

Hoyt seeks open board meetings at St. Mary's

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St. Mary's School for the Deaf in Buffalo and 10 similar schools across New York would be forced to open their board meetings to the public under legislation introduced by Assemblyman Sam Hoyt.

Hoyt, a member of the St. Mary's board, drafted the legislation after the board rejected his request two months ago to open its meetings to the public. The bill was recently introduced and referred to the Assembly Education Committee.

"Protection of the taxpayers' wallets can only be accomplished by opening up these meetings," Hoyt, D-Buffalo, said in a bill memorandum.

St. Mary's is one of 11 state-funded schools for the blind, deaf and disabled in New York State that share \$111 million annually in state funds but operate as private, nonprofit schools. Their board meetings are closed to the public. Their business records are private.

A Buffalo News review recently found that some of the schools have awarded contracts to firms owned by or associated with their board members. Others used their privately raised money to make political contributions.

The 11 schools are members of the 4201 Schools Association, named for the section of the state education law that governs them. The association opposes Hoyt's bill.

"If enacted into law, this measure would be unwarranted and unnecessary intrusion into the operation of the 4201 schools and discourage well-meaning and honorably motivated individuals from serving on the boards of directors of these institutions," said Harold Mowl Jr., chairman of the 4201 Schools Association, and superintendent of the Rochester School for the Deaf.

"Nonsense," Hoyt responded. "These are taxpayers' dollars. It works fine for traditional public schools. It will work fine for 4201 schools. If you want to be almost entirely funded with taxpayer dollars, you have to expect there will be some transparency with regard to the board's activities."

Hoyt's bill has support from St. Mary's parents and staff who are upset with the way the outgoing superintendent, William P. Johnson, has operated the school, and who argue that the school board doesn't always learn about staff and parent concerns.

In response to those complaints, the St. Mary's board is working with parents to create a Parent-Teacher Organization, whose president may eventually be given a role with or on the board, according to board Chairwoman Margaret C. McCarthy.

When asked about Hoyt's bill, McCarthy responded: "I understand he needs to do what he believes is in the best interests of his constituents."

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