

RIGHT or WRONG? School prayer

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My child's kindergarten teacher taught him a prayer, which his class recites before lunch. Do you think that is OK, or should I talk to her?

If the public school teacher shares your religious beliefs, you might be tempted to let this one slide. Ignore that impulse and take up the matter with the school.

When we allow public school teachers to lead or sponsor prayers, we gamble with our children's faith formation. Your child's kindergarten teacher might be leading the class in prayers consistent with your beliefs. Next school year, things could be different. It makes sense to look to public schools to choose teachers for our children. It does not make sense to allow those choices to affect our children's faith formation. This is one reason for ensuring the government does not meddle in religion.

Another reason to keep the government out of the prayer business is to protect the rights of conscience. In the United States, we recognize the government has limited powers. While we charge our government with the responsibility for managing many secular matters, we give it no power over prayer. Under our constitutional order, prayer and other aspects of belief and practice are recognized as matters of conscience and reserved for individuals, families and religious communities.

The practice of minding these boundaries produces a wealth of civic and spiritual goods. When we protect the right of every individual to make free and uncoerced decisions about religion, we foster a climate that supports human dignity and one that enables meaningful faith commitments. When

we ensure religious messages and practices are fully owned and operated by people of faith and their communities, we help to keep religion authentic. When we separate a person's civic worth from his or her spirituality, we are able to unite as a nation across our deep differences.

Accordingly, public schools should recognize and respect these boundaries and issue an equal welcome to children and families of all faiths and none. If public schools lead or sponsor prayers, it becomes impossible for them to do so.

Does this mean children cannot or should not pray in public schools? Certainly not. Children are free to pray silently at school at any time. They may pray audibly over their lunch at school and at other times, so long as they do not disrupt instructional activities. Students may pray in student-organized groups—such as Equal Access Bible clubs—that meet on the campus of secondary schools during non-instructional time. Students also may pray corporately on campus during events like “See You at the Pole.”

So, let's ensure that students know about their opportunities to pray at school. But let's also make sure the government plays no role in promoting or sponsoring those prayers.

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Right or Wrong? is sponsored by the T.B. Maston Chair of Christian Ethics at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon School of Theology. Send your questions about how to apply your faith to btillman@hsutx.edu.