

# The Tuition Crisis

## Who's Doing What?

Sarina Roffe

One of the most discussed social challenges in Jewish communities worldwide is tuition affordability. The increasing cost of tuition at Jewish schools has outstripped the ability of many families to pay. More families than ever before—one out of two—is on tuition assistance today.

Surveys show that our community places a high value on Jewish education. We want our children to be raised in a Jewish environment and to remain in the community after they grow up and marry. A Jewish education is the single most important thing we can provide—as a community—to keep our children near and dear.

A yeshivah education is the very foundation of our community, preparing our children to be future

leaders. Yeshivahs are the glue that holds our community together, where our core values, such as keeping Shabbat, performing *hesed*, giving *tzedeka*, keeping kosher, as well as our other fundamental values are instilled in our children, and where they make lifelong friends.

While there is no single big solution to the tuition crisis, there are multi-pronged efforts in the works.

### What's Being Done?

Whenever someone that my parents knew was short money, my mother would say a “piddle and a piddle make a puddle.” In other words, you get a little bit here, and a little bit there, and before you know it, you have what you need to make up the financial shortfall.

As a consultant working with many nonprofit organizations in the

community, I see their work, their dedication and their commitment to helping families with tuition.

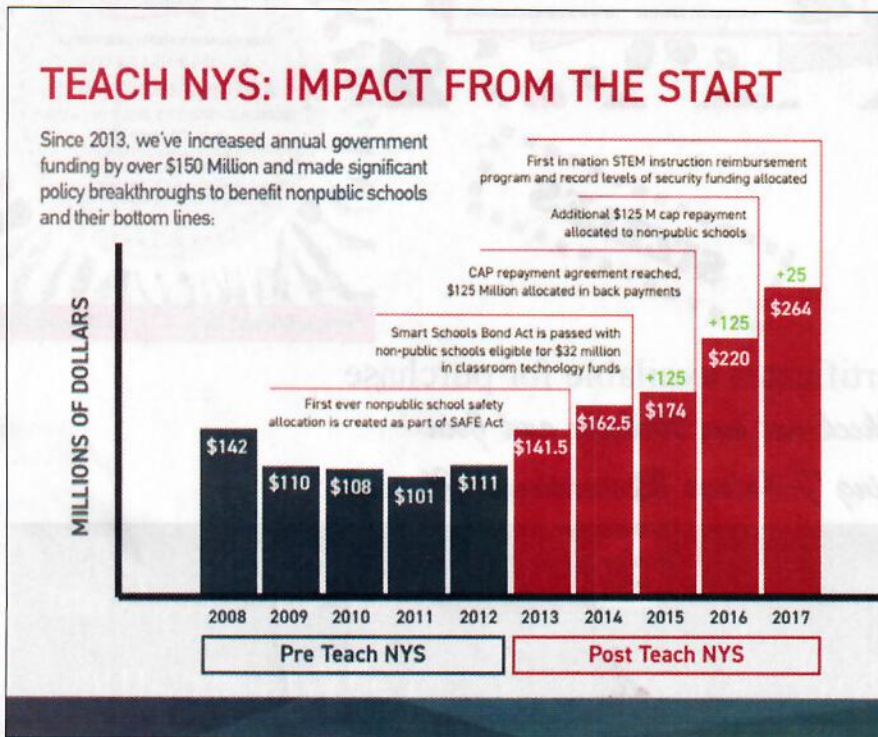
Currently, at least three organizations have long-term initiatives to help alleviate the problem. Each organization has a different approach.

**Teach NYS** – Teach NYS was formed by the Sephardic Community Federation, and in 2013 it merged with the Orthodox Union. New York non-public schools educate approximately 400,000 students, but receive less than 2% of state education funds. Teach NYS advocates for the government funding to bridge that discrepancy.

