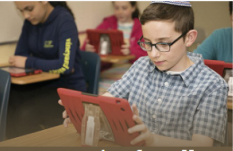


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By JOANNE PALMER

TeachNJ, TeachNY work toward goal of state funding for day school safety, STEM, and more



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TeachNJ, TeachNY work toward goal of state funding for day school safety, STEM, and more

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By JOANNE PALMER | May 8, 2019, 11:34 pm | 0



Next week, TeachNJ will host Governor Phil Murphy at its annual dinner; he'll give the keynote address to the organization at the Newark Museum.

That's not bad for a four-year-old group that advocates for public money for private schools. In fact, it's impressive. It's also not accidental, according to the founding and executive director of its parent group, the New York-based, Orthodox Union-affiliated Teach Coalition, Maury Litwack of Teaneck.

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If the group were not broadly based, non-combative, respectful of public schools and the faith-based schools of people of other faiths and of Jews across the religious spectrum; if it were not specific about the funding for which it advocates, which is for security, textbooks, school nurses, and STEM education; if it were not advocating along with other groups



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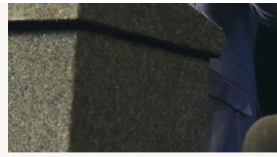


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advocating along with other groups but instead acting against them, then it would not have succeeded, Mr. Litwack said.

He started working on the idea of an organization like Teach in 2013, he



Maury Litwack

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said; he'd come to the OU, where he worked on "governmental affairs work on the federal side in D.C.," from a career in Washington, working first for two members of Congress and then as a Washington lobbyist for Miami Dade County. That year, he convened a meeting of representatives of a dozen Jewish day schools, "everyone across the spectrum from yeshivish to modern Orthodox to Solomon Schechter," he said; there also was someone from the "Sephardic community in Brooklyn." The idea behind the meeting was that "at the time, New York State housed more than 100,000 day school kids." The state already gave the schools money for "busing, nursing, and textbook aid, but there was no history of consistent increases" as the number of students grew.

"There was a real concern that to combat the tuition crisis in day schools, which had grown year by year, the government would have to play some role in providing more services and benefits," Mr. Litwack said.

"The meeting was to form an organization that would do three things. One, it was to be a single-issue advocacy organization. The issue was Jewish education. What the AARP does for seniors, or AIPAC does for the pro-Israel community — that's what we would do for Jewish education.

"Number two was to work together. All the schools would show up together and present a united front. At the time, there were a few individuals who were lobbying in Albany, or in city politics, but they were not necessarily representative of the whole community.

"Three was that we would approach the issues in a completely different way than they had ever been approached before. That means that we wouldn't be advocating for things like vouchers, which were anathema to the teachers union. And we wouldn't be advocating in a way that would take money away from the public-school system, or to fight with it. We weren't part of any school-choice activities."

It was an intriguing idea, and a powerful one. "At the end of that meeting, six schools formed the organization," Mr. Litwack said. The names of some of those founding schools since have changed; then, they were Manhattan Day School, North Shore Academy, Solomon Schechter School of Long Island, Westchester Day School, SAR, and the Yeshivah of Flatbush.



Assemblyman Gary Schaer (D-Dist. 36) speaks as TeachNJS's director, Josh Caplan, stands by.

"We started having a lot of success with this model, because we were approaching and advocating with elected officials," Mr. Litwack said. "One of the first wins we got was for security funding per pupil in New York State in 2014, and when we got that funding elected officials started to look at us as real advocates for what was at that time about 12 percent of the education in the state." That number includes all nonpublic schools, he explained; secular private schools and religious schools run by all faith groups, mostly Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim.



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He likes to stay away from the term “private school,” Mr. Litwack said, because that term makes it sound like the students are wealthy and entitled. “We have kids who can’t afford school without scholarships,” he said. “It is not entitlement. It is part and parcel of our heritage.”

New York State also passed what Mr. Litwack called “groundbreaking legislation,” providing funding for security and also for STEM education. STEM is science, technology, engineering, and math; they are all objective, fact-based subjects that have nothing to do with religion. “Whether a child goes to a public or a nonpublic school, the state can make an economic investment in their education. It can make sure that they have a 21st-century STEM education, and funding it is not anathema to people who argue that they don’t want to pay for children’s religious education.

“It resonated with local and state officials.”

In the 2015-16 school year, New York State allocated about \$25 per child for security funding. “That was a great allocation,” Mr. Litwack said. “And then you start to see the operations build and grow in a serious way.

“The model needs active involvement from parents and the schools. You can come up with the best policy and the best relationships with elected officials and you can hire the best lobbyists, but at the end of the day, if you don’t have the people, you are done. You are toast.”

Also, he added, the spending is audited; the state makes sure that it is spent for the reasons it was allocated. If not, once again, they would be toast.

