

The Jewish Week

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The Values, And Value, Of Day School Education

by Yossi Prager

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Amid all the ferment over day school tuition, the animating question has been “What kind of Jewish education can we afford?” I’d like to suggest that instead of conceiving day school education as an economic proposition, we view it as a value proposition. Through that lens, the important question is “How can we sustain the kind of intensive and immersive Jewish education that will enrich and guide our children in the 21st century?”

We need to remind ourselves of the purpose for offering our children a Jewish education to begin with. Terms such as “Jewish identity” or “continuity” don’t begin to capture the importance of a day school. There are different flavors of day schools, denominational and post-denominational, and their differing outlooks offer choice for Jews of many different backgrounds. Yet almost all are committed to ensuring that young Jews have the textual skills, religious enculturation and commitment to the Jewish people to enable their graduates to be active participants – and often leaders — in Jewish life.

An overwhelming body of data links day school education to subsequent Jewish involvement, even after factoring out home life. And day school graduates have made a disproportionate impact on American Jewish life, especially in recent years. Multicultural America, too, benefits from the contributions made to American culture and ideas by Jews steeped in their rich tradition.

The current economic crisis also highlights the extent to which we need educational outcomes to go beyond teaching knowledge and skills — to shape value systems and characters. The recession arose at least in part because of questionable values at the corporate and individual levels, and the economic decline now in turn compels a new set of choices that depend on values and priorities. Children feel the tension, added to their normal questions about fear, hope, joy, independence and friendship. To cope and grow, our children deserve the wisdom and values embedded in Jewish texts and traditions.

But wisdom and values cannot be internalized from sound bites. The more deeply children understand our rich tradition on its own terms (ideally in Hebrew, its own language) the more that the meaning they draw from the Torah becomes a part of who they are. Toward this end, day schools immerse students in intensive study of the great texts of the Jewish civilization. If my meaning is not clear, visit a Jewish high school and listen to students debate the ancient truths of the Bible and Talmud in the context of our modern reality. And as these students mature and continue on to college and adulthood,

the rich Jewish identities developed in day schools help them integrate distinctive Jewish thinking into a larger American culture also in search of meaning and guidance.

In arguing that day schools are a critical Jewish value proposition, I do not mean to dismiss the economic pressures. The schools must also be affordable economic propositions. Serious thinking must go into creating economies of scale to help schools succeed in a fiscally responsible fashion. Effective use of technology, collaborations among day schools that lead to cost savings and attracting new philanthropists to the cause should all be near the top of the priority list for day school leaders. Recently, The Avi Chai Foundation requested proposals for day school collaborations that would yield cost savings. Of 53 total submissions by the deadline, only a handful came from New York-area schools, indicating that some of the creative thinking lies ahead.

Personally, I put great faith in Gary Rosenblatt's suggestion ("Day School Model May Now Be Thing Of The Past," May 8): just as American Jews channel their talent, money and votes toward support for Israel, today the challenge is to focus our energies with equal dedication on advocating government support of the secular side of day school education. Many Western countries — England, Australia, France, Mexico, parts of Canada — already cover the costs of general studies at parochial schools. In most of these countries, Jews have higher affiliation rates than in America without suffering the "parade of horrors" threatened by advocates of an impermeable wall between church and state in America.

Much can be achieved on the legislative front even without pushing the boundaries of church-state law. Tax credits, for example, are unquestionably constitutional, as is government funding for textbooks, computers, busing, nursing and other secular services as well as reimbursement for testing and attendance taking. If the community could mobilize the Jewish grass roots to join with those of other faiths and back only the kinds of government aid that are already constitutionally permitted, we could make important progress. (In New York there are already organizations such as Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York, Agudath Israel and Teach NYS leading the charge that need greater grass-roots support. Similar energy must be harnessed in other states.)

As we know through AIPAC and similar groups, we have the political skills to apply to parochial school funding. Now we need to muster the will to develop PACs, contact legislators in significant numbers and support organizations taking the case for funding of secular activities at parochial schools to the state legislatures. If we succeed, we can lower day school tuition considerably.

Progress on the tuition crisis will no doubt also be advanced by innovative ideas about day school educational and/or economic models that have not even been conceived yet. At Avi Chai, which has been among the largest philanthropic investors in day school education over the past 15 years, we, like so many others, have turned our attention to the fundamental economic questions. We want to hear innovative ideas. Please e-mail me your ideas at yprager@avichaina.org. With sufficient will, the Jewish community has the means to align the value and economic propositions represented by day school education.

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