

Did you know?

(The third in a series of articles exploring religious education in government schools.)

Praying

One of the most difficult questions is whether teachers can pray with groups of students. It is a difficult question because what is legal and what is appropriate are not always the same in our increasingly multifaith society.

When the state took over responsibility for education, general religious education (GRE) was Christian and prayer by Christians was consistent with that Act. In the past many teachers would pray with their class at the beginning of the day, possibly using a school prayer that was distinctly Christian. The only requirement was that the prayer be non-denominational.

The Rawlinson Committee into *Religious Education in NSW Government Schools*, 1981, recommended broadening the meaning of GRE to include other faiths. The implications for prayer in schools was set out in a memorandum in 1996 on *School Prayers* which indicates that a school prayer should be inclusive and not faith specific. While this is clear advice for school prayers and for consistency with the desired meaning of GRE, it does not answer the question about Christian teachers praying with their class or groups of students.

The difficult answer is that it might be legal but is it appropriate? Christians work by the *law of love* and imposing religious practice on people of other faiths, or no faith, could be considered inconsistent with this law. Although parents can withdraw their children from GRE, including prayers, it should never get to this stage on the issue of teachers praying in class.

A different perspective sometimes helps to understand this point. Parents might feel concerned if their child's teacher, a Muslim, stopped all children from eating and drinking during the daytime for the length of Ramadan. Other parents may express similar concerns when religious practices are imposed on students, including prayers.