



# The New York Education Tax Credit: What's at Stake

**A**s we near the finish line of this year's legislative session in Albany, which is scheduled to conclude on June 17, advocates and *askanim* from across New York's Jewish spectrum are pushing hard for legislation that would provide significant relief for hard-pressed tuition-paying parents in our community.

Specifically, Governor Andrew Cuomo has proposed a bill entitled the "Parental Choice in Education Act." The bill includes four components:

- 1) \$70 million to fund tax credits for parents earning less than \$60,000 who pay tuition for their children's education, in the amount of \$500 per child.
- 2) \$50 million to fund tax credits for people or corporations that contribute to scholarship funds that benefit needy students in nonpublic schools, in the amount of 75% of the contribution.
- 3) \$20 million to reimburse public school teachers for up to \$200 of monies they lay out from their own pockets for school supplies.
- 4) \$10 million to fund public school improvement programs across the state.

Thus, of the \$150 million included in the Governor's proposal, \$120 million would be earmarked for the nonpublic school community. As children enrolled in Jewish schools across New York represent approximately one-third of the state's total nonpublic school population, it can be guesstimated that the Parental Choice in Education Act would inject as much as \$40 million into the New York yeshivah community.

Little wonder, therefore, that advocates for the community have organized a major campaign to help pass the governor's proposal. Leaders of Agudath Israel, the Orthodox Union, and UJA-Federation have converged on Albany to buttonhole members of the state legislature, urging them to support education tax credits. Yeshivos

and day schools have mobilized their parent bodies to flood the legislature with e-mails and phone calls promoting the legislation. Individual *askanim* from different communities have reached out to their political contacts. I do not recall a more concentrated statewide advocacy effort in the over 30 years I have been involved in Jewish public life.

Whether these efforts will succeed remains to be seen. Powerful political forces are aligned against the legislation, and there is certainly a good chance that it will not pass. However, as we head into the home stretch of this year's legislative session, the possibility that New York will enact some form of meaningful education tax credit is real.

**THE SIGNIFICANCE** of this initiative cannot be overstated — not just for hard-pressed yeshivos and tuition-paying parents in New York, who will be the immediate beneficiaries if an education tax credit is enacted, but for other Jewish communities that are working to promote "school choice" policies like tax credits and vouchers in their respective states and local jurisdictions.

Such policies have been gaining momentum in recent years — thanks in part to advocacy efforts of Agudath Israel activists across the United States — but those advances have been primarily in states under Republican political control. New York, in contrast, is largely a Democratic state, where there has been longstanding opposition to school choice initiatives. If a nationally prominent, socially liberal Democratic governor of New York puts forth, and succeeds in enacting, legislation that meaningfully promotes parental choice in education, it could open up new opportunities in jurisdictions across the country.

Indeed, as I can attest on the basis of the many calls and e-mails I have received from national leaders of the school choice movement, the eyes of the nation are upon New York.

The leading role by a liberal Democratic politician in this initiative is not the only eyebrow-raising aspect of the current battle in Albany. Perhaps even more surprising from a historical perspective — and even more important — is the advocacy involvement of UJA-Federation.

**FORMANY YEARS**, the American secular Jewish establishment was firmly opposed to any form of governmental assistance to religious school communities. To the secular establishment, the constitutional barrier of separation between church and state was sacrosanct and impenetrable. And so, when issues involving governmental assistance to religious school communities would arise, whether in legislative bodies or in the courts, one could automatically assume that Orthodox groups like Agudath Israel, the OU, and COLPA would be on one side of the fence, and that secular groups like ADL, American Jewish Congress, and American Jewish Committee would be on the other.

Yet, wonder of wonders, here we have UJA-Federation — a bastion of secular Jewish'keit if there ever was one — emerging

in New York over the past few years as a major ally in the fight for education tax credits and other government programs designed to benefit the Jewish school community. Might we dare to dream that the tide is turning, that the secular Jewish world is finally recognizing that Jewish education is the key to Jewish continuity and Jewish survival?

By the time *Mishpacha* readers read this article, we may already know the fate of the Parental Choice in Education Act. Whatever the ultimate outcome, whether Governor Cuomo's bill is enacted or tabled, or whether some compromise proposal arises in its place, there are important lessons to be drawn from this entire episode.

And perhaps the most important lesson of all has nothing to do with advocacy or politics or legislation, but with the *pintele Yid* that rests within even the most estranged Jew. ●

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