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# Jewish Day Schools: The Same As Other Independent Schools, But Different

by Steven Lorch, Head, Solomon Schechter School of Manhattan

School accreditation visiting committee meetings are usually staid affairs. So it surprised me recently to see a group of mostly secular independent school educators sitting as members of an accreditation visiting committee for a Jewish day school burst into spontaneous applause in the middle of the reading of a draft section of their report. Here is the passage that triggered this unusual display of emotion:

*The school's graduates are products of a rare mix: strong academic preparation, profound values education, deep identification with a religious tradition, warm community spirit, and contemporary mores and culture. Thanks to this rich background, the committee believes that, on balance, they are more likely than most of their public and independent school contemporaries to achieve much happiness and success in their lives and careers.*

This accreditation committee wasn't applauding the school for its wonderful way of instilling Jewish life and Jewish knowledge in its students – the most obvious benefits of a Jewish education. Rather, its members were acknowledging the school's unusual effectiveness in helping students attain the goals that their own secular independent schools share: strong character, strong academic achievement, and the inner resources to succeed in life and career.

As good as that school is, however, I was struck by the degree to which these are structural qualities – that is, not ones unique to a particular institution, but ones that emerge from the way Jewish day schools approach their educational mission differently from other excellent independent schools. Jewish day schools give their students profound values education

grounded in both a religious tradition and a warm community spirit, and their dual curriculum makes for especially strong academic preparation. With this mixture in their school environment, it's no wonder that studies do in fact show graduates of Jewish day schools to be especially happy and successful in college and in their lives.

### “Profound Values Education”

Values education heads every list of the distinctive qualities of independent schools, or of reasons parents choose to send their children to independent schools (Independent School Management, 1992). And yet Jewish day school leaders have become increasingly accustomed to hearing their independent school colleagues admire the strength and vibrancy of the moral climate of Jewish day schools.

Of course, independent schools and Jewish day schools both promote a commitment to values; the difference lies in the nature of the value-driven commitment that each encourages. In independent schools, the moral climate rests on a foundation of common values, such as compassion, fair-

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ness, honesty, respect and responsibility, which are broadly agreed upon in principle, but not necessarily in the details of their application to particular dilemmas or gray areas (Bassett, 2004). Take fairness, for example: what does it mean? Equal treatment for all? Providing for the needs of each person, even if some have different needs from others? A problem for many independent schools is what, or whom, to look to

for guidance in answering tough questions like this. An even bigger problem, in view of the consensus within independent schools on general moral principles, and the lack of consensus at the level of application to complex real-life dilemmas, is how to prevent the shared values from turning into mere truisms or slogans – or, in other words, to ensure that they retain their vibrancy and currency.

In Jewish day schools, by contrast, value commitments are richly detailed, elaborated, and supported by a vast system of ethical and legal litera-

ture. The foundation of moral striving in Jewish day schools, therefore, is a densely constructed system, the key elements of which include:

- symbolic action (mitzvot – religiously prescribed behaviors);
- authorized texts for study (the Hebrew Bible and commentaries, rabbinic interpretations and expansions of biblical law and narrative, the prayer book, codes of Jewish law, and millennia of court proceedings and case law); and
- symbolic space (the synagogue, the land of Israel) and symbolic time (Jewish calendar and life cycle events, as well as associated rituals and ceremonies).

On this foundation rest the shared language, core concepts, sources of authority, and agreed methods of deliberation and adjudication that Jewish day schools depend on, particularly

at moments of uncertainty and moral challenge, to work toward resolution and healing. In this sense, even though Jewish day schools, and their graduates, may not exhibit stronger moral sensitivity than their public or independent school counterparts, they do tend to feel somewhat more grounded

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in their ethical views and moral commitments. Many of them are often acutely conscious of their value systems and able to articulate the sources to which they customarily appeal to resolve their own dilemmas or to reflect on their own choices. This is the value added of the “profound values education” to which that accreditation report referred.

### **“Deep Identification with a Religious Tradition [and] Warm Community Spirit”**

If values are central to Jewish day schools’ cultural climate, religious tradition and community spirit amplify and abet the influence of values education.

“Sense of belonging” (also referred to as “sense of community”) is a construct that social psychologists have developed to describe feelings that one is similar to others, is accepted and valued by others, and that one’s needs will be met through his or her commitment to be together with

others (Sarason, 1974; McMillan and Chavis, 1986). In schools, students' sense of belonging – as reflected in positive relationships with peers and teachers, a positive climate for learning, extracurricular involvement, and the absence of perceived ethnic-based discrimination – has been associated with high academic performance, strong attendance, reduced behavioral problems, and resistance to high-risk behavior (Gamoran, 1992; Johnson et al., 2001; Willms, 2003; Napoli et al., 2003).

One of the hallmarks of independent schools is the extent to which they foster a sense of belonging within their communities (Abelman, 2007; Madsen, 1996). Students, teachers and others find personal identification and meaning in a school's traditions and culture and in the strong personal relationships that are developed between teachers and students, and among students, in and out of class. These ties often carry on long after their years within the school have come to an end.

The power of Jewish day schools to create belonging and community, however, is even greater than that of other independent schools. Traditions

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in Jewish day schools are derived not only from the school's institutional past, but also from the sweep of Jewish history across the centuries. Culture is not only the school's culture, but also the participation of the school community in the shared experience, the

drama and celebration of the Jewish community that transcends continents and encompasses past, present and future. Shared values are reinforced by a common engagement with a canon of richly resonant foundational texts and committed action.

