

Religion Today  
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*It's OK to Pray in Your School*  
Paul V.M. Flesher

The school year is arriving again. This seems like a good moment to revisit that continually confused and confusing issue, prayer in schools. There is a great deal of misinformation and misunderstanding of what kind of prayer is permitted in the public schools of the United States of America. So let me take this column to review what is and what is not allowed with regard to prayer in public schools.

What kind of prayer is allowed in a public school?

Everyone and anyone who goes to a school may pray there. "Everyone," that means students, teachers, staff and administrators, may offer a private prayer to the divine at anytime they choose. "Anyone," that means any person of any religious faith, be they Methodist, Baptist, Catholic, or Mormon, or Native American. It also includes members of Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Wicca. Even Pagans and Neo-Pagans can pray, as can members of any religion or worshippers of any god or goddess I have not mentioned. Thus praying in the schools is permitted to everyone there, as long as it is private and personal, and does not interrupt legitimate school activities.

It is also OK for students of like beliefs to join together to pray, whether informally ("let's meet at the west door before the bell") or more formally in a religious club of voluntary membership. This club may meet on school property, such as in a classroom, at times when clubs are usually allowed to meet. The only exception to this is if the school has banned clubs altogether. The rule of thumb is that religious clubs must be treated the same as other clubs.

Similarly, it is permitted for teachers, staff, and even administrators to join together voluntarily to pray. Again, this may occur in formal or informal settings.

What kind of prayer is not allowed in a public school?

It is not OK to pray in a school in way that would knowingly or unknowingly coerce anyone of a different belief to join in. Thus teachers, principals and others in a position of authority should not use that position to persuade, require, expect, or intimidate

students or others under their supervision to take part in prayer that they otherwise would not. Schools are inherently hierarchical and those who are higher in the hierarchy should do nothing that would seem to exercise that position to make those below them pray.

Similarly, prayer should not be part of public school functions. Although this rule can be a bit vague, the main principle is clear. A general prayer offered in a manner designed to be inclusive of all present, whatever religion they adhere to and articulating generally positive sentiments agreeable to them, is sometimes acceptable, if not done too frequently. Graduation ceremonies can usually include this kind of prayer. Prayers that adhere to a single doctrinal line or reflect a non-inclusive theology do not belong at school functions, even if said by a student. These general prayers should not be ended with a religion-specific phrase, such as, "In the name of Jesus Christ, amen."

In general, prayer should not be conducted in such a way to exclude or stigmatize those who do not participate in or follow a particular religion.

Finally, participation in prayer should not be used as a basis to reward or promote those who take part or to withhold such rewards from people who do not. Favoritism should not be shown to members of the same faith and discrimination should not take place against members of different religions. Administrators should takes pains to ensure that even the appearance of favoritism does not arise.

These rules, both positive and negative, are designed to ensure every individual's freedom to believe and worship as they choose, and to prevent the power of the state (as exercised by the school and its employees) from interfering with that right. Those who do not follow such rules may be exercising what they see as their own religious freedom, but they will be doing it at the expense of the religious freedom of others. It is the balance of everyone's religious freedom that the rules aim to maintain.