

# CONGRES

## A Radical proposal whose Time Has come:

A mutually beneficial plan could help both the public schools and the *yeshivot*, without violating the Constitution

BY JONATHAN ISLER  
WITH KENNY GLUCK

The yeshivah would take the bold step of eliminating its entire secular studies program and pass the savings along to tuition-paying parents. In essence, the yeshivah's secular studies department would be financed by the public school district.

Students would be regarded as yeshivah students and public school students simultaneously.

I was never one to be satisfied with the status quo or to accept a situation because "that's how it's always been done." I believe change should be embraced and not feared as long as it has the ability to improve the current situation.

That's why some months ago, I, along with a few community members in Woodmere, New York, where I live, came up with a radical plan to tackle the astronomical cost of yeshivah tuition. Our initial plan was to have yeshivah kids receive their secular education in the public school and their religious instruction in classrooms that would be rented, after hours, from the public school. Much of the feedback we received regarding our original plan reflected concerns about disrupting the yeshivah environment; so in crafting our current plan we tried to ensure that the yeshivah environment will not be compromised in any way.

Our local district, the Lawrence School District, is unique. Largely because of the significant Orthodox population in the area, the district suffers from dwindling enrollment, budget failures and poor student test scoring. The district is, in essence, a corporation desperately in need of a corporate restructuring plan.

Most *yeshivot* only close budget gaps by raising the cost of its product (tuition). Parents are being financially strangled and can no longer afford to pay tuition. It is interesting to note that each side has what the other one needs. The local *frum* community has the students as well as the ability to deliver budget victories and raise test scores. The public schools have the financial resources that *yeshivot* desperately need. Is this a *shidduch*? Maybe yes!

As of this printing, the newest proposal is to have the yeshivah students remain in

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yeshivah all day, as they currently do. Students will *daven* and take *limudei kodesh* classes in the morning. The yeshivah would take the bold step of eliminating its entire secular studies program and pass the savings along to tuition-paying parents. Public school teachers would teach yeshivah students in the yeshivah building. In essence, the yeshivah's secular studies department would be financed by the public school district.

This proposal can only work because the school district has an obligation to provide a free secular education to every child in the district, and that education need not take place in the public school. We envision students being dually enrolled in yeshivah and public school, that is, they would be regarded as yeshivah students and public school students simultaneously. This plan would obviously benefit the school district as well since the increased enrollment would lead to increased dollars from the state.

In recent years the Supreme Court has begun adopting a less rigid interpretation of the Establishment Clause of the Constitution. With the likely ascension of Justice John G. Roberts, Jr. to the bench, this pattern may continue. In essence, providing a secular education for a religious institution does not directly support the establishment of a religion, and the Court may see it that way in the near future.

Most major businesses at some point consider outsourcing in order to save money; *yeshivot* should be no different. Furthermore, *yeshivot* tend to employ retired or active public school teachers to teach secular studies, so there will be little change in that regard. What is important, however, is that the yeshivah retains control over the curriculum so as to ensure Orthodox sensibilities are taken into account. Is all this effort worth a 30 to 40 percent tuition reduction? In my opinion the answer is *yes*. The local school district is in the process of exploring the legality of the initiative and trying to determine the best way to move forward. Will our plan succeed if it passes legal muster? Will both sides be able to employ visionary thinking and take bold steps? For the sake of our children, I sure hope so. **IA**