

Religion in Public Schools

The role of religion in public schools has long been a topic of debate, with some people arguing that religious practices such as prayer and Bible reading belong in the schools of a historically Christian nation, while others argue that the separation of church and state demands that religion be kept out of schools altogether. Politicians and school administrators, who have to make decisions about the place of religion in public schools, often look to the results of survey research to gauge how the public feels about such issues.

So what are the opinions of the public when it comes to religion in public schools? Does the right of free speech mean that teachers and students should be allowed to pray in schools, or does the separation of church and state preclude religious activity on campus? In this learning module, we explore the opinions of average Americans.

Open your web browser and go to the homepage for the Association of Religion Data Archives (at www.theARDA.com).

Begin by locating the *State of the First Amendment Survey, 2005* on the ARDA website. For assistance locating a data file on the ARDA, click [here](#).

Using information from the summary page for this survey, answer the following question:

1. How many people were interviewed for the *State of the First Amendment Survey, 2005*?

Some people in the United States feel that students in schools are given just the right amount of religious freedom. In other words, they believe students are given enough freedom to preserve their freedom of religion, but not so much that it affects the separation of church and state. Others feel that students don't have enough freedom to express their religious beliefs, and still others feel they have too much. Let us explore Americans' feelings about religious freedom in schools.

Find the variable labeled PBSCRLFR (variable #25). For assistance locating a specific variable on the ARDA, click [here](#).

2. What question is being asked in the variable PBSCRLFR?



3. As a whole, are Americans most likely to feel that students have too little, too much, or just the right amount of religious freedom in schools?

While the majority of Americans share the same opinion when it comes to religious freedom in schools, a large percentage of Americans do not. However, these differing viewpoints may not be distributed randomly. Certain types of people may be more or less likely to feel certain ways about different issues. Let us look at how different types of Americans answered the question above. Click on the “Analyze results” link below the question.

4. Next, look at the table that shows how Americans of different faiths answered the question about religious freedom [i.e., the table titled “Religion (I-RELIGION)”]. Fill in the following table with the percentage of people who fall into each category:

	No Religious Affiliation	Catholic	Protestant	Jewish	Other
Students have too much religious freedom					
Students have too little religious freedom					

5. Which religious group was most likely to report that students have too much religious freedom? Which religion was most likely to report that students have too little freedom?

So far we've examined how Americans feel about the amount of religious freedom students are given in school and how their responses differed based on their religion. Now, let's look at some of the more specific issues regarding the place of religion in schools. Locate the variable PBSPST10 (variable #46).

6. What question is being asked?

7. What is the most common response to this question? What is the second most common response?

You may have noticed that most of the people who answered that question either said they "Strongly Agree" or "Strongly Disagree." When people give responses that tend to be high and low, we say that they are "polarized" on that issue.

8. What are some other issues relating to religion and school where the public might be "polarized"?

As we mentioned earlier, people's responses to questions can be different depending on what they are like and what they do. Click on the "Analyze Results" link under this question.

Once again you will see several tables indicating how different types of people responded to this question.

The first table on the page shows how people of different ages responded to the question about posting the Ten Commandments inside school buildings.

9. Do people who believe the Ten Commandments should be posted in schools tend to be younger or older?

People who are similar in age often have similar opinions since they grew up at the same time period and are members of the same generation.

Next, return to the main codebook page and find the question labeled SEASPRO (variable #49). Click on the “Analyze Results” link and scroll down to the table titled “Age (I-AGE).”

10. Overall, are older people more or less likely to want schools to put on Nativity reenactments with Christian music? Describe what you found below:

In this last section we examined the relationship between age and the display of Christian symbols and stories in schools.

Let’s examine the distribution of religious materials to school students. Find the variable labeled ALRELINF (variable #50). This question asks whether schools should be allowed to send home information about religious youth programs.

11. Click the “Analyze results” link and complete the following:

Percent who “Strongly disagree” that schools should be allowed to send home information about religious youth programs and groups.

18–30 years old _____

31–44 years old _____

45–61 years old _____

62+ years old _____

Let's have a look at another dataset collected slightly more recently. Go to the *Baylor Religion Survey, Wave II Instructional Dataset*. There are two questions in this survey that pertain to religion in public schools. Find them by going to the Codebook, pressing Ctrl+F and typing "public school" into the search box that appears.

12. What does the first question ask? (Hint: The variable is labeled PRAYSCHL).

13. Click the "Analyze Results" link. Which religious group is most likely to "Strongly Agree"? Does worship attendance seem to affect someone's likelihood of strongly agreeing with the statement in the question? How so?

Even more recently, a related question was asked in the General Social Survey (GSS). Go to the *General Social Survey 2014 – Instructional Dataset*. Click on the Codebook, press Ctrl+F and type "prayer".

14. What does question #158 (PRAYER) ask?

15. How is this question different to the PRAYSCHL question from the Baylor Religion Survey?

16. Are you surprised by the percentage of people who disagree with the Supreme Court's ruling about requiring the Lord's Prayer in public schools? Why or why not?

As you may have noticed from the previous questions, people are often in favor of religion in schools in some ways, but against religion in schools in other ways.

In this learning module we looked at peoples' beliefs about religion in schools and how they vary according to religion and age. Also, we saw that different kinds of people can have different ideas about how religion should be allowed into schools. If the past is any indication, the role of religion in schools will continue to be a matter of debate for years to come.