

Testimony of YAFFED Executive Director Adina Mermelstein Konikoff

To

**The New York State Joint Legislative Budget Hearing
on Elementary and Secondary Education**

January 29, 2026

Thank you Senator Krueger, Chair of the Senate Finance Committee; Assemblymember Pretlow, Chair of the Ways and Means Committee; Senator Mayer, Chair of the Senate Education Committee; Senator Liu, Chair of the Senate New York City Education Committee; Assemblymember Benedetto, Chair of the Assembly Education Committee; and members of the Legislature.

I am honored to have the opportunity to present this testimony. My name is Adina Mermelstein Konikoff, and I am the Executive Director of YAFFED. For the past several years we have come here to Albany with a simple message, “Do not change the laws governing substantial equivalency in New York State”. We have done this because the State education department was implementing an enforcement system intended to address the systemic lack of oversight of nonpublic schools that has led to a crisis of failing general education studies at Hasidic yeshivas. It is our mission to correct this problem, and after many years of our advocacy, the State was acting to do so.

Unfortunately, last year, the legislature and the governor did come together to change the law. As a result, yeshivas that have not been teaching general education studies will have up to eight years to change. That means that thousands of students will graduate out of the system without improvements in their classrooms. These students should not have to wait eight years to learn math, English or other skills that will enable them to develop and grow into productive citizens.

I am here today to urge the Legislature to support and fund YAFFED’s Education Resource Project which is working to connect students with existing educational programs and opportunities outside of their yeshiva that are culturally responsive and can serve their unique needs.

Our program, unlike existing supports for people who want to leave the Hasidic community, is designed to serve families and students who remain committed to the Hasidic yeshiva system, but who are seeking access—often quietly and at great personal risk—to basic educational supports. The Education Resource Project works like an ombudsman program and has been developing a resource database that includes Yiddish-speaking tutors, culturally responsive high school equivalency programs, remedial instruction, and educational counseling. We connect individuals seeking aid and assistance with existing programs run by community-based individuals and organizations who have the connection and cultural competency to work with Hasidic families.

Our request is about equity. The legislature made a decision to give yeshiva operators eight years to improve. Now, the legislature must make an equitable commitment to the families of

these yeshivas that ensures access to educational programs to help mitigate the deficit caused by the legislature's actions. For those seeking help, remediation programming is a critical next step, a bridge toward equity for students who want to increase their general education knowledge and increase their economic mobility.

We are asking the legislature for two hundred thousand dollars. These funds will support staff to connect with programs, counsel families and individuals, and identify those people who are looking for help.

This is necessary because there are more than 111,000 students attending 264 Hasidic yeshivas in New York State. For decades, a significant number of these schools—particularly boys' schools—have failed to provide even the most rudimentary instruction in English, math, science, or social studies.

There is little publicly available information capturing what students are being denied, in part because the State has hamstrung the collection of data. To fill this gap, YAFFED released a [curriculum study](#) last fall. The findings were staggering:

- In Hasidic boys' schools studied, students receive an average of less than two hours per week of secular instruction across all subjects.
- Researchers identified more than a dozen schools that provide no secular education whatsoever.
- Only 13% of Hasidic boys' high school classes include any science instruction, and fewer than one in four teach math.

The consequences spread far beyond the classroom. These students graduate without English fluency or financial literacy, and face severe barriers to employment, higher education, and self-sufficiency. Tragically, 63% of Hasidic New Yorkers live below or near the poverty line, and Hasidic men earn roughly 30% less than their non-Hasidic counterparts.

YAFFED works directly with current students and alumni of Hasidic yeshivas. And we have seen that when students decide to salvage their education, they have few places to turn.

Remediation programming does not address the root cause of educational neglect, but it would make resources accessible to more students. In doing so, this program will be a lifeline for Hasidic youth whose parents want to make their futures better, and ensure they do not have to navigate their educational journeys alone.

By rolling back substantial equivalency enforcement last budget cycle, the State gutted meaningful protections, turning its back on tens of thousands of children. Funding this program is not an act of generosity. This is about restoring what has been lost, and beginning to undo a wrong. Providing resources to students who have been left behind is the bare minimum.

This funding request asks you to do one small thing now: acknowledge the harm that has been done, and provide students with resources they need to chart their own paths.

Thank you for your consideration.