

New Help for the Tuition Crisis?

A proposed bill may help get more money to yeshivah parents



Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX), one of the sponsors of the Education Freedom Scholarships and Opportunity Act, at the Agudah National Leadership Mission to Washington 2018 with (left to right) Rabbi Shlomo Gertzulin, executive vice president for finance and administration; Rabbi Abba Cohen, vice president for government affairs and Washington director and counsel; Rabbi Chaim David Zwiebel, executive vice president, and Agudah board of trustees members Shlomo Werdiger and Chaskel Bennett

Imagine if your child was eligible for a scholarship to attend *yeshivah*. What kind of change would that make in your life?

That prospect may become a reality if a newly proposed piece of legislation manages to make its way through Congress. Introduced publicly last week by Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos and Senator Ted Cruz of Texas, the legislation is being referred to by the Department of Education in shorthand as Education Freedom Scholarships.

One of the groups that has been lobbying on behalf of this proposal is Agudath Israel of America, and Rabbi A. D. Motzen, the national director of state relations for the Agudah, spoke to *Ami* about what it would entail.

It is not a program in which the federal government directly gives money to parents, Rabbi Motzen cautioned. Instead, the idea is that it would provide \$5 billion nationwide in tax credits to individuals or organizations that donate money to state

education scholarship programs, including those who give to *yeshivah* parents.

Those states with scholarship tax credits already provide donors with tax credits for such donations. But these tax credits are nonrefundable, meaning that they can only reduce or eliminate the donor's state tax burden. The federal program will provide a credit on their federal taxes for any money they spend beyond the state credit. That is, if a person owes \$1,000 in taxes to his state and he gives a donation of \$2,000 (and assuming his state has 100 percent credits), the first \$1,000 of the donation will eliminate his state tax bill, and the second \$1,000 will be applied to his federal tax bill.

This kind of program will hopefully expand donations to these programs. And Rabbi Motzen noted: "Some states don't have a tax credit program. They can create one—and that's really the goal of this bill—but even if they don't, all the states have to do is provide a list of recognized scholarship organizations." Those orga-

nizations will qualify for the federal tax credit. He noted that adding organizations to such a list does not even require the state legislature, just the governor.

And states will be incentivized to do so, because donors can get a federal tax credit no matter which state they donate their money in. "If New York doesn't participate but New Jersey does, New York donors can give to scholarship organizations in New Jersey," Rabbi Motzen explained. The desire to keep the money in-state will push politicians to participate.

Rabbi Motzen noted that the scholarships that qualifying organizations give aren't confined to private school tuition. They cover advanced, elective and remedial courses; apprenticeships and industry instruction; special education services; tutoring; after-school and summer programs; and other programs and educational services. These kinds of programs can help public school students just as much as private school students.

That's a reason that there is hope among advocates for this tax credit that it will gain bipartisan support. "If anyone examines the actual policy," Rabbi Motzen said, "the typical opposition points aren't relevant to this proposal."

The official introduction of the bill in Congress is expected this week, he said, and he anticipates a wide group of allies on this bill who will support it.

"I've worked in states where people thought the proposals would never pass," he said. He noted that in Illinois, where it was thought to be a lost cause, there are now students in Jewish schools receiving scholarships as high as \$13,000 because of the state scholarship tax credit, which passed on a bipartisan basis.

"My estimate is that there are 6,500 kids in Jewish schools across the country getting the benefits of scholarship tax credits," Rabbi Motzen said. Those scholarships are significant, and families are reaping real benefits, in their *shalom bayis*, in their *menuchas hanefesh*, and in other aspects of their lives. If this new proposal passes, many more families may be able to see similar benefits. ●