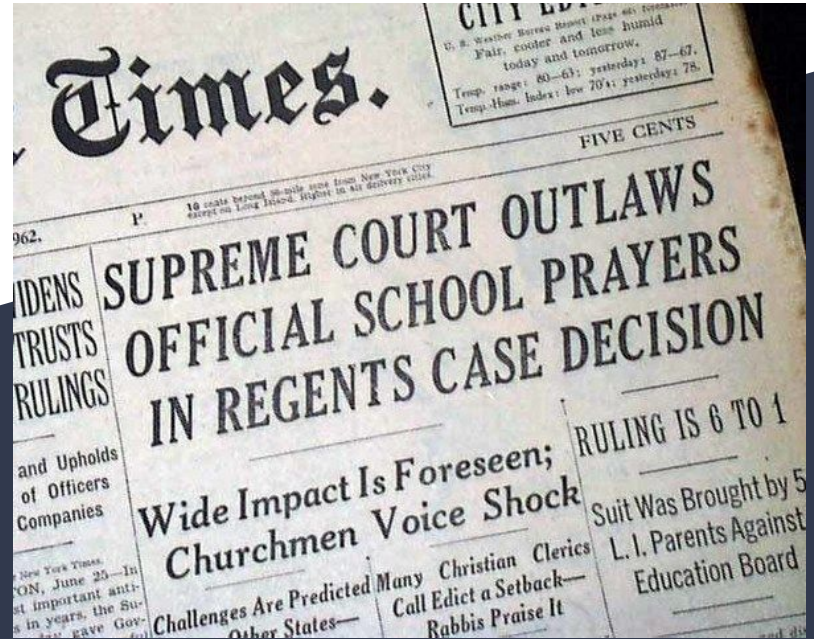


Engel V. Vitale (1962)

Aliyah Gortarez, Lana Rhode, Emilio Figueroa,
Marvin Benallie, Marcos Smith, Grace Ostrop



The Facts of the Case



The New York State Board of Regents authorized a short, voluntary prayer for recitation at the start of each school day that read, “Almighty God, we acknowledge our dependence upon Thee, and we beg Thy blessings upon us, our parents, our teachers, and our country,”

In 1958–59 a group of parents that included Steven Engel, objected to the prayer and sued the school board president, William Vitale. Claiming that it violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment of the Constitution. The prayer, which proponents argued was constitutional because it was voluntary and promoted the free exercise of religion (also protected in the First Amendment), was upheld by New York’s courts, prompting the petitioners to file a successful appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court.

The Decision of the Case.



The court ruled in favor of Engel with a 6 - 1 vote. They stated that even if participation is not required, states cannot hold prayers in schools. It was also stated that recitation of prayers also violated the Establishment clause, specifically the part that is the separation between church and state.

Overview of Opinions

The majority concluded that school-sanctioned prayer violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment which prevents government interference with religion. Justice Black believed that Americans hold religion closely so it would be unconstitutional to force another religion on someone. Justice Douglas claimed that any type of public promotion of religion is unconstitutional while Justice Stewart argued that the Establishment Clause only referred to the prevention of state-sponsored churches.

The First Amendment

The Establishment Clause in the First Amendment prohibits the government from making any law “respecting an establishment of religion.”

The government cannot establish an official religion.

Steven Engel joined by other parents argued that the prayer lead by the school was in direct violation of the establishment clause.

Impact on Society

The court prioritized the individual liberty to be free of government interference.

Is hailed by some as a victory for religious freedom while others see it as a blow to the nation's religious traditions.

Cases that followed

Abington School District v. Schempp:

A Pennsylvania law requires schools to open each day with the pledge of allegiance and a reading from the bible. The court cited the Engel V. Vitale case stating this violated the first amendment.

Santa Fe Independent School District v. Doe:

At a Texas high school a student was chosen before football games to talk to the players and fans. They often said a prayer over the stadium speakers. Some students argued that this was a violation of the first amendment however, the school argued since it was student ran and not sponsored by the school. The court rejected the schools argument stating it is a violation of the first amendment since the prayer was given on the stadium speakers, which is school property.