

Graduation Prayer in the Public Schools: Questions & Answers



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Introduction

Graduation from high school is a milestone in the lives of young adults. It is a time for families to take pride in the achievements of their children. Particularly in the public schools, graduation ceremonies bring together students and families from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds to collectively celebrate their graduates' successful completion of high school.

Although often well intended, the introduction of prayer or other religious activities at a public school graduation has the potential to undermine the collective spirit of the day. In light of the diversity within our nation's public

schools, such religious activities - whether performed by faculty, clergy, students or others - can cause controversy and divide communities along religious lines. To some students, family members or others present, who do not follow the faith tradition observed as part of a graduation ceremony program, such activities convey an exclusionary message.

Public schools should respect and embrace the religious diversity of all students and their families. The Anti-Defamation League firmly believes that prayer or other religious activities (whether sectarian or non-sectarian) should not be a part of public high school graduation ceremonies. Furthermore, the U.S. Supreme Court and other courts have ruled that school-sponsored prayers at graduation, whether conducted by faculty, clergy or students, are unconstitutional.

A prayer is school-sponsored if a public school administration has control over the prayer or it is “endorsed” -sanctioned - by a school. Whether or not a prayer is school-sponsored is fact- specific and depends on multiple variables, including the answers to such questions as:

- Does the public school administration authorize or invite a person to offer a prayer at a graduation ceremony?
- Does a prayer result from a public school policy or practice?; and/or
- Does the public school in any way control the content or purpose of graduation messages, including prayers, or review them in advance of graduation?

Click on the link below for questions and answers that further examine the legal implications of specific graduation prayer issues in the public schools: