

Engel v. Vitale / Background •—Answer Key

In the 1950s students and teachers in New York’s public schools said this school-provided prayer each day: “Almighty God, we acknowledge our dependence upon Thee, and we beg Thy blessings upon us, our parents, our teachers and our country.”

That prayer was written and approved by New York’s public school officials, who recommended that schools say the prayer every morning after the Pledge of Allegiance. A teacher was always in the room when the prayer was said and either led the prayer or chose a student to do so. Students did not have to say the prayer; they could remain silent.

Even though the prayer was **voluntary**, some people, including parent Steven Engel, disagreed with it. They felt that it violated their religious beliefs and practices. They sued William Vitale, the head of the local school board, arguing that saying a prayer at the start of the day in a public school **violated** the First Amendment’s **Establishment Clause**. The Establishment Clause says, “Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion.” The school system argued that the prayer was voluntary and was protected by the **Free Exercise Clause** of the First Amendment, which says “Congress shall make no law ... prohibiting the free exercise” of religion.

The New York courts said it was acceptable to have schools arrange to have students recite the prayer every morning. The **plaintiffs** (parents and students including Engel) then asked the U.S. Supreme Court to review the case. The Court agreed to hear it.

Questions to Consider

1. Why was a prayer included at the start of every school day in New York public schools?
In the 1950’s, prayer was included in school in New York because it was part of a program of “moral and spiritual” education.
2. Why did Steven Engel and others object to the prayer?
Steven Engel and others objected to the prayer because they thought it went against their religious beliefs and those of their children.
3. What does the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment say? How does it apply to this case?
The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment says that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.” It applies here because it could be argued that the government-sponsored prayer program is akin to respecting an establishment of a particular religion.

4. What does the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment say? How does it apply to this case?

The Free Exercise clause of the First Amendment says that “Congress shall make no law...prohibiting the free exercise” [of religion]. It applies here because it could be argued that banning the prayer would violate the right of observing students to exercise a religious practice.

5. Do you think that the recitation of a teacher-led prayer violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment? Explain.

Student answers will vary but will likely fall along the same arguments as those in the case.