

Mayor de Blasio's UPK program is a step forward, but needs to mature with age

UPK FAR FROM UNIVERSAL

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—Maury Litwack

A centerpiece of Bill de Blasio’s successful 2013 campaign for New York City mayor was his plan to bring to the Big Apple state-funded preschool classes to help ensure four-year-olds’ readiness for kindergarten, a program known nationwide as Universal Pre-K (UPK). Although Mr. de Blasio invited yeshivos to apply for the \$7,500-per-child grants, some in the city’s Orthodox Jewish community are now claiming the program isn’t nearly as inclusive as the word “universal” in its name might indicate.

In the just-ended first year of the program, for which New York State is providing \$300 million in funding, only 1,000 yeshivah kids, or 11% of the overall yeshivah student population, were enrolled. But after many months of lobbying by the *frum* community, Mr. de Blasio recently announced changes that he said would make UPK programs much more broadly accessible to religious Jewish youngsters.

Among the changes are: permission for a short break in the school day that could be used for the children to daven and *bentsh*; a change in the classroom hours requirement from a daily one of just over six hours to a weekly one of about 30.5

hours; and a change that will allow schools to count classroom time on Sundays and federal holidays toward the required number of hours.

A City Hall official who declined to be identified acknowledged that the program “works better for some yeshivos than others, but due to these changes it can work for many more schools than it did last year, especially since many of them already have school on Sundays and they won’t even need to extend their school week. UPK has only been operational for one year, so we need to give it time, but this is definitely a step forward.”

The recent changes were intended to address the problem of how to comply with the UPK requirements without burdening four-year-olds with an overly long school day and without compromising on the Torah character of their schooling. But some advocates for yeshivos are concerned that the changes don’t go far enough, or, some would even say, very far at all. The Orthodox Union has been particularly outspoken on the issue, with Maury Litwack, the OU’s director of state political affairs, calling the recent changes merely “cosmetic.”

Litwack says Sunday school time was already permitted in last year’s program, but didn’t help

increase enrollment beyond a paltry 11% of eligible yeshivah kids. Nor, he says, will permitting a break in the school day for religious activities have much impact, it would just extend what, at six hours and 20 minutes, is an already impossibly long day for four-year-olds. “Mayor de Blasio campaigned in our community on this issue, promising that UPK would include everyone, yet it doesn’t. We don’t want the percentage of yeshivah students enrolled going from 11% to 12%, we want it going to 50%.”

Although Agudath Israel of America’s executive vice president, Rabbi Chaim Dovid Zwiebel, calls the changes made thus far “meaningful, albeit incremental,” he and Mr. Litwack agree that the best way to make UPK work for the yeshivah community would be for the city to offer a half-day option, as well as reduce the number of classroom hours required to five per day, or 25 per week, in line with state requirements. Rabbi Zwiebel says that in a December 2014 letter to him, Deputy Mayor Richard Buery did, in fact, promise to add more half-day seats, and now, he’s “disappointed” that Buery appears to be backing away from that commitment.

“A full-day program won’t be for everyone,” says Rabbi Zwiebel, “so it’s important that the half-day option happens, and we’ll continue to push for that.” As for the option of reducing the required instructional day to five hours, he says, the de Blasio administration has cited studies showing that the ideal pre-kindergarten school day is just over six hours. “But we explained that when you add in the *limudei kodesh* component, our kids will indeed end up being in school for that amount of time.”

For his part, the OU’s Litwack says the reason he cares so much about this issue is that “the tuition burden is such a big problem in the *frum* community and here’s a chance to get heavily subsidized help for young parents just starting out. It’s a question of basic fairness, and we’ll continue to fight on it.”



PHOTO: AP