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Highland Park Board of Education Meets With Orthodox Leaders

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Highland Park Board of Education Meets With Orthodox Leaders

By Harry Glazer | May 10, 2018

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A few years back there were serious tensions between the Orthodox community in Highland Park and leaders of the local public school system.

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Orthodox community leaders, including Congregation Ohav Emethâs Renovation Committee Co-Chair Michael Garber (1st from left) and Congregation Ahavas Achimâs President Jeremy Renna (4th from left), with other Orthodox community leaders and Highland Park Board of Education leaders at the April 30 forum. Dr. Scott Taylor and Darcie Cimarusti stand in the center of the group. (Credit: Photo by Harry Glazer)

Members of the Orthodox community, upset with local property tax increases, suspected that public school spending was not well managed. Leaders of the public school system, preoccupied with other challenges, were not prepared to engage with the Orthodox community. The result was a lot of Board of Education meetings where Orthodox residents spoke out and harshly criticized the schools. The situation was tense and uncomfortable; it was also unproductive, serving neither group's interests very well.

The dynamic began to change four years ago with the arrival of a new Highland Park Public Schools Superintendent, Dr. Scott Taylor, and the election of a new Board of Education, led by Darcie Cimarusti. The new public schools leaders decided to reach out proactively to

the Orthodox community and hold an annual open forum on the schools' budget in a local synagogue, before the spending plan was finalized. The public schools leaders shared their calculations and invited honest feedback. They found a receptive audience in a cadre of Orthodox community leaders, representing different shuls in town, and an annual tradition was started.

On April 30 the third annual open forum on the Highland Park public schools' upcoming FY budget took place, this year in Congregation Ahavas Achim. The public schools' process was transparent, the discussion was open and honest and the resulting conversation was constructive. Better still, community tensions have dissipated over the past few years—a win/win all around.

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