

American Government & Politics: A Christian Worldview.
The Classroom Battlefield: School Prayer v. Private Speech (15–25 Minutes)

TEACHER INSTRUCTIONS

Goal

In this activity, students contrast the government's role in *Engel v. Vitale* (1962) with the rights of private citizens in *Good News Club v. Milford Central School* (2001) to understand the difference between a government-led prayer and private religious speech. They also address the overall key question of what government's legitimate function is regarding education.

Instructions

1. Put students in pairs or small groups.
2. If you'd like, you can read the historical context paragraph together, or ask for a student volunteer. Or you can just tell students to read the historical context paragraph silently, and then discuss the key phrases and analysis questions together.
3. Give students 10–12 minutes to answer these questions in pairs/small groups (more or less, of course, based on your classroom time).
4. Ask for volunteers to answer; get several per question if possible!

Suggested Part 2 Key

1. AWV, but one new potential issue created by the ruling is that a number of witchcraft and Satan-worshipping clubs have begun to pop up as a result of the ruling.
2. AWV, but as the answer to the first question mentioned, if schools prevent “viewpoint discrimination,” they must allow have voluntary clubs that violate the consciences of many taxpayers (LGBTQ clubs, etc.).

Here's another key question related to this topic: If schools approve certain clubs because those clubs taught students “character” like the Boy Scouts and 4-H, who gets to define “character”? This opens up an entire other can of worms.
3. AWV, but likely many students will say it isn't, that most kids are smart enough to know that the Good News Club is not the same thing as school (all the other kids have gone home, as the GNC meets *after* school; their teachers are not the ones teaching the GNC lessons, etc.). Justice Clarence Thomas addressed this rather spurious claim by the dissenting Supreme Court justices in this case by writing in his decision, “We decline to employ Establishment Clause jurisprudence using a modified heckler's veto, in which a group's religious activity can be proscribed on the basis of what the youngest students might misperceive.”
4. AWV, but again, the Bible proves its prescience by limiting the proper functions of government to discouraging and punishing forms of violence, theft, fraud, damage, and so on. Government should have nothing to do with education whatsoever, unless it involves some aspect of preventing or punishing violence or fraud.

America finds itself in a situation in which school board elections have become practically life-and-death battles, with one side (“conservative” or “liberal,” for example) trying to win so it can assert its dominance over the other side by way of controlling how the taxes collected from ALL local homeowners are spent in curriculum, teachers, and so on. A much better solution would be to totally end government schools and the taxes that fund them, allow families to pay for their own children's education, and watch as many free-for-the-poor schools funded by charities, churches, and organizations start popping up everywhere. (This is exactly what happened in America before local, state, and federal government began to involve themselves in education.)

American Government & Politics: A Christian Worldview.

The Classroom Battlefield: School Prayer v. Private Speech

Part 1 – Historical Context. Almost 40 years after *Engel v. Vitale*, a private Christian organization (Child Evangelism Fellowship) asked to use a public school classroom after school hours for Bible lessons and scripture memorization. The school district said “No,” claiming that because the club’s activities were “religious in nature,” allowing them on campus would make the school look like it was endorsing a religion (violating the First Amendment’s “Establishment Clause”). The organization sued, the case went to the Supreme Court (*Good News Club v. Milford Central School*), and Child Evangelism Fellowship won the case in 2001.

Source	Key Phrases from Justices Ruling on the Case
<i>Engel v. Vitale</i> (Majority Opinion)	“It is no part of the business of government to compose official prayers...for any group of the American people to recite.” ... “The First Amendment was added to the Constitution to stand as a guarantee that neither what the people can do for their government nor what government can do for the people shall be dependent upon the government’s religious viewpoint.”
<i>Engel v. Vitale</i> (Dissent)	“I cannot see how an ‘official religion’ is established by letting those who want to say a prayer say it. On the contrary...to deny the wish of these school children to join in reciting this prayer is to deny them the opportunity of sharing in the spiritual heritage of our Nation.”
<i>Good News Club v. Milford Central School</i> (Majority Opinion)	“When the State, as a speaker, chooses a...viewpoint, it may censor other viewpoints. But when it creates a limited public forum, it may not do so...the State’s restriction discriminates against the Club’s subject matter...instruction and prayer...from a religious viewpoint.” ... “Establishment Clause concerns are not a sufficient reason to justify viewpoint discrimination.”
<i>Good News Club v. Milford Central School</i> (Dissent)	“The Court is blind to the reality that a young child may not distinguish between an after-school event and school-sponsored activity.”

Part 2 – Analysis

1. **The “Business of Government”:** In *Engel*, the Court’s majority asserted that the government was overstepping by writing prayers. Does the *Good News Club* decision fix this by keeping the government out of the “speech-policing” business, or can you think of any potential new problems created?
2. **Viewpoint Discrimination:** The school in the *Good News Club* case allowed the Boy Scouts and 4-H club to meet after hours (they discuss “character development”). When they blocked the Good News Club, the Court ruled it was “viewpoint discrimination” because the school was allowing other clubs to teach character, but punishing this one for using a religious “viewpoint” to teach character. Does this ruling protect Christian students or just create a “free-for-all” on school grounds?
3. **The Dissent’s Fear:** The dissenting justices in the *Good News Club* case said that some elementary school children couldn’t tell the difference between the school’s math class and the club’s Bible lesson. Is this a legitimate concern of the school? Why or why not?
4. **Back to Basics:** What issue about government and education do these cases fail to get to the root of? How would following the Bible’s standards on the legitimate purposes of government better address the issues brought up by these cases? (**Fact to consider:** All homeowners in a city/county pay property taxes, and part of these taxes go to pay for local government schools.)