

# When every millisecond counts: How Agudath Israel Helped Chicago Parents Apply for Millions of Scholarship Dollars

March 9, 2018



It was a race that would be decided by milliseconds.

The prize? Up to \$13,000 in tuition scholarships for each child wishing to attend private school.

The competition? 40,000 fellow parents.

The challenge? Be of the first to fill out an online application form for a new state tax credit scholarship program. Due to limited funds and a legally-mandated, first-come first-served policy, the scholarship organization can only award scholarships to the first few thousand families who completed their application as soon as the online portal would go live.

What would *you* do?

More than 400 Chicago families turned to Agudath Israel of Illinois (AIOI) for help and Agudah delivered.

Ever since the passage of the \$100 million Invest in Kids Act last summer, in addition to its advocacy role, AIOI has been focused on implementation of the new program. The program allows donors to receive a 75% state tax credit for contributions to a scholarship organization, which then uses those funds to award tuition grants to low- and middle-income families on a first-come

first-served basis. AIOI teamed up with [Empower Illinois](#), the largest scholarship granting organization in the state.

Anticipating up to 50,000 applications, Empower Illinois created a reservation system where the submissions of the first page of the application by the parent was time-stamped by the millisecond, and would become the ticket to potentially receive a scholarship for the entire family. The stakes were high as eligible families could receive up to \$13,000 per child and \$26,000 for children with special needs, so AIOI organized an event that would give all eligible families the greatest chance to receive scholarships.

In advance of the application window going live, AIOI spent months educating parents and schools about the program and ensuring that all eligible families were ready to apply on the selected date. With many families having limited internet access or computer proficiency, AIOI worked to ensure that everyone had access to the fastest and most reliable system. Agudath Israel staff set up a warehouse with over 400 computers with fiber optic cable and created training exercises to maximize data entry speed. Agudah then mobilized community volunteers to assist with typing, computer logistics, and to serve as support staff.



As soon as the online portal went live, the room was filled with the tapping of keyboards. Applicants were asked to raise their hand upon completing the

initial application. Within seconds, everyone had their hands in the air and over 500 people spontaneously broke out into applause which was followed by a short celebration with music and dancing.

For most parents this was not the first time they tried to apply. Just four weeks earlier, Empower Illinois tried to launch, but was overwhelmed when 24,000 parents attempted to apply at the same time, causing the servers to crash.

In the days and weeks that followed the devastating technological failure, AIOI expended great effort, working with Empower Illinois and their partners in determining how to ensure a more reliable and easier process. To accommodate the Orthodox Jewish community, the application relaunch was scheduled so that it wouldn't interfere with the Jewish holiday of Purim which began the following evening.

With over 21,000 applications received in the first hour of the application window, only a small percentage were expected to receive notifications that they were approved to move to the next stage of the application. On Monday, March 3, the first 1,300 applicants were sent emails with a link to complete the remainder of application. Thankfully, a significant majority of the AIOI event attendees breathed a sigh of relief upon learning that they were included in that first batch, marking the event a success. It is still unknown exactly how much funding will be available, as the program is funded through donations, but this was certainly another significant step closer to bringing additional vital resources to local families.

"There are so many people that have given countless hours and sleepless nights," said Rabbi Shlomo Soroka, AIOI's director of government affairs. "The success of this effort was possible only because of the dedication and unified effort of the entire community."