



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

NON \neq EQUIVALENT:

THE STATE OF EDUCATION IN
NEW YORK CITY'S HASIDIC YESHIVAS

SEPTEMBER 2017

Yaffed (Young Advocates for Fair Education) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit advocacy organization committed to improving secular education within ultra-Orthodox schools. We fervently believe that every child is entitled to a fair and equitable education that is in compliance with the law. Our work involves raising awareness about the importance of general studies education, and encouraging elected officials, Department of Education officials and the leadership of the ultra-Orthodox world to act responsibly in preparing their youth for economic sufficiency and for broad access to the resources of the modern world.

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For more information:

www.yaffed.org



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NEW YORK IS FAILING ITS HASIDIC YOUTH.

Most Hasidic children attend special non-public schools from age 5 or earlier to adulthood or beyond. The language of instruction is Yiddish, the same language the students speak at home, and sometimes includes some Hebrew and/or Aramaic texts. The schools are separated by gender: girls attend a girls' school, and boys attend a boys' school, or Yeshiva.

Both provide a rigorous religious education intended to build the foundation for a life lived according to Hasidic Jewish principles. Where they differ, however, is in the education they provide beyond this foundation. Girls, who are not allowed to become *rabbis* (respected Jewish scholars and leaders) learn general subjects such as English, math, science, and social studies during the second half of the school day. Boys, on the other hand, are expected to aspire to become rabbis, so they continue studying Jewish texts, such as the *Torah* (the Hebrew Bible), *Talmud* (Jewish law), and other religious subjects for the entire school day.

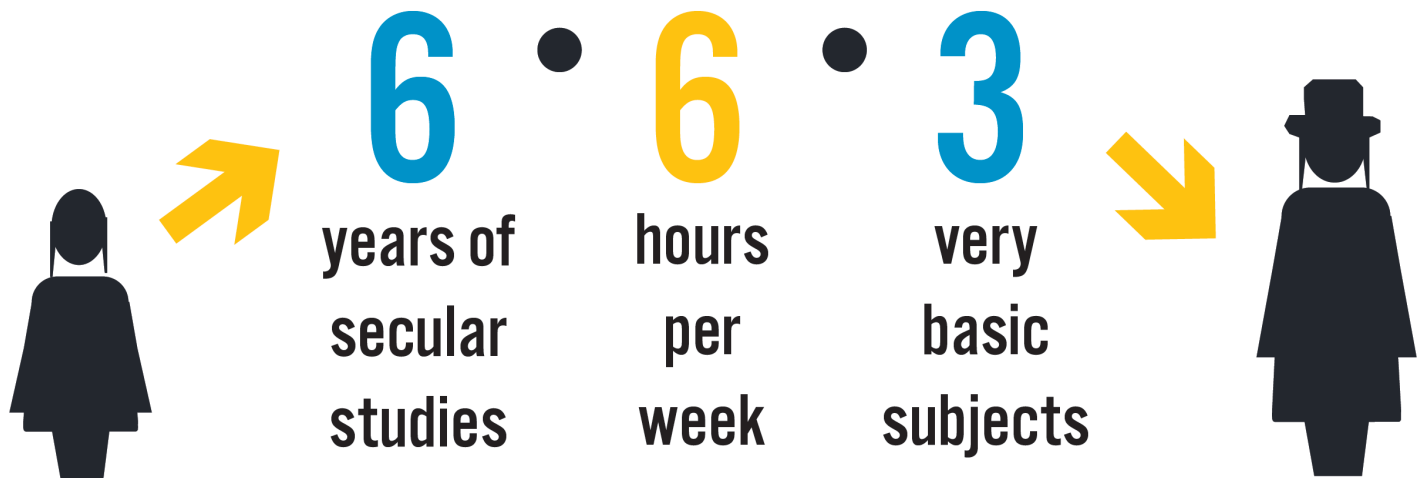


The average Hasidic boy:

- learns only basic English reading, writing, and arithmetic,
- for 90 minutes a day,
- four days a week,
- from age 7 to age 12.

After he turns 13, he spends 12 hours a day in yeshiva but learns only Judaic studies -- no English, no math, no science, no history...

When yeshivas do provide education in secular subjects, it is in just a few grades, for one hour to ninety minutes at the end of the long school day. Typically, instruction is provided in very basic English reading and arithmetic, along with minimal levels of English writing. Teachers are often unqualified -- some barely know English themselves -- and the "English" class period (as the time devoted to secular studies is called) is often treated as free time for restless students. Textbooks are heavily censored, when they are used at all. High schools for boys typically provide absolutely no secular education.



The average young Hasidic man leaves the yeshiva system completely unprepared to work in – or interact with – the world outside his community.

