A push for more secular classes at ultra-Orthodox schools in NY

At the ultra-Orthodox Jewish schools Pesach Eisen attended in Brooklyn, most of the day was spent studying religious texts with classes taught in Yiddish. One class at the end of the day was spent on secular subjects including English and math, enough to be “able to go to the food stamps office and apply.”

“Everything was super basic. … Nobody took it seriously, so even if you were a studious person you had no chance” to use the secular education at the schools to gain entry to a good college, said Eisen, now 32. As a young student, he had to take remedial classes and study intensively on his own before he succeeded in graduating from college in 2016.

Complaints that schools like Eisen’s run by New York’s strictly observant Hasidic Jews barely teach English, math, science or social studies have fueled a movement to demand stricter oversight by state and local educational authorities. Critics filed a lawsuit July 23 in federal court, seeking to stop the state from enforcing legislation that was intended to shield the schools, called yeshivas, from some government oversight.

“When we grew up there was no such thing as big aspirations — I want to be a doctor, I want to be a lawyer, I want to be a businessman,”’’ said Eisen, who no longer practices the ultra-Orthodox faith. “It’s, ‘I want to be a rabbi.’ That’s the only thing.

Defenders of the yeshivas say parents have the right to send their children to schools that provide a Jewish education consistent with their beliefs and traditions.

There are about 275 Orthodox Jewish yeshivas in New York state, but many are modern Orthodox schools that provide a full secular curriculum along with religious studies.

The lawsuit was filed by Young Advocates for Fair Education, or YAFFED, which is pushing for improved secular education in the ultra-Orthodox schools. It names Democratic Gov. Andrew Cuomo and the state Department of Education’s top two officials as defendants.

YAFFED founder Naftuli Moster said there are 83 Hasidic yeshivas in New York City where secular education is generally given short shrift. The number in other parts of the state is 38. An estimated 115,000 children attend the schools.

For boys in the Hasidic yeshiva system, the emphasis is on studying religious texts. Classes are taught in Yiddish, the language spoken in most Hasidic homes. Secular subjects are relegated to the end of the long school day, when the boys are restless and inattentive, critics say.

Once the boys reach high school, they don’t study secular subjects, devoting their entire day to the Talmud, other Jewish texts.

Hasidic girls can’t study the Talmud and therefore learn more English, math and social studies than Hasidic boys do.

Although the schools are private, they are not entirely free of government oversight because of a state law requiring that instruction in nonpublic schools be substantially equivalent to the instruction given at local public schools.

(AP)

Macron aide under investigation for assault

French President Emmanuel Macron’s top bodyguard was placed under investigation on July 22 after he was identified in an amateur video beating a protester on May Day in a case that has sparked a political storm.

Alexandre Benalla, long a fixture at Macron’s side, was taken into custody for police questioning on July 20.

The prosecutor’s office said on July 22 that Benalla would be investigated over group violence, interference in public service and illegal wearing of a police badge along with two other felonies.

Being the target of an investigation in France does not necessarily lead to a trial.

Macron fired Benalla, the head of his personal security detail, on July 20 but faced criticism for failing to act sooner.

Daily newspaper Le Monde released a video July 18 showing Benalla at the May 1 protests in Paris wearing a riot helmet and police tags while off-duty.

In the footage, he can be seen dragging a woman away from a protest and later beating a male demonstrator. On July 20, French media released a second video, which showed Benalla also man-handling the woman. (Reuters)

Macron fired Benalla, the head of his personal security detail, on July 20 but faced criticism for failing to act sooner.

(AP)

This Week’s OMG!

French President Emmanuel Macron’s top bodyguard was placed under investigation on July 22 after he was identified in an amateur video beating a protester on May Day in a case that has sparked a political storm.

Alexandre Benalla, long a fixture at Macron’s side, was taken into custody for police questioning on July 20.

The prosecutor’s office said on July 22 that Benalla would be investigated over group violence, interference in public service and illegal wearing of a police badge along with two other felonies.

Being the target of an investigation in France does not necessarily lead to a trial.

Macron fired Benalla, the head of his personal security detail, on July 20 but faced criticism for failing to act sooner.