

Proposed New York budget to cut spending would hurt Catholic schools

ALBANY, N.Y. – A new budget released by New York Gov. David Paterson Dec. 16 that proposes \$9 billion in spending cuts would eliminate a program used by Catholic schools and other independent and religious schools.

The program is the comprehensive attendance policy mandated for all New York schools. It will only continue in public schools according to the budget proposal.

It requires the taking and reporting of students' attendance throughout the day as a way to eliminate cutting class and keep children on school grounds. Under state law, nonpublic schools have received reimbursement for the costs associated with implementing the program.

"We understand the difficult situation the state finds itself in," said Richard Barnes, executive director of the New York State Catholic Conference, the public policy arm of the state's bishops.

But cutting the program "will have a devastating impact on Catholic schools that are on the bubble and will no doubt cause tuition increases or program cuts," he said in a Dec. 17 statement.

Cutting the attendance program would eliminate \$62 million that Catholic schools receive as part of reimbursements to implement various mandated services. According to Mr. Barnes, the cut in the program for public schools will be only temporary.

"Our families cannot absorb any more strain and the state cannot afford to continue allowing our schools to close – which will only exacerbate the financial crisis lawmakers are desperately trying to solve," he said.

Barnes said eliminating the attendance program for the state's nonpublic schools

“unfairly targets the families of Catholic school children and those in other tuition-paying nonpublic schools, who will save the state more than \$8 billion this year alone.”

The proposed budget also includes 137 new or increased taxes and fees and an easing of restrictions on gambling.

Next door in New Jersey, Catholic schools received some unwelcome criticism in mid-December in an advertisement sponsored by the New Jersey Education Association that took aim at voucher proposals to benefit faith-based schools. The ad appeared in several local newspapers.

Written by association president Joyce Powell, the ad likened voucher efforts in the state to bailouts that would “extend scarce public resources to prop up schools which are going out of business due to lack of enrollment.”

She said voucher proponents want to “to undermine quality public education in New Jersey.”

In a Dec. 16 statement, James Goodness, communications director of the Archdiocese of Newark, N.J., said Mr. Powell was “clinging tenaciously to tired rhetoric and settling for failure when students most in need deserve a quality education.”

The archdiocese, he said, is “a proponent of school choice” along with other dioceses in the state and a broad coalition of civil rights, faith-based and parent organizations. “We make no apologies for this stance,” he added.

He said the state’s proposed scholarship program, which did not pass the state Legislature last year, would provide \$6,000 scholarships for 20,000 students in a five-year period.

Goodness said the program would provide “both school reform and fiscal reform in a state badly in need of financial relief.”