

**Testimony of Beatrice Weber, Senior Advisor, YAFFED**

*Joint Legislative Public Hearing on the 2025 Executive Budget Proposal: Elementary & Secondary Education*

**January 29, 2025**

Good morning, Chairs Krueger, Pretlow, Benedetto, Mayer, and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the 2025 Executive Budget Proposal as it relates to elementary and secondary education.

My name is Beatrice Weber, and I am a Senior Advisor to YAFFED (Young Advocates for Fair Education), a nonprofit dedicated to ensuring that all students in Hasidic and Haredi yeshivas receive a sound basic education, as required under New York State law. I am also here as a parent of children who have attended yeshivas.

Over 65,000 students are enrolled in Hasidic and Haredi yeshivas across New York State. While many yeshivas provide a strong education that balances secular and religious studies, thousands of students—particularly boys—are being left behind. These boys typically receive minimal instruction in core subjects such as English, math, and science before age 13, after which their education consists almost exclusively of Judaic studies.

The consequences of this educational neglect are severe. Nearly **43% of Hasidic Jews in New York City live below the poverty line**, and an additional 16% live near poverty. Many graduates of these schools lack English fluency, which profoundly limits their future opportunities. Without basic literacy, numeracy, or high school diplomas, these young men are unprepared for higher education, vocational training, or employment, perpetuating cycles of poverty and economic instability.

This problem will only grow more urgent. By 2030, one in eight schoolchildren in New York City—and up to one-third in Brooklyn—will be Hasidic. Without swift intervention, we risk a significant portion of our future workforce struggling with illiteracy and economic hardship.

The New York State Education Department (NYSED) has worked diligently to develop and enforce regulations requiring nonpublic schools to provide an education "substantially equivalent" to that of public schools. Despite intense political pressure, coordinated public comment campaigns, and repeated legal challenges orchestrated by certain yeshiva operators, NYSED has upheld its mission to protect children's educational rights.

Yet, implementation of these regulations has been slow and inconsistent. On June 30, 2023, NYSED identified **18 schools as noncompliant**, including some that provided no general education whatsoever. These schools failed to teach even the most basic subjects, such as English, math, and science. More than 18 months later, parents report that little to no progress

has been made in these schools, and the students remain severely behind. I speak from personal experience, as my own child attended one of these schools.

Arguments that these schools need more time to comply with NYSED's reasonable standards are disingenuous. These schools have had years to make the necessary adjustments, yet most have made no meaningful changes. Instead, yeshiva operators have actively resisted reform through legal and political maneuvering. After repeatedly losing in state court, they recently filed an administrative complaint in search of a more favorable ruling in federal court. Last legislative session, these operators lobbied tirelessly for a backroom deal to undermine NYSED's authority and shield noncompliant schools from accountability.

To address these challenges and ensure that every child receives a sound basic education, I urge the Legislature to:

1. **Resist any further delays** in enforcing substantial equivalency regulations. Political pressure and backroom deals must not be allowed to derail years of thoughtful deliberation and public input.
2. **Provide resources for students failed by their schools.** This includes funding for remedial education, workforce development programs, and other opportunities for young adults who have graduated without basic skills.

Again, this is not an attack on religious education. Many Jewish schools across New York State excel at providing a robust secular education alongside religious instruction. However, the failure of certain schools to comply with state education laws is a grave injustice to their students.

This issue is about children's rights—their right to an education, their right to opportunity, and their right to a future.

As lawmakers, you have the power to ensure that every child in New York State, regardless of their background or the school they attend, is equipped with the tools they need to succeed in life. Let NYSED do its job. Let the regulators regulate. And let us work together to safeguard the futures of these children.

Thank you for your time and attention. I am happy to answer any questions.