The average yeshiva graduate:

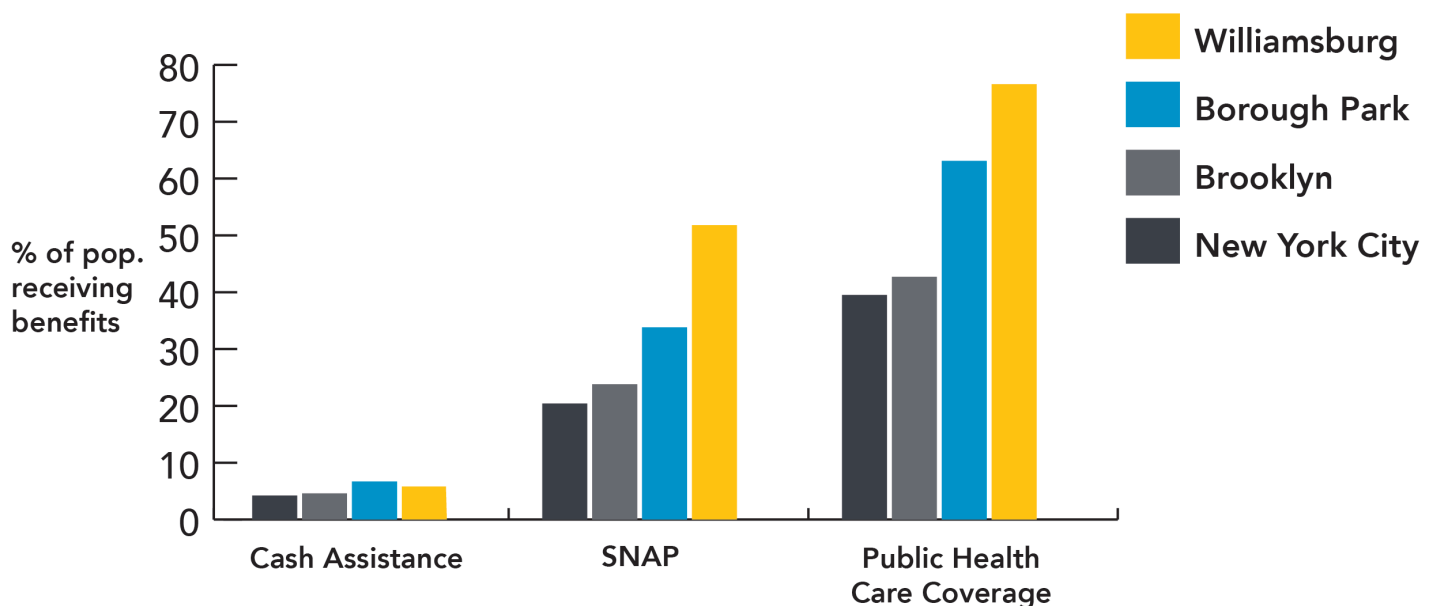
- speaks little or no English,
- has few or no marketable skills,
- earns a household income well below the average Brooklynite's,
- marries young and has many children, and
- is forced to rely upon public assistance to support his large family.

Without secular education, young men lack the requisite skills to obtain employment with a decent income to support themselves and their (often large) families. Furthermore, because most yeshivas choose not to administer the Regents Examinations or to award diplomas, graduates find it nearly impossible to pursue post-secondary education to attain the skills they need.

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This puts Hasidic families at high risk for poverty and reliance upon government assistance. Approximately 43% of Hasidic households in New York are poor and another 16% are near poor. Hasidic communities in Brooklyn have a greater percentage of families receiving cash assistance, food stamps, public health care coverage, and Section 8 housing vouchers, as compared to Brooklyn and New York City as a whole. The percentage of people in a heavily Hasidic district of Brooklyn utilizing public income support such as cash assistance (TANF), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and Medicaid has increased dramatically in the last decade as the population grew rapidly without improvements in education.

Rates of Public Assistance Utilization in Heavily Hasidic Communities of Brooklyn (compared to overall rates in Brooklyn and NYC)



Data source: 2010-2014 ACS Profile, via NYC Census FactFinder, <http://maps.nyc.gov/census/>.

The Hasidic population in New York City is expected to continue to grow rapidly, with especially high growth among children and young people, so that by 2030 up to one-eighth of the city's schoolchildren, and up to one-third of Brooklyn's, will be Hasidic.



The New York State and City education departments (NYSED and DOE) have abdicated their responsibility to ensure that all students within their jurisdiction receive an adequate education.

State and city education officials have been aware of this responsibility and the lack of enforcement of standards for at least two decades. New York State education laws require that non-public schools provide an education that is “substantially equivalent” to that provided in the public schools. Yet, it is an “open secret” that yeshivas provide subpar education in state-mandated subjects. Hasidic leaders boast openly about the minimal time their schools spend on secular subjects, and have stated that they believe the government is happy to allow this to continue.



