

STUDENT FORUM

Should Public School Prayer Be Allowed?

To the Student

This forum will give you an opportunity to take responsibility for your own learning. It is similar to a panel discussion in which people come together to debate issues. The activity will help you explore other people's views on the complex controversy of whether prayer should be allowed in public schools.

Freedom of religion is the right of persons to believe in and practice whatever faith they choose; it is also the right to have no religious beliefs at all. These rights are found in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Various court rulings have interpreted this amendment clause to mean that the government, which includes agencies such as schools, may not promote or give special treatment to any religion. For example, the courts have struck down different school prayer programs, as well as programs that teach the Bible.

In the last decade, there have been signs that the Supreme Court may be rethinking its stand on whether teaching about religion in public schools is constitutional, and various decisions have supported the religious liberty rights of students wanting, for example, to hold meetings of religious clubs on school grounds. The result has been considerable confusion about just what students' religious rights might be at school. Is religious freedom denied when students are not permitted to have a graduation invocation and benediction? Is the freedom to have no religion violated if nonbelievers have to listen?

Here are some questions you might consider during the discussion:

- What exactly does the First Amendment say regarding freedom of religion?
- To what extent should the beliefs of the nation's founders influence today's interpretations of religious freedom?
- Why might public attitudes tend toward supporting prayer in public schools?
- Should public attitudes influence courts' interpretations about freedom of religion?
- What are the subtle inconsistencies in the facts you learn during the forum? For example, (1) the American public overwhelmingly supports freedom of religion, even for the most extreme groups, and (2) four-fifths of Americans would allow prayers at graduation, and almost two-thirds believe teachers should be allowed to lead prayers at school.

How to Conduct the Forum

1. The class selects 10 students to serve on the panel.
2. All students complete the forum ballot and submit it to the panel.
3. Students form groups to develop or adapt forum character roles.
4. The panel selects a facilitator and clerk from among student volunteers. The facilitator coordinates speakers and maintains order if necessary. The clerk records key ideas expressed.
5. The panel conducts the forum.
6. All students should once again complete the forum ballot. Then the panel should review, compare, summarize, and report the results to the class.
7. Students discuss how the forum presentation might have affected their opinions.

BACKGROUND

In societies with official state religions, school can be much different than in societies where church and state are separated by law. Such is the case when comparing colonial America to the United States today. During colonial times, church officials performed many of the roles that our schools play. Ministers often held classes in their homes for students who could afford a fee. Those who couldn't were taught at home. Lessons in religious beliefs and obedience were common for all young people.

Even though American colonists were deeply religious and came here for religious freedom, they were often intolerant of other groups and would impose penalties on those who did not follow a colony's official religion. Roman Catholics and Jews could not vote in most colonies. To be a citizen in Georgia, a colonist had to belong to the Anglican Church. Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and most of the founders favored separation of church and state, and this was guaranteed by the Constitution's First Amendment.

Eventually, the nation's educational efforts evolved into a public system that more and more eliminated reference to religious subjects as well as religious rites such as prayer. Yet church and state aren't entirely separated in America, starting with our nation's motto: In God We Trust. With public opinion and the courts recently seeming to become more tolerant of certain religious activities in public schools, this forum will explore contemporary opinions about how far, and in what manner, prayer might be protected there.

INTRODUCTION

The following people have agreed to discuss their views and positions in a panel discussion. They represent the interests of various individuals who are involved in debate about school prayer. Students playing the roles should have five minutes to present their positions and to answer questions from the audience. Students in the audience may play the role of reporters covering the discussion and residents of the community. When questioned by the audience, the students should answer in a manner consistent with their roles.

Role 1: Ahmed Beloian

Hi! I'm Ajay Beloian, a senior at this high school, and I don't see why it is unconstitutional to allow prayers both in the classroom and at school activities, as long as participation is voluntary and the prayers are nonsectarian. Everyone can join in if no one faith is sponsored, and students who for some other reason don't want to pray can just quietly wait for the prayer to finish. I've never met anyone offended by prayer, have you? In my grandparents' day, morning prayer came from the Book of Psalms, and they don't remember a single complaint either. It's not as if any school would prepare a book of its own prayers for everyday use, and any clergy composing a special prayer for a school function would be a professional who knows what's right for a nondenominational setting. To cover any objections, all that is needed is an announcement prior to the prayers saying that, while everyone is asked to rise during the prayer, no one has to join in, and just because they've stood up doesn't mean that anyone will assume that they have joined in.

