



## Editor's Column

### Hebrew school confidential



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I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by Hebrew school. Okay, I exaggerate. Many of them weren't the best minds at all, and most spent way too much of their time watching *Brady Bunch* reruns.

But they hated Hebrew school, and it turned them off to Jewish life, sometimes for good.

And I'll even say this: Bad Hebrew school experiences not only shaped the Jewish worldview of alienated baby boomers, but helped establish the priorities of our most active, most highly identified Jews. I have a hunch that the rise of the day school movement in the past 20 years is owed in no small part to Jewish professionals and philanthropists who, drawing on their own childhood trauma, felt the supplementary school model was unsalvageable. The best minds, and the big bucks, went into the day schools, attracting, in turn, parents with grim Hebrew school memories of their own.

And yet, the majority of children receiving a Jewish education in this country are enrolled in supplementary schools. That's 230,000 kids at some 2,000 part-time schools.

And here's another hunch: As the economy continues to falter, parents who were willing and able to pay day school tuitions will start to take a look at alternatives. It's happening already.

The best and worst of what they'll find is contained in a new report from the Avi Chai Foundation, "Schools That Work: What We Can Learn from Good Jewish Supplementary

Schools.” Jack Wertheimer of the Jewish Theological Seminary led a research team that looked at 10 schools with reputations for getting it right. The optimist in me reads their report and thinks that where there’s a will there’s a way; the pessimist wonders if there is enough will and talent out there to carry its lessons into hundreds of synagogues and community schools.

The report recognizes how community priorities stunted the field in recent decades: With the philanthropic momentum going toward day schools, summer camping, early childhood programs, and free trips to Israel, it wasn’t until 2007 that we had a national agency devoted to supplementary schools (the pokily named Partnership for Effective Learning and Innovative Education, or PELIE).

And the challenges faced by the schools are legion. The report notes a scarcity of qualified teachers. Fewer and fewer hours are devoted to part-time school by over-programmed families. No one is quite sure how to teach Hebrew, or how to balance Hebrew with Jewish history, teaching Israel, prayer skills or “talking about God” (remember God?). And the bar or bat mitzva is still treated as “graduation day”: one-third of students drop out after their big year; 55 percent leave within two years of their bar or bat mitzva.

But the heart of the report is descriptions of schools that are meeting these challenges, and thriving. There’s the 900-family Reform synagogue (the schools are identified with pseudonyms) that is known for combining formal and experiential learning. That means the classroom stuff is combined with a range of options, including youth groups, choirs, a drama club, and social action projects. The kids quoted emphasized the sense of community and use a word you rarely hear associated with Hebrew schools: “Fun.”

A Chabad school on the West Coast merges “an unmistakably mission-driven approach with an unabashed entrepreneurial edge.” The rabbi and wife who run the place have a smile and gentle touch for every parent and student and try to maximize every minute of their one-day-a-week program. They teach fourth-graders about home rituals by building a mock-up of a typical Jewish home. And here’s what they tell kids who come late or leave early: “I’m glad you came even for part of the time.”

And there’s a tiny Conservative synagogue in the Midwest that fully integrates the students into Saturday morning services and the full range of synagogue activities. It combines necessity — they need every hand they can get — and vision: The shul and school aim to be a place where every person “is counted on to contribute ideas, talents, time, and energy.”

In fact, developing a “community” is among the five “noteworthy characteristics” of schools that work. The others are taking Jewish study seriously, making Jewish education experiential, engaging the entire family, and making both teachers and students feel valued.

Above all, perhaps, effective schools “define a vision of their ideal graduate and the means they will develop to produce such students.” The history of the supplementary school is one of low expectations and ill-defined goals. The best schools have vision.

Wertheimer also calls for communal vision and writes that Hebrews schools lack “champions” among funders and professionals. He and his team want to see a clearinghouse for good ideas, local and national partnerships that keep each school from having to reinvent the wheel, and philanthropists who find part-time schooling as glamorous as other Jewish causes.

Day schools are vital parts of the American-Jewish landscape and should remain so. Their champions are searching for creative ways to control the cost, and I hope they succeed.

But day schools are not for everybody. Writes Wertheimer: “Still, if only for the sheer numbers of students they enroll and the importance of the education they can potentially deliver, part-time Jewish lower and high schools cannot be permitted to languish as a weak link.”

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