

Case Study: Protesting the Pledge (1942)

EXPLORE THE DEBATE

Should students in public schools be required to salute and pledge allegiance to the flag?

THE CASE

You are the principal of a school in Charleston, W.Va. Your school district requires all students each morning to recite the Pledge of Allegiance while standing and extending an open arm to the United States flag. The district feels this practice encourages patriotism and good citizenship.

Two of your students — sisters — have objected to this policy. As Jehovah's Witnesses, these students say it is against their religion to honor objects, idols or earthly governments. Their father has instructed them not to perform the salute or pledge.

When they first refused to participate, you sent them home for their behavior. But now they are refusing to participate day after day. Because they don't want to be marked truant or tardy, they arrive in time for the pledge but remain seated during it. Each time, you've sent them home.

Their behavior is becoming a distraction, and now the girls' family is threatening to sue the school district for violating their freedom of religion and speech, which are protected by the First Amendment.

Should you push the school district to change its policy and allow students to sit out this ritual?

DEBATE POSITIONS

- 1. Yes. Schools can keep the salute and pledge, but participation should not be mandatory.**
 - The school district should not force individuals to do things that go against their religious beliefs. Schools should compromise to protect individual beliefs and expression.
- 2. No. Allowing some students to not participate in the salute and pledge will do harm to your school community.**
 - The pledge is not a religious practice; it is a demonstration of good citizenship and a show of national unity. Student's individual rights must be flexible to work with school policies that are made for the greater good.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Should protecting First Amendment freedom of speech and religion be more important than protecting school rules or practices?
- Do you agree with the family's claims that such a requirement violates their freedom of religion? What about their freedom of speech?
- As a principal, do you think saluting the flag and pledging allegiance are important in teaching civics and/or history? Does it help establish school unity?
- Is there a difference between distractive behavior and disruptive behavior? Does it matter in this case?
- Can you think of ways that might respect the family's wishes and still maintain decorum in the classroom? What about making the students stand but not salute? Or having them wait outside the classroom door?