miss., June 18—A Mississippi mother who is battling to keep prayers out of her local public school said today that House Speaker Newt Gingrich's statement, that if a school voucher program were in effect she could send her children elsewhere, is "completely nuts."

Lisa Herdahl, a 34-year-old Wisconsin Lutheran who moved to mostly Baptist Mississippi in 1993, also rejected Gingrich's description of her as one person trying to change an entire community.

"It's me trying to make a community follow the law and the Constitution. The Constitution was not written for the minority or the majority but for everybody," she said.

The woman and her six children, five of whom go to the North Pontotoc Attendance Center in this northern Mississippi town, drew national attention last year when the American Civil Liberties Union sued the Pontotoc County School District on their behalf.

She said that the school system, by allowing students to pray over the intercom and by providing classrooms for religious instruction, was violating a 1962 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that prohibits school prayer.

In April, U.S. District Judge Neal Biggers granted a restraining order against morning prayers. A trial is set for next March 4 on the devotionals and the issue of Bible instruction in school classrooms.

When one of Gingrich's constituents mentioned the Herdahl case Saturday at a town hall meeting in Roswell, Ga., the House speaker, a

Georgia Republican, said he believes it is "nonsense to say that one person can dictate to 3,000."

"My attitude is that we'll give you a voucher for the value of your child's education," he continued. "Go find a school you like. But don't dictate to everybody else in your community based on your particular prejudices."

"I think it's completely nuts to have vouchers to attend the schools," Herdahl said. "Are you going to give vouchers for different religious

groups? Catholics go to one? Baptists go to another? I can't believe that."

The Herdahl children, all baptized Lutheran, have been teased, taunted and even called devil worshipers for choosing not to participate at school in religious activities prescribed by local Protestant fundamentalists.

When Gingrich was told there were no other schools in the area for the Herdahl children to attend, he said: "But there would be if you had vouchers."