Relying on a network of lobbyists, lawmakers, partner schools, devoted grassroots volunteers and a full staff, Teach NYS advocates for affordable and necessary resources for non-public schools. As a result, New York State now appropriates close to \$300 million for non-public schools. Through various Teach NYS programs, Sephardic yeshivahs in Brooklyn are receiving well over \$10 million in funding.

This funding has tripled since Teach NYS and the OU merged, and is used for resources including security, technology, and mandated services reimbursement.

Imagine if our school systems received the same government resources for secular studies as public schools, because that idea is rapidly gaining steam. Recently, a historic government program—completely engineered by Teach NYS—began the process of providing \$5 million in assistance for STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics instruction), giving stu-



dents the ability to compete in the new economy.

For the first time in the nation's history, this bill begins to provide equal funding for STEM instruction in non-public schools and public schools alike.

The success of Teach NYS prompted the broader Teach Advocacy Network. In New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Florida and California, Teach Advocacy network now services close to 90% of non-public schools in America. Teach NYS member schools include Magen David, Barkai, YDE, and Yeshivah of Flatbush. More information can be found at [teachadvocacy.org](http://teachadvocacy.org).

### **Project Education**

During the past several years, Project Education has had many accomplishments. The board met with community members, conducted online surveys, and held focus groups. Under the leadership of Albert Laboz, the organization found that our community places an extremely high value on Jewish education.

While nearly half of the parents in our community receive tuition assistance of some kind, Project Education developed the Tuition Assistance Principles, which sets out expectations and responsibilities of both the schools and parents who receive tuition assistance in a most respectful and dignified manner. Six community schools were signatories to the Principles document, which is a major accomplishment of Project Education.

The six schools also agreed to a universal application for tuition assistance, which means when families have children in more than

one school, they can use the same application. The application is being used by five yeshivahs. When each school had a different application for assistance, it was very confusing for parents. A universal application makes it easier. We have a fillable pdf on [projectedu.org](http://projectedu.org).

Currently, Project Education is working on a fundraising initiative to decrease the cost of high school tuition by as much as one third. It would decrease tuition overall, and make it possible for half the families on tuition assistance to afford tuition.

Project Education will continue to find solutions that help, and eventually will alleviate the high cost of tuition. More information is available at [projectedu.org](http://projectedu.org).

### **United Children's Education Foundation (UCEF)**

The mission of UCEF is to use the united buying power of community businesses to support yeshivah education. UCEF recruits businesses and refers them to vendors that provide business services. The vendors have been approved through the UCEF pilot-testing process and include a range of business services from branding to printing, office products, credit card processing, warehousing and distribution, cargo, insurance, ocean and air freight, and e-commerce.

When there is a successful pairing of a business and vendor, the vendor pays UCEF a royalty, which is used to offset the cost of tuition for the community's most needy families. UCEF is recruiting on an ongoing basis and there is no limit to how much can be raised through these business relationships. Community members can recommend that a

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business use a UCEF vendor to benefit the community.

In the 2016-2017 school year, the organization raised enough funds to provide \$350,000 in scholarships to qualified children. To qualify, the families must have a minimum of two children enrolled in grades K-12 in a community yeshivah, and pray regularly at a community synagogue. There are also some financial considerations that UCEF requires. More information is available at [ucef.com](http://ucef.com).

### **Communal Responsibility**

When Moses was in the desert, G-d instructed him to take a census of the Jewish People in order for each Jew to pay a half-shekel tax to maintain the central communal institution of Jewish learning—the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle). The *Mishkan* was supported by all.

Each member of the community has a financial obligation to support our schools. Strengthening the educational system ensures that our children will grow up firmly entrenched in Jewish values.

Each of these three organizations is doing something different to address the tuition crisis. Each is effective in its approach. As my mom said—a piddle and a piddle make a puddle—every dollar helps. □

*Sarina Roffe is a career journalist. She holds a masters in Jewish Studies and is considered an expert in Aleppan Jewry. She is a member of Brooklyn's Syrian Jewish community and the Jewish Genealogical Society, Inc. of New York.*