Once it proved so successful in New York, Teach officials started to look over the Hudson. “In 2015, we started TeachNJ to replicate the success in the New Jersey area,” Mr. Litwack said. Its director is Josh Caplan of Teaneck, and a staff works with him.

There also are Teach organizations in Pennsylvania, Florida, Maryland, and California; this year, another group opened in Ontario. Each has its own director.

Because it already had a track record, “the first meeting in New Jersey was very different than the first one in New York,” Mr. Litwack said. “Twenty schools signed up immediately, and the federation” — that’s the Jewish Federation of Northern New Jersey — “signed up and invested money in it as well.”

From the start, parents were active. “In the last few years, we have seen historic increases in funding in New Jersey,” Mr. Litwack said. “Our organization has encouraged the community to make their voices heard by showing up in Trenton and testifying, by showing up in meetings with local officials in dozens of local offices, and by making thousands of phone calls.

“All that activism and all that involvement is why the state of New Jersey passed legislative funding to provide \$150 per child in security funding.



From left, TeachNJ’s grassroots director, Renee Klyman; the Teach Coalition’s political affairs director, Daniel Mitzner; New Jersey’s education commissioner, Dr. Lamont Repollet; and TeachNJ’s director, Josh Caplan, stand together on January 8 as the Nonpublic School Security Bill is signed.

“We have been asking for security funding increases, nursing funding, and technology funding. We want to see the state of New Jersey replicate what New York has done so successfully in the STEM program,” he added.

Mr. Litwack is thrilled that the dinner, meant to be the first of an annual

series — before this, the yearly fundraising meetings were breakfasts — will feature Governor Murphy. “That’s a testament to who we are and what we are trying to do,” Mr. Litwack said. “It is an opportunity for the community to thank him for his work, and to show why as Jewish day-school parents we make sacrifices for Jewish education. Why we send our kids there. Why that is so important.”

Mr. Litwack’s feelings for TeachNJ are both theoretical and concrete; he has four children, and they’re all in Ben Porat Yosef in Paramus.

“We also are extremely proud of the fact that as an organization we are a leader in security funding, not just in New Jersey but around the nation during this difficult time,” he continued. “As an example of that, last week Governor Newsom of California announced a \$115 million security allocation to protect synagogues and day schools, among other nonprofits. Teach California was instrumental in advocating for that. So whether it is \$150 per child in New Jersey or security guards in New York or in California after the tragedy in Poway, we are proud that we not only are advocating for Jewish education but providing security to our community in our time of need.

“So when you see all this, it is not a surprise that the governor is coming to speak to us. It is not surprising that we are a success. We are building a movement for our kids and our grandkids, and I believe that it also is good for the state of New Jersey, and for New York state, and really for any state.”

And, he said, this is not limited to Jews. “We had stood side by side with others, whether on the steps of City Hall in New York or in front of our schools in New Jersey with Catholics and Muslims, calling for more safety funding for our kids.

“That is a testament to how we operate. We don’t want this funding to be going only to our kids. We want it to go to every kid.”

What about the separation of church and state? Is it right for state funds to go to private religious institutions?

Yes, Mr. Litwack said. Just think about how it really works. “I believe that the state should invest fully in our public-school kids, but our finances do not operate like that.

“The state of New Jersey has hundreds of millions of dollars that it spends on tax credits for corporations and businesses. If we are going to have a genuine conversation about this, don’t tell us that the \$150 per child, which at the most is about \$22 million, is where we are going to find the money to plug the holes in education funding.

“The state literally is spending money in all kinds of places where you could make the argument that it should go instead to public education.



Assemblywoman Valerie Vainieri Huttie (D-Dist. 37), center, watches as a Ma'ayanot student and her teacher, Reyce Krause, work on coding.

“It is a disingenuous argument that the state can plug the holes through this funding. When you look at the state budget, you look at the incentives they offer corporations, you see that there are a lot of other places where we can make that argument.”

Instead, look at it this way.

“This is what the Jewish community is capable of doing — having all the

schools working together with the OU, with the federation, hosting an extraordinarily progressive governor who will be talking about how we can educate every child in New Jersey.

“To me, that is a dream.”

In keeping with its goal of working with all Jews on Jewish education, the Teach Coalition also works with Prizmah: Center for Jewish Day Schools, whose members come from across the Jewish spectrum.

Twenty schools belong to TeachNJ, and it is supported by two federations — the one in northern New Jersey and the Jewish Federation in the Heart of New Jersey, which covers Monmouth and Middlesex counties.

“We believe that federation money can be better leveraged to help the school system through this effort than it can be through other methods,” Jason Shames, the CEO of the Jewish Federation of Northern New Jersey, said. “Federation has been a leader in this since Day One. We have been giving TeachNJ \$50,000 a year, and that is why we say ‘leverage,’ because of the state reimbursements for things that we believe that every student in New Jersey should be eligible for — security, textbooks, nursing, nutrition, and STEM.

