Bringing New Young Families Into Our Day Schools

By Nili Simhai

What does it take for someone to feel welcome in a new space? What does it take for someone to think of themselves as part of a new social circle?

These questions may not seem relevant to the issue of growing day school enrollment, but they are at the heart of a new collaborative initiative of the Harold Grinspoon Foundation and AVI CHAI. Leveraging the wisdom and experience of the PJ Library and its many engagement programs, the two foundations launched a new effort this year called the PJ Library Day School Enrollment and Engagement (DSEE) initiative. Sixteen day schools in four different communities are currently working with an experienced PJ Library professional in their community to create engagement programs. The goal is to bring new families into the orbit of their school, give them the opportunity to feel connected to the school community, and to build relationships, which, over the long term, will lead to more enrollments.

At the core of this initiative is a set of program design principles that take to task many common tendencies people have when creating Jewish programs. These tendencies can include: not having a clear target audience for programs; making assumptions about the target audience’s Jewish knowledge, background, or interests; or simply not creating the most warm, welcoming space possible for new families, in which they can make connections to the existing community.
Here are some of the program design principles that schools are working with:

**Defining the target audience and meeting their needs**

Often, Jewish programs are created around a holiday or other calendar event. The tendency is to think about the program theme, or the craft/activity, or even the Jewish value, and create programming around that. While these are all important elements of program design, they are not necessarily the right place to start. Schools in the DSEE initiative start by asking questions about the demographics of Jewish families in their catchment. They identify different target groups based on age, neighborhood, and ethno-cultural background. Then they try to identify what current needs these families have, besides a place to send their kids to school, that the school could fulfill.

If the target audience is stay-at-home parents of two-year-olds, maybe the need is a place to go for a “Mom and Tot” type music program, and that the program be on a Thursday morning at ten. If the target audience is parents with kids in a public pre-school, then maybe the need is something fun to do on a public holiday. Some schools in this initiative are experimenting with programs that are centered on parenting issues such as sleep patterns or kindergarten readiness. Some are experimenting with programs that meet parents’ social needs with yoga in the park, or family golf outings.

Does this mean Jewish content is eliminated in these programs? Of course not. Jewish content and values are woven throughout. And, yes, sometimes the primary need a family has is a place to celebrate a Jewish holiday.

**Showcasing the best of the school**

Whether the program is actually in the school or not, it needs to highlight the best of the school. That might mean that the very talented or beloved kindergarten teacher should lead the program, to give participants a taste of what the school is all about. It might mean the program should take place in the new school science lab or kitchen. Many schools are starting to think about how to incorporate their older students into programs. Parent Ambassadors serve this goal wonderfully as well.

**Marketing that is low-barrier access**

Marketing, the very thing that should be bringing people into a program, can actually give them the subtle message that they don’t belong. Schools in the DSEE initiative operate on the assumption that their marketing is the first step that a potential new family takes into their school. If the potential participant does not “see themselves,” or see their need, in the marketing, then, subconsciously, they cannot see themselves at the school.

In addition to analyzing their marketing for the usual elements of inviting colors, photographs, fonts, etc., DSEE schools review every marketing piece to make sure that the language and images used reflect the diversity of Jewish life, and the diversity of their target audience. No assumptions should be made about a family’s knowledge of Hebrew words, Jewish concepts,
family make-up, or holiday practices in the marketing materials. It is also important to remember that the target audience is not looking for a new school. They are looking for a program for their young family. Marketing should lead with a value, a social opportunity or a fun activity, not the name of the school.

**Warm and welcoming spaces**

This design principle seems to be the most obvious. We all want to believe that our day schools are warm, friendly places. After all, for the family with a child enrolled in the school, this is essentially their second home. But this not the case for someone walking into a school for the first time.

Think of all the barriers that someone potentially might face in order get to their program. Is the parking clearly marked? Is it obvious which door to go in and are school doors usually locked? Is there security? How do they find the room? How does a new family integrate into an ongoing program where everyone else has formed a connection? With this framework in mind, every barrier becomes a welcoming opportunity.

**Creating relationships instead of transactions**

Above all other design principles is a rethinking of how we approach the opportunities we have to interact with a potential new family. As any good admissions director will tell you, enrolling a new family often requires developing a relationship with them. Yet, most of the traditional venues they have for meeting parents – open houses, school tours, etc. – are implicitly about negotiating a transaction. Is the family going to enroll, or not? If not, that family need never step into that school again.

DSEE programs are designed around the principle that families are welcomed into the school early on, perhaps before they are even contemplating where to send their kids for kindergarten, and are welcome to be there even if they ultimately choose not to send their kids to the school. Pilot DSEE schools take care not to engage in heavy-handed marketing of their school during programs, and instead to naturally weave showcased elements of their school into the program. Parent Ambassadors who have made the mistake of starting a conversation with the words, “So, I hear you’re interested in our school!” have been gently redirected to start with something that builds a social connection. By creating relationships, rather than transactions, we believe we will ultimately have more enrollments.

Some examples of DSEE programs include:

- **PJ Plus**: A turnkey program designed and implemented by the Schwartz Reisman Centre to engage families in active Jewish learning together. Through hands-on activities – including storytelling based on PJ Library books, arts and crafts, music, movement, puppets, and more – parents and their children will participate in an educationally fun and meaningful experience, embracing Jewish values. This turnkey program will take place in the schools and will be paired with visits to classrooms, school tours, etc. (Robbins Hebrew Academy and Paul Penna Downtown Jewish Day School)
• Inquiring Day: In conjunction with the school science fair, there would be a pizza party and a special preview of the projects and experiments for children of preschool to early elementary school age. Mad Science will also present some interactive demos for these kids. (Solomon Schechter Academy of Montreal)

• The Science of Passover: Held at the Ecomuseum, this program will feature various hands-on activities to teach young children the science behind Passover. Activities will include a “wild beasts” station, light and dark workshops, Frog Find Seavenger Hunt, etc. (Hebrew Foundation School of Montreal)

• Zumba Dance Party: Using PJ Library music CDs (Gottesman Day School of MetroWest