

OPINION

JOHN S. KNIGHT (894-1981)

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The Miami Herald | EDITORIALS

Charter school needs oversight

Re the July 13 story *Will Broward charter school cross the line on religion?*: Whether the Ben Gamla Charter School in Hollywood will cross the constitutional line dividing church and state because it may use tax dollars to advance religion is not a question that can be simply answered by whether classes will be conducted in Hebrew or whether kosher lunches are served.

Rather, the key will lie in the content of the school's curriculum. Charter schools are run by private agencies, but they still are public schools. Like other public schools they can teach about religion. However, they cannot proselytize.

What is required is adequate oversight by the Broward County School Board, which has the responsibility of insisting upon accountability and the constitu-

tional use of taxpayers' dollars.

Unfortunately, charter schools too often are an end-run around prohibitions on using government funds to advance religion. Regardless of whether the religion being taught is Judaism, Christianity or Islam, the Constitution imposes an obligation on the public body chartering the school to ensure adequate oversight of both academic and constitutional standards.

Whether Ben Gamla's curriculum stays within the constitutional scope of what a school can or cannot teach is to be determined. A vigilant community — and a vigilant ACLU — will be watching to make sure everything is conducted as required.

- REBECCA HARRISON STEELE, director, Religious Freedom Project, ACLU of Florida, Tampa