

Benjamin Tucker:

Good morning Honorable Chair Brewer, committee members, and my fellow New Yorkers. My name is Benjamin Tucker and I'm here representing YAFFED. We're an advocacy organization concerned about the quality of education at Hasidic yeshivas.

In New York City, there are tens of thousands of students attending yeshivas that fail to provide an education that is consistent with the New York State law. Every non-public school in New York State is required under Education Law Section 3204 to provide an education that is substantially equivalent to that which is provided by the local school district. Unfortunately, in the Hasidic community, there are scores of yeshivas that have ignored state law and have created a culture of educational neglect.

This situation has been allowed to exist for decades. This is a generational problem in the Hasidic community now. The quality of education at Hasidic yeshivas runs the spectrum of virtually a non-existent secular studies program to secular studies programs that are substantially equivalent. That this has been allowed to exist is a function of collusion between elected officials, education regulators, and yeshiva operators.

Thankfully, the state Education Department produced clarifying rules that provide a clear framework for enforcement by the local school district. As a result of this action and court orders resulting from legal cases brought by YAFFED, the New York City Department of Education performed quality reviews of two dozen yeshivas that resulted last June in 18 yeshivas being deemed to be failing their students. Slowly, the system has begun to respond to this problem. Slowly, action appears to be in process.

However, this process requires oversight. Delays drew out the initial investigation for over seven years. In 2019, the New York City Department of Investigation declared that then-Mayor Bill de Blasio had horse-traded the issue in order to gain political favor with Hasidic community leaders. Throughout all this time, these yeshivas have been generously funded with public dollars in the form of mandated service aid, transportation aid, textbook money, special education funding, and food programs. Each of these government funding programs requires applicants to attest that they are in compliance with all local and state laws. Yet we know that these yeshivas are not. It is an undisputed fact that 18 yeshivas are not compliant. We urge the Special Commissioner to launch a full investigation into funding that has been provided to yeshivas that provide only a religious education. We urge the Special Commissioner to provide ongoing oversight to the Office of Non-Public Schools at the Department of Education. This office is charged with ensuring the compliance of non-public schools. This issue has been far too politicized over the years to allow these processes to continue unwatched. Compliance must be verified. Politics must be removed from the assurance of compliance. Thank you.