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Day Schools Show Continued Growth

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Day school enrollment around the country grew by 11 percent in the last five years, according to a new census, and if present trends continue, there will be a nearly 25 percent increase in the decade between 1999 and 2009. While non-Orthodox schools showed modest growth, more than 80 percent of the 205,000 students nationwide are in Orthodox schools, and 68 percent of all day schools in the country are in New York and New Jersey. (In New York, which has more than 300 day schools and yeshivas, 97 percent of the schools are Orthodox.) Marvin Schick, an educational consultant who headed the study sponsored by the Avi Chai Foundation, noted that day schools have become virtually mandatory among Orthodox families, and that fact, combined with the high birth rate in the community, "ensures continuing enrollment growth." Schick pointed out that the 7 percent growth rate of non-Orthodox day schools in the last five years is noteworthy because it took place during a period of increasing tuition costs and a troubled economy.

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The study, which found "a measure of change within a pattern of overall stability," was completed during a period of growing consensus among Jewish leaders and educators that a day school education is the best insurance of a strong Jewish identity for youngsters in this era of growing assimilation. But the overwhelming majority of Jewish students attend public schools, in part because of the community's longtime support of public school education, financial concerns about day school tuition (averaging around \$5,000 a year per child), a sense that a day school education is too parochial in 21st century America and the perception that secular studies in day schools are less competitive than in other schools. Schick said the "impressive" growth rate of day schools masks some serious problems, including the continuing economic burden for parents, the shortage of top educators, particularly principals, and the decline among Solomon Schechter (Conservative) schools nationally, despite the success of several in the New York metropolitan area. Non-denominational community schools are increasing — there are 20 more than five years ago — and account for the growth in enrollment of such schools of 17 percent. In all, the study found 759 schools, an increase of about 80 in the last five years. The report defines six categories of Orthodox schools: Centrist, Chabad,

Chasidic, Immigrant/Outreach, Modern and Yeshiva World. Less delineated are the variations within the non-Orthodox, but it mostly consists of students from Conservative homes. Only 2 percent of all enrolled day school students are Reform, and there has been a small decline in that category in the last five years. Yossi Prager, executive director of Avi Chai in New York, said the goal of the census was "to determine the extent to which the day school movement continues to grow." He said Avi Chai was "reasonably pleased" by the results. He and other experts noted there are various ways to interpret some of the data in either a positive or negative light, depending on one's inclination. For example, Steve Bayme, the national director of contemporary Jewish life for the American Jewish Committee, pointed out that in 1960, there were only 90,000 students in day schools, compared to more than 200,000 today. "There has been a major growth in the acceptability of day schools across the board," he said, along with the perception that young people can go on to gain placement at top colleges. But Bayme also explained that a long-term problem remains, namely that non-Orthodox families are still reluctant to send their children to a day school past bar or bat mitzvah age. Most of the enrollment in non-Orthodox schools is in preschool and lower grades. The Schick study finds a steep decline after eighth grade, "with the ninth grade having fewer than half of the students of the grade below," according to the report. "Obviously," Schick writes, "a full-day Jewish high school is not yet the cup of tea for a majority of non-Orthodox students." Bayme bemoaned the fact that "at the very moment that the day school can make the biggest difference in Jewish literacy, that's when we lose so many children." He said a critical challenge for the Conservative and Reform communities is to "break into the high school years." Prager agreed that there has been more focus by philanthropists and communal leaders on attracting families to Jewish day schools than on transitioning youngsters from a Jewish junior high to a Jewish high school and from Jewish kindergarten to a day school first grade. He said that suggests the need for better feeder systems, stronger relationships between the current and potential future school and an improved "curriculum alignment." But the study points out that while the decline in high school enrollment may be viewed as "disappointing," particularly in light of the major investment a number of philanthropies have made in creating and advocating for Jewish high schools for the non-Orthodox, the actual number of students in such high schools has grown from 1,500 in 1992 to 2,200 five years ago to 4,100 this year. Avi Chai, which focuses on projects to promote Jewish education, has created several programs to help ease the burden of tuition on parents, like halving the cost for schools in some communities to see if that would dramatically increase enrollment. So far, says Prager, the financial relief definitely helps, but is not the only factor. Parents remain concerned about the quality of education in day schools and of having their children study and socialize only with other Jewish children. He called the report's findings that non-Orthodox enrollment growth is less than that of five years ago "a wake up call for philanthropists and community leaders" seeking to promote day school education. The census also found that almost 40 percent of all day schools have fewer than 100 students, suggesting that keeping such schools afloat is a serious challenge. In general, Schick found a migration of more observant families to the New York metropolitan area, in part because of educational concerns. One very small but noteworthy development is that more than 1,000 students in day schools are non-Jews who make no claim on Judaism. Some schools accept them for financial reasons. Prager called the situation "not a big issue but potentially dangerous." Schick, who has visited more than 400 day schools around the country, told The Jewish Week that while many face serious financial challenges and may not have the labs, libraries, and other facilities found in most public schools, the Jewish schools are able to offer "the opportunity for Judaic growth and

an atmosphere for intellectual and spiritual development that can overcome easily recognizable faults." He said he looks for empathy among teachers and administrators, and schools that have more than one approach for reaching children, and he cautions parents who are over-involved in their children's studies, homework and grades to step back a bit and let the youngsters grow at their own pace. "I see my job as looking for the good in schools, not the bad," Schick said, and stressed that schools have an obligation to students to increase, not reduce, their sense of self-esteem.

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