

# Florida may expand prayer, religious expression in public schools

[Scott Travis](#)



All Florida students could soon be free to publicly pray and share religious views in school.

Lawmakers are considering a bill that would clarify, and in some cases expand, how students can express their religious beliefs in public schools.

"I grew up in an America where you were free to express your faith. There was no intimidation. You could say Jesus out loud," said Sen.

Dennis Baxley, R-Ocala, the bill's sponsor. "The pendulum has swung so far, and there's been a chilling effect on people of faith expressing and being who they are."

Under the "Florida Student and School Personnel Religious Liberties Act," which passed the Senate's Education Committee on Monday:

- School districts could not discriminate against students, parents or school personnel based on their "religious viewpoint or religious expression."
- Students would be allowed to express their religious beliefs in written or oral assignments.
- Students could wear clothing, accessories and jewelry that display a religious message or symbol to the same extent secular messages or symbols are allowed.
- Students could pray and engage in or organize religious activities before, during or after school.
- Teachers and other school employees could not be prevented from participating in religious activities on school grounds before or after school, as long the activities were initiated by students and didn't conflict with the employees' job responsibilities.

School districts and individual schools currently have different interpretations on whether these types of religious activities are allowed, and they need clarity, Baxley said.

One of the incidents cited Monday occurred in Broward County in 2014. A 12-year-old student at [Park Lakes Elementary](#) in Lauderdale Lakes was told he couldn't read the Bible during a free reading period. Broward Schools Superintendent Robert Runcie later apologized and

said the teacher's actions were wrong.

John Sullivan, director of legislative affairs for Broward County schools, said he doesn't think the proposal would have a major effect on the district.

"It's our understanding that our non-discrimination policy already covers this," he said. "We're in line so I don't see many changes we would need to make."

The Palm Beach County School District declined to comment.

Critics say the proposal could lead teachers and students to proselytize.

"It creates a situation where one person is imposing his or her religious beliefs or practices or denigrating religion on others," said David Barkey, a lawyer for the Southeastern area of the Anti-Defamation League. "This is a very sensitive issue for the Jewish community because there is a long and unfortunate history of our children being subjected to religious coercion in public schools."

Florida Citizens for Science, a group that advocates for the teaching of evolution, also has voiced concerns. The provision that allows teachers to express their religious views "can kick open the door for creationists and even climate change deniers in instructional positions to freely express their anti-science views in the classroom," the group wrote on its blog.

But Anthony Verdugo, founder of the Miami-based Christian Family

Coalition of Florida, said the bill is needed. He said he received a complaint last week that a student was forced to remove her necklace with a cross because a teacher said it could be a gang symbol.

"This is an equality bill. It prohibits discrimination," he said. "I don't think there's a member in the Legislature that supports discrimination."

[stravis@sunsentinel.com](mailto:stravis@sunsentinel.com), [561-243-6637](tel:561-243-6637) or Twitter [@smtravis](https://twitter.com/smtravis)