Role 2: Ira Ellis

My name is Ira Ellis, and I have some real problems with the idea of having any religious observance whatever at the public school, even though, as a rabbi, I'm very interested in the spiritual development of the students in this community. Look at it this way. Are school administrators in any position to choose who should lead prayers at school and what the content of those prayers should be? And yet, this is what we, in fact, force them to do when we ask for prayer in the classroom or at school events. School administrators are employees of our local

government. An important First Amendment principle is that it is not the part of government to arrange for or to compose prayers for anyone. Nothing could be clearer. Instead, what I'm hearing is that, in order to avoid establishing religion in the schools, but to make sure religion takes place there in the form of prayer, at its own discretion the government may establish a nonsectarian civil religion of its own choosing. This argument defies logic and the First Amendment.

Role 3: Sanford Cole

My name is Sanford Cole, and I'm a counselor working in the inner-city schools as part of the Building Better Youth program. I'm for prayer, and history backs me up. There's a precedent for nonsectarian prayer in many government ceremonies and actions in our country. The Declaration of Independence appeals to "the Supreme Judge of the World" and vows reliance on "the protection of divine providence." We've had prayer at presidential inaugurations and at congressional and Supreme Court opening sessions since George Washington, the First Congress, and John Marshall. We need to interpret the establishment clause in ways that do not invalidate long-standing traditions of our nation and compromise the classroom as an environment for developing high moral values. To deprive our schools of the unifying mechanism of public prayer to spare nonbelievers what is a minimal inconvenience of standing or sitting in respectful nonparticipation is senseless. If there is a person whose religious faith and values have been compromised by waiting through a prayer, then how strong could that faith and those values be?

Role 4: Frances Lara

I'm Frances Lara, a psychology professor at a nearby state university. It simply isn't true that people cannot be coerced by being forced to passively sit by while prayers are spoken. School sponsorship and supervision of prayer place public as well as peer pressure to participate, and this may violate what a student believes, constituting pressure. Even though that pressure may be indirect, it still has a coercive effect because peers and teachers are present, and, at times, the prayers represent long-held community beliefs and traditions that government, under the First Amendment, may not require attendees to conform to in any manner. What's more, the First Amendment obligates government to guard and respect the diversity of religious beliefs and to respect the lack of belief too, which it cannot do if it sanctions prayer prepared by any denomination for use in the school. The question doesn't turn on how likely it is that someone's beliefs will be compromised because government may not compromise them at all; it turns, instead, on what is allowable governmental activity, and sponsoring prayer simply is not.

Role 5: Angelica Thomas

I'm Angelica Thomas, and my six children attend the public schools of this community. To me, prayer is just like free speech -- Americans have always had that right, and they should be able to pray at school if they want. Besides, we are used to hearing the views of all sorts of people-- we're taught right in school that it's good for us. If all students--believers, agnostics, and atheists alike--are expected to tolerate information and ideas their families don't agree with in their textbooks and other media, which teachers are allowed to use for instruction, then why can't they be expected to tolerate prayer? I'm very concerned about how our community is going to fight the unsolicited electronic filth that is coming into our homes. One of our greatest tools is our school system, which can help frame students' activities in a devotion to the high ethical principles that all religions have in common. What is more likely to harm these kids-- pornography on the Internet, videos about drug abuse and venereal disease, photos of the mangled war dead in Europe and Africa, or prayer? End of story.

Role 6: Gertrudis Cruz

My name is Gertrudis Cruz. As a debate teacher, I'm deeply disturbed by some of the faulty reasoning being used here. The First Amendment protects our freedoms of speech and religion differently. Freedom of speech is protected by allowing its fullest expression and government participation. Religion is protected by disallowing any government intervention. And to say that students have a choice of whether to pray in school or attend school functions with prayer is preposterous. What affords government the power to deprive them, without just cause, of the opportunity to participate in any school activity? What if the government does have precedents of religious ceremonies and actions? It also has precedents of institutionalized slavery and disenfranchisement of women, African Americans, and Native Americans. Might we ever consider repeating these mistakes because they happened before? A precedent doesn't necessarily have the compelling force of a good argument based in sound logic.

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