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Day School Enrollment Boom Detailed

National census finds big rise in non-Orthodox numbers; thinning ranks in upper grades.

JONATHAN MARK

Associate Editor

Providing perhaps the most compelling evidence to date of the Jewish community's growing embrace of the day school movement, a national census reveals that non-Orthodox parents are enrolling their children in unprecedented numbers, though eight in 10 students are still Orthodox.

Non-Orthodox day school enrollment jumped 25 percent in the 1990s, to 37,000, with high school enrollment nearly doubling. There are now as many children in the Conservative movement's Solomon Schechter schools (17,550) as in Satmar schools.

In another surprise, despite the perceived move to the right within Orthodoxy, the census showed enrollment there almost evenly divided among its three main divisions: the Modern Orthodox and centrists; the chasidim, including Chabad; and the "black hat" non-chasidim who refer to themselves as "yeshivish," or "the yeshiva world."

Modern Orthodox and centrist schools (essentially Modern Orthodox but with separate classes for boys and girls) tallied a slightly higher enrollment (49,326 in 172 schools) than did the yeshivish (48,774 in 172 schools); both topped the chasidim, who had 46,497 students in 125 schools.

The survey, claiming to be "the most complete census to date," was released this week by the Avi Chai Foundation, a private group promoting Jewish education and identity. The census, conducted during the 1998-99 school year and only in the United States, found 185,000 students from 4-year-old preschoolers through 12th-graders in some 700 schools, a 12 to 15 percent increase (20,000-25,000 students) since 1990. The number swells to more than 200,000, stated the census, if one includes 3-year-old nursery school children.

Two-thirds of the national day school population is concentrated in New York and New Jersey. Today, some 40 percent of children receiving a formal Jewish education do so in day schools. In 1956, by comparison, 95 percent of those children received their Jewish education in afternoon Hebrew schools.

The census was conducted by Marvin Schick, an AVI CHAI consultant and president of the Rabbi Jacob Joseph schools. Schick said he gathered data from 670 schools, about 50 of which have both elementary and high schools, or separate branches, with a 100 percent participation rate from all known schools. He acknowledged that as many as 15,000 students might have eluded the survey for various reasons.

An Avi Chai statement, released along with the census, attributes the enrollment boom to a growing interest in Jewish culture; a desire to provide children with a secure, confident sense of Jewishness in the wake of intermarriage statistics; a desire to ground children in moral and spiritual values and, a growing concern about academics and safety in urban public schools.

Yet the census presents a set of statistics that seem contradictory: Day school enrollment dips precipitously with every successive grade, from kindergarten through High school. From chasidic to Conservative to non-denominational, every group had more students in first grade than in sixth grade, and more students in sixth grade than graduating from high school.

"Day schools continue to be a preschool or lower-grade phenomenon' Schick writes in the survey. He attributes this to an Orthodox baby boom that swells the lower grades, as well as male students leaving yeshiva high school early for seminary study, but the seminary numbers are not documented.

Schick contends in the study instead that an inordinately high proportion of grade-by-grade enrollment decline is attributable to the non-Orthodox." In the yeshivish world the drop is not always grade-by-grade but it is downward: 3,967 first graders become 2,996 eighth graders, and a temporary bump-up to 3,434 high school freshman dips to 2,900 high school seniors. The census does not indicate how many "at risk" students are expelled from the various schools for detours or religious deviations, a problem the yeshivish world is attempting to confront.

The more cosmopolitan Orthodox are not spared either: There are 4,118 Modern/centrist first-graders but only 2,012 high school seniors. The Conservative movement and non-denominational schools (such as Manhattan's Heschel School) have 3,764 first-graders, but only 373 students in Conservative or community high schools.

The census does not include any information on tuitions-some of which are as high as \$15,000 per high school student-and what impact that may have on parents' decision to pull their high school age children out of day schools.

The census also does not reflect the financial health of the various schools, and what effect that may have on tuitions, enrollments and classroom dynamics. However, in an interview with *The Jewish Week*, Schick said the economic situation is just about as divisive as it could be, with some schools paying teachers as little as \$9,000 while other schools pay top teachers more than \$90,000. According to Bar-Ilan University's Center for Diaspora Education, some day school principals earn more than \$200,000, while others have to take second jobs to survive.

Jack Wertheimer, a provost and professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary, who contributed an extensive study of Jewish education in the 1999 *American Jewish Year Book*, writes in the December issue of *Commentary* that "Most schools struggle to make ends meet, relying on their own limited resources and modest assistance from local Jewish philanthropies. Of even greater concern, the day school movement 'has been treated with marked ambivalence by the leading national Jewish organization, whose positions both on internal Jewish affairs and on key issues of public policy have often flown in the face of the schools' manifest interests."

The census also admits to being "incomplete" in gauging the number of students in special education. The report recognizes 18 schools as specializing in special ed, with 662 students needing, such instruction. However, of the other 150,000 students in regular day schools (no schools in the census were identified by name), only 487 are said to need special education.

Other than Chabad, in all the chasidic schools, according to the census, only one student needs special ed. In the Reform day schools --with just 11 percent of the chasidic day school population-- 127 students are in special ed. In Modern Orthodox schools (26,961 students) only 25 are in special ed, but in Conservative schools (20,504 students) 164 students were enrolled, the same as in the non-chasidic right-wing.

Outside the Jewish day school system, 10 percent of students nationwide are enrolled in special ed programs.

How crowded are day schools? Occupancy rates range from a low of about 80 percent in non-denominational schools to a high of 96 percent in yeshiva-world institutions. Schick states in the study that "every day schools-especially the larger institutions are already operating at or near capacity, and some are above capacity."

Some Satmar schools in Brooklyn are so overcrowded that some classrooms meet in hallways to accommodate the overflow. According to the census, Satmar constitutes nearly 45 percent of chasidic enrollment (excluding Chabad) and "nearly 10 percent of all U.S. day school children"-more than 17,500 students.

Chabad-Lubavitch, which is frequently differentiated by the census from the more insular chasidic groups, has 7,791 students in 44 schools. The Reform movement has 4,495 in 20 schools.

Many day schools are small, according to the census. "Nearly 40 percent of all U.S. day schools enroll 100 or fewer students." Schick writes. This presents "serious educational, financial and communal issues. ... there are schools that will not survive, while others will struggle with tiny enrollments that may serve as disincentive for potential day school parents."

Schick writes that this survey "comes at the end of a century that began with yeshivas and day schools being denigrated as old-world institutions by most of organized American Jewry. We now have a greater appreciation of day schools. The value of this survey will be enhanced if there follow-ups, hopefully at 10-year intervals."