

Over 100 Pastors Take Public Schools to the Mat for Promoting Eastern Religion

If you think clergy will remain silent as local students are instructed in class to practice Eastern Religion, don't hold your breath. Pastors are sounding off and telling schools the practice of yoga "poses" a major problem.

Over 100 clergymen are chiming in by sending a correspondence to 39 school districts across the region, including the State Board of Education. According to the clergymen, yoga is not merely an external physical practice with a physiological effect, but rather, an internal spiritual practice advertised as being spiritually transformative.

Courts have repeatedly ruled yoga and meditation are religious practices. A 1988 Arkansas case commonly known as *Powell v. Perry* concluded that "yoga is a method of practicing Hinduism." The 9th District Court of Appeals ruled in a 1995 case that the "Hindu-Yoga spiritual tradition" is a "religious tradition."

The clergy contend schools are in violation of the Establishment Clause. In their letter, the clergy focused on several cases of public schools permitting instruction of Eastern Religion during school hours in Clear Fork, Galion, Lexington, Lucas, Mansfield and Shelby school districts.

"We have a family in our congregation with sons that were instructed to practice yoga," says Rabbi William Hallbrook of Sar Shalom Center. "This is contrary to their religious beliefs. I do not think we can take this lightly. We need to take this [yoga] out of the public school systems. I believe it is harming our children."

This past January, the family's mother testified to the Lexington School Board that her sons were coerced to participate in yoga activities during class without her permission and against their will.

Episodes the mother cited included a music teacher in March 2017 showing a video instructing third-grade students to do postures "bowing to the sun god," and using "devotional praying hands" in front of their heart. In April 2018, a life-skills teacher allegedly showed a video to seventh-graders discussing the practice of yoga and how to collect life-giving forces of the universe.

In fact, according to the mother a language arts teacher in August 2019 pressured her sixth-grader to daily perform yoga postures, rebuking the class by saying, "You are not too cool to not do this [yoga]."

Several individual attempts were recently made by area clergy to address the promotion of Eastern Religion in Galion, Lucas, Mansfield and Shelby Schools. Only the Lucas superintendent has responded, saying it was a one-time event only.

The clergy stated in their corporate letter: "This diverse body of faith leaders concurs with the Judicial Branch and Eastern Religion experts that yoga is a form of Eastern Religion. As clergymen representing one hundred and five congregations, we are requesting a written response from the Boards of the listed school districts assuring yoga and any forms of transcendental meditation will not be permitted within their school districts during school hours."

Along with the letter, the clergy attached copies of the updated "Guidance on Constitutionally Protected Prayer and Religious Expression," from the Department of Education. They concluded the letter by saying "the American Center for Law & Justice (ACLJ) will be notified about the listed incidents. The ACLJ has launched a national petition and initiated

forthcoming litigation regarding this matter.”

In Plain School District, Stark County parents took issue with the morning yoga routine for all 300 students involving a Tibetan bell and yoga poses. The elementary school also had a “mindfulness room” featuring scrolls containing quotes by the Dalai Lama. Consequently, the school district took action and discontinued the program in 2013.

Pastor Henry Bradley of New Community Temple Church of God in Christ suggests local school districts currently promoting yoga may not be aware of less controversial alternatives.

“There are scientifically proven alternatives that include aerobic exercise, napping, and healthy lunches which could provide students better focus skills, improved health, and higher academic performance. Why not try these instead of promoting religious practices that will lead to court litigation? What the schools are doing now is Eastern Religion indoctrination.”

The American Yoga Association has advised against yoga for children under age 16 because postures can interfere with still-growing bodies.

In regards to exercise and stress relief, pastors believe yoga is distinctly different from other forms of exercise like tennis or golf. One study finds yoga is maintained for spiritual purposes and not for exercise.

“Even if yoga is disputed as a form of religious practice, there is little doubt on the effects of yoga, ” says Dr. Mark Hamilton, an associate professor of philosophy at Ashland University and pastor at Providence Church. “A study found over 62% of students in secular yoga change their primary reason for practicing. Most initiate yoga practice for exercise and stress relief, but the study concluded for many, spirituality becomes their primary reason for maintaining practice. This is not seen in other forms of exercise.”

At any rate, clergy in the Buckeye Bible Belt are keeping school officials on their toes concerning Eastern Religion. Now school boards will decide whether to resolve the matter locally, or in federal court.

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