

# *N.Y.S. Coalition for Independent and Religious Schools*

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- Agudath Israel of America
- Association of Christian Schools International
- Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York
- Lutheran Schools Association
- NYS Association of Independent Schools
- NYS Catholic Conference

Testimony  
of the  
New York State Coalition for  
Independent & Religious Schools  
to  
Governor Andrew M. Cuomo's  
*New NY Education Reform Commission*

Presented by  
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NYS Catholic Conference

LeMoyne College  
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Good afternoon Chairman Parsons and distinguished members of Governor Cuomo's Education Reform Commission. As co-chairman of the NYS Coalition for Independent and Religious Schools, I speak today on behalf of the administrators, teachers, parents and nearly 500,000 students of approximately 2,000 religious and independent schools across the state -- and in doing so, express our appreciation for the opportunity to present this testimony.

My remarks will, first, identify the key strengths of and the challenges facing the state's religious and independent schools and explain how these are inescapably linked to issues the Commission is examining related to student performance, education funding and parent/family engagement. Second, I will also offer solutions that will:

- improve overall student performance;
- increase the high school graduation rate;
- increase resources available for public schools;
- reduce class sizes in already overcrowded urban public schools;
- boost parental involvement; and
- ease the tax burden on New Yorkers.

## **Key Strengths**

Religious and independent schools have a long and distinguished history in New York and throughout the United States. It was nearly 400 years ago when the nation's oldest private school was established for the colonists of New Amsterdam, now known as New York City. They have a proven track record of student performance and are prized for their success in serving students with a wide range of abilities and backgrounds, including the disadvantaged. Because of their strong and cherished history, religious and independent schools have been woven into the fabric of thousands of diverse communities – many of which continue to witness high rates of crime, poverty and unemployment. Despite these challenging factors, religious and independent schools offer a haven for children in these communities and are able to demonstrate high student performance, including 4-year high school graduation rates and college success rates typically well above 90 percent.

Another very important strength is that religious and independent schools are subject to a higher standard of accountability than traditional public schools. Largely independent of government, our schools are answerable primarily and directly to tuition-paying parents. Religious and independent schools respond directly to their concerns and work hard to ensure that their children are receiving an excellent education. The schools are mission-driven and the programs they create are designed to meet the needs of the particular communities and families they serve.

Further, private schools can far more easily establish a particular type of culture and identity than traditional public schools. The faith and religious teachings that inform and characterize most of our schools – and that help students tackle central questions about life’s meaning and purpose – are simply off limits in public schools. Even those of our schools that have no religious affiliation can create cultures emphasizing core values including integrity, service, and character. Religious and independent schools respond to the individuals who share a common vision of what the school, and what the outcome for students, should be. Our schools reflect their families’ values, reinforce the moral fabric of society, support good behavior, and inspire students to seek a life of service to others.

Another key strength is the savings realized by taxpayers. Each and every student enrolled in a religious or independent school represents a huge savings – nearly \$20,000 – to state and local taxpayers. On a statewide basis, religious and independent schools are saving taxpayers nearly \$10 billion annually. On the other hand, every student enrolled in a public school represents a huge cost to taxpayers. As such, the more students that are educated in religious and independent instead of public schools, the greater the savings to taxpayers.

To summarize, religious and independent schools have a long history and a record of strong academic performance. They provide families with proven, effective options. They are free of excessive government control that can stifle success and compromise a school’s unique identity. They are highly accountable and respond to the needs of families. They reflect a community’s values and offer students a solid foundation in life along with lessons about the issues that matter most. And they accomplish all this while saving taxpayers an enormous amount of money.

## Key Challenges

Because religious and independent schools are answerable to parents, they are subject to the same market forces intrinsic to a system where customers get to choose. A school can just as easily be rejected if it is not meeting any of a variety of parents' expectations. Our schools need increased and dedicated resources to address the various aspects of running a modern school. Unlike public schools that receive state aid and have tax levy authority to fund their operation, our schools can and sometimes lag behind their public counterparts in critical areas such as: professional development and teacher mentoring; program diversity and richness; up-to-date instructional materials and equipment; facility and capital needs; nursing coverage; and transportation services. Without resources to meet these needs, parents question whether their hard-earned tuition dollars are worth the sacrifice.

This leads to the greatest challenge facing religious and independent schools – the tuition crisis. Don't think, however, that the impact of the tuition crisis is constrained to tuition-paying families who find it is increasingly difficult to afford rising tuition while continuing to pay taxes to support public schools. Although religious and independent schools produce tremendous savings to taxpayers, it comes at great cost to the tuition-paying families. They are the only taxpayers not benefiting from this savings. They are, in effect, paying twice for education. As a result, more and more parents have and are continuing to enroll their children in the public sector solely due to economic circumstances. This shift of enrollment out of the private sector not only exacerbates the challenges faced by the public school system, it comes at a far greater cost to taxpayers.

