

Religious coercion lawsuit in Chicago schools settled

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(RNS)—The Chicago Board of Education and New York’s David Lynch Foundation have agreed to settle a three-year-long class-action lawsuit that alleged public high school students were forced to practice Hindu rituals through the guise of a meditation program.

The “Quiet Time” initiative of the David Lynch Foundation for Consciousness-Based Education and World Peace implemented a twice-daily 15-minute meditation session in five Chicago high schools between 2015 and 2019.

The initiative—the late filmmaker’s project to bring Transcendental Meditation to “at-risk populations” around the world, including inner-city students and prison inmates—was part of a study designed to “decrease stress and the effects of trauma” for students living in high-crime neighborhoods.

More than 2,000 students participated in the study, co-run by the University of Chicago’s Urban Labs social and behavioral research initiative on community violence.

The foundation argued TM’s form of mantra meditation—the silent repetition of one word or sound to enter a state of self-hypnosis—was completely nonreligious.

Invocations of Hindu deities

Plaintiffs argued the Sanskrit invocations of Hindu deities and an initiation

puja, called a “ceremony of gratitude” by instructors, felt distinctly religious.

“Everybody that I talked to was outraged and angry, particularly the students,” attorney John Mauck, who represented the 200 plaintiffs who filed claims, told RNS.

“They felt manipulated and lied to. TM lies. They say it’s not religious, but it plunges students into a religious ritual.”

More than 700 of the participants, who were under 18 at the time of the program, will be rewarded a portion of \$2.6 million. They include students who were part of the control group and did not meditate, according to the settlement negotiation, ruled on by Federal Judge Matthew Kennelly.

Though representatives of the foundation and Chicago Public Schools asserted the program was not mandatory, several students said they were reprimanded or their academic standing threatened if they refused.

Various participants in the lawsuit allegedly were told not to inform their parents of the TM practice, “especially if they were religious,” Mauck said. Some claimed they were told by instructors the Sanskrit prayer in the initiation process “didn’t have any meaning.”

Placing an offering at a shrine

Kaya Hudgins, the Muslim student at the forefront of the class-action lawsuit, told RNS she and her classmates were taken individually to a small room. They were instructed to place an offering of fruit at an altar with brass cups of camphor, incense and rice and a photograph of Brahmananda Saraswati.



Marharishi Mahesh Yogi, an Indian guru, lectures students on “Transcendental Meditation” at the Harvard Law School Forum on Jan. 22, 1968 in Cambridge, Mass. (AP File Photo)

Also known as Guru Dev, Brahmananda Saraswati was the master of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the Hindu guru who started the global TM movement in 1955.

Students were asked to repeat the Sanskrit words a representative uttered and, at the end of the ceremony, were given a one-word mantra and told not to repeat it to anyone.

The CEO of the David Lynch Foundation, Bob Roth, testified in the case’s deposition saying instructors never asked the students to participate in the puja ceremony. Roth has also refuted that the mantras have “any deity connection,” despite Maharishi’s statements the mantras “fetch to us the grace of personal gods.”

In another instance, Roth has called the initiation ceremony a “lovely cultural tradition, and not religious in any way,” again contrary to the founder’s views, according to former TM instructor and key witness Aryeh

Siegel.

“They (The David Lynch Foundation) consider the puja an inviolable requirement for learning TM, because TM teachers believe the ceremony ties the participant spiritually to the gurus being worshipped,” Siegel, the author of *Transcendental Deception*, told RNS in an email.

Neither the David Lynch Foundation nor UChicago’s Urban Labs responded to requests for comments. No results from the “Quiet Time” study have been publicly released.

Prior legal troubles for TM

This is not the first time TM has gotten into legal trouble. A New Jersey case from 1979 titled Malnak vs. Yogi found TM in schools to be “unlawful,” after a thorough review of the meanings behind the Sanskrit incantations.

Mauck’s firm has settled two other similar cases, one in which a Christian student was awarded \$150,000 in damages after refusing to “kneel before anyone except the Lord God.”

According to Mauck, who used the word “demon” interchangeably with “Hindu deity,” there is “only one God to believers, the monotheists.”

“If you talk to the most knowledgeable Muslims, Jews or Christians, they would agree that all these little gods are not gods at all,” he said.

Mat McDermott, the communications director for the Hindu America Foundation, bristles at the claim Hindu gods are demonic, saying such accusations “show a profound religious bias and lack of understanding about anything related to Hinduism.”

“Calling TM demonic shows an utter lack of understanding about the techniques actually taught in TM,” McDermott said.

TM rests ‘within a Hindu context’

Even so, McDermott and the Hindu America Foundation agree TM sits “within a Hindu context of meditation techniques,” and McDermott said there are other, less religious ways to do meditation in schools.

“(It’s) entirely possible to teach many breath-focused meditation techniques without any religious component to them, and not run afoul of separation of church and state issues,” McDermott said.

“Focusing on the breath alone has powerful benefits for calming and concentration. If that’s all you do, I’d still call it meditating, and that has no inherent religious or spiritual component.”

Retired journalism professor Joseph Weber, who wrote the book *Transcendental Meditation in America: How a New Age Movement Remade a Small Town in Iowa*, agrees meditation itself should not be demonized.

“The idea of meditation in schools—especially troubled ones—seems like a positive thing,” he told RNS in a written statement. “Anything that helps kids settle their minds seems useful. The problem with TM-oriented work in schools, however, is that it can be propagandistic for the TM organization.”

“One wishes that a secular group untainted by the TM group, would teach the meditation, not the TM folks. It would be like yoga teachers uninvolved with the practice’s history teaching it as a stretching and fitness technique. That would seem fine.”