

Sidebar: Religious expression in public and private education

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Baptists are devoted to religious liberty and education, two values that sometimes seem to compete. For example: How can Baptists support a secular institution like public education that limits the free exercise of religion, and why wouldn't Baptists champion private education in which teachers and students can evangelize freely?

Differing rules of admission

In response to questions like these, some Baptists have established private schools to provide primary, secondary and higher education in which teachers and students are free to promote Christianity. How these schools are funded has been the subject of [much discussion](#).

Other Baptists, while not opposing private education, point out that private and public education operate under different sets of rules, some of which govern admission.

For example, private schools are not required to accept all students who apply and may deny admission to students based on various measures like entrance exams or religious codes of conduct.

"Private schools ... get to choose their students ... For example, private schools do not have to respect the federal educational requirements for special needs students," Kathryn Freeman, director of public policy for the [Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission](#), stated in an email.

The contention among these Baptists is that all students should have equal

access to quality education and that private education may cut across equal access by giving advantage to some students over others. Of course, achieving equal access to quality education inevitably leads back to funding debates.

Differing rules for religious expression

Differing rules also govern the free exercise of religion in public and private education. In Christian private schools, teachers may share their Christian faith openly with students and are even encouraged to do so.

In public schools, on the other hand, “explicit religious activity” is allowed within certain limits. Freeman points out that such limits are not an outright ban of religion in public schools.

According to a publication of the [Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty](#):

- “Voluntary student-initiated prayer is permitted if it is not disruptive, but school-sponsored prayer is not allowed.”
- “Religious messages on clothing” are subject to the dress code of each school district but are not subject to more stringent restriction than other messages.
- Religious events are permitted on public school grounds as long as they are student-initiated and meet when classes are not in session.
- “Students are free to pray, read Scripture, make religious comments in class—when relevant to a subject being discussed—and even share their faith with others at school. Students cannot disrupt a classroom or harass others, but they have the right to talk about their beliefs.”

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