Over the last five years...

- NYSED and the DOE have largely stonewalled Yaffed and yeshiva graduates who have asked them to enforce standards in yeshivas.
- The DOE finally agreed to investigate yeshivas after Yaffed and Attorney Norman Siegel issued a widely publicized letter in 2015, signed by 52 yeshiva graduates and parents and naming 39 schools.
- The DOE partnered with a group created to oppose Yaffed and developed a “plan” for curriculum reform that did nothing to ensure that yeshivas would meet state standards.
- The DOE has promised to release a report on the investigation, which is now more than a year overdue.
- The DOE would not commit to releasing a report before the mayoral election.

After the DOE announced its investigation, yeshivas and Hasidic leaders formed a group called Parents for Educational and Religious Liberty in Schools (PEARLS) to “protect our sacred education.” The group is represented by a public relations firm and spent approximately \$1 million on its cause within its first year. Its leaders include some of the most powerful ultra-Orthodox representatives in New York, as well as a former fundraiser for Mayor de Blasio.

While largely stonewalling Yaffed, the DOE worked with PEARLS to create a “plan” for improvement of yeshiva education, which the DOE would not share with Yaffed. A year after the “plan” was announced and supposedly was to be implemented in all 39 yeshivas named in Yaffed’s letter, secular education in those schools has not noticeably improved.



Meanwhile, Mayor de Blasio sent a letter to one of the worst offenders, yeshiva Oholei Torah, praising its “excellence” and “well-rounded education” in May 2017.

Oholei Torah is one of the 39 yeshivas named in Yaffed’s letter and is one of the schools that the DOE affirmed would implement a new secular curriculum in the 2016-17 school year. It did not. Oholei Torah provides zero secular education to its students, grades K-12.



Yeshivas benefit from hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars.

Federal money goes to yeshivas through:

- Title I, II, and III,
- Head Start and child care contracts,
- the E-rate telecommunications program, and
- food programs such as the USDA Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP) and Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP).

State and city funding is provided to yeshivas through:

- Academic Intervention Services (AIS),
- Nonpublic School Safety Equipment (NPSE),
- Mandated Services Aid (MSA),
- the Comprehensive Attendance Program (CAP),
- EarlyLearn,
- Universal Pre-K,
- child care vouchers, and
- New York City Council discretionary funds.

These funds are not insignificant. For example, it is estimated that yeshivas receive \$120 million a year from the state-funded, city-run Child Care Block Grant Subsidy Program -- nearly a quarter of the allocation to the entire city, and about fifteen percent of the state total.

These taxpayer dollars are on top of the tuition and private contributions that yeshivas receive.

Yeshivas have also benefited from some questionable financial practices. They have been investigated for misuse of millions of dollars of E-rate and CACFP funds, and one received hundreds of thousands of dollars from an illegal hotel run by one of its board members.



Despite some Hasidic leaders' fears that improving secular instruction in yeshivas would endanger the sanctity of their religious studies, several girls' schools and a handful of yeshivas already provide a decent general education in combination with strong Jewish studies programs. Secular and religious education can coexist in yeshivas, just as they do in many Jewish day schools, Catholic schools, and Muslim schools.

THIS REPORT THEREFORE RECOMMENDS...



RECOMMENDATIONS

Yaffed believes that all yeshivas in New York City should meet all state laws and guidelines regarding educational standards. In order to do so...

Beginning immediately (2017):

- The New York City Department of Education should establish a task force within the next six months to improve education in yeshivas.
- The DOE and NYSED should encourage and assist yeshivas in meeting all state requirements.
- Yeshivas should begin to annually increase the amount of time spent on secular studies per day by at least 30-45 minutes.

By August 2018:

- The DOE task force should establish time-specific benchmarks for yeshivas to meet as they move toward compliance with state guidelines.

By August 2019:

- The DOE and NYSED should discontinue all funding to schools not meeting benchmarks.

By September 2020:

- Yeshivas should spend a minimum of 3 hours on secular studies in elementary schools and 2.5 hours in high schools.
- Yeshivas should teach all state-mandated subjects for each grade level.
- Yeshivas should administer Regents exams and provide diplomas to all high school graduates.

The DOE and NYSED should monitor compliance on a regular and on-going basis. Both agencies should improve transparency to the public regarding funding provided to non-public schools, response to complaints, and monitoring of compliance.

See the full report for more detailed recommendations.

For the sake of New York City's children and families, for taxpayers throughout the city, state, and the nation, and in the interest of international law and the fundamental human right to education, New York cannot ignore this issue any longer.

**“THE FOUNDATION OF EVERY STATE
IS THE EDUCATION OF ITS YOUTH.”**

- DIOGENES LAERTIUS



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