

Engel v. Vitale / Background •

As you read the background summary of the case below, look for the **important vocabulary terms**. You can find definitions for these terms on the separate vocabulary handout.

In the 1950s students and teachers in New York’s public schools said this school-provided prayer each day: “Almighty God, we acknowledge our dependence upon Thee, and we beg Thy blessings upon us, our parents, our teachers and our country.”

That prayer was written and approved by New York’s public school officials, who recommended that schools say the prayer every morning after the Pledge of Allegiance. A teacher was always in the room when the prayer was said and either led the prayer or chose a student to do so. Students did not have to say the prayer; they could remain silent.

Even though the prayer was **voluntary**, some people, including parent Steven Engel, disagreed with it. They felt that it violated their religious beliefs and practices. They sued William Vitale, the head of the local school board, arguing that saying a prayer at the start of the day in a public school **violated** the First Amendment’s **Establishment Clause**. The Establishment Clause says, “Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion.” The school system argued that the prayer was voluntary and was protected by the **Free Exercise Clause** of the First Amendment, which says “Congress shall make no law ... prohibiting the free exercise” of religion.

The New York courts said it was acceptable to have schools arrange to have students recite the prayer every morning. The **plaintiffs** (parents and students including Engel) then asked the U.S. Supreme Court to review the case. The Court agreed to hear it.

Questions to Consider

1. Why was a prayer included at the start of every school day in New York public schools?

2. Why did Steven Engel and others object to the prayer?

