

# OPEN LETTER TO CHANCELLOR ROSA

August 19, 2019

Honorable Betty A. Rosa  
Chancellor  
New York State Board of Regents  
89 Washington Avenue  
Albany, New York 12234

Dear Chancellor Rosa:

We are congregational Rabbis who minister to significant communities. We care for and teach thousands of children and teenagers. We are deeply invested in their development, both as committed Jews and as productive members of society. And we are deeply concerned about the proposed regulations governing nonpublic school education in New York, which could have a far-reaching negative impact on our communities in New York and any other state where the New York policy could create a dangerous precedent.

In our community, education is valued above almost all else. Twice daily in our prayers parents are reminded that among their principal duties is to provide for the instruction of their children: "Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. Impress them upon your children. . . ." (Deut. 6:6). In our congregations, nearly 100 percent of school-age children attend Jewish schools, as our congregants appreciate that providing their children a solid Jewish education is a core parental responsibility and an essential means of assuring Jewish continuity.

Established and organized elementary school learning, beginning at the age of six, was regarded as compulsory in Jewish communities as early as 64 CE. In keeping with this tradition, Jewish communities have established their own schools throughout the ages.

Here as in few other countries, the Jewish passion for knowledge has produced not only great Torah scholars but also prominent leaders in almost every field. Those leaders have emerged from our yeshiva system, with its dual curriculum. The typical Jewish school day begins with Jewish studies classes, which typically run into early afternoon. Secular studies - English, Math, Science and Social Studies - are typically taught four afternoons a week.

Our morning curriculum includes the study of Biblical and other Judaic texts, frequently translated into English. There is a great deal of textual and grammatical analysis. Our children study Talmudic texts, which deal significantly with civil law, and the art of critical thinking. They are also exposed to ethical and philosophical works, which provide them with foundational lessons in character development and a moral framework for life.

With that perspective, let us turn to the regulations that have been proposed.

They would require our elementary schools to teach a dozen secular studies courses, including the arts, career development, occupational studies, and family and consumer science. In grades 7 and 8, they would be required to provide approximately 4.4 hours of secular studies instruction each weekday afternoon. The requirements for high school are similarly extensive and prescriptive.

That is untenable and unnecessary. Our children already have a heavy workload given their Jewish studies classes, which prepare them for a life of learning. These regulations would require every yeshiva to shift hours and resources away from those classes and towards courses that parents have not asked for and that no educator would suggest are core requirements.

The proposed regulations are also an invasion of our schools' professionalism, which demands that our educators alone determine time allocation for courses given. We have sufficient experience and substantial achievement to insist that we remain the arbiters of our daily schedule. Schools familiar with their students and their backgrounds, the dual curriculum and its demands, are best capable of setting and regulating the schedule.

Every morning, we pray that "we and our children, and our children's children, and all Jewish children be sincere students of Torah." If adopted, these regulations will make it that much more difficult for our prayers to be realized.

We appeal to you, please let us do it our way. We shall not disappoint, except those who seek to be disappointed.

Some are quoted as saying that the ultimate purpose of education is for improving the lives of others and for leaving your community and world better than you found it."

If you let us, with G-d's help, we will.

Thank you for your kind consideration.

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