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Judge: Bikinis, cigarettes should not keep girls from graduation

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MANILA, Philippines -- A group of high school students originally banned from their graduation today for putting photos of themselves posing in bikinis at a beach party on Facebook will join the ceremony after all, thanks to a court order to lift the Catholic school's ban. [1]

A regional trial court judge in central Philippines' Cebu City has ordered officials of St. Theresa's College [2] to allow senior students to join their graduation. The judge reportedly ordered school officials to also treat the minors with kindness and civility and avoid discriminating against them during the commencement exercises.

Five girls were reportedly banned from graduation for the bikini photos [3]. School rules ban posting Internet pictures showing "ample body exposure." [4]

The mother of one of the teens sued the school principal, Sr. Celeste Maria Purisima Pe, and four other lay officials who reportedly claimed the students violated the school handbook for conduct on and off campus, reports say [1]. The judge ruled in favor of all five students involved, though only one mother petitioned.

School officials did not comment on the ruling, but asked the court to reconsider. The school lawyer has been cited saying one photo showed a girl holding a cigarette and a liquor bottle while others showed all five girls wearing bikinis at a beach party. He also said rules and regulations were set up to maintain morality of the school.

Missionary sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary established Saint Theresa's in 1933 upon the invitation of Cebu's archbishop. Inspired by the life and works of foundress Mother Marie Louise De Meester and the spirituality of St. Teresa of Avila, the school offers programs from kindergarten through college.

The parent who filed a civil suit Tuesday also sought unspecified damage claims, saying the student involved had suffered sleepless nights since being punished. The suit also argued that the photos were not lewd and that the students' Facebook accounts were only accessible to friends.

News readers' comments criticized the school's decision [5], though some accepted the officials' punishment as part of the right of Catholic schools to uphold character and values in line with their mission [6].

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Links:
[1] http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/169033/court-chastises-school-for-barring-girls-from-graduation-over-bikini-photos
[2] http://www.everythingcebu.com/cebu-profile-basic-info/schools/st-theresas-college-%E2%80%93-cebu/
[3] http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/wireStory/philippine-court-halts-students-graduation-ban-16027189#.T3RQZK7X-PU

[4] http://www.interaksyon.com/article/28100/catholic-school-punishes-filipina-teenager-over-facebook-bikini-pic
[5] http://www.rappler.com/nation/3131-groups-hit-school-for-punishing-girl-over-bikini-pic
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