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"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."

— FIRST AMENDMENT TO THE UNITED STATES CONSTITUTION

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EDITORIALS

The diploma wars

■ The state School Boards Association has taken the test debate to another level.

SCHOOLS AND STANDARDS

The state School Boards Association, in its important vote on alternative diplomas this week, sent a unmistakable message to Education Commissioner Richard Mills and the state Board of Regents:

Don't be locked into state-mandated tests. Open your minds to other ways of assessing student achievement.

This page has played a similar tune. The standards movement in New York — as valuable an educational initiative as this state has seen in years — ought not be compromised because of a rigid adherence to one means of assessment.

Mills and the Regents have to be flexible on the issue of alternative diplomas or they risk losing the bipartisan political support — a rare commodity in New York — that undergirds the standards effort.

The best thing about the standardized Regents tests is that it represents a consistent measuring tool. Alternative diploma tracks can vary wildly in quality and inclusion of basic academic values. But there are some that work, and

the state's best approach is to work with districts to adopt an acceptable model.

If the state is perceived to be resistant to good alternatives, and wedded only to the five mandated Regents exams, then it is likely that opposition will continue to build. Every testing glitch or miscue will become evidence of the weakness of the Regents program. And that, eventually, will hurt the standards movement as a whole.

Actually, there are ample signs now of opposition to the testing regimen. At first, it was voiced through a small minority of school leaders such as Fairport's William Cala. But the politicians have been climbing aboard; legislative hearings on the testing mandates are planned next month.

And the vote by delegates to the state school boards meeting was a major leap; 52 percent of those attending want the state to give districts the power to award local diplomas.

It would take a much greater leap for the Legislature to grant that power. But Mills and the Regents should get out in front of this budding anti-test movement by helping interested districts develop alternative diploma tracks that incorporate all the academic virtues at the heart of the standards movement. Flexibility is the keyword going forward. □

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