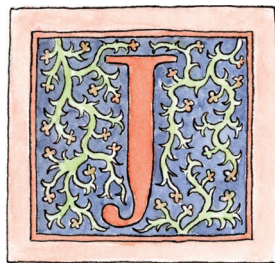


What Makes a Day School Great



JEWISH DAY SCHOOLS have had a good pandemic. Across North America and following a decade of steady erosion in student numbers, enrollment in September 2021 at non-Haredi schools increased by 3.7 percent compared with the previous year, equivalent to more than 3,000 additional students. There will probably be another increase in September 2022.

True, the pandemic continues to pose numerous challenges to schools: ever-changing health regulations, unexpected staff resignations, sudden inflows and outflows of students, and the conundrum of how to offer classes in-person, remotely, and by hybrid means, all at the same time. Overall, the fact that more students are enrolled in these schools today than before the pandemic highlights some of their special qualities.

Just what are these qualities? What makes a good Jewish day

school? What is at stake in this field? These are the questions I propose to answer in this essay.

First, however, some fundamentals. Outside Israel, about 400,000 children are enrolled in Jewish all-day schools—about 30 percent of total possible enrollees worldwide. The majority of day schools are Haredi (fervently Orthodox) institutions. In the United States, for example, a recent census estimated that about two-thirds of day-school students attend such schools.

Most schools are incorporated as private institutions, but not in some European countries, or in Montreal, Canada, where they are publicly funded. Almost all enroll only young people raised as Jews, but if they are publicly funded, some are required to include non-Jewish students; some private Jewish day schools also choose to do so for various ideological or pragmatic reasons. Generally, day schools have much smaller student enrollments than do neighboring public schools, but not always; in a handful of countries, you can find day schools with thousands of students.

Last, and perhaps the only statement one can make unequivocally about all day schools: They provide a dual curriculum of Jewish and general studies, albeit in widely varying proportions. In Haredi schools, general education can occupy just 10 percent of a student's time; in the most liberal schools, it can be more than 80 percent.

Mainstream day schools (that is, not including the fervently Orthodox institutions about which information is hard to glean) make three commitments: They promise Jewish community, Jewish cultural virtuosity, and secular academic achievement. It is extremely difficult to deliver on all three of these commitments. Good schools find a way.



To start with the promise of community: I have spent most of my adult life working in or studying Jewish day schools. I've visited

dozens of day schools on five continents. The last two schools I visited in person powerfully clarified something for me. The schools were in Milan and Helsinki, and I speak neither Italian nor Finnish. My lack of comprehension meant that instead of being distracted by what people were saying, I had to pay very close attention to how they looked and acted. What I observed was, first, the diverse appearance of those who attended these particular schools. Their dress indicated socioeconomic and religious diversity: For example, some were in kippot and tzitzit; some just in kippot; some had neither; some were sporting the latest fashions, others not. Second, I saw the warmth and informality of relationships among students of different ages, parents, educators, and across all of these groups. This informality and multigenerational interaction—in classrooms, corridors, at lunchtime, at times of prayer—conveyed a sense of people feeling at home.

To cite a different data point: In a survey our team at Rosov Consulting conducted of day-school students in Latin America and Europe on behalf of UnitEd, an initiative of Israel's Ministry of Diaspora Affairs, students were asked to reflect on what they gained from their day-school education. The two outcomes they most consistently identified were that their schools made them feel that they belonged somewhere and that they provided them with a strong connection to their Jewish heritage. Feeling that you belong somewhere is perhaps the most powerful point of entry to community. As sectarian enclaves carved out within non-Jewish societies, Jewish day schools offer the promise of Jewish community, and often—as I observed in Finland and Italy—the feeling of being at home.

