



## Federal Student Aid

By Tom Stiles

Since last year, we have received a number of calls from member schools having a problem with community colleges in New York. The Registrars or financial aid person questioned whether a school was “accredited” by the State of New York. As you know, the State of New York does not “accredit” any school --- private or public.

The State Department of Education does “**register**” schools, but registration is voluntary. Our schools choose not to be registered. To meet the compulsory education law (children from 6 to 16 years of age must attend school), our schools follow the requirements of becoming a “**substantially equivalent school.**” This is determined by the local board of education of the local district; and is usually handled by the Superintendent. The new school submits a letter, a copy of the curriculum plan, a Certificate of Occupancy (C.O.) and a list of students. This makes the new school “legal.”

NYACS also recommends that each member school get a **Basic Education Data System (BEDS)** number from the State Department of Education. This is used to check enrollment; we report as a courtesy.

For several years now, if a school is a member of NYACS and has a BEDS number, the Office of Non-Public Schools will write a letter that states that the school is a “**recognized school**” in the State of New York. This letter, along with a letter from NYACS, and often some telephone conversations, usually clears up misunderstandings.

The last one of these misunderstandings had to do with Federal Aid, and the claim that the Federal Department of Education had issued new guidelines. According to the Federal Student Aid website the new requirements are:

“If you enroll in higher education for the first time on or after July 1, 2012, in order to be eligible for federal student aid, you must have either a high school diploma or a recognized equivalent (such as a General Educational Development certificate (GED) or a *homeschool* education).” -

<http://studentaid.ed.gov/about/announcements/recent-changes>

Since our schools are operated legally, and are deemed “substantially equivalent;” I believe that that our graduates meet this requirement. Our graduates have a “substantially equivalent” diploma issued by their school.

But there is a problem. As you know, the NYS Department of Education says “only registered schools may issue a diploma” according the Regulations of the Commissioner.

“Only those public and nonpublic high schools which are registered by the Board of Regents upon recommendation of the commissioner, may issue diplomas and administer Regents examinations.” (Part 100.2 9ps) - Regulations of the Commissioner.

We strongly disagree. We do not issue State of New York Diplomas to our graduates, but rather our own diplomas. Even though the NYACS Board has meet with state officials over this matter, it is still unresolved. We have basically agreed to disagree; that has not interfered with us developing a cordial relationship with the State Department of Education.

Some of the community colleges have used the “diploma” issue as justification for not releasing federal aid money to students. I have talked this over with the AACCS Washington staff, and they believe this is a misinterpretation and they are seeking clarification from the Federal Department of Education. I have sent them the names of the community colleges where I have dealt with this problem – but I need to know if you have had this problem too.

New York State Education Law section 661(4)(c) specifies that to be eligible for State student financial aid, a student "must have a certificate of graduation from a school providing secondary education; or the recognized equivalent of such certificate; or have achieved a passing score, as determined by the United States secretary of education, on a federally approved examination which demonstrates that the student can benefit from the education being offered."

<http://www.p12.nysed.gov/nonpub/homeinstruction/homeinstruct.html>

This alone should be sufficient for the community colleges, and I would be glad to write any college on behalf of one of your graduates. There is also another avenue that has worked – getting the local Superintendent to write a letter certifying that your graduate received a “substantially equivalent” high school education. He may or may not be willing to do this, depending on the relationship you have with him.

Please pray for us as we seek to get a final solution to this problem.