

California Parents Sue Over Religious Yoga Classes in Grade School

The parents of two California grade school students have sued to block the teaching of yoga classes they complain promote eastern religions, saying children who exercise their choice to opt out of the popular program face bullying and teasing.

The Encinitas Unified School District, near San Diego, began the program in September to teach Ashtanga yoga as part of the district's physical education program—and school officials insist the program does not teach any religion.

Lawyers for the parents challenging the yoga program disagreed.

“As a **First Amendment** lawyer, I wouldn't go after an exercise program. I don't go after people for stretching,” said attorney Dean Broyles, who heads the National Center on Law and Policy, which filed the suit on Wednesday in a San Diego court.

“But Ashtanga yoga is a religious-based yoga, and if we are separating **church and state**, we can't pick and choose religious favorites,” he said.

The lawsuit is the latest twist in a broader national clash over the separation of religion from public education that has seen spirited debate on issues ranging from the permissibility of student-led prayer to whether science instructors can teach alternatives to evolution.

The lawsuit, which does not seek any monetary damages, objects to eight-limbed tree posters they say are derived from Hindu beliefs, the Namaste greeting and several of the yoga poses

that they say represent the worship of Hindu deities.

According to the suit, a \$533,000 grant from the Jois Foundation, which supports yoga in schools, allowed the school district to assign 60 minutes of the 100 minutes of physical education required each week to Ashtanga yoga, taught in the schools by Jois-certified teachers.

Broyles said that while children are allowed to opt out of the yoga program, they are not given other exercise options.

"The kids who are opting out are getting teased and bullied," he said. "We have one little girl whose classmates told her her parents are stupid because she opted out. That's not supposed to happen in our schools."

Encinitas schools Superintendent Tim Baird said the suit was unfounded and that the district had worked with parents who had concerns as they developed and implemented the program.

"We are disappointed by the suit. We thought we had worked well with the concerned parents and had resolved their concerns," he added.

Encinitas resident Dave Peck said his law firm had offered to represent the school district for free but was turned down and is now working with parents who support teaching yoga in schools. He called the lawsuit "a tortured attempt to find indoctrination where none exists."

"There is really no dispute as to the physical and mental health benefits of the yoga program—teachers and parents throughout the district have raved about noticeable improvement in the students' focus," said Peck, whose children attend Encinitas schools.

"We reject the argument that yoga poses constitute the practice of Hinduism as both a matter of law and common sense. There is absolutely nothing religious or spiritual about the

classroom instruction," he said.

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