



JOINT HEARING
On
Mayoral Control of the New York City School District

Testimony of
Naftuli Moster
Executive Director of YAFFED

Presented to

Senate Standing Committee on New York City Education
Senate Standing Committee on Education
Assembly Standing Committee on Education

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Chairman Lui, Chairwoman Mayer, Chairman Benedetto, Senators, Assembly members, and my fellow New Yorkers. My name is Naftuli Moster and I am the founder and Executive Director of the non-profit organization YAFFED, Young Advocates for Fair Education. YAFFED was formed ten years ago because tens of thousands of New York State school children attend private schools that fail to follow New York State education law section 3204 which mandates that every school teach a substantially equivalent education as to what is taught in the local public schools. These schools, mostly ultra-orthodox yeshivas, operate in flagrant violation of the law and openly refuse to teach math, science, social studies, and even English. For the past ten years I have been working to get government entities in the state to enforce the law. Instead, each year, these schools continue to operate in violation of the law and receive taxpayer dollars in the form of “mandated services” aid and other forms of state and local district aid that is designated for non-public schools. This year’s historic budget includes over three hundred million dollars in public money earmarked for non-public schools.

The majority of these unlawful yeshivas are operating in New York City. We estimate that there are forty five thousand school children in New York City attending yeshivas that fail to provide a basic education. Seven years ago, in 2015, Yaffed, along with over fifty yeshiva graduates and yeshiva parents, filed a complaint with the New York City Department of Education demanding that the Department compel unlawful yeshivas to follow the law. Six

years later, nothing has happened. The de Blasio administration did nothing. Its own Department of Investigation declared in 2019 that the Mayor was choosing politics over education. All we have seen in the six years since the complaint was filed are two letters from the chancellor to the state commissioner of education which admitted that ninety percent of the yeshivas investigated were deficient.

Every year that passes the students of these schools get older, more students enter, and more students graduate. Every year that these schools are not forced to comply with the law this cycle of educational neglect continues.

I would ask every member of this committee to take a moment and think about what it would mean today to have grown up never having learned basic science. Is there a single member of this committee who can articulate a reasoned argument why any child in the year 2022 does not need to learn science?

It is worth noting that the letters that the chancellor wrote in 2019 were written after the New York City Department of Investigation released its report finding that the Mayor had engaged in “horse-trading” on this issue, delaying progress on the investigation specifically to win an extension of mayoral control with support from Yeshiva leaders. It was not until the Mayor was publicly called out by an official body that his Department of Education felt it necessary to respond to what was a lawful complaint. The Mayor did not want to act, and he did not act - all the way up to the very last day when he left office. No one had been able to compel him to do something. Sometimes absolute power results in absolutely nothing happening.

New York City’s school district has operated under the system of Mayoral Control for almost two decades now. The system’s effect on public school children has been pilloried by some and lauded by others. I am not here to speak about Mayoral Control from the perspective of the public schools. I am here to speak about how the system as applied by the former mayor enabled a politician to make political calculations that stymied a vital investigation. We have allowed a system of governance to exist where the mayor can ignore state law, and, through his own inaction, allow an entire community’s youth to grow up having never been given the education that is their right as written into our own state constitution and enacted in state law. There must be limits to any one executive’s power and the system must have a mechanism that keeps it accountable to those it is meant to protect.

As you consider whether to renew the Mayoral Control law, I urge the members of this committee to remember the plight of these children. If you renew the law, I urge you to include safeguards that allow a form of active oversight of the Mayor's actions so that this cycle of ignorance is not able to continue. We believe a centralized authority is a good thing, but there needs to be more accountability, not just on contracts but also on policy and enforcement. I urge you to stand with me and make sure that no one can trade children's futures for their own political gain as our last mayor did. Help break the cycle of ignorance once and for all.

I thank you for your time and for your continued service.

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