

On Vouchers, Guv Sticks To His Guns

by Paul Bass | Jan 11, 2012 8:02 am



Greer welcomes Malloy to Edgewood Tuesday night.

Gov. Dannel P. Malloy knew what New Haven's Jewish leaders wanted him to say. He didn't say it.

Malloy came prepared to be asked about school vouchers for private-school tuition when he visited an Ellsworth Avenue home Tuesday night for a "town meeting" with two dozen influential Jews.

He was prepared, because it was a return visit. He had visited the house—[Edgewood](#) and [Jewish community](#) activist Eliezer Greer's home—in October 2009, during his campaign for governor. The 2009 gathering had pressed him to support government vouchers for families who send their children to religious day schools. Despite seeking the politically influential group's support at a key juncture in a tantalizing close gubernatorial campaign, Malloy said at the time that he had a

philosophical disagreement with the group on vouchers. Greer and other neighborhood organizers supported Malloy in the campaign anyway.

Malloy repeated that voucher position during Tuesday night's hour-long conversation. He also extended an olive branch: a pledge to work together to help religious and other private schools obtain more government health services and access to higher-education scholarships and grants.

"I don't come to places and tell you what I don't believe," he said. "I'd rather be honest about it."

How This Night Was Different From That Other Night



Front row (from left): B'nai Jacob Rabbi Joel Levenson, former state consumer affairs chief Mark Shiffrin, Jewish Foundation head Lisa Stanger. Back row: Register reporter Mary O'Leary, Rabbi Hesch Sommer of Jewish Family Services, CT ADL chief Gary Jones. Fox 61 crew is behind them.

While the question and the setting were the same, Tuesday night's event differed in politically significant ways from Malloy's October 2009 visit.

For one thing, more people showed up. Malloy noted that: He observed that the living-room table had been turned 90 degrees this time in order to connect it to a second table in the kitchen

and thus accommodate more participants. That's what happens when a candidate [wins office and becomes a governor](#), he half-joked.

And the two dozen attendees Tuesday night represented a broader swath of Jewish leadership than the October 2009 group did. Leaders of Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and Hasidic congregations sat around the table (including three Rabbis Greer). So did leaders of leading Jewish establishment organizations: the Jewish Federation, the Jewish Foundation, Jewish Family Services, and the Anti-Defamation League. Most hadn't sat in on the last session.

The broader attendance reflected the growing political influence of the Greers' organization, which works hard on election campaigns and civic issues like neighborhood crime and housing development. The rare appearance of a sitting governor at a public house party reflected that influence, too.

The 2009 session was closed to the press. Tuesday night, TV, print and web reporters showed up and recorded the action.

How This Night Was Like That Other Night



Malloy with Jewish Federation President Sydney Perry.

Both gatherings, like Passover seders, featured philosophical questions that sparked extensive discussion. Especially when it came to school vouchers.

Jewish Federation President Sydney Perry pressed Malloy on the question first. Will he support them as part of his newly announced school reform initiative? Perry asked.

“I wouldn’t hold my breath anticipating that it will be part of this year’s agenda,” Malloy responded. “There are issues we can make progress on ... short of vouchers.” He cited improving religious schools’ “access” to government educational services and changing the way Connecticut yeshiva students are “treated differently from non-religious institutions.”

“These issues are very much on the table.”

Former Beaver Hills Alderman Moti Sandman later raised the question again. He’s active in a Hasidic-run yeshiva on Norton Street, which has grown dramatically in recent years, drawing students from around the world.

“Our greatest goal would be school vouchers,” Sandman declared. He argued that his family is being deprived out of government services it deserves by paying taxes but also having to pay tuition to send children to school.

“I don’t think it will pass the legislature,” Malloy responded, referring to vouchers. And as someone who attended Catholic schools as a child, he added, “I’m not convinced that that’s necessarily the right way to go [anyway].” He called sending children to parochial school “a choice people have made since the founding of this country and the creation of the public education system, where ... more than 90 percent of children are educated.”



Andy Weinstein of Congregation Beth El-Keser Israel & former Beaver Hills Alderman Moti Sandman.

“I don’t have a choice,” Sandman retorted. “I have a religious obligation” to send children to religious school. He said the absence of a voucher system “stifles” his ability to practice his religion.

After the event, Malloy elaborated on the ways he can work on education issues with groups like the Jewish organizations represented in the room.

He said local boards of education are improperly denying religious schools funding for nurses, for instance. “I’m not saying a 50-person school needs a full-time nurse five days a week,” but it deserves its “fair share” of nursing help. The same goes for aides for the learning disabled and other special-education students, he said.

He also noted that Connecticut, unlike neighboring states, denies certification to yeshiva students to apply for Pell grants and higher-ed loans. He said he wants that to change.

Despite the occasional difference of views, the tone remained warm and respectful throughout the evening. Attendees repeatedly praised Malloy’s performance in office. They praised his overall school-reform plan (especially his bringing [Stefan Pryor](#), the new education commissioner, back to Connecticut). As they left the house, some noted, as well, Malloy’s willingness to tell people what he thinks rather than what they want to hear.