

November 10, 2000

Day Schools Need Standards, Too

By YOSSI PRAGER

Listening to the presidential candidates debate their views on education, I was struck not so much by their disagreement on government vouchers as by their agreement on the need for standards and accountability in our school systems.

I hope Jewish day schools are listening. General studies programs at day schools are generally quite good, at times competitive with the best public and private alternatives. However, Judaic studies programs - especially ones at non-Orthodox schools - are considerably less uniform.

By what grade should the average student develop the ability to sight read a passage from the Torah? Some schools require this skill from students in third grade; other schools hope students will have mastered it by the end of eighth grade. One Jewish day school I recently encountered teaches Jewish texts in translation at the high school level.

Similar questions can be asked about Hebrew, Mishnah, Talmud, Jewish history, Israel and Zionism. The differences among schools in curricula and expectations are equally great in these subjects. In part, this range stems from the number of class periods devoted to Judaic studies. Minimalist schools offer as little as one class in Hebrew language a day and a second class, offered three to five times a week, encompassing the rest of Judaism. Maximalist schools devote half the day or more to Judaic studies.

In principle, the number of hours devoted to Judaic studies should not determine the Judaic outcome. Rather, the desired Judaic outcome should determine the number of class hours spent on those subjects.

Many day schools say they lack qualified Judaic studies teachers, a problem that is perhaps their most serious challenge. However, the teacher shortage is no excuse for avoiding standards. A number of programs are being developed to recruit and train new teachers for the field. These new programs will benefit from the adoption of concrete standards, because the schools' realistic expectations from teachers will determine the content of the training programs.

The day school system is decentralized, with schools subject to competing pulls from their boards, parents, administrations and faculty. In this context, it will not be easy to persuade schools to develop cooperatively a set of communal standards within each movement or type of school. It will be even harder to develop methods of accountability, such as national tests, to measure schools' achievements. Nevertheless, if our community believes that the Jewish heritage and language continue to be worthy of serious study, day schools need standards and accountability for Judaic studies, just as they do for general studies. Our children deserve no less.

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