

# Agudath Israel of Illinois Celebrates the Launch of \$100 Million State Scholarship Program

It didn't take long. Illinois donors, including many from the Jewish community, generously pledged more than \$36 million for private school scholarships in just one day. The pledges were the first step in the implementation of the new \$100 million Illinois Scholarship Tax Credit program.

Tuesday was the first day for individuals and corporations to reserve tax credits through the Illinois Department of Revenue. Under the new program, donors who contribute to Scholarship Granting Organizations (SGOs) receive a 75% state tax credit. The donations to SGOs will then be used to provide scholarships to Illinois students from low- and middle-income families to attend the qualified private school of their choice.

The tax credit program, officially known as the Invest in Kids Act, was part of a larger education funding bill signed into law in August. Agudath Israel of Illinois (AIOI) had been advocating for a school choice program for many years and, together with a strong coalition, played a major role in crafting and advocating for the tax credit bill.

AIOI partnered with [Empower Illinois](#), the state's leading SGO, to raise funds and distribute scholarships. While donations were made to scholarship organizations all across Illinois, 82% of the total contributions on the first day were designated to Empower Illinois. Individuals and companies can still reserve tax credits until the \$75 million statewide cap has been met.

Empower Illinois is scheduled to begin accepting student scholarship applications on January 24, 2018. Scholarship of up to approximately \$13,000 (\$26,000 for students with special needs) will be awarded to students beginning in the 2018-2019 school year.

According to Empower Illinois board member and AI0I executive committee member, Avrum Weinfeld, participation in the Orthodox Jewish community was widespread, with hundreds of taxpayers from across the income spectrum participating.

AI0I's director of government affairs, Rabbi Shlomo Soroka, was [interviewed by NPR](#) regarding the roll-out of the program. He was extremely gratified to see that so many community members, even those that are themselves eligible to receive scholarships, pledged donations. "I couldn't be prouder of how our community has responded thus far," he said. "It indicates how committed our families are to support our educational system and making it an affordable option."

AI0I applauds the leadership of the Illinois Legislature and Governor Rauner (and his administration) for working together to create the program, and the Illinois Department of Revenue and State Board of Education for facilitating the implementation of the program.

"It was a great beginning to what is certain to be a transformative year for children," said Myles Mendoza, Executive Director of Empower Illinois. "We are amazed by the amount that's been pledged to help give these students the education they deserve, and its only Day One. We're grateful to our network of educators and advocates, including Agudath Israel, who have joined our fight for equal access to education and excited to see more children gain access to the education that best serves their needs."