

# HMH Social Studies

## CASE:

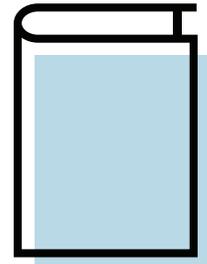
# ENGEL

# VS. VITALE

**DATE DECIDED** 06/25/1962

### FACTS & BACKGROUND

The state of New York recommended that public schools begin the day by having students say a prayer that the state had written. A group of parents sued to stop the official prayer. They said it was contrary to their beliefs. They said the law was unconstitutional. The First Amendment says that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion." The parents argued that the state illegally preferred religion to no religion. The state replied that no one was forced to say the prayer.



### DECISION

The court agreed with the parents. It struck down the state law. Justice Hugo Black wrote for the majority. He pointed out that the prayer was clearly religious. He said the First Amendment "must at least mean that in this country it is no part of the business of government to compose official prayers for any group of American people to recite as part of a religious program carried on by government."



### IMPACT OF THE DECISION

The decision was very controversial. Many people felt it was against religion. A year later, in *Abington School District v. Schempp* (1963), the court issued another controversial ruling. It struck down beginning the school day with a Bible reading. Many attempts have been made to change the Constitution to permit prayer in public schools but none have been successful.

### QUESTIONS

1

Read the First Amendment. Do you think it forbids organized prayer in school? Why or why not?

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2

James Madison wrote, "It is proper to take alarm at the first experiment on our liberties." What do you think he meant by that? Is saying an official prayer in school the first step toward "establishing" religion? Explain your answer.

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