Prayer and Public Schools

Read Supreme Court decisions through both religion clauses.

USG.C.6.7 "Analyze how the First Amendment protects religious freedom through both the Free Exercise Clause and the Establishment Clause by examining landmark Supreme Court decisions including free exercise cases (e.g., West Virginia v. Barnette..."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline two school rules that restricted religious practice, circle two school-organized prayer practices, and label the competing concerns in the Kennedy paragraph: 1 for individual freedom and 2 for school sponsorship.

Whose Choice Is It?

1. A school can ask students to follow many rules, but some rules collide with conscience. In West Virginia v. Barnette (1943), Jehovah's Witness students objected to saluting the flag. The Supreme Court ruled that public schools could not force students to salute it or recite the pledge. In Wisconsin v. Yoder (1972), Amish parents challenged a rule requiring their children to attend school past eighth grade. The Court allowed an exemption because compulsory attendance seriously burdened their established religious way of life.

2. Other cases ask when a public school crosses the line into promoting religion. In Engel v. Vitale (1962), a state wrote a prayer for students to recite at school; letting students opt out did not make that government-sponsored prayer constitutional. In Lee v. Weisman (1992), a public school invited a clergy member to give prayers at graduation. The Court held that the school's role and the pressure students felt to participate made the practice unconstitutional, even though attending graduation was not required.

3. A different question arose when a football coach prayed after games. In Kennedy v. Bremerton School District (2022), the district restricted his prayers, fearing that observers would see school approval of religion. The Court found that his prayer was personal, not a school-led religious exercise, and protected by the Free Exercise Clause and free speech. The Court rejected the idea that permitting this prayer would violate the Establishment Clause. The key distinction was between a public employee's own religious expression and a school organizing prayer.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did the school rules challenged in Barnette and Yoder affect religious practice in different ways?

2. Why did letting students opt out not solve the problem in Engel? How was Lee similar?

3. Why did the Court treat the coach's prayer in Kennedy differently from the prayers in Engel and Lee?

4. What concern led the district to restrict the coach's prayer, and which protection did the Court say the restriction violated?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Your school allows clubs to meet at lunch. A student-led club asks to pray during its meeting while a teacher supervises but does not join in. Should the school allow it? Explain how both religion clauses apply, using two cases from the passage.

ANSWER KEY

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HIGH SCHOOL · USG.C.6.7

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two school rules that restricted religious practice, circle two school-organized prayer practices, and label the competing concerns in the Kennedy paragraph: 1 for individual freedom and 2 for school sponsorship. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did the school rules challenged in Barnette and Yoder affect religious practice in different ways?	**The rule in Barnette forced students to salute the flag or recite the pledge despite their beliefs. The rule in Yoder required attendance past eighth grade, which burdened the Amish families' religious way of life.**
2	Why did letting students opt out not solve the problem in Engel? How was Lee similar?	**The prayer in Engel was written by the state, so it remained government-sponsored. In Lee, the school arranged graduation prayers, and students felt pressure to participate.**
3	Why did the Court treat the coach's prayer in Kennedy differently from the prayers in Engel and Lee?	**The Court found the coach's prayer to be his personal expression. In Engel and Lee, the government or school organized prayers for students.**
4	What concern led the district to restrict the coach's prayer, and which protection did the Court say the restriction violated?	**The district feared that allowing the prayer would appear to be school approval of religion. The Court said the restriction violated the coach's Free Exercise and free speech rights.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

The school should allow the club to meet under the same rules as other clubs. The students' prayer is their own religious exercise, like the personal expression protected in Kennedy. Engel barred a state-written prayer offered at school, not prayer chosen by students in a club. Because the teacher only supervises, allowing the meeting does not mean the school is organizing a prayer.

Accept responses that distinguish private religious expression from school-sponsored prayer and use two relevant cases accurately. Students may discuss conditions, such as equal access for other clubs and no teacher-led prayer.