

NYC SCHOOLS CHANCELLOR DOES A 360: RELIGIOUS LOSES

On November 14, New York City Schools Chancellor Harold Levy approved a new policy that would allow school officials to designate a specific area where Muslim students could gather to pray during Ramadan. On the evening of November 15, he reversed himself saying that no such accommodation will be tolerated.

The *New York Post* broke the initial story about Levy's 180. Curiously, there was no official announcement of this new policy from the New York City Board of Education. No matter, upon reading about the new policy in the newspaper, William Donohue faxed a letter to Schools Chancellor Harold Levy commending him for his decision; he also issued a news release on the subject.

In his letter to Levy, Donohue said, "In the spirit of inclusiveness, I am asking that you also accommodate the interests of Jews and Christians." He specifically asked Levy to "institutionalize this policy by requiring all schools to set aside a permanent area that can be accessed by students of all faiths for any religious observance they want." Donohue stressed that "reasonableness must guide any such policy and it should be understood that not every request will be granted." He then asked, "But if it is okay for Muslims to pray at noon in, say Room 123, why should it not be okay for Catholic schoolchildren to receive ashes on Ash Wednesday at noon in Room 123?"

Late in the day of November 15, league communications director Patrick Scully contacted the Schools Chancellor's office to find out if there were any new developments regarding this issue. He was told there were not. He also told Levy's office that Donohue was going on national television to discuss this

issue (he appeared that night on the Fox News Channel show, "Hannity and Colmes"). That is why we were so taken aback to learn the next day that Levy had reversed his policy.

In a statement to the press, Donohue wondered, "Is it because the Catholic League was requesting parity for Jews and Christians?" He also raised another troublesome aspect to this story. "The initial decision to accommodate Muslim students," he said, "was never publicly announced—the *New York Post* broke the story—but the decision to do a 360 was formally posted on the Board of Education's website." Donohue asked, "Was Levy trying to slip this by New Yorkers? What accounts for his duplicity?"

On the morning of November 16, we learned that Mayor-elect Michael Bloomberg was going to have lunch with Levy. We immediately contacted his office asking that he question Levy about both his reversal and his tactics when they meet for lunch. "Something smells about all this," Donohue charged, "and we hope Bloomberg (who has said he supports school prayer) gets to the bottom of it."

Given that Hanukkah and Christmas are upon us, this is a story that will have several repercussions, both in New York and around the country.