

Should public schools start the day with a silent prayer time?

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Should Public Schools Start the Day With Silent Prayer Time? Beginning the day with silent prayer time in public schools is a very controversial topic. Some people say that prayer should be allowed in public schools because of its constitutionality, that it would acknowledge the religious heritage of America and of education, and that it would improve society and the school environment. Others say that prayer should not be allowed in public schools because public schools are funded by the tax payers (who are not all religious), because it is illegal, and because of the greatly diverse population in the school itself.

Public schools have a very diverse student, staff, and teacher population whose religious, or non-religious, views are very diverse too. For this very simple reason and others, including the legality of the idea and the funding sources of the schools, public schools should not begin the day with silent prayer time. An argument for prayer in school is that it would acknowledge the religious heritage of the nation and of education itself. They point out that the founding fathers of America used religion to form the backbone of the nation and believed in freedom to practice one's religion openly. They argue that education itself has a rich spiritual history.

“ Pro-prayer” people point out that of the first 108 universities founded in America, 106 were distinctly Christian, including the first, Harvard University, chartered in 1636 (Arguments). The historical background of America and education do not need to be recognized at the beginning of the school day, especially not with prayer. There are many other ways to acknowledge historical background without violating any constitutional clauses and amendments. Even so, it just isn't necessary.

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There's a historical background to everything, but that does not mean that it needs to be recognized. There are many holidays with historical background that states do not recognize, like Cesar Chavez Day, Emancipation Day, and Black Friday ("Public"). There's a historical background to the things I eat for dinner, but that doesn't mean that it is necessary that I acknowledge it before I sit down to eat it. Another argument for prayer in schools is that it will lead to a decrease in drug use, alcoholism, suicide, teen pregnancy, school shootings, bullying, and HIV transmission. They say that school prayer will do this because it will instill moral values, create a love for others above oneself, and provide a better sense of right and wrong. People who argue for prayer in schools also say that it will lead to increased tolerance in teens in public schools for the same reasons.

They also say that public schools should have prayer because schools must do more than train children's minds academically. They must also nurture their souls and reinforce the values taught at home and in the community (Arguments). On the contrary, if schools were to nurture the souls of children and reinforce the values taught at home and in the community, they would be taking over the responsibilities of parents and churches, and that is not necessary. It is the duty of parents and churches to instill religious beliefs and reinforce them. Silent prayer time in schools would be the government not only breaking laws like the Establishment clause, but also usurping the rights of parents and churches (Gaylor).

I do not think that prayer alone could transform someone's moral values and turn him/her into a devout Christian with solid Christian values, especially a

teen in a public school who's already spent at least 13 years of his/her life forming his/her own morals. Also, not all religious people have good morals, or follow all of the "rules" of their specific religion. I know many that do not. So, it is false to claim that prayer would lead to a decrease in things like alcoholism, drug use, and pregnancy in public schools because sometimes, even religious people do not have good morals. Many people who argue against prayer in public schools say that it would lead to the exact opposite of tolerance—intolerance. It would lead to intolerance because it would highlight religious differences between peers, and anyone who declined participation in the prayer time or even protested against it is at risk to be ostracized by their peers (Against).

Prayer would highlight the minorities, and minorities are famous for getting singled out, ridiculed, and picked on. Imagine that you're a child in anywhere from kindergarten to twelfth grade. You just got to school, and you're sitting down in class. It's silent prayer time now. You're nervous because everyone in your class is a Christian... except you.

During the prayer time, one of your class-mates sees that you're not praying. After class he goes and tells all of his friends, and suddenly you're the odd man out. You're the one kid who doesn't believe in God. You're the kid that's going to go to hell, and now none of your friends talk to you because of it. Imagine how you would feel.

You would feel terrible, left out, hated, different, and not in a good way. You might be thinking, this is a bit extreme, but it isn't. Things like this have happened before. In 1984, an Alabama law was created that authorized
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teachers to conduct regular religious prayer services and activities in school classrooms during the school day (Wallace). Ishmael Jaffree lived in Alabama and had three children that went to school there. Jaffree and his three children were agnostics.

