

ENGEL V. VITALE: A CASE SUMMARY

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled on June 25, 1962, that voluntary nondenominational prayer in public schools violated the U. S. Constitution's first Amendment prohibition of the state establishment of religion. The Engel v. Vitale case grew from a group of unhappy parents who felt that the schools in Herricks Union Free School District in Hyde Park, New York, violated the rights of their children. Students had been asked to listen to a morning prayer each day, The prayer was a part of a program on "moral and spiritual" training. The prayer was a short, simple one, *"Almighty God, we acknowledge our dependence upon Thee, and we beg Thy blessings upon us, our parents, our teachers, and our country. Amen."* But it generated a wave of concern at a time when children were expected to pray in schools as a normal part of the school day.

The parents were led by Steven Engle, a Jewish man. The plaintiffs -- the people bringing charges against the school district -- thought it was their duty to challenge whether or not asking students to participate in the prayer was constitutional. The individuals who brought the suit described themselves as "religious," but their argument was they could not see what the prayer hoped to accomplish. They did not want their children to be required to pray a Christian prayer in school every day. These parents sued the school district arguing that the law violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment -- the constitutional text that stated that Congress did not have the right to make laws "respecting an establishment of a religion."

William J. Vitale, Jr., was the President of the Board of Education when this suit was filed. Representing the school, Vitale and the remainder of the School Board argued that they had not violated the First Amendment or the Establishment Clause because students were not **forced** to repeat the prayer, and they were free to leave the room during the prayer. They also argued that since the prayer was nondenominational, they were not violating the free exercise clause in the First Amendment.

At first, the lower courts agreed with the school district. They found in favor of Vitale and the School Board. When this verdict was announced, Engel and the group of parents supporting the complaint appealed the verdict to the U. S. Supreme Court because they felt strongly about this issue. When the Supreme Court heard the case, they ruled in favor of Engle and the other parents in a 6-1 decision. Justice Black wrote that "it is no part of the official business of government to compose official prayers for any group of American people to recite as part of a religious program carried out by the government."

The dissenting justice, Justice Potter Stewart, believed that the Establishment Clause had been misinterpreted. He wrote that the clause was only meant to keep Congress from establishing a national religion. The only Justice to disagree with the majority opinion, Justice Stewart's dissent was important because it reflected the way many people across the country felt about voluntary prayer in schools. Those who supported this opinion believed that the court was taking away the option for students to practice freedom of religion.

This decision was declared by the case's opponents as the "moment when the U. S. Supreme Court kicked God out of the public schools, supposedly paving the way for a decline in educational quality and a dramatic rise in delinquency and immorality." The case drew a lot of

attention -- positive and negative. Parents who supported the challenge reported that their children were threatened at school, and they themselves had endured name calling and threatening phone calls as the suit made its way through the courts.

The Supreme Court argued that compulsory prayer breached the constitutional wall of separation between church and state. The Court ruled that the government had no business imposing formal prayers for any segment of its population to repeat in a classroom setting. They concluded that the state could not hold prayers in public school even if participation is not required and even if the prayer is not tied to a particular religion. The relevant text is: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof [. . .] “

Engel has been the basis for several subsequent decisions limiting government-directed prayer in schools and at school events. Prayers at events like athletic contests, graduations, or other school gatherings are also prohibited under this law. Even if the prayer is nondenominational, it is unconstitutional for a school to sponsor it.

This case was one of the first in a series of cases in the latter half of the twentieth century in which a variety of religious activities sponsored by the government were found unconstitutional. This was the first case that specifically prohibited the government from sponsoring or endorsing official prayer in schools. This ruling has led to prohibition of reading Bible passages or reciting the Lord’s Prayer at school events, posting of the Ten Commandments on classroom walls, observing of “moments of silence” when the intention is to induce prayer, and prayers at events and ceremonies.

The amendment has had long-reaching implications in schools. While public schools do not have the right to sponsor religious activities, students have the right to engage in individual and group prayer and religious discussion throughout the school day as long as the activities are not disruptive. School officials may not encourage or discourage participation in these events. While celebration of religious holidays and events are not permitted at schools, students have the freedom to express their beliefs about religion in homework, art, orally, or in writing.

Black, Hugo L. (1962, June 25). Engel v. Vitale. Teaching American History.
<https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/engel-v-vitale-2/>

National Constitution Center. (n.d.). The establishment clause. <https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/amendments/amendment-i/interpretations/264>