



Spotlight on: *Jewish Day School Education*

I. A Brief History and Rationale for Jewish Day School Education

Dr. Jack Wertheimer, in his comprehensive article, “Jewish Education in the United States: Recent Trends and Issues,” reminds us that day schools are not a 20th century phenomenon in American Jewish life. A small group of schools existed in the 19th century. However, the day schools of the 20th century assigned themselves a different mission. Historian Haym Soloveitchik observed that up until the middle of the 20th century, the Jewish community assumed that “Jewishness was something almost innate, and no school was needed to inculcate it.” The inability of families to play their accustomed roles and the collapse of ethnic neighborhoods, according to Soloveitchik, necessitated the creation of a new type of day school movement predicated upon the assumption that:

“in contemporary society...Jewish identity is not inevitable. It is not a matter of course, but of choice: a conscious preference of the enclave over the host society. For such a choice to be made, a sense of particularity and belonging must be instilled by intentional enterprise of instruction. Without education there is no identity, for identity in a multi-culture is ideological....Identity maintenance and consciousness raising are ideological exigencies, needs that can be met only by education.”

Significant growth in day schools began toward the end of World War II, after the founding of a national society called *Torah Umesorah*. It was founded in 1944 for the express purpose of establishing orthodox yeshivas throughout the United States. At the time, there were roughly 30 day schools with an enrollment of between 6,000 and 7,000 students in the entire country and only six were outside of New York City. By the early 1970s, the figure exceeded 67,000 students in 330 day schools. In just

three decades, the number of day schools outside of New York rose from six to include every community with a population of more than 7,500 Jews; even among communities with fewer than 5,000 Jews there were 20 day schools.

Gradually, pressure built within the other major denominations to create their own network of day schools. First came the Conservative movement, whose embrace of the day school initially was tentative, if not ambivalent. The day school was even more controversial in the Reform movement. Both denominations struggled with the issue of what could be perceived as their abandonment of the public school system. Eventually, however, the leadership of both movements embraced day schools as an important vehicle for fostering a Jewishly literate and committed population, and the number of schools affiliated with each movement grew substantially in the last decades of the 20th century. In the 1980s and 90s a growing number of day schools opened under communal or independent auspices. The Jewish Community Day School Network (RAVSAK) was formed to offer services to these unaffiliated, community schools.

II. Day Schools Today: Some Facts and Figures

By the year 2000, there were approximately 185,000 students in all day schools (approximately 750 schools) in the United States. This was more than a trebling of the number of students in 1962. Three-quarters of the students and of the schools were Orthodox. Still, there has been a significant increase in the number of non-Orthodox schools in the last 15 years. There are now more than 70 day schools under Conservative auspices, more than 20 Reform day schools, and over 70 community day schools. In the last decade this growth has extended to Jewish day high schools, with new schools opening in communities across the continent. The Jewish day school enterprise costs well over \$1 billion annually. On a per capita basis, it is the most expensive and extensive type of Jewish education currently being supported by the North American Jewish community.

The prominence of day schools and the widespread belief that they represent the most effective form of Jewish education available today has led to rapidly expanding private philanthropic investment in this arena. Much of this has been spearheaded by the Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education (PEJE), established by a consortium of philanthropists at the end of the 1990s to support the opening of new schools, and today serving as an advocate and source of expertise and support for the day school movement as a whole. Other foundations, both locally and nationally, have also become deeply engaged with issues of day school support and development, notably Avi Chai, which has sponsored research, provides loans for capital needs and has supported numerous day school related projects ranging from tuition subvention to technology development.