What about what I have called “Jewish cultural virtuosity”? Research about those who become virtuosos in the arts or in business highlights the benefits of doing the same tasks repeatedly. Psychologists attribute this process to neurological plasticity; they say that our brains change through repeated exposure to the same experiences. Anthropologists attribute these same outcomes to the

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power of ritual: repeated performance that produces a bodily form of knowing. As I have written elsewhere, Jewish day schools are unusual in the amount of time they have at their disposal for Jewish education and, crucially, the extent to which that time forms part of a rhythmic Jewish cycle, in daily practices, weekly routines, and annual celebrations.

When attuned to the developmental readiness of children, day schools have the capacity to provide children with formative experiences within a regularized structure, by means of which young people can become cultural virtuosos, proficient in Hebrew, fluent in prayer; independent interpreters of Jewish texts; and responsible enactors of Jewish values within their communities. Giving young people repeated opportunities to experience and practice valued Jewish activities, day schools are perhaps better placed than any other vehicle to provide the Jewish education and experiences that nurture Jewish cultural virtuosos. This is their second great promise.

Their third promise concerns secular academic achievement. In a longitudinal study of Jewish high-school students conducted over a decade in the United Kingdom, our team found that the most widespread aspiration of parents for their teenage children was that they be equipped to advance to the higher education of their choice. A fundamental task for schools, then, is to enable children

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to reach that platform. If parents also prioritize their child's receiving an intensive Jewish education, they might be ready to accept a less than thoroughly excellent general education — but not much less! This is nonnegotiable. Schools are expected to enable children to fulfill their academic potential in a pedagogically effective, technologically up-to-date fashion. That is the most basic compact between parents and schools of all kinds. Unfortunately, in many societies, schools fall short of this basic commitment. For Jewish day schools, especially those in competitive marketplaces, helping children grow academically as far as they can go is a bottom line.



Delivering on all three of these promises — Jewish community, cultural virtuosity, and secular academic achievement — is exquisitely difficult, especially because these commitments frequently exist in tension with one another.

Most obviously, the time needed for a young person to become a Jewish cultural virtuoso (mastering Jewish texts and building communicative proficiency in Hebrew) eats into the hours required for developing general educational potential. Schools might achieve efficiencies by integrating discrete elements of the Jewish and general

curriculum (say, math and sukkah measurements), but it is very challenging to do such integration meaningfully.

Building community is difficult, too, when parents are paying customers. When tuition is high, the parents' relationship with their child's school readily becomes transactional rather than communitarian. Parents might be broadly committed to community (and the inclusion of all Jewish children, including those differently abled from their own child) but probably not if inclusion is at the expense of their own child's progress. Parents want to be sure their own child is thriving. Ultimately, that's what they're paying for.

Even when these promises are not in tension, they are difficult to fulfill. Students report that the communitarian dimensions of a day-school education underpin some of the most memorable experiences of their school days — celebrating Yom Ha'atzmaut, for example, or participating in a school Shabbaton — but these events can also feel constricting. What some experience as family-like, others find insular. Some students undoubtedly find the environment claustrophobic, a bubble from which they want to escape at the earliest opportunity. It takes great skill for educators to build community that neither suffocates nor excludes.

Virtuosity is rooted in practice, working hard on the same things repeatedly until one gets them right. The problem with practice of this kind is that it can become routinized. Students can benefit from returning to the same topics year after year, but only if they have a chance to go deeper or to see things differently each time. If the curriculum is not carefully calibrated and the pedagogy not developmentally appropriate, the content becomes repetitive.

Finally, and perhaps most difficult of all, designing a program of learning that matches the developmental needs of each and every student requires not only great pedagogical sophistication, it also calls for knowing what each student requires at any given time. Building and implementing a personalized program of learning in this fashion does not come easy and depends on having tools to track students' growth over time.

These are structural challenges that impede delivering on the promise of day-school education; they're woven into the fabric of every day school, whatever its situation. More obviously, schools face circumstantial challenges, too. They can't deliver much of what they promise without securing the services of sufficient numbers of quality educators and capable leaders who can articulate and implement a compelling educational vision. Recruiting such personnel is highly contingent on where schools are located. It's much easier to do so in Manhattan than Milan.

