

Suit says Cobb schools ‘capitulated’ to Christians in yoga flap



Yoga in schools. (San Diego Union-Tribune)

By [Ty Tagami](#)

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An assistant principal who says she introduced yoga into her Cobb County school to calm down disruptive students is claiming she was victimized by Christian parents [who objected on religious grounds, and by a school district that "capitulated" to them.](#)

The resulting federal lawsuit jabs a couple of hot-button issues in public education. Beyond the debate about yoga and religion, it raises the question of whether it's bad for an educator's career to be transferred to a "lower-performing" school.

Bonnie Cole, who is now the assistant principal at Mableton Elementary, asserts that it is and that the forced move from Bullard Elementary added 16 miles to her commute. She is seeking financial recompense for the resulting distress, inconvenience, income loss, "humiliation" and "indignities" and the effect on her career.

The lawsuit against the school district filed Monday in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Georgia says that yoga, as Cole introduced it, was not done as a religious practice and the school district was being hypocritical because during that period emails containing "Christian-based Daily Scripture Devotionals" were being sent to all staff.

District spokeswoman Donna Lowry said there would be no comment on pending litigation, and Cole's attorney, Edward D. Buckley, did not return a call seeking comment.

Explore [You can read the original story about the parents concerns here.](#)

Cole, who says she is a Christian, says school leaders and ultimately the school board buckled under pressure from parents who held a prayer rally at Bullard "for Jesus to rid the school of Buddhism." The next day, two women put their hands on Cole's office window and prayed.

"Not only was the capitulation and transfer a humiliating and public demonstration of the district's lack of support of Ms. Cole, it made clear to the community that religious activities will be allowed as long as they are part of the "accepted" religion of Christianity," her lawsuit says.

Cheryl Crawford, who runs a nonprofit that has introduced yoga into about 30 schools in metro Atlanta, said teachers want it because it calms disruptive students by teaching them to channel emotions like anger, fear and sadness. "Just telling them to focus doesn't work. That's pretty well-known now."

Cobb has a history of controversy over religion in schools. In 2002, the district put [a sticker](#) on science textbooks that said evolution is "a theory, not a fact" and encouraged students to read with an open mind, "critically considered."

Yoga has been controversial among conservative Christians. Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, [said in 2010](#) that yoga is derived from Eastern religions and is not a Christian pathway to God. A [lawsuit in southern California alleged](#) that yoga in school violated the First Amendment ban on the government establishment of religion.

Cole's lawsuit claims Cobb "engaged in the 'de facto' establishment" of the parents' belief that yoga didn't conform to their Christian beliefs, and violated the First Amendment by allowing Christianity on school grounds and in school emails.

Experts say the question of whether yoga is a religious practice that violates the constitution's establishment clause is an exceedingly difficult one to answer.

"This is a hotly contested topic," said [Jonathan R. Herman](#), who teaches religion at Georgia State University. Yoga's roots in Hinduism are typically stripped away in the practice of it today, he said. Instead, it's often seen as spiritual but not religious, he said. "It's a way of being religious in modern America while being ostensibly anti-religion.

It's a slippery issue for academics, let alone the courts.

Another expert, [Winnifred Fallers Sullivan](#), who teaches at Indiana University at Bloomington about the intersection of religion and law, said "religion" itself is a debatable word in the context of the establishment clause.

The word "religion" is used as shorthand for a variety of ideas and practices, and academics and courts can legitimately disagree about whether something is, or isn't, "religious," she said.

"I think it's a deeply unstable and unsettled concept."