***Santa Fe Independent School District v. Jane Doe* (2000)**

**Issue:** School Prayer

**Bottom Line:** Public schools Cannot Sponsor Religious Activity

**Background**

A Texas school district allowed a student "chaplain," who had been elected by fellow students, to lead a prayer over the public address system before home football games. Several students and their parents anonymously sued the school district, claiming a violation of what's known as the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, which states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

**Ruling**

The Supreme Court ruled that the school district's policy regarding prayer was unconstitutional. Although led by students, the prayers were still a school-sponsored activity, the Court said, and they were coercive because they placed students in the position of having to participate in a religious ceremony.

"The Constitution demands that schools not force on students the difficult choice between attending these games and avoiding personally offensive religious rituals," the Court said. The Justices added that "nothing in the Constitution ... prohibits any public school student from voluntarily praying at any time before, during, or after the school day."

**Impact**

Since the Santa Fe decision, several lower courts have held that student-initiated group prayer is protected under the First Amendment if it is not sponsored by the school. This is generally accepted to mean, for instance, that a group of student athletes could pray together before a game in the locker room, as long as the coach or other school officials are not involved.

Information from: <http://www.nytimes.com/learning/teachers/featured_articles/20080915monday.html>

**Thematic Question:** How does the topic of rights and responsibility relate to this court case?

**Notes:**