If the extent to which schools fulfill these three promises is a measure of their quality, how well are they doing? Recent data are quite promising.

Recently, working in partnership with Prizmah: Center for Jewish Day Schools, the Rosov Consulting team interviewed more than a hundred families whose children switched into a day school during the first year of the pandemic.

We learned two important things. First, many had previously stayed away because of a series of misconceptions: They assumed that such schools lacked diversity and were educationally inferior to public schools, and that they would be religiously oppressive. Second, we discovered how satisfied families were with what their children now experienced: They relished the sense of community that schools provided during a time of dislocation and the degree to which their child's educational needs were being met even in trying times. These families were not much interested in their children becoming Jewish cultural virtuosos, which was part of why they had previously stayed away. But they *were* thrilled with what they were now experiencing. To use the concepts I previously proposed, their children were experiencing both Jewish community and secular academic achievement.

A similar positive assessment derives from a book I recently wrote with Jack Wertheimer, *Inside Jewish Day Schools: Learning, Leadership,*

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and Community. The book is made up of detailed portraits of nine North American day schools, spanning the denominational spectrum and ranging in size, location, and education orientation.

We did not set out to study exceptional schools. We were interested, rather, in exploring what Jewish day schools in reasonable organizational health and in relatively stable circumstances are capable of offering. While we can't say how representative these schools are of the broader day-school field, we can attest that each of the nine offers evidence that day schools are capable of meeting the three promises described here. By different means, and in the face of different challenges, these schools were able to make a positive difference in the lives of children, parents, and communities. We observed compelling evidence of Jewish community, cultural virtuosity, and secular academic achievement.

The data for our book were gathered over an 18-month period in 2018 and 2019, before the world was altered by the pandemic. In September 2020, before the manuscript was finalized, we returned to the schools to see how they had fared. Undoubtedly, the pandemic had constituted a terrible stress test. Yet it was one that these schools were able to confront by drawing on precisely those educational, technological, and interpersonal assets they had previously accumulated. The schools were making good on what they had always promised—a truth that many who had not previously taken day-school education seriously are at last beginning to see.

Does this mean that schools can't do better? Of course they can. Here are three modest suggestions.

First, as vehicles for Jewish education, day schools have an unusual quantity of time at their disposal. They need to make the best possible use of that time; that's a message I've heard during hundreds of interviews with students. While, as I have argued, repeated work on burnishing skills is a key to virtuosity, students (and their parents) want to see regular progress and not too much déjà vu. A key here, and something that can be hard across school divisions, is ensuring close communication across grade levels to ensure students don't waste their time revisiting the same material or topics in multiple classes.

Second, the arguments made in this piece depend heavily on the successful recruitment and retention of quality educators and sufficient numbers of families. Few educators take up a day-school position without being at least somewhat aware of the poor salaries they'll receive. Higher salaries might tempt more to cross the threshold. Unfortunately, that's not financially sustainable. In recent work our team conducted for CASJE (the Collaborative for Applied Studies in Jewish Education), we did, however, find that higher investment in faculty professional development is associated with higher levels of job satisfaction, self-efficacy, and career commitment. That's a much less expensive proposition. An increase in investment of this kind (conceivable with philanthropic support) could go a long way in retaining valued staff.

Finally, as I indicated, misconceptions still exist about what it's like to attend a Jewish day school. Schools that try to recruit families not already sold on the proposition need to make a better case for what they offer. Distilling this case into three core claims of the kind made here would probably help; those claims could even be part of a collective branding effort across the sector. Ultimately, parents come to schools because of word of mouth,

but it would help if what parents heard from their peers was consistent with the same messages schools are broadcasting through the other channels they use: synagogue pulpits and social media, for example. Perhaps these three promises could underpin a community covenant for day-school education, an explicit collective commitment to these outcomes. That would certainly send a clear and consistent message. *