

Handout 3: Supreme Court Case Study 2

Engel v. Vitale (1962)

Background

In the 1960s, students in New York classrooms would start their day by saying the Pledge of Allegiance and an official prayer written by the state. Teachers were required to lead the daily prayer. However, students were not required to say the prayer and could stay silent while the prayer was said. A group of families thought that the state was pressuring their students to participate in a prayer that might go against their religious beliefs.

The group of families sued the state of New York, arguing that saying the official prayer in public school violated the students' rights. The case eventually made it to the Supreme Court.

Constitutional Question Related to This Case

The following question was asked when the case was tried in court.

- Does the reading of a prayer at the start of the school day violate the First Amendment?

The First Amendment	The First Amendment Summary
Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.	The government cannot create an official religion, laws that support official religious activities, or laws that prevent people from practicing their religion. The government must also protect the freedoms of speech, press, assembly, and petition.

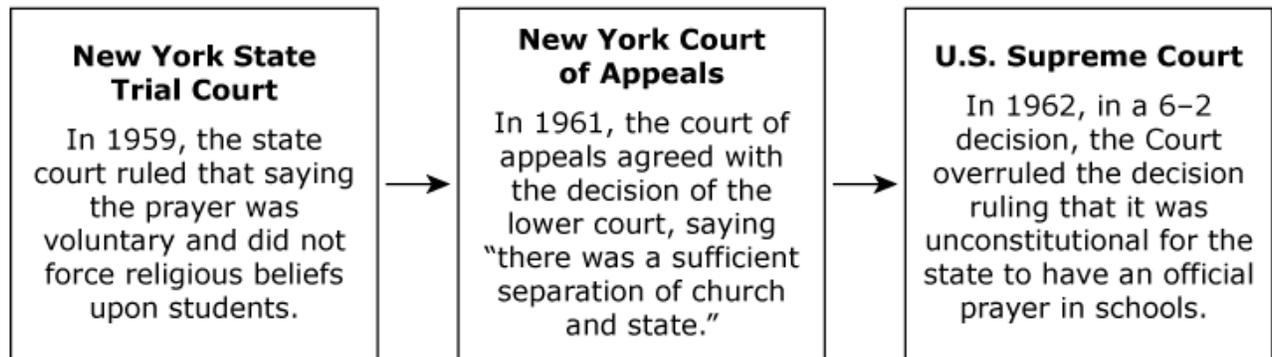
Selected Arguments in the Case

The following are the arguments used by each side when the case was tried in court.

Engel (Parents of Students)	Vitale (New York Public Schools)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Public schools are part of the government and the First Amendment states that the government cannot favor one religion over another.• Saying the prayer aloud pressures children to take part in a religious activity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The United States was founded on religious principles, so the prayer is protected under the U.S. Constitution.• The prayer did not favor one religion over another.• The prayer is voluntary. Children were not required to say the prayer aloud.

The Path to the Supreme Court

The following diagram shows how the case moved through the court system, eventually reaching the Supreme Court.



Impact on the Lives of People in the United States

Before this case, it was common for public schools in the United States to start the day with a prayer. The Court's decision ended this practice. Later, the Supreme Court also decided that organized prayer at school events like football games and graduation ceremonies were also violations of the First Amendment. However, *Engel v Vitale* banned only school-led prayers; students may still pray by themselves or in groups, provided the prayer activity does not disrupt classroom instruction.