



Discount day school aims for \$5,000 tuition

by Debra Rubin, New Jersey Jewish News

With the economy still suffering, many parents are opting out of sending their children to Jewish day schools, where \$20,000 or more for tuition isn't unheard of.

But what if there was a way to get a day school education for a quarter of the cost?

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 New Jersey in September. Its projected tuition: \$5,000 a year.

The grant from the New York- and Jerusalem-based foundation was given with the promise of more funding if the school commits to meeting certain milestones, said Lauren Arie Gellman, founder and director of the new school. Gellman added that she expects the school to be self-supporting within several years.

Although the first group of about 30 ninth- and 10th-graders at the Pre-Collegiate Learning Center of New Jersey 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.

“We are hoping to attract three groups,” Gellman said. “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 tuition, considerably less than that of other day schools. 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 will access computer-based instructional materials, including lectures conducted or prerecorded by off-site instructors. Students' progress also will be tracked online.

Students will work at their own pace, although teachers will be on site to assist and keep order, Gellman said.

The school also plans to use secular curricular material developed for home-schooling programs, such as Rosetta Stone and 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 accreditation is one of its goals, Gellman said.

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 emphasized 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 would be 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 nearby professor teaching that subject. Gellman said many academic experts already have been lined up.

Students will be required to take part in morning prayers, but in keeping with the school's nondenominational approach, they may do so at a synagogue of their choice, said Rabbi Robert Wolkoff of Conservative Congregation B'nai Tikvah in North Brunswick, one of the school's earliest advocates.

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

"We find it very exciting to have each student do daily tefilot at their own local congregation," Wolkoff said, calling it "a way for kids to strengthen the bond with their own communities."

Its funders hope the concept of the school will translate to other parts of the country where a low-cost Jewish education option would be beneficial.

"Avi Chai is pleased to support a new venture that takes advantage of the world of online 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."