

# Prayer meetings...

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Nebraska made national headlines two years ago when Cass County Attorney Ron Moravec prosecuted the Rev. Everett Sileven for operating an unapproved Christian school in Louisville. Sileven and many parents appeared before the Legislature in February 1983 to support bills that would have allowed unapproved schools to teach Nebraska children. Religious schools could operate with non-certified teachers, or parents could teach children in their homes.

The bills died, but the effort again raised questions about what makes a good education. One parent noted:

"Educators talk about teaching kids values and morals. This is

offensive to us because they can't use the Bible as a basis for anything. They won't even acknowledge God."

Other states faced equally tense struggles, many over school prayer. In August 1984, President Reagan signed the Equal Access Act into law to further clarify the McCollum ruling. Dick Kurtenbach, executive director of the Nebraska Civil Liberties Union, briefly summed up the significance of the act: — It allowed private practice of religious beliefs in public schools, based on guarantees of freedom of religious and political speech; for example, private prayer or meditation in classrooms is allowed. — It more clearly defines the difference between religious speech and religious practice.

The American Civil Liberties Union lists some examples of the difference between speech and practice, Kurtenbach said. Religious speech would include academic study of the Bible as literature, philosophical discussions on religious issues and comparative study of religions. Practice includes formal religious ritual, such as prayer services, mass or communion.

"The Equal Access Act doesn't change the Supreme Court's ruling on organized religion," Kurtenbach said. "It just more clearly defines the difference between organized practice and freedom of religious speech."

Kurtenbach said "common sense" helps distinguish such differences.

"Religious freedom works two ways," he said. "We have the right to practice religion free of government interference. But the government cannot allow religion to interfere with public education."

In other words, governments cannot promote or discourage religious practice or belief — especially when applied to a "good education."

Now the Lincoln Board of Education is considering a policy to allow students to use school buildings for religious or political meetings. The meetings would not be held during class hours, nor would they be school sponsored. The policy is worded following Equal Access Act guidelines, according to school attorney Ed Perry.

Neither school staff members nor outsiders could conduct these meetings, but staffers could be present. In other words, students can organize Bible study or prayer groups, but ministers couldn't lead them.

The school board will take action on the policy Dec. 11.

Kurtenbach stressed that the Equal Access Act is not limited to religious meetings, and did not have the stated intent of "fostering the practice of religion in schools."

He also said that the NCLU intends to monitor the policy, but at this stage tentatively approves the policy as explained by Perry because of the use of language following the Equal Access Act.

But the policy has the potential to cause many problems. The courts and the lawmakers still have not clearly delineated the difference between prayer as religious speech and prayer as religious practice.

Lincoln is a fairly homogeneous city, but there are still many religions practiced within its boundaries. The yellow pages in the city directory show 58 denominations and divisions of denominations, each with several churches listed below. How will Lincoln afford equal access for all of these groups? Will dominant, majority religions take precedence over the African Methodist Episcopal or the Jehovah's Witnesses?

"These are the questions a federal judge will face if the Equal Access Act is pressed," Kurtenbach said. "How will equal access apply to a school setting?"

As noted before, Lincoln abounds with strong, enthusiastic churches, most with youth programs and study groups. There is no need to bring prayer meetings into schools: Such action could be ruled religious practice, or it could lead to clearly organized practice of religion in public schools.

The policy may follow the Equal Access Act's guidelines in every intent and purpose, but the act itself has inherent problems. Religious meetings of all kinds should be held in chosen churches, where religious leaders can lead them and school officials will be involved and affected only if they so choose. They can devote the rest of their time to doing what they do best — giving children a "good education."

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