



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2004 Volume I: The Supreme Court in American Political History

In God We Trust: Public Schools and Religious Freedom

Guide for Curriculum Unit 04.01.03
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Most Americans today agree that the United States should not have an established church and are opposed to religious persecution in any form. There is still wide disagreement among citizens on the proper role of religion and religious expression in our public schools. How high is the so-called "wall of separation" of church and state? Has the United States Supreme Court totally removed prayer and the Bible from public schools, or do students still have a limited right to freedom of religious expression? What are the legal limits and guidelines for respecting the minority point of view? Is God a proper subject for discussion in the public schools or not?

This unit is written for middle or high school students in United States History, Government or Civics classes. The unit documents some of the history behind the current debate about religious freedom and the public schools, beginning with the colonial period when required religious instruction promoted Christian values and virtues as a way of passing these values down to succeeding generations of children. After the Constitution was ratified, established churches gave up their control over public education, but religious values were still widely promoted and reading the Bible was encouraged in schools. It wasn't until the 1960s that the Supreme Court struck down compulsory school prayer and Bible readings as violations of the establishment clause of the Constitution. Students engaged in this unit will discover why people on both sides of the religion debate have fought so hard to protect their freedoms. Should it matter that the phrase "under God" remain in the Pledge of Allegiance? Does it matter that some find offensive any mention of God in a public setting? The issues in this unit will challenge my students to appreciate the protections of the law, and the freedom to express their personal values and opinions in a public school setting. The Lesson Plan section focuses on the issues surrounding the 2004 Pledge of Allegiance case and the "moment of silence" laws; documents for teachers are included.

(Recommended for U.S History, Civics and Law, grades 10-12.)

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