Warning to the private voucher school: What the government funds, the government runs—case in point, Florida Catholic Schools

The Florida Attorney General is threatening to take away state funding from Catholic schools for violating state law regarding vaccine policies. The Catholic Bishops are pushing back. The bishops will likely win this fight; however, as greater levels of tax funds enter the private school market, regulations will eventually come.

Most private religious schools have doctrinal positions that conflict with government rules, regulations and laws. Some private schools are funded at the rate of 100% from tax dollars. Private school operators will eventually have to choose between government funding and doctrinal purity.

A spokesperson for the Catholic Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops stated in an August 17 USA Today article: “Government officials may no more determine the content of Catholic teaching than church officials may determine the content of Florida law.” Really, Mr. Spokesperson?

The Catholic church has been lobbying for government funding for private schools since at least the mid-1800s. Lawmakers and courts resisted government funding for religious schools until caving-in in recent years.

Now that taxpayers are funding private religious schools, it is only fair that government regulates those schools. Eventually the government WILL regulate private schools. Private school operators may wish to reconsider their demand for tax dollars.

Florida bishops push back on funding threats over vaccines

Florida bishops fight Uthmeier over school funding threats

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Catholic bishops in Florida are accusing Attorney General James Uthmeier of overstepping his authority and infringing on their First Amendment–protected religious freedoms.

This comes after the chief state legal officer threatened Catholic school eligibility for state-funded scholarships if they didn't accept vaccine exemptions.

The letter was sent by Michael Sheedy, executive director of the Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops. He explained that vaccine policies are a controversial, continually evolving issue, but that the bishops' position is to protect the safety of students, staff, teachers and parents who could be harmed by preventable diseases.

But Sheedy expressed concerns not only with Uthmeier's inquiry on the "religious grounds" of its vaccine policies, but also the threat of removing state funding due to differing viewpoints.

To that, he said any "inquiry is foreclosed by the First Amendment."

"Whether Catholic educational institutions should recognize particular exemption requests necessarily implicate questions of religious teaching, moral theology, ecclesiastical authority, and the mission of Catholic education. Those are matters entrusted to the Church alone," Sheedy wrote in a letter dated Aug. 7, but made publicly available Aug. 17.

"Government officials may no more determine the content of Catholic teaching than Church officials may determine the content of Florida law," he added.

More: Florida attorney general warns Catholic schools on vaccine policy

More than 500,000 students receive voucher funds from the state toward their home or private schooling. And about 86,000 students who receive state scholarship funds attend Catholic schools, according to the Florida Catholic Conference.

Uthmeier's office did not immediately respond to a request for comment, but the DeSantis administration, which Uthmeier once was part of as chief of staff, has pushed to eliminate Florida vaccine requirements in schools.

The conference said Uthmeier's office had not responded to their letter. But on Aug. 17 Uthmeier further criticized the Catholic Church's "religious mission" to "force vaccinate students over the religious, conscience, and medical objections of their families."

"However, a separate question is whether a private school that doesn't follow state laws protecting parental rights and deeply held beliefs should still be permitted to participate in state programs and receive state funding," Uthmeier wrote on X.

Uthmeier first sent his letter on July 31, more than a week before school had begun for multiple districts across the state. He argued that Catholic schools would be putting an "undue burden" on parental rights to choose a school corresponding to their beliefs.

But Sheedy wrote that if they don't want to vaccinate, Catholic parents can instead opt for virtual or home schooling.

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