III. Jewish Day Schools and the Federation System

As day schools proliferated, the question of federation financial support became a topic of debate. Initially, there was strong opposition from those who argued that day schools served only a small section of the population and the interests of particular denominations, rather than the entire community. Many federations also at first rejected requests for allocations from day schools because their bylaws prevented beneficiary agencies from conducting their own fund-raising campaigns. The inherent dilemma was that day schools could not survive without doing their own fund-raising because federation funding was inadequate to meet their needs. Over the course of the post-war decades, a major shift took place in federation attitudes toward day schools. Increasing numbers of federations decided to allocate resources to day schools, but this support was inevitably limited. Despite increases in absolute dollars flowing into day schools from federations, it became apparent that if federations were to assume responsibility for even half of the day schools' budgets, the entire domestic spending of the federated system would be needed to fund Jewish education, an option which was completely unrealistic.

In 1999, a new era in federation-day school relationships was inaugurated with the creation of the UJC/JESNA Task Force on Day School Viability and Vitality. The Task Force's Report epitomized the positive, collaborative nature of the new relationship. It recommended that federations assume a substantial role in support of day schools beyond annual allocations.

The Report called on federations to:

1. Provide increased financial resources and other forms of assistance for all types of Jewish education, with special emphasis on support that helps to ensure day school viability and vitality.
2. Adopt and promote the principle that while the primary responsibility for a Jewish education is that of the parent, no Jewish family that desires to send its child(ren) to a Jewish day school should be prevented from doing so for financial reasons.
3. Adopt and promote the principle that excellence in Jewish day schools is the best guarantee over the long term for school growth and financial resource development.
4. Adopt and promote the principle that excellence is linked to the quality of human resources, both lay and professional, and work to attract, train, and retain top quality Jewish educators, administrators and lay leaders.

The Report serves today as the basis for ongoing, vigorous efforts to involve federations in helping day schools maintain financial stability and educational excellence through the efforts of local communities, as well as JESNA and UJC nationally. JESNA and UJC established the Continental Council for Jewish Day School Education to serve as a forum for bringing together all of day school education's stakeholders to develop and implement a shared agenda for strengthening day schools. The Council is comprised of representatives of the national day school associations, the central agencies for Jewish education, all the national religious movements, major foundations, federations, and national Jewish communal organizations. Through its five working groups on *affordability; marketing and advocacy; community relationships; compensation systems and professional recruitment; and development and retention*, the Council has become a strong national advocate for day school education in local communities, working in partnership with local federations, central agencies for Jewish education, and other organizations. Its work dovetails with the Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education (PEJE) which works directly with individual day schools and groupings of day schools.

IV. Excellence Criteria for Building Jewish Day Schools

The recent, rapid growth of day schools has prompted the development of a set of criteria of excellence. Rabbi

Joshua Elkin and Dr. Naava Frank of the Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education (PEJE) have identified the following domains of Excellence for Jewish Day Schools:

A. Jewish Day Schools must have a compelling, coherent educational vision

The school vision should be bold, compelling, exciting and something people want to be part of and want to create. It should be a shared vision of all members of the school community. This vision should guide and inform all the details of the school. It should shape everything, from the overall curriculum to staff hiring, from scheduling to school displays, from food to how people interact with each other.

Part of this vision must include:

i. *A Defined Role for Jewish Texts, Study and Practice*

The Jewish character of the school should flow naturally from the vision and should imbue all activities, meetings, events, facilities, and school practices. The schools' Jewish values should be clearly articulated and modeled. Jewish texts and learning should hold a prominent place throughout the life of the school in the classroom, in the boardroom and in the lunchroom. Ongoing text study should lead to action. There should also be a strong commitment to Jewish family education.

ii. *School Climate*

School climate reflects how people treat each other in the school and what values are represented in interpersonal interactions in the school, such as respect and having high expectations from all students. A positive school climate is an outcome of a school that has given a great deal of thought to vision and its implementation. One should see regular behaviors based on *derech eretz*, *tzedakah*, *gemilut hasadim*, and *tikkun olam*.

B. Effective Board Composition and Function

The school's Board guides the school and supports the Head of School. It does not micro-manage but sets board policies, does long-term planning, raises funds and performs financial oversight. A strong working relationship between Board and Head is a critical success indicator. In order to function effectively, a board must acquire knowledge, proficiency and expertise. Members must

represent a diversity of experience including, but not limited to, law, financial management, education, public relations, fund raising, and human resources management. The Board needs to function well as a group. Therefore, a strong board has members who have experience working on other boards and know and understand effective board process. The ongoing growth of the skills of the board via board training is critical as the school evolves.

