

Unions Protest Security For Religious Schools

By DAN ROSENBLUM | Posted: Monday, December 14, 2015 5:00 pm

Arguing that it would divert public-education funding toward religious schools, several unions urged Mayor de Blasio to veto a bill that would provide nearly \$20 million to hire as many as 500 security guards for private schools. The City Council passed the bill Dec. 7, two weeks after its leadership reached a deal with the Mayor to fund the guards.

If Mr. de Blasio signs it into law, as expected, the city would reimburse pre-k-to-12 religious schools for an unarmed guard. Larger schools would qualify for an additional one for every 500 students, and their pay would be tied to the prevailing wage. Supporters pointed to the prevalence of school shootings and foreign terrorist attacks on “soft” targets.



Gregory Floyd

GREG FLOYD: ‘New Yorkers should be outraged.’

‘Landmark Measure’

“This is a first-of-its-kind measure to keep its students in non-public schools safe, and we’re proud to lead on this landmark safety measure,” Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito said before the vote.

An earlier draft would have allocated about \$50 million to send hundreds of School Safety Agents to private schools, but the Mayor and the NYPD bristled at the price and said that would impair the department’s flexibility to assign resources. The cost of the current proposal would be capped at \$19.8 million in its first year, but would rise to accommodate pay raises and an expansion of the program to other schools that qualify for the funding.

Education Committee Chair Daniel Dromm, who opposed the original proposal and was one of four Council Members who voted against the latest incarnation, said he was “deeply disappointed” by the passage. “This is an unprecedented step in the direction of subsidizing private education,” he said. “Security guards in these schools will still be required to call the NYPD if there is any threat to student safety.”

‘They’ll Be Back’

He added that many religious schools should be required to sign non-discrimination agreements and said they would soon be asking for more services. “I know the same lobbyists for these private and parochial schools and yeshivas will be back again to rob the public-school budget of additional funding at some point in the future,” he said.

David Greenfield, the bill’s sponsor, denied the city would take money from any other school programs. “This follows 50 years of legal precedent,” he said, noting that the city already pays for busing, School Crossing Guards and nurses at non-Department of Education facilities. “We’re simply extending this one final point, which is for school safety officers,” he said.

‘Good Use of Funding’

He responded to Mr. Dromm’s charge that the legislation circumvented the annual budget process. “If that’s not a good use of government funding—making sure that every parent has the peace of mind knowing that their child goes to school and is safe—quite frankly, I’m not really sure what is a good use of government funding,” Mr. Greenfield said.

But Gregory Floyd, who represents SSAs as president of Teamsters Local 237, emerged as one of the plan’s harshest critics, saying it was a starting point to gradually subsidizing other private-school operations. “Every New Yorker should be outraged at this proposal,” he said. “This is a giveaway of taxpayers’ money.”

He said the guards didn’t have the training, the authority to make arrests or police-department support that SSAs had. “In my opinion, this is nothing but campaigning and pandering,” he said of the Mayor’s support. “And I suspect you’re going to see a lot of that over the next couple of years.” He said he was pessimistic about a mayoral veto, stating that would be “betraying the trust of those who worked with him behind the scenes to get this passed.”

The New York Civil Liberties Union called the bill a blurring of religious-sectarian lines and said the city could barely afford the costs of policing the non-public schools, even as the organization has urged the DOE to reduce police presence in those schools and hire more guidance counselors to bring school-climate changes.

‘Would Be Shameful’

“In a city as diverse as New York, where many public school kids lack access to working computers, it would be shameful for city leaders to offer precious taxpayer money to private institutions,” NYCLU Advocacy Director Johanna Miller said in a statement.

She also condemned the timing of the bill, which had been announced the afternoon before Thanksgiving. “The City Council’s practice of giving inadequate and untimely notice before so-called public hearings is undemocratic and virtually guarantees participation will be limited

solely to professional advocates and lobbyists,” Ms. Miller said.

Teacher unions also oppose the plan. “Crossing the line between public and private is something our forefathers were smart enough not to do,” said United Federation of Teachers President Michael Mulgrew.

The Council of School Supervisors and Administrators urged the Mayor to veto it, saying in a statement that it “sends the wrong message to both labor and to the dedicated safety agents who provide daily support to the school leadership for the safe and orderly operation of city schools.”

‘Whose Idea Was This?’

President Ernest Logan said he was frustrated with the plan, noting that some public schools lacked dedicated SSAs and that larger ones weren’t assigned the full complement of officers.

“I want to know who in their right mind thought this was a good idea to take city money and put it into the private industry when you haven’t taken care of the money that you’re required to for the public,” he said.

He estimated the public schools needed 500 more SSAs and added that the NYPD was generally charged with protecting all of the city schoolchildren.

A to-be-determined agency would develop a list of providers and handle the reimbursements up to prevailing wage rates.

More Members for 32BJ

The workers would likely be represented by Service Employees International Union Local 32BJ, which has supported the Mayor’s affordable-housing expansion.

Mr. de Blasio said last week he was “comfortable signing” the bill, which would go into effect April 1, allowing more guards to respond to security concerns. “They will be in regular contact with NYPD, in fact, they will be additional eyes and ears for the NYPD,” he said. “We’re trying to see if there’s some ways the NYPD can provide training.”

He said that private and religious school were part of the city’s education landscape—nearly 250,000 K-12 students, about 20 percent of the city’s schoolchildren, attend Jewish, Catholic and other private schools—and have prominent roles in his pre-kindergarten and after-school program expansion. “We have worked hand in hand, particularly with the parochial schools, and we think that’s the smart way to do it,” he said. “We think that’s good government.”