“It’s based on a per-capita rebate, like a credit from Trenton.” There are about 6,000 day-school students in the area, he said. “So if you do that math, divide \$50,000 by 6,000. That is pennies. But if our money and our efforts at the state level result in an increase to the tax reimbursement to the school, there is an exponentially greater impact.”

What about the church/state debate? “Look, we are not being disrespectful, but I think that when we talk about Jewish continuity, which is our mission, we felt that the overriding desire to help the day schools out is primary,” Mr. Shames said. “We think that in Bergen County, about 40 percent of the kids in K through 12 go to Jewish day schools. It’s one of the highest rates in the country.

“Public schools have been receiving this from the state forever. Jewish families already are paying exorbitant funding to schools, so it seems reasonable that some of it should come back to them.

“If you do the homework, you see that compared to Pennsylvania and New York, we get pennies on the dollar in terms of what private-school kids get from Albany and Harrisburg. When we first started this project, New York was giving back \$900 per kid, and New Jersey was giving back about \$100. It was a great divide.

“And we still have the highest property taxes in the country,” he added.

Sixty-five schools belong to TeachNY; they include ASHAR in New City. (ASHAR is more formally known as the Adolph Schreiber Hebrew Academy of Rockland.)

David Katznelson is ASHAR’s executive director. “TeachNY assists us in identifying and applying for different grants that are available,” he said. “In a nutshell, that’s what they do for us. The landscape is full of grants and opportunities. They help us identify which ones are appropriate for us.

“For the whole group, they advocate on behalf of institutions like ours, so that we can recognize and obtain our fair share of government opportunities and programs.”

Like other schools, Ashar can use the help. “As a small institution, we wouldn’t know half of what’s out there,” Mr. Katznelson said.

Although TeachNY’s main purpose is to help with funding, it also provides the school’s students with an education in how the government works, and how they as citizens can lobby its officials. “We have taken our kids on trips to Albany, which is an education in itself,” he said. “We’ve sat in House sessions and met with lawmakers.”

Sarit Perry of Englewood has an 11-year-old and a 9-year-old at the Solomon Schechter Day School of Bergen County in New Milford. She’s been active with TeachNJ.

“It’s trying to get funding for all private schools,” she said. She’s lobbied for it; “I went with a leader of a Muslim school. The issue that concerns her most is security, for all kids, in all schools. She’s particularly aware of the similarities between the security concerns of Jewish and Muslim schools. The Muslim representative said that her schools also are constantly under

The Muslim representatives said that her schools also are constantly under threat," she reported. "With the help of TeachNJ, we were able to get money for security."

She felt the need to advocate because "I was tired of standing on the side and just constantly having more and more fees tacked onto our tuition for security. And when this organization started, I had the opportunity to get involved.

"They paired me up with Eliana Pintor Marin," a Democratic member of the state's General Assembly who represents New Jersey's 29th District, centered around Newark. "She's on the budget committee, and I usually meet her in Trenton."

One of the things Ms. Perry has learned through her advocacy work is the importance of voting.

"When I meet with assembly members, they make it clear that they want to talk to voters," she said. "It is irrelevant who you vote for, but if they are talking to someone who hasn't gone into a voting booth for year, they are talking to someone whose voice doesn't count.

"If you don't vote, your voice just doesn't doesn't count."

Chaim Book of Teaneck is the president of the board of Torah Academy of Bergen County in Teaneck. "I think that TeachNJ is working really hard to establish good relationships with legislators and with Trenton, for the benefit of our entire community, and certainly for the Jewish day schools," he said. "And we already have seen the rewards of those efforts."

The first benefits TABC has reaped have been for security. "It's been phenomenal for us," Mr. Book said.

Beyond that, "TeachNJ is hard-working, and they're looking out for the interest of the entire faith community, not just the Jewish community," he said. "That's a really important thing."

"I am what they call an active parent," Yehuda Brum of Fair Lawn said. His daughter is a first grader at the Rosenbaum Yeshiva of North Jersey in River Edge, and whose sons will follow as soon as they're old enough. He's gone to meetings in other people's houses and hosted one in his own. "I went to the bill-signing when the governor signed the security grant," he said. "It's the usual activist thing, getting involved."

Why? "Because I think day-school tuition is one of the most pressing issues in the Orthodox community," he said. He wants to "make sure that day-school parents are treated in the same way as other parents, to make sure that the taxes we pay go for security, to make sure that we are getting what we are kicking in."

Who: TeachNJ

What: Holds its first annual dinner

When: On Wednesday, May 15, at 6:30

Where: At the Newark Museum, 49 Washington Street

What else: Governor Phil Murphy will speak

How much: \$200 per person / \$360 per couple / \$1800 and up to join Host Committee

For reservations: Email teachnjdinner@teachcoalition.org, call (201) -655-9948 or go to teachcoalition.org/nj/dinner

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