



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on March 11, 2013

Mississippi Legislature Passes School Prayer Bill

Mississippi lawmakers have passed legislation that would legalize student-led prayer in the state's public schools. Senate Bill 2633, which went to Gov. Phil Bryant March 6 for his signature, would also allow students to talk about their faith in the classroom and organize school Bible clubs, as well as pray at football games, graduation ceremonies, and during morning announcements.



Sponsors of the bill said that secular groups have intimidated and confused school administrators about the legality of religious expression in schools, and the law is meant to bring clarity. According to those on both sides of the issue, "Organized school prayer remains widespread in Mississippi, despite opponents' efforts to curtail it," reported the [Associated Press](#). "In October, for example, the ACLU sent a letter to the Lincoln County school system demanding a halt to routine prayer at West Lincoln High School."

The bill's proponents insist it will not force students to pray, but will enable them to do so voluntarily. But Bear Atwood, director of Mississippi's ACLU chapter, argued that students who do not wish to pray would still be a captive audience. [Christianity Today](#) quoted Atwood as saying that the new law could also lead to procedural issues and unwanted favoritism, such as with "school administrators selecting which students lead prayer in announcements or before a basketball game."

One of the leaders in the campaign for school prayer over the past several years has been Republican State Rep. Mark Formby, who has introduced a school prayer bill every year since 2009. He said the measure is meant to dispel all confusion about what students can and cannot do in school relative to religious expression, including wearing religious-themed clothing, discussing their faith in the classroom, and voluntarily praying at school-sponsored events. "I'm not so much worried about what's allowed as what's disallowed," Formby told [Fox News](#). He added that he has had many conversations with parents concerned about the issue, and the bill is meant to clear the air. Formby explained that the measure "doesn't have to restore school prayer," but it "will allow children, on a voluntary basis, to pray or not to pray."

However, other proponents of school prayer hope the measure is merely the first step in allowing one and all to voluntarily pray in public schools. "People ask me if this is a step toward getting prayer back in schools," Paul Ott, a Christian radio and television host, told Fox. "I think this is THE step to getting prayer back in schools."

While it is almost certain that if signed by the governor, the law will face legal challenges, its chief sponsor, State Sen. Chris McDaniel, said he is confident it will stand up to any lawsuit. "What this does," he explained "is make clear that the expressive conduct [student prayer] is not that of the state. If the conduct is not that of the state, then the Supreme Court has said that speech is protected speech, even if it's religious. So, the ACLU, if they claim it's unconstitutional, they're dead wrong and we look forward to our day in court, if that's the case."



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