



School Prayer

"Almighty God, we acknowledge our dependence upon Thee, and we beg Thy blessings upon us, our parents, our teachers and our country. Amen."

The above prayer was used to begin the school day in the state of New York for most of our nation's history. Students were not required to say the prayer; they could remain silent, or even step outside of the room during this time, if they chose. However, a group of families whose children attended public school in New Hyde Park, New York, complained that this voluntary prayer, called the "Regent's prayer," contradicted their religious beliefs, and they eventually became the plaintiffs in the Supreme Court case *Engel v. Vitale*. Three of the parties were Jewish, the other two claimed to be "spiritual" people who did not belong to any particular organized religion.

The case marked the pinnacle of challenges to religion in schools which had been growing in the twentieth century. This movement was due partially to the growth of public schools during the time, in combination with the Supreme Court's use of the Fourteenth Amendment to apply First Amendment limitations to the states.

The Supreme Court ruled that it violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment

("Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion") for public schools to hold official recitation of prayers, and that it was not enough that students were neither required to participate, or that there was no retaliation for not participating. In the decision,, Justice Hugo Black wrote: "We think that by using its public school system to encourage recitation of the Regents' prayer, the State of New York has adopted a practice wholly inconsistent with the Establishment Clause...It is no part of the business of government to compose official prayers for any group of the American people to recite as a part of a religious program carried on by government."

Engle v. Vitale is often cited as a decision outlawing all prayer in public schools, but that is not the case. The ruling prohibits schools from writing or choosing a specific prayer and requiring all students to say it. It does not prohibit students from praying quietly to themselves, nor does it prevent students from gathering together before or after school for prayer activities.

DIRECTIONS: Identify the central idea. Then summarize the article.