



New Jewish high school aims for \$5,000 tuition

by Debra Rubin
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Bolstered by a \$50,000 grant from the Avi Chai Foundation, a nondenominational Jewish high school offering self-paced individual learning and low-cost tuition is expected to open in central Jersey in September.

The Pre-Collegiate Learning Center of New Jersey has not yet decided on a location, said founder and director Lauren Arie Gellman of Highland Park. However, she said, she expected the site to be within 20 minutes of her Middlesex County community.

Gellman said within the last several weeks the school received a \$50,000 planning grant from the New York- and Jerusalem-based Avi Chai Foundation with the promise of more funding if the school commits to meeting certain milestones. She said, however, that she expects the school to be self-supporting within several years.

Although the first group of about 30 ninth- and 10th-graders will be mostly local, Gellman said, the school will add one grade a year through 12th grade and reach an enrollment of up to 240 students from a 40-mile radius. She expects to enroll students from Middlesex, Mercer, Monmouth, Somerset, and Union counties and possibly as far away as Bergen County, Staten Island, and Brooklyn.

“We are hoping to attract three groups,” Gellman told *NJJN*: “students who do not have formal Jewish education, those whose families may have been priced out of the day school world, and those who may have gone to a school like Schechter or an Orthodox yeshiva and want to aim for something even better.”

One of the school’s major lures is its projected annual tuition of \$5,000, considerably less than other day school tuitions, which can run \$15,000 or more per year. Parents will be expected to purchase some textbooks and supply certain items such as a laptop computer.

The school expects to keep costs down through lower expenditures on teaching staff than a typical Jewish day school. Instead, students will be assigned to their own computer portals through which they

Open house

The Pre-Collegiate Learning Center of New Jersey will hold an open house on Sunday, Dec. 12, at 2 p.m. at Congregation B’nai Tikvah, North Brunswick. To RSVP contact pclcnj@gmail.com; for more information, go to pclcnj.com.

will access computer-based instructional materials, including lectures conducted or prerecorded by off-site instructors. Students' progress will also be tracked on-line, said Gellman. Youngsters will work at their own pace, although "highly qualified" teachers will be on site to assist and keep order.

The school plans to use secular curricular material developed for home-schooling programs, such as Rosetta Stone or Thinkwell.

Classes will be supported by weekly on-site labs and requested sessions with instructors. The private school does not have to be accredited, but is seeking to be, said Gellman.

"Avi Chai is pleased to support a new venture that takes advantage of the world of on-line learning, which could yield both educational and financial benefits for day schools," said foundation program officer Rachel Mohl Abrahams. "We hope that other schools will consider experiments of this nature."

Gellman is a former book publishing executive and founding board member of the Orthodox Netivot Montessori Yeshiva in Edison, where the youngest of her three daughters is enrolled. She said PCLC's philosophy is based on that school's.

Gellman's husband, Peter, an investment advisor and member of the school's board of trustees, has been involved with educational reform for many years, including a school reform design for the Hudson Institute. He formerly taught international affairs at Princeton and Oxford universities and was a board member of the Solomon Schechter Day School of Raritan Valley in East Brunswick.

The couple's middle daughter is a seventh-grader at Solomon Schechter Day School of Essex and Union in West Orange, and their oldest is enrolled as a 10th-grader at Stanford University's EPGY Online High School. The couple belongs to the Highland Park Conservative Temple-Congregation Anshe Emeth.

Jewish studies

PCLC's senior Jewish studies consultant is Rabbi Joshua Ross of Highland Park, associate director of the Orthodox Union's Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus, which offers Jewish studies opportunities at various colleges and universities. The school will hire a full-time Jewish studies adviser, said Gellman.

Ross, a native of Halifax, Nova Scotia, is a graduate of Dalhousie University there and received his ordination in 2000 from Yeshiva Hamivtar in Israel, where he later went on to serve as interim director. Ross has led JLIC programs at Princeton and Cornell universities.

Ross will serve on the school's advisory board, which includes Rabbi Mordecai Schwartz of Highland Park, who teaches Talmud at the Jewish Theological Seminary, and Dr. Maurice Elias, a psychology professor at Rutgers who has authored books and papers on parenting, teaching, and learning.

According to PCLC's website, the school's Jewish studies program will combine "traditional classroom learning with supervised Beit Midrash learning." Core courses will include Tanach (Hebrew Bible) and rabbinical/talmudic subjects.

Gellman said each enrolled student would work with an individual team of both staff and volunteer coaches and mentors and would receive an academic and non-academic "game plan" based on individual interests and goals.

She also promised opportunities to customize learning, flexibility in course selection, the possibility of self-paced learning in many Jewish and secular subjects, and a yearly two-week "mini-mester" during which students are actively mentored through individualized learning projects.

The personal “coaching” team will continuously work with the student and his or her family to tailor the program to personal needs. For example, Gellman said, if a student is gifted in a certain subject there could be a match with a Princeton or Rutgers professor teaching that subject. Gellman said many such academic experts have already been lined up.

In keeping with its nondenominational approach, students will be required to take part in morning prayers at a synagogue of their choice, said Rabbi Robert Wolkoff of Conservative Congregation B’nai Tikvah in North Brunswick, who has been a staunch advocate of the school from the beginning.

Students whose synagogues may not have a minyan may go to another to fulfill the requirement. There is also discussion of establishing morning minyanim in private homes.

“We find it very exciting to have each student do daily *tefilot* [prayers] at their own local congregation,” said Wolkoff. “They can follow their own prayer practices and we don’t have these silly little fights among rabbis behaving badly. This also is a way for kids to strengthen the bond with their own communities. One of the problems when kids go to day school is that they sort of leave their own congregation behind. This integrates them into the congregation, which is very smart.”

Although his own three children are years away from high school, Wolkoff said, a concern for him and others in the Conservative community is the distance youngsters have to travel to the nearest Schechter high school — in West Orange.

Wolkoff praised PCLC’s combination of open classrooms, significant computer time, direct resistance to “one-style-fits-all teaching,” and intensive study of Mishna and Talmud with respect for ideological differences.

One-on-one teaching will be offered at the advanced level, particularly for math and Jewish subjects.

Those factors make the school “enormously beneficial to our Jewish community in Middlesex and across the entire area,” he said.

Wolkoff said he expects Ross, who is Orthodox, to respect the nondenominational nature of the school and the diversity of its potential students.

“I believe he will come to understand my way of doing things, and I will come to understand his way of doing things,” Wolkoff said, “and together we can work out something wonderful for all our kids.”

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