While the tuition crisis has plagued a variety of our schools including historically black independent schools, Lutheran, and some smaller non-sectarian schools, its greatest impact has been on Catholic schools. More than 250 Catholic schools have closed in New York State in the last 20 years – 80 percent of which closed in the last decade since the establishment of charter schools. While the tuition crisis predates charter schools in the state, there is no question that charter schools have had a direct and precipitous impact on the decline of Catholic school enrollment. It is not surprising, therefore, to see a correlation between the closing of approximately 200 Catholic schools in the last 10 years while approximately 200 charter schools have opened. Just last year, the Archdiocese of New York closed 31 of its schools.

In just 15 years, there has been a shift in enrollment of more than 100,000 students from Catholic schools alone to the public school sector. At today's rate of public school spending, that shift is costing taxpayers nearly \$2 billion annually. Considering that there are another 260 charter schools yet to open, the cost to taxpayers could easily double to \$4 billion. It is important to recognize that the shift in enrollment occurs in small increments, often a few families at a time. But at a per student cost of nearly \$20,000 in public schools – it adds up quickly.

It is also important to recognize that when, say, only 10 students leave a private school, there are that many fewer families supporting the cost of the school – so those who remain are forced to shoulder higher tuition to make up the difference – often forcing even more families to leave. This compounding effect is what threatens the solvency of a private school. And even though neighboring Catholic schools have available seats for those displaced by a closing Catholic school, experience demonstrates that approximately only 40 percent of the families are able to take advantage of that option. The rest, having no alternative, are forced to enroll their children in the public sector – again, at far greater cost to taxpayers and increased strain on these public schools.

The basic problem is that there is an enormous imbalance in education funding - an unlevel playing field wherein public schools receive a 100 percent subsidy of taxpayer dollars and the taxpaying families of religious and independent schools received less than a one percent subsidy which comes mostly in the form of instructional materials and some in-kind services. The establishment and growth of charter schools, while providing additional options for families, further tilted the already unlevel playing field. As a result, public sector seats are supplanting (rather than supplementing) private sector seats, which increases the burden on taxpayers.

Unless there is some leveling of the playing field and a reversal of this trend, the state will continue to lose high-performing religious and independent schools, especially Catholic schools, which will result in fewer diverse options for families, an increased burden on the public school sector, a shifting of more students to schools that are academically weak and have lower graduation rates, and a likely worsening of the drop-out rate – all at a higher cost.

This funding imbalance makes sense from neither an educational perspective nor a financial perspective.

## The Solutions

Governor Cuomo has charged his *New NY Education Reform Commission* with the task of examining a broad array of factors and devising proposals that will improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the state's education system that serves 3.1 million students. The issues being considered by this Commission have been considered by numerous commissions and workgroups over the years – with little to show for it. In fact, education spending in the public sector has increased dramatically while showing no gains (and some decline) in academic performance. Our coalition fears that we will end up with the *same old* New York unless there is a bold and dramatic realignment of education funding – a realignment that provides parents with the means to select the most appropriate school for their children. As a matter of justice, this realignment must include providing parents whose children are enrolled in chronically underachieving schools the means to enroll their children in a school that works.

We offer and urge the Commission's consideration of the following proposals to achieve this end:

- **Tax Credits for Education Expenses** – would provide parents of children in both private and public schools with a tax credit for personal educational expenses, including tuition, which could include tuition at a neighboring public school district;
- **Education Investment Tax Credits** – (a variation of which is contained in S.2732-C / A.5081-C which passed the Senate 55-7 in 2011 and 55-4 in 2012) would increase the tax benefit for the charitable donations of corporations and individuals from a tax deduction to a tax credit as long as the donations are made to a public school, an entity that serves a public school, or scholarship programs that assist parents with tuition; and
- **Education Scholarships** – similar to the long-established Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) for higher education, we propose a TAP II program for elementary and secondary schools in which the value of the scholarship would be based on a percentage of public school funding in order to guarantee savings to taxpayers.

These proposals, in one form or another, have been successfully adopted in 17 states (one third of the country), some of which date back more than 20 years. Even with the downturn of the economy, lawmakers in several states increased the value of or the cap imposed on their respective tax credit programs because they realized that the programs were saving their states significant costs.

By providing parents with the means to select the most appropriate school for their children, all schools, including public schools, will become more responsive, and therefore more accountable, to the families of the children they serve.

Providing some leveling of funding between the public and private schools will stop, if not reverse, the erosion of private school enrollment thereby alleviating the burden on already overcrowded public school classrooms. At the same time, these proposals would enable more children to be enrolled in schools that have a proven track record of academic achievement. Such a shift in enrollment would provide public schools with the added benefit of reduced class sizes and increased spending on a per-pupil basis – thereby enabling them to enhance their effectiveness. Moreover, because the state would be spending less to educate additional children in religious and independent schools, the state would have more of their limited resources available to devote to enhancing programs in schools, including public schools.

We firmly believe that these proposals, in short, represent the kind of bold and dramatic realignment needed to;

- improve overall student performance;
- increase the high school graduation rate;
- increase resources available for public schools;
- reduce class sizes in already overcrowded urban public schools;
- boost parental involvement; and
- ease the tax burden on New Yorkers.

We urge you to reverse the current trends outlined in our testimony by enacting a scholarship or education tax credit program that will provide meaningful assistance to enable parents to choose the school best suited for their children. You can afford to do no less.

Thank you.