

**JOINT NYS BUDGET HEARING
ON THE
2024/2025 EXECUTIVE BUDGET
Elementary and Secondary Education**

**Testimony
of
Beatrice Weber
Executive Director of YAFFED**

**Presented
on
February 1, 2024**

Honorable Committee Chairs, Senators, Assembly Members, and my fellow New Yorkers, my name is Beatrice Weber. I am the Executive Director of YAFFED. We are an advocacy organization committed to the educational rights of children and have been fighting for improvements to the quality of general education at Hasidic yeshivas for the past decade.

You may remember representatives from YAFFED testifying at this budget hearing in years past. It has been a long, slow-moving struggle and I must admit that even today I cannot point to a single classroom that has improved its general education programming. But we are hopeful and have had some positive movement regarding the public policy around this issue. Last year, the state education department enacted a new regulation that outlines the enforcement mechanism by which local school districts are to hold nonpublic schools accountable to state education law section 3204, which demands that every school offer an education that is substantially equivalent to that which is offered in the public schools.

Subsequently, this past June, after conducting substantive school reviews, the New York City Department of Education gave seventeen yeshivas a negative compliance determination. These yeshivas were making no attempts to improve. Most offer virtually no general studies education beyond a few minutes at the end of the day. As a result of these determinations, if these yeshivas do not improve by the end of this school year, they will no longer be considered “schools” that satisfy the compulsory education law. They will lose all access to public funding and their students will need to find other means to satisfy the compulsory education law or they and their families will be liable for truancy.

Some would call this a success. It is not. Success would be children receiving the quality education that they deserve. This is a failure because the children are still not learning. In fact, some students will inevitably age out of the yeshiva system before any school improvements are made.

The good news is that the City of New York has been following the rules laid out by the state and conducted substantive school reviews this past spring. We do remain concerned and

cautious, however. Even in New York City, the Mayor continues to provide rhetoric support to the yeshiva community. North of the city, there is little hope that either the East Ramapo Central School District or the district in Kiryas Joel will adequately implement the regulation. There are approximately thirty thousand students attending yeshivas in East Ramapo and another ten thousand in Kiryas Joel. With the current power structures in these two areas, we see a difficult road ahead in getting the districts to conduct robust reviews of their constituent yeshivas.

We believe the regulation will need to be tightened and we are collecting evidence to support that assertion. One of several concerns that has manifested regards the accreditation pathway. NYSED's recently released list of approved substantial equivalency accreditors includes an agency operated by a Hasidic sect that runs yeshivas declared failing by the New York City Department of Education. This raises questions about the agency's commitment and ability to effectively regulate its schools and ensure the quality of their general education programs.

But, we are also hopeful. We are hopeful that the pressure and scrutiny by regulators will begin to produce change in the classroom. We know there will be holdouts and already certain sect leaders have made very public proclamations of rebellion and obfuscation. A heavy hand will be needed to deal with the most radical of yeshiva operators. We will need your continued support as the enforcement and oversight mechanism continues to roll out.

At the center of these bureaucratic machinations and political maneuverings are tens of thousands of children who sit in classrooms that have forever failed to educate them. These are not schools that have gone bad, or students who have landed in a new bad school. These are schools that were designed to not teach general education. In their care are children of all ages, including high school aged children, who have spent their entire school careers in an environment absent of general education studies. In the best of scenarios, these yeshivas will take time to become equivalent but many, many current students will fail to be brought up to grade level absent comprehensive educational interventions.

So, we must ask ourselves, what of the children? We must attend to the needs of these children today. They have been overlooked and neglected. The education that is their right has been withheld from them. We have failed them. So, it is our responsibility now to make it right.

I am here therefore, first, to say thank you for standing with us and with the educational rights of children. Thank you for standing firm in the face of lobbying by Yeshiva operators to weaken the law. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak before you today.

Now, I am saying please. Please stand up for the children who have been attending failing yeshivas. They need individual supports and remediation. They can't wait for their yeshivas to improve. Their families deserve access to programs that are culturally responsive to the Hasidic community and are robust enough to work with students who have little to no background in the English language, science or math.

We are asking for \$250,000 for the launch of a pilot program to provide culturally responsive educational supports such as tutoring to students of nonpublic schools deemed noncompliant with NYS education law §3204. Even with the full participation of yeshiva leaders, students who have been enrolled in these deficient educational programs have substantial work ahead if they wish to make up for the lost years of education. Yeshivas will be

focused on implementing curricula that are compliant and are not likely to have the systemic resources necessary to bring current students up to grade level. A student who is currently in what would be the ninth grade but has only learned English up to a third-grade level will need supports that are distinct from the efforts yeshivas will need to make putting a competent teacher in the classroom. It is incumbent upon the state of New York to ensure that these students have access to culturally competent educational services that will enable them to achieve personal success and be full participants in society.

Additionally, we want the yeshiva sector to thrive and we are aware of the financial hardship with which many yeshivas operate. Mandated Services Aid for nonpublic schools should be expanded to include the administrative costs associated with a school's time and resources as used in demonstration of compliance with NYS Commissioner's regulation part 130. This change should be reflected beginning in the 'Announcement of Aid' document posted by NYSED in August of 2024 to ensure that schools' efforts during the 2023-2024 school year are aid-able. The time and effort that is required of school administrators to demonstrate legal compliance regarding substantial equivalency should not be minimized. Unfunded mandates placed upon schools inherently take attention and funding away from the classroom. Demonstration of substantial equivalency should not be a net drain on a school's resources, and we believe strongly that nonpublic schools' mandated services reimbursement program should include the administrative costs associated with compliance demonstration.

Thank you for considering our budget requests.