

Case 4: *New Jersey v. T.L.O.* (1985)

In 1980, T.L.O., a 14-year-old freshman at a New Jersey high school, was caught smoking in the bathroom. T.L.O. told the vice principal she had not been smoking and claimed she did not smoke at all. The vice principal then searched her purse. He found not only cigarettes, but rolling papers, a small amount of marijuana, a pipe, a large amount of cash, and a list of student names and amounts of money owed to T.L.O. The school gave this evidence to the juvenile court, which prosecuted T.L.O. for drug dealing.

T.L.O.'s lawyers argued that the vice principal had violated the Fourth Amendment, which protects citizens against unreasonable search and seizure. They said that the evidence should be thrown out because it was obtained illegally. The juvenile court refused to throw out the evidence. The court ruled that school officials could search students if they had reasonable suspicion that a student was doing something illegal or against school rules. They stated that the vice principal's suspicion that T.L.O. had been smoking justified his decision to open her purse. Once the purse was open and he discovered rolling papers, his reasonable suspicion that she was carrying marijuana justified a further search. The court convicted T.L.O. of drug dealing.

T.L.O. appealed the juvenile court's decision to the New Jersey Supreme Court. This court disagreed that the vice principal had reasonable grounds to search T.L.O.'s purse. According to the court, the crime T.L.O. was accused of—smoking—was not related to what was in her purse. Smoking on campus violated school rules, but possession of cigarettes was not against the rules. The court stated that the vice principal's belief that T.L.O. was lying was not enough to justify the search of her purse. Finally, even if he had been justified in opening the purse, the evidence he saw of drug use did not justify the extensive search of her things. The New Jersey court overturned the juvenile court ruling. This case came before the U.S. Supreme Court, which considered these issues:

DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING ISSUES WITH YOUR GROUP:

1. Does the Fourth Amendment protect students from searches by school officials?
2. Under what circumstances, if any, can school officials search students or their belongings?

Question: Was the search of T.L.O.'s purse illegal?

WRITE YOUR RESPONSES TO THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS IN YOUR WRITING FOLDER:

1. Your decision:
2. Explanation of your group's majority opinion:
3. Explanation of your group's minority opinion:
4. Actual Supreme Court ruling: