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Hasidim seeking minute of silence in public schools

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Hasidic members of a Brooklyn school board want Crown Heights public schools to start the day with a moment of silence, a move some parents worry is too close to a moment of prayer.

"A tragedy took place Sept. 11, so we need to mandate a moment dedicated to silent meditation," said Stuart Balberg, one of four Hasidic members of Community School Board 17 who advocate a pause at the start of the school day.

How students would use the moment "is up to the child and their parents. I would not go so far, though, to use the word 'prayer' in any kind of mandate," Balberg said.

So far, Balberg and the author of the plan, Yitzchok Wagshul, have been unable to drum up the five out of nine votes needed to put the question to a vote. The vote could come as soon as next month.

State law allows the Board of Education to mandate a moment of silence, provided the policy makes no reference to prayer or carries any religious overtones.

Last month, the U.S. Supreme Court let stand a Virginia law that required schools to pause for a moment of silence so students could meditate, pray or sit quietly.

Patrick Scully, a spokesman for the Catholic League, said city schools would benefit from a similar daily pause.

But Schools Chancellor Harold Levy said yesterday he was against local school districts imposing such policies because they could be open to abuse.

"Here is a case where the Devil is in the details," said Donna Lieberman, interim director of the New York Civil Liberties Union. "A moment of silence is not inherently religious, but the Board of Ed would have to keep a careful eye on it."

Parents had doubts, too. Of a dozen Crown Heights parents and guardians interviewed yesterday, nine were against the idea.

"Even with all the flag-waving, there are some things public schools just should not get into," said Betty Louise Brown, who has three grandchildren in District 17 schools.

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