Effective school leadership must include:

i. *Sound Planning, Decision-Making and Financial Management by the Lay and Professional Leadership*

Key stakeholders should always work toward the goal of creating and running a quality school. They must possess the capacity to set bold, yet realistic, financial goals and make well-researched and carefully considered decisions. Board training and strategic planning are key to careful planning and decision-making. It is important to have accurate demographic information.

ii. *Lay and Professional Collaboration*

Effective school functioning is tied to the quality of the collaboration between the lay and professional leadership. The relationship should be supportive and mutually enriching. Lay and professional leadership should reflect upon, refine and evaluate the way they are working together in order to maximize their collaborative potential.

C. Skilled Professional Staff: Administrative and Instructional

The human resources of the school are a critical key to its achieving excellence. The school Head needs to be a strong visionary leader with expertise and experience in the complex tasks of running and growing a school. The teachers need to be experienced and trained. All of the staff needs to be exposed to ongoing development of their skills in order for the school to grow. There should be a collegial relationship among teachers and opportunities for them to discuss and reflect on their educational practice.

Staff are most likely to achieve excellence with:

i. *Professional Development*

A school's growth and development is tied to the growth of its professional staff. Professional development can be done in-house, city-wide, regionally, nationally or internationally.

ii. *Ongoing Reflection and Self-Evaluation*

Institutions that adopt a reflective process can continue to learn, evolve and improve themselves. Creating a culture of learning organizations can help to enhance this feature.

D. Effective and Current Schooling Practices

Jewish day schools of excellence are knowledgeable about the research, techniques and programs in the field of general education. Findings in cognitive research, curricula for moral education, new techniques in technology implementation and new materials for teaching of particular subjects are some examples of the type of information that schools need to keep up with and learn from the general educational community.

E. Focus on Cultivating and Maintaining Key Community Linkages

A school is only a part of a child's life as a Jew. To grow and enrich the total life of a Jew, there need to be linkages to other institutions and approaches to Jewish living through synagogues, youth groups and camps. Strengthening the linkages among Jewish communal institutions expands the overall Jewish identity options of the future Jewish community. The importance of such linkages are especially noticeable in school marketing and recruitment efforts which should be carefully considered and of the highest caliber. To maximize credibility in the eyes of prospective parents such plans need to be supported by all stakeholders in the school; these programs should be on-going and well-funded.

F. Fund-Raising: Annual and Long Term

Schools need to develop sophisticated fund raising plans in order to build and maintain schools of excellence. There needs to be appropriate board and leadership

involvement. The annual campaign is a permanent feature of the school's operation, which includes broad-based giving opportunities aimed at maximizing participation. There needs to be ongoing cultivation of new donors and stewardship of existing donors. There must be clearly defined roles for the lay and professional people. And efforts should be made to establish links into the broader community.

V. Conclusion

Day schools are one of the great American Jewish success stories of the 20th century. They have emerged as key players in the communal strategy to promote Jewish identity and ensure Jewish continuity. Federations and private Jewish foundations have placed day school education high on their agendas, recognizing both the potential day schools embody and the serious challenges they face if they are to maintain financial viability, high levels of educational quality, and accessibility to all Jewish families who may wish to take advantage of the education they offer.

Expanding the model that has developed in recent years of partnership and synergy among schools, the organized community, and private philanthropy in which resources, information and strategic planning efforts are leveraged for mutual benefit, will enable further growth and vitality of day school education in North America.

For additional information on how JESNA can help you make a difference in Jewish day school education, please contact JESNA's Information Solutions Hotline 212-284-6897 or email questions@jesna.org.

These Spotlight papers have been prepared by JESNA to provide funders and other community leaders with a brief overview of important areas in Jewish education.

References:

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