

A School for D.C.'s Jewish Elite

The Jewish Primary Day School is now the place to be for the kids of Washington's politically connected Jews

By [Allison Hoffman](#) | April 3, 2013 12:00 AM



The scene at the [Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital](#) ^[1] was pretty much like what you'd expect to find at any school like it just before Passover. Kindergarteners sat in a circle learning Hebrew words while first-graders practiced setting up Seder plates and second-graders rehearsed complicated Israeli dances; upstairs, older children lounged on sofas discussing the construction of polyhedrons with their math teacher. In the hallways, displays of student artwork commemorating the Exodus from Egypt hung alongside photographs of a school trip to Israel and a wall board devoted to the importance of composting.

It's easier to see how this Washington, D.C., school is different on days when the parents show up: For teacher conferences, it's not unusual for some parents—who include some of the most prominent Jews in politics today—to come accompanied by Secret Service details. Two U.S. ambassadors, including the current ambassador to Israel, [Daniel Shapiro](#) ^[2], had children at the school before they were

dispatched abroad. Rahm Emanuel's children were enrolled while he served as President Obama's chief of staff; the younger daughter of former vice-presidential candidate and Connecticut Sen. Joe Lieberman is also an alumna. And the guests who come to speak at the school are among the capital's biggest names: Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice chose the school for her first public appearance after leaving office in 2009 and was roundly grilled by a fourth-grader about [waterboarding](#) [3]. This past December, Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagan showed up to light [Hanukkah candles](#) [4] with students.

Other private schools in Washington have similarly high-powered students—most notably [Sidwell Friends](#) [5], which graduated Chelsea Clinton and now enrolls both Malia and Sasha Obama. But the Jewish Primary Day School, known as JPDS, has emerged as the favorite of the city's young Jewish elite and an informal epicenter of Jewish life in Obama's Washington. "It's not just that JPDS is the Semitic Sidwell," said Kenneth Baer, a former adviser to Treasury Secretary Jack Lew, whose daughter was recently accepted for this fall's incoming class. "It's also a very haimish place for the families involved."



Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagan lights the menorah with JPDS student-council leaders and head of school Naomi Reem. (Courtesy JPDS-NC)

JPDS started in 1988 with a handful of kindergarteners whose parents wanted them to remain in a Jewish school but were hesitant about putting such young children on buses to the suburban campus of the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School, in Rockville, Md. The founding group included Lew, who was Obama's chief of staff before his [Treasury](#) [6] appointment, and others who attended [Adas Israel](#) [7], the capital's largest Conservative synagogue, which housed JPDS in its early years. "My son Daniel was in the first graduating class," said Charles Krauthammer, the conservative *Washington Post* columnist. "They had a sweet little graduation ceremony with five or six little kids."

Today, JPDS has 279 students, kindergarten through sixth grade, and occupies a building on 16th Street, which dead ends at the White House a few miles south of campus. This fall, it will add a second campus for pre-K and kindergarten classes to accommodate growing demand for places and expects to reach 350 students in the next few years—something the school's founders never would have anticipated 25 years ago, when they had to recruit children one by one for their startup school. "After President Obama was elected," said Lew's wife, Ruth Schwartz, "Jack went to [Keshet Israel](#) [8] the week acceptance letters went out, and he said there was this whispering, 'Did you get in, did you get in?' He called me and said, sit down, you're not going to believe this, because the idea that people were fighting to get in was amazing."

The school is not affiliated with any single Jewish denomination and attracts families from across the spectrum of Jewish observance, from Reform to Modern Orthodox. Children attend morning prayers,

and the boys are required to cover their heads, but even parents who are avowedly atheist say the Judaic studies curriculum encourages questioning and learning in the classic Talmudic sense rather than belief. A big draw, for many, is the Hebrew-immersion program, which starts in kindergarten. “My boy is 10 and we can chat in Hebrew, which as far as I’m concerned is the key to the whole thing,” said Leon Wieseltier, the literary editor of *The New Republic*. “Yidwell Friends is what it is.”

Its expansion has been driven in part by the revival of residential life in the District, which has prompted families that might once have left for Maryland’s Jewish neighborhoods to stay in the city. “There are many of us who came here for work when we were starting or advancing our careers, and then we fell in love with it and were looking for a Jewish day school that complemented that commitment to D.C.,” said Norman Eisen, a Harvard Law classmate of Obama’s and now [ambassador](#) ^[9] to the Czech Republic, whose daughter Tamar started at JPDS as a kindergartener. Other parents include Andrew Shapiro, an assistant secretary in the State Department, and Adam Szubin, director of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control. “If you look at the parent emails, there are plenty of Gmail addresses but also a lot of .govs,” said Hadar Susskind, the parent of two JPDS students, who is director of [Bend the Arc](#) ^[10], the Jewish political advocacy group, and formerly a policy director at J Street.

The concentration of parents who have proximity to real-world policy decisions lends a distinct seriousness to school debates, like an ongoing one about the maps of Israel used in classrooms. “It started with my aunt, who visited the school and said, ‘These maps don’t show the West Bank,’ ” said Daniel Brumberg, an expert on political reform in the Islamic world at the United States Institute of Peace, who has a third-grader at the school. “I think the fact that you do have this exceptional group of parents who are involved at so many different levels of government means you have people who think more about these things, and with Dan [Shapiro] as our ambassador, it just brings these issues home.”

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But part of the school’s charm, parents say, is that it remains a uniquely egalitarian place by Washington standards. “Importing the Washington power hierarchy into the school would not be socially acceptable the way it would be at some of the other schools,” said *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, whose children attended JPDS and who continues to help with fundraising efforts. As at similar private schools elsewhere in Washington, or in Los Angeles or New York, the kids don’t really care who their friends’ parents are. “They’re not afraid of them,” said Steve Rabinowitz, a parent and former Clinton White House staffer who helped run Jewish outreach for Obama’s 2012 campaign. “They have play dates, they carpool.”

And while the list of parents who have sent their kids to JPDS is indeed impressive, oftentimes their connection to the school precedes their climb up Washington’s political ladder; in many cases, young parents emerge as power players as their children progress through the school, not before. Daniel Shapiro—whose wife, Julie Fisher, taught at JPDS for many years—was a staffer for Sen. Bill Nelson when his oldest daughter started kindergarten there. “Dan was just Julie’s husband, because she was much more important around here than he was,” said Adina Kanefield, the school’s development director. “Dan and Norm [Eisen] were both parents here first, when they were just a Hill staffer and a lawyer, before they were ambassadors.”

Fisher, for her part, remembers being anxious during her first parent-teacher conferences with Joe Lieberman and his wife, Hadassah, when she taught their daughter Hani. “For us at JPDS they were important not because they’re famous, but because they’re parents,” said Fisher, who said she expects her two younger children, who are in first and second grade, to return to JPDS once the family’s time in Tel Aviv is up. “Now that I’m in this crazy world I understand what they were looking for, that they could come in and people didn’t care what they did for a living.”

Next fall’s new incoming parents include a senior Department of Justice appointee and an aide to Vice President Joe Biden. “We know with some of the parents coming in that they’ll be those people in a few years,” said Naomi Reem, JPDS’s head of school. “But they’re not there yet.”

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