

The Prayer Group Dilemma: Choose Your Own Equitable Adventure

Setting: *In a small-town high school where the population is predominantly Christian, the school is known for fostering a close-knit community. Many students have grown up together, attending the same elementary and middle schools, and their families often attend the same churches and participate in community events. This continuity creates a sense of familiarity and shared values among students, teachers, and families. The school takes pride in encouraging strong participation in extracurricular activities like sports, student government, and church-affiliated volunteer groups, which are seen as integral to students' personal and social development.*

However, the school faces challenges in supporting the needs of students from non-Christian backgrounds or those who do not align with the majority culture in other ways. The religious hegemony, while comforting to many, creates an environment where students from religious minorities in U.S. public schools (such as Muslims, Jews, Hindus) and agnostic and atheist students may feel isolated or marginalized. For these students, the school's culture, while welcoming on the surface, may feel exclusionary when it comes to fully participating in the community.

Scenario: A group of Muslim students at the high school has requested to use two empty classrooms during lunchtime for their daily noon prayer—one for boys and one for girls to pray separately. These students have been quietly praying in hallways or stairwells, but they feel uncomfortable and fear being disruptive. When the Muslim students approach the principal to request a designated prayer space, the principal is hesitant. The principal worries that granting the request might be seen as favoring one religion over others and could lead to complaints from parents or other students. The principal tells the students that while they are free to pray on school grounds, they cannot officially sanction the use of classrooms for prayer.

The Muslim students continue to pray in hallways, which draws attention from other students. Some Christian students, noticing the Muslim students praying, decide to organize a "prayer circle" in the middle of the school courtyard during lunch as a public display of their faith. The principal tacitly permits the Christian students' prayer circle, without disruption or comment, viewing it as an expression of free speech and a student-led activity. The Muslim students feel frustrated and singled out, as their private, quiet prayer is restricted to inconvenient and uncomfortable locations, while the Christian students are seemingly allowed a prominent, visible space for their religious expression. The Muslim students seek you out for guidance, questioning why the school is treating these religious expressions differently.

First, a note: What is the difference between intent and impact?

One's **intent** is typically driven by **goals that inform an action**. **Impact** is the resulting **effect of the action**. Sometimes, our goal-based actions are in misalignment with the effect of those actions. In these cases, it is important to consider how your actions were received, rather than focusing on what you *meant* to occur; resistance to [critical self-reflection](#) may reflect that the motives of your intent were self-serving, rather than for the benefit of others.

You cite the similarity between the Christian students creating their own prayer circle, and what the Muslim students were doing before—quietly praying in hallways or stairwells—and suggest the Muslim students just go back to doing that.

Intent:

- The previous arrangement seemed to be working for the Muslim students before, and for the Christian students now, so you believe you are encouraging them to take the situation into their own hands.

Impact:

- The school becomes divided, with tensions rising among students of different religious backgrounds. The lack of clear and equitable policies leads to confusion and resentment—particularly among non-Christian students.

Critical Reflection toward Religious Competency

How can schools balance the rights of students to religious expression with concerns about maintaining a secular environment?



You are unsure how to address the situation and feel caught between supporting your students and adhering to school policies. You begin to feel that the situation highlights a need for clearer guidelines on religious expression in schools.

Intent:

- Defaulting to the principal's decision, assuming their knowledge of school policy and practice, seems to be the best way to go, as rules are in place to protect all students.

Impact:

- Regardless of what is written into policy, the Muslim students feel alienated and unfairly treated—tied directly to their identity. Some consider avoiding prayer during school hours, while others become more vocal in their demands for equitable treatment. The Christian students, on the other hand, feel supported by the school principal but are confused about the claims of disparity in treatment.

Critical Reflection toward Religious Competency

What role should teachers play in advocating for students' rights while respecting school policies and community concerns?



You sympathize with the Muslim students and speak with the principal about finding a fair solution, pointing out that denying the Muslim students a space could be seen as a violation of their religious rights, First Amendment rights, and senses of personhood¹. Additionally, it is within the students' rights to be afforded space to pray (ing.org, n.d.). To reinforce the conversation, you provide the principal supplemental professional development materials from the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center, [*EquiLearn Mini-Module: What Does Freedom of Religion Mean for Students?*](#) (Roscigno & Dalia, 2024) to begin the schoolwide conversation regarding freedom of religion in schools.

Intent:

- You understand that religious practices are core to peoples' beings, and that the Muslim students asking for space to practice—especially if it's not disruptive—is not too much to ask.

Impact:

- The Muslim students feel vindicated and deeply supported by your initiative. The conversation reaches the school board, which decides to implement a policy that allows any student group to use an empty classroom for religious or cultural activities, provided it doesn't disrupt the school day. The policy is communicated clearly to all students and parents, and the school also provides training on religious diversity and inclusion.

¹Section 8524(a) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act, mandates the Secretary of Education to provide guidance on constitutionally protected prayer in public elementary and secondary schools. Additionally, Section 8524(b) requires Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) to certify annually that they have no policies restricting constitutionally protected prayer to receive ESEA funds.



Now what?

Action Steps to Becoming Religiously Competent

- Familiarize yourself with the basic beliefs, practices, holidays, and customs of the religions represented in your school environment. Acknowledge and accommodate all religious holidays in the classroom by avoiding scheduling major tests or events on these days.
- Include [diverse religious perspectives in the curriculum where relevant](#), ensuring that all students see their beliefs represented positively.
- Communicate with parents and students about any specific religious needs, such as dietary restrictions or prayer times, and work to accommodate them.
- Encourage respectful discussions about religion, allowing students to share their beliefs [without fear of judgment or discrimination](#).
- Use inclusive language that does not assume all students share the same religious beliefs or practices.
- Be aware of the school's policies regarding religious expression, accommodation, and curriculum.
- [Participate in professional development opportunities](#) focused on religious literacy and cultural competence. Work with other teachers and staff to share best practices for religious competence and to support each other in creating an inclusive environment.

Meet the Author

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