

PRAYER IN SCHOOL ISSUE HEATS UP AGAIN

Three major developments regarding the perennial issue of prayer in the schools recently occurred.

On October 29, the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear a challenge to a state law in Virginia requiring a minute of silence in the schools. On the legislative front, Rep. Ernest Istook of Oklahoma announced on the same day that he plans to reintroduce a constitutional amendment that would allow religious expression, including prayer, to take place on public property without interference by the authorities. And on November 15, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a non-binding resolution encouraging public schools to set aside prayer time for students.

The fact that the high court deferred to the state legislature in Virginia suggests the judges do not want to upset the apple cart on this tender issue in post 9-11 America.

Rep. Istook's constitutional amendment would bar state sponsorship of religion and would also prohibit the preferential treatment of one religion over the other. This would simply affirm the status quo. But what it would also do is protect the right of citizens, including students, to voluntarily exercise religious speech on public property.

The Catholic League publicly thanked Rep. Istook for courageously broaching the issue. "Those opposed to the Istook amendment," said William Donohue, "should not take this opportunity to further demagogue the issue; rather they should dispassionately seek to persuade us why censoring religious speech is the American way."

Regarding the vote by the House, even though it was non-binding, the fact that it passed 297-125 sent an important

message to friends and foes of the amendment alike.

We expect that people of faith will continue to seize this special moment and demand that their religious liberty rights be fully restored.