

# Catholic Courier

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## Guidelines open schools to more religious activity

Bibles, rosaries and other religious items may take their place in public-school lockers this fall, alongside the clutter of textbooks, notebooks and gym clothes.

Despite widespread public opinion to the contrary, no U.S. court actually ever forbade the presence of such items on public-school grounds. In fact, it has been students, parents, teachers and administrators — not the federal courts — who have interpreted the Supreme Court's rulings against school-sponsored prayer and similar activities to mean that religion has absolutely no place in a public school.

In August, however, the U.S. Department of Education issued guidelines to every school superintendent in the country, making clear that students are entitled to more legal freedoms than restrictions when it comes to expressing their faith in public schools.

The guidelines emphasize, for example, that students have the right to pray individually or in groups and to discuss their religious views with their peers, so long as such activity does not become harassment.

Additionally, student religious groups have the same right to use their activities — through such media as the school newspaper or yearbook — as any that are possessed by non-religious groups, the guidelines state.

But school administrators and teachers, on the other hand, are much more strict about religious activities. School officials must remain strictly neutral on student religious expression, neither encouraging nor discouraging it, the guidelines state.

However, such administration-endorsed activities as school-sponsored prayer and invocations at commencement ceremonies are still forbidden for public schools.

According to government officials, the education department decided to issue the guidelines in an effort to stem a seemingly endless series of lawsuits filed against school districts both by proponents of religion in public schools and opponents of school-sponsored faith activities.

August W. Steinhilber, general counsel of the National School Boards Association, noted that religion is the primary source of conflicts his office is asked to address, far exceeding litigation related to access for the handicapped and sexual harassment, the second- and third-largest categories, respectively.

Steinhilber made that point during an Aug. 30 Washington, D.C., press conference at which U.S. Education Secretary Richard Riley announced the new guidelines.

Steinhilber said the guidelines clarify the basic points of law on student prayer, religious discussion, religious content of classroom materials and religious neutrality about religion and other topics, the guidelines will give administrators and school boards a quick reference for addressing those issues that arise most commonly, Steinhilber said.

"We can't expect the principals to know all the laws and Supreme Court rulings," he added.

"School boards have been caught in the cross fire," Steinhilber said, noting that groups ranging from ultra-conservative to ultra-liberal have used questions about religion in public schools to pursue their own agendas.

Continued on page 10

Story by Ben Callahan, Staff Writer

Photo illustration by S. John Wilkin, Staff Photographer

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