

# Trump announces school prayer guidelines

January 17, 2020

WASHINGTON—President Trump marked National Religious Freedom Day by announcing a revised set of guidelines for religious expression in public schools and new regulations regarding government funds directed to faith-based agencies.

At an Oval Office ceremony surrounded by schoolchildren, Trump allowed the students to tell stories about instances in which they felt their religious freedom had been restricted in school.

A [White House briefing](#) said the Trump Administration was updating 2003 federal guidelines regarding protected religious expression in schools to “help safeguard students’ rights by giving education providers and students the most current information concerning prayer in public schools.”

At the event, Trump said he was announcing “historic steps to protect the First Amendment right to pray in public schools.”

## Guidelines well received by some

Kelly Shackelford, chief counsel for the Plano-based [First Liberty Institute](#), commended Trump “for his strong efforts” to protect religious freedom.

“The actions taken today are a sign of an incredible reclamation of religious liberty for students, teachers, coaches and school employees who want to freely live out their faith,” Shackelford said.

Shackelford noted some First Liberty clients—student Hannah Allen and Coach Joe Kennedy—were present at the Oval Office ceremony.



Ronnie Floyd

“The religious freedom of America’s public school students and teachers does not stop at the schoolhouse gate. Today’s guidelines affirm that promise.”

Similarly, Ronnie Floyd, president and CEO of the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee, voiced appreciation for the attention the White House directed to school prayer, according to [Baptist Press](#).

“For years, I have sensed a growing restraint being placed upon students, faculty and administration about practicing prayer in public schools,” Floyd said. “I am convinced the greatest need in our schools is to release students, faculty and administration to live out their faith publicly, including the practice of prayer. Therefore, I am thankful for any clarity about First Amendment rights that releases all persons to practice their faith in our schools and in every public setting.”

## **A ‘restatement of long-settled legal protection’**

In contrast, Amanda Tyler, executive director of the [Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty](#), said the revised set of guidelines “appears largely to be a restatement of long-settled legal protection.”



Amanda Tyler

“According to long-settled legal and constitutional protections for religious expression in the public schools, public school students are free to pray, wear religious clothing and accessories and talk about their beliefs,” [Tyler wrote](#) in a commentary article published by Religion News Service.

“Religious groups can meet on school grounds, and teachers can teach about religion as an academic subject. Religious liberty, in short, is already a treasured value in our nation’s public schools.”

As noted in “[A Teacher’s Guide to Religion in Public Schools](#),” a resource published by the First Amendment Center and endorsed by the BJC and multiple other religious organizations, “Students have the right to pray individually or in groups or to discuss their religious views with their peers so long as they are not disruptive.”

Students also have the right “to read their Bibles or other scriptures, say grace before meals, pray before tests, and discuss religion with other willing student listeners,” the guide continues.

## **Some differences noted**

One apparent substantive difference between the 2003 guidelines and the new Department of Education guidelines is the establishment of a state-mandated process for filing complaints against schools or school districts when students believe their rights have been violated.

The guidelines require local education agencies to certify that they have no policies that prevent constitutionally protected prayer.

Rachel Laser, president and CEO of Americans United for Separation of

Church and State, affirmed the right of students to pray voluntarily in public schools, but she criticized the Trump Administration for failing to protect the rights of students who choose not to participate in religious exercises.

“We have no doubt that the president’s use of his microphone to invite prayer in public schools opens the door to more constitutional violations such as students feeling pressured to bow their heads at school events or participate in team baptisms,” Laser said. “Anyone who truly values religious freedom knows we must protect everyone’s right to pray, or not pray, as they choose, free from government intrusion.”

## **‘Sounded a false alarm’**

Tyler voiced concern on [social media](#) about the “rhetoric leading up to the announcement” by the Trump Administration, saying it “sounded a false alarm about the status of prayer in public schools.”

Furthermore, she asserted, it echoes the claims of Christian Nationalism, an ideology that seeks “to merge Christian and American identities.”

“Those pushing a Christian nationalist agenda often use inflated claims about prayer in school being ‘under attack’ to push for official, government-sanctioned prayer in schools,” Tyler [tweeted](#).



The Trump Administration also announced rules related to nine federal agencies calling for less regulation of religious organizations and faith-based social service providers that receive government funding—a move Tyler characterized as “a much bigger deal” than the revisions in the public education guidelines.

“It’s wrong to suggest that treating religious organizations differently is discriminatory when government funding is involved,” she [tweeted](#).

“There are important reasons—ones that protect everyone’s religious freedom—to insist on constitutional safeguards that ensure that the government doesn’t fund religion or religious activities, while protecting the free exercise rights of those seeking government services.”

Shackelford of the First Liberty Institute saw the rule changes differently.

“These are concrete steps that will help end religious discrimination and ensure people of faith will be treated equally when they seek to partner with federal or state governments to provide services to communities,” he said.