He spoke out against this law through the court case *Wallace v Jaffree*. His family was subjected to harassment and death threats for speaking out and being different. His children were beat up on the way to and from school (Gaylor). Things like this happen all the time with other issues, like dressing differently than the rest of your peers. So, why would this issue be an exception? “ Pro-prayer” groups argue that ruling against prayer in school is unconstitutional because the Supreme Court has misinterpreted the Establishment Clause in the constitution.

They say that a simple and voluntary school prayer time does not amount to the government establishing a religion any more than the government recognition of holidays like Christmas does. People who argue for prayer in public schools say that prayer in schools supports the principle of freedom of religion that is granted in the Constitution. “ Pro-prayer” groups say that in banning prayer in public schools, the Supreme Court has misinterpreted the constitutional principle of freedom of religion for freedom from religion (“ Arguments”). People who argue for prayer in public schools say that the Supreme Court has misinterpreted freedom of religion for freedom from religion, but in this case, of and from mean the same thing. To worship one religion is to be free from the others, and to worship no religion is to be free from all religions.

Both choices are legal and protected under the freedom of religion principle in the constitution. They make religion sound like a tyrant that you cannot be free from, but it isn't, and you can be free from it if you so choose. The Supreme Court recognized Christmas as a holiday because people of many religious or non religious preferences celebrate it, not just people of the Christian faith (Robinson). Because of this fact, the federal government is not attempting to establish a religion, and therefore this cannot be compared to prayer in school because not all people of many religious or non religious preferences pray. People who argue against prayer in public schools say that it should not be incorporated into school routines because it is unconstitutional.

It is unconstitutional because the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment states that the government cannot make any law respecting the establishment of religion. Because public schools are government funded, prayer led by school officials or incorporated into the school routine amounts to government-established religion and is thereby unconstitutional. It also violates the “ separation of church and state” which is an accepted principle of American law. Separation of church and state states that the government cannot interfere in the practices of the church or advance and advocate religious observances in government settings. Scheduled prayer time in public schools would directly violate this principle because public schools are government funded (Against). In 1961, the Board of Regents for the State of New York authorized a short, voluntary prayer for recitation at the start of each school day.

It was an optional nondenominational prayer that was read aloud at the beginning of the school day. Some parents at New Hyde Park-Garden City Park School District objected to this prayer and brought the issue to court in a case called Engel v. Vitale. The court ruled that neither the prayer's nondenominational character nor its voluntary character saves it from unconstitutionality. By providing the prayer, New York officially approved religion, which is a violation of the Establishment clause and of separation of state (Engel). Many cases have been brought to the court about this issue since 1961, and the ruling has always been the same.

The controversy now is over the exact same thing, except the prayer is silent instead of read aloud. Allow me to ask you one question: If it wasn't allowed then, why would, and why should, it be allowed now? Prayer should not be included during the day at public schools because all types of taxpayers fund public schools: Jewish, Catholic, Quaker, Buddhist, Baptist, atheist, agnostic, etc. For this reason public schools should be free of religious observances, coercion, and prayer (Gaylor). You can look at it this way: parents who are religious and want their children to be able to pray and practice their religion at school during the school day pay to have their children sent to a private school where those things are allowed. Yes, they do still have to pay taxes that go to funding public schools, but everyone has to do that. It's the law.

Parents who pay taxes and have their children sent to public school practice a variety of different religions, or do not practice a religion at all. These parents are not paying for their child to go to school and get a religion, especially, I'm assuming, if they are not religious. They are paying for their

child to go get an education. So, does it make sense for the government to institute prayer in a place that is funded by such a diverse group of people, even some that are not even religious? The answer is no. Public schools should not start the day with a silent prayer time.

Silent prayer time could lead to the ostracization of the minorities; put yourself in the shoes of a child who's the odd man out. Silent prayer time is illegal; it violates the Establishment Clause and separation of church and state. Taxpayers and parents aren't paying for their children to be proselytized; they're paying for an education. Prayer does not have a place in public schools. Prayer is private, school is public, and prayer is best left at home.