Board Votes to Require Recitation of Pledge at Public Schools

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The New York City Board of Education unanimously adopted a resolution last night to require all public schools to lead students in the Pledge of Allegiance at the beginning of every school day and at all schoolwide assemblies and events.

The resolution, which also states that students and staff members will neither be compelled to participate nor disciplined if they choose not to recite the pledge, is essentially a copy of a state education law already on the books.

But the requirement to recite the pledge has been all but ignored at most New York City schools for much of the last 30 years, since the waning days of the Vietnam War, education officials say.

Ninfa Segarra, the president of the Board of Education and the sponsor of the resolution, said, ''It's a small way to thank the heroes of 9/11 and let them know they won't be forgotten in our public schools.''

Schools Chancellor Harold O. Levy said yesterday afternoon that he also supported the resolution, but he cautioned that citizens have a greater responsibility to guard against discrimination and to tolerate dissenting views.

But the New York Civil Liberties Union objected strongly to the proposal, noting that the New York City school system has many students who are not American citizens. Those students are likely ''to be scapegoated or targeted for harassment'' if they do not participate, said Donna Lieberman, interim director of the organization.

In 1943, the United States Supreme Court ruled in West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette that public school students could not be compelled to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. In that landmark decision, Justice Robert H. Jackson wrote, ''To believe that patriotism will not flourish if patriotic ceremonies are voluntary and spontaneous instead of a compulsory routine is to make an unflattering estimate of the appeal of our institutions to free minds.''

The resolution comes as school districts around the country grapple with the issue of what displays of patriotism are appropriate at a time of both national pride and mourning. The school board in Madison, Wis., created an uproar when it initially banned the pledge of allegiance despite a new state law calling for a daily display of patriotism. But this week, the board reversed it decision after hundreds of residents protested.

In the Madison case, opponents of saying the pledge said that it was militaristic and that the words ''under God,'' which were added to the pledge in 1954, were a religious reference that did not belong in public schools.

No such sentiments were voiced yesterday at the Board of Education's headquarters in Brooklyn. When Ms. Segarra announced at an afternoon session of the board that the resolution was likely to be adopted later that evening, a crowd of nearly 100 students, teachers and others attending the meeting burst into applause.

At the evening meeting, several people spoke in favor of the resolution, including Curtis Sliwa, the radio personality and founder of the Guardian Angels.

Mr. Sliwa spoke of his uncle, who he said was a custodian at James Madison High School in Brooklyn, and whose job it was to make sure every classroom had a flag.

''If one of those flags was spoiled or tattered, he would make sure to replace it,'' Mr. Sliwa said.

He said he supported the pledge resolution because ''it brings everyone together'' in what has long been a racially divided city that places more emphasis on differences than similarities.

Mr. Levy, who will be responsible for making sure the resolution is put into effect, was more cautious in his support.

''At every opportunity,'' he said, ''we should make sure that tolerance is something that we teach, both by example and by reminding people what's important.''

Teachers and children should also be reminded ''to be protective of particularly the Muslim children and children who wear traditional garb,'' Mr. Levy said. ''This is what it is to be an American, as well as saluting the flag.''

The resolution also sets a goal for schools to display the American flag outside the building and in as many classrooms as is practical, and it encourages schools to form color guards to present the flags of the city, state and nation at assemblies.

State education law already has similar requirements, going so far as to set out the sizes of flags and the materials of which they should be made.

The law also requires the observance of Flag Day, June 14, in all schools, and the teaching of proper care of the flag: it should be brushed with a soft cloth once a week, for example.

But both the state and the new city regulation make implicit note of the Supreme Court's ruling in saying that neither teachers nor students can be compelled to participate in the pledge. The state regulation specifically notes a lower court's ruling that those refusing to salute the flag may not be required to stand or to leave the room.

1. What are some reasons that the Pledge is said every day in schools?

2. What are some arguments against saying the pledge in school everyday?

3. Which side of the argument are you on? Do you think the pledge should be said everyday in school, and do you think everyone should say it? Do you think it should be said in places other than schools? Why or why not?

4. Do you think students and teachers should be required to say the pledge every day? Why or why not?

5. Write your own level 3 question and respond to it. Your question could be directly about this topic, or it could be some related topic.