

JLC lobbies for Jewish Day School scholarships



Representatives from the Jewish Leadership Coalition, the Orthodox Union, Chabad, Agudath Israel, Step Up for Students, and synagogues and Jewish Day Schools throughout South Florida recently lobbied the Florida House and Senate to expand the tax-credit scholarship program which would help working-class Jewish families send their children to Jewish Day Schools. (Submitted photo / March 10, 2014)

By Randall P. Lieberman

Dr. Allan Ira Jacob, a Miami Beach nephrologist, founded the Jewish Leadership Coalition (JLC) in 2010 and serves as its chairman.

Active for a long time in community and philanthropic affairs, Jacob has served in leadership positions for many local Jewish institutions and is currently the president of Toras Emes Academy of North Miami Beach, one of the largest Orthodox Jewish Day Schools in the region.

The issue of school choice and the ability of lower-income Jewish families to receive voucher scholarships to send their children to Jewish Day Schools is a very important one to Jacob and led to his founding of the JLC.

Jacob said: "Contrary to popular belief, many Jewish families earn incomes low enough to qualify for tax-credit scholarship programs and are thereby able to send their children to Jewish Day Schools. These scholarship funds help offset the cost of providing secular education to these

children at Jewish schools."

The JLC is a nonprofit, social-welfare organization made up of Jewish lay leaders, business professionals, rabbis and day school administrators from the Orthodox, Modern Orthodox and Conservative Jewish communities in South Florida to represent the interests of the South Florida Jewish Day School community.

In mid-February, a 30-member group from the JLC took a trip to the State Capital in Tallahassee to meet with state legislators to show support of legislation which would expand the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program — including raising the scholarship amount, limiting barriers to enrollment and extending the scholarship to middle-class families.

Don Gaetz, a Niceville Republican and former schools superintendent who is the current president of the Florida Senate, told the Tampa Bay Times that "Despite all of the Tallahassee heavyweights, the most effective advocates have been scholarship students and their parents." Gaetz

specifically mentioned a group of rabbis and Jewish parents [the JLC] who had recently come to his office to discuss the importance of vouchers in their community. though it affects many Jewish students in his district. I urge you to contact Slosberg's office at 561-496-5940 to ask him to vote favorably on this pending legislation."

Added Maury Litwack, state director for political affairs for the Orthodox Union, a partner in the JLC: "We work in a number of different state legislatures and what sets Florida apart for success — to grow a major piece of legislation like this — is the incredible unity of all of the Jewish community to advocate with one voice."

Members of the JLC were very pleased with the lobbying trip.

Steven Jacoby, of Hollywood, for example, found the trip very satisfying.

Jacoby said: "The trip allowed our group to articulate the importance of the current (and future) legislation to our community. We were able to articulate that the public schools do not meet the needs of the traditional Jewish community and the legislation will allow all parents/taxpayers to choose what is best for their children while saving the state money."

Tobi Ash, of Miami Beach, also enjoyed this year's trip and last year's initial JLC trip to Tallahassee.

Ash said: "In 2002, the State enacted groundbreaking legislation to create tax-credit programs that provide opportunity scholarships for students. When this program began, low-income families at the poverty line were given scholarships to attend schools of their choice. JLC wants to expand the income eligibility so struggling working-class residents of our state have that very same choice."

Rabbi Efrem Goldberg, of the Boca Raton Synagogue, specified some numbers.

Goldberg said: "This academic year, Jewish Day Schools in South Florida are receiving more than \$6 million from the Step Up for Students scholarship program, but the potential exists to receive much more. Currently, there is a cap to the scholarship fund limiting how many dollars can be donated while getting a tax credit. Moreover, the current law has a narrow definition of low-income that restricts the candidates who qualify for receiving aid. We lobbied on behalf of the proposed legislation that would raise the cap and the income level."

Goldberg also said the JLC was mostly well received, but he was particularly disappointed with Irv Slosberg, the State representative for his temple's district.

Goldberg said: "Our message was mostly greeted warmly and enthusiastically. However, Irv Slosberg, who represents the 91st District, was non-committal when asked if he would vote in favor of the proposed legislation,

Step Up For Students (SUFS) is one of the nonprofits that administers tax-credit scholarships to low-income students in Florida. The JLC works with SUFS, as 1,300 Jewish children in South Florida currently receive tuition relief. However, many more could receive scholarships if the program were to expand.

To this end, the JLC recently hosted John Kirtley, SUFS founder and board chairman, at Young Israel of Hollywood for a keynote speech titled "The Role of the Jewish Community in the Legislative Process." Kirtley was incredibly appreciative of the commitment from the South Florida Jewish community to advance the parental choice movement.

The JLC is working with Step Up for Students to reach out to elected officials regarding this legislation.

Said JLC executive director Elliot Schreiber, "If you are interested in this issue, contact us and we'll be happy to explain what you can do to support the cause and which legislators you should contact."

For more information about the status of the tax-credit legislations, click the "Legislative Updates for Tax Credit Scholarships" link on the home page of the Step Up for Students website (www.stepupforstudents.org).