

NY STATE INTRUDES INTO CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

The New York State Education Department (NYSED) is considering a proposal that would greatly increase state oversight over private and religious schools—threatening the academic autonomy and religious freedom of Catholic schools.

The proposed regulations would delegate direct oversight of private and religious schools to the superintendents and school boards of the public school districts in which they are located. So, for example, on Long Island, the Mineola school district would be given authority to oversee Chaminade High School, and the Uniondale school district would oversee Kellenberg Memorial High School. District officials would be required to visit the Catholic schools periodically to make determinations regarding such things as curricula, testing and teacher competence.

“Test scores, report cards, teacher lesson plans, statistical data, etc., would all be subject to their review,” explains Chaminade principal Brother Joseph Bellizzi.

This is an unacceptable intrusion into the autonomy of our Catholic schools, and a clear violation of the separation of church and state. It is blatant overkill, ostensibly in response to complaints that some ultra-Orthodox yeshivas were failing to provide basic academic instruction. Now the state is using that limited problem to justify a blanket power grab that would put all private and religious schools under its control.

Besides being an attack on religious liberty, this is absurd from an academic standpoint. As Brother Joseph Bellizzi and Kellenberg principal Brother Kenneth Hoagland point out, their schools have always maintained a comprehensive educational

program, “equal or superior to the program of studies dictated by the NYSED.” Indeed, given how some Catholic schools, particularly in low income communities, outperform their public school counterparts, perhaps it is the Catholic school administrators who should be overseeing the public schools.

That of course, would never happen—and shouldn’t, given the religious mission of Catholic schools. But the double standard in New York State education policy is glaring. Constantly, we are told that the state can in no way—even indirectly—financially assist the families of Catholic school children, without violating the “separation of church and state.” Yet now the state presumes to intrude directly into the classrooms and administration of our Catholic schools, in order to fix a problem that does not exist.