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A Necessary Separation

In proposed Valley charter school, church-state line isn't clear enough

The Los Angeles Board of Education should reject the controversial application for the proposed Northwest Charter School in the San Fernando Valley. Why? Because the public school system should not open its doors to potentially sectarian teaching. That is what private schools are for.

The author of this charter school petition is a Scientologist, which is no more disqualifying for a public school educator than any other religion. However, Linda Smith, a veteran public school teacher, says she would use the Applied Scholastics series in the new charter school. This is a set of textbooks, teaching methods and classroom procedures based on the writings of the late L. Ron Hubbard, founder of the Church of Scientology. Smith and Ian Lyons, president of Applied Scholastics, describe the curriculum and methods as nonsectarian, which is a requirement for state charter schools. Applied Scholastics has been described in news reports as an educational system including basic phonics, grammar, punctuation, instruction on how to use a dictionary and a workbook on how to handle everyday problems.

But the fact that Hubbard's name is on the material and that it is printed by Bridge Publications, which also produces literature for the Church of Scientology, raises serious concerns. Such a concern would be raised if any religious

leader were to author textbooks for a public school.

The Applied Scholastics teaching method is not used as official curriculum in any L.A. public schools, and that is as it should be. The state 1992 Charter School Act grants wide latitude in curriculum and freedom from many state and local education regulations in order to encourage major educational reform.

Charter schools remain public and receive financing from the state. Of course these special campuses cannot violate state or federal laws, including those regarding separation of church and state. In the case of this application, the separation is not clear enough.

There are currently 15 charter schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District, including Pacoima's very successful Vaughn Next Century Learning Center, which is run by Yvonne Chan, the principal. Responsibility for monitoring charter schools remains with the school district or the state, whichever granted the charter.

Most scrutiny of charter school applications has focused on financial status. In Los Angeles, for example, charter applicants are required to raise \$200,000 in start-up financing. In the wake of the debate over the Hubbard materials, school district officials may need to pay closer attention to what goes on at every charter school.