A recent study of the effects of enrollment in Jewish day schools, independent schools and public schools on Jewish college students found that graduates of Jewish day schools indeed do report that their school experience was more engaged and connected than do graduates of other independent schools and public schools. "When students are asked to reflect on the social climate of the high schools they attended, Jewish high school

alumni describe a greater sense of belonging in their schools and feel more strongly that their peers enjoyed being together than do respondents who attended either private or public high schools” (Chertok et al., 2007). Once they reach college, they continue to feel a strong connection to other graduates of Jewish day schools on campus, but

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they also move beyond their previous social network. Interestingly, they are as likely as independent school alumni to participate in sports on campus and more likely to get involved in performing arts groups and political or social action groups. Finally, they are slightly more likely to make friends through their student activities (as opposed, for example, to their residence arrangements) than graduates of other independent schools. These effects are, again, the legacy of a religious tradition and community spirit whose presence in the school enables students to feel more strongly the impact of values teaching.

In understanding these differences, it’s important to remember that students at Jewish day schools do not lead cloistered lives; they live in the real world and are fully exposed to its influences, just the same as their contemporaries in other schools. The visiting committee member who made the initial observation that evolved into the passage I quoted above was very clear on this point: students at the school look the same, talk the same language, wear the same clothes, eat the same foods, and listen to the same music as students at her independent school. We might have expected, therefore, that their experience of school life would be much the same, too. But it isn’t. In conversation after conversation with visiting committee members, the Jewish day school students they met unselfconsciously described their experience of teachers and schoolmates as loving, nurturing, and family-like. They laid claim with passion and gratitude, and also critical reflection, to the traditions, values and beliefs into which their school had inducted them; they thoughtfully grappled with cutting-edge worldly ideas, timeless religious constructs, and the creative interactions between them. And finally, they referred not only to their personal interests and aspirations, but also to their group responsibilities and values when discuss-

ing their future plans – the same unusual depth of values that studies find in Jewish day school graduates generally.

### **“Strong Academic Preparation”**

If Jewish day school graduates’ academic preparation were simply comparable to that at other fine independent schools, it might still, in combination with values education and other great strengths, produce more successful graduates. Parents often worry, in fact, that the dual curriculum may put too much pressure on the amount of time available for core academic subjects like reading and math. But, in fact, there are a number of factors relating to the academic program that suggest that academic preparation is indeed a great strength of Jewish day schools, even in comparison to elite independent schools:

- First, on account of the dual curriculum of Jewish and general academic studies, the school day is typically longer at Jewish day schools than at other schools. It is not unusual to hear Jewish day school graduates report that their course load in high school was more challenging than at college, or that the work ethic, or organizational skills or stamina that they acquired in school was more than adequate to sustain them through college.
- Second, bilingualism seems to be good for learners. There is ample evidence, accumulated mainly in Canadian studies of French immersion, that high degrees of proficiency in a second language confer upon functionally bilingual students an academic advantage (Genesee, 1987; Turnbull et al., 2003). The levels of Hebrew language proficiency attained by many students in many Jewish day schools may be an additional factor in their subsequent academic success.
- Finally, Jewish studies subjects are themselves highly academic in content and skill demands. The study of Bible at an introductory level, for example, requires that emergent second language learners decode and read for understanding a text written in an ancient idiom for adult native Hebrew speakers, a task more or less comparable to non-native English learners reading Shakespeare. More advanced Bible study introduces the need for a close reading of the text and the ability to entertain multiple perspectives on, and interpretations of, a literary work. Skills learned in Jewish studies coursework are typically readily transferable to

other literatures, to history (especially reading primary sources), and to philosophy.

These factors may partially explain a recent research finding that supports the view that graduates of Jewish day schools are more successful academically than other private or public school graduates. Jewish day school graduates have higher academic self-confidence than their peers – and academic self-confidence has been shown in other studies to be positively associated with higher grade-point average, persistence within a selected major, and approaching the college experience as an exciting challenge rather than a challenge to one's self-esteem (Chertok, 2007).

### **“Much Happiness and Success in Their Lives and Careers”**

Values, community, and an academic environment whose unique elements are conducive to educational success are wonderful qualities in and of themselves. But the visiting committee members were applauding something more: the sense that that Jewish day school's graduates had unusually strong prospects for future happiness and success. Why might experienced educators draw that conclusion? From what we know about Jewish day schools, two possibilities seem plausible: first, because of the evidence about the role of meaning in promoting connection, efficacy, and fulfillment (Frankl, 1984); and second, because of the role of self-esteem in promoting happiness and enhanced initiative (Baumeister et al., 2003).

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It is easy to see why attending a Jewish day school can be a source of enhanced meaning for students. The sense of belonging that comes from community and tradition, the fulfillment that comes with a commitment to clear, well-defined values, and the efficacy that comes from both academic self-confidence and an integrated commitment to moral action, all may contribute to this effect. To the extent that these qualities of the school program promote meaning in life, they may also be indirectly associated with happiness and success.



Self-esteem is another likely link between the school program and long-term student outcomes. Nearly all of the Jewish day school characteristics discussed above – shared values, warm community, religious identification, and academic performance – are potential correlates of self-esteem; self-esteem, in turn, is a factor in promoting happiness and initiative; and initiative is a factor in promoting success in life and in one's career.

### This Rare Mix

The combination of these factors in students' learning experience – and the increased meaning and self-esteem to which they can contribute – are all ways that Jewish day schools add another layer to the experience that independent schools generally provide. For families open to a Jewish education for their children, these factors, and the potential benefits to children from them, can open new ways of thinking about what makes schools good, and what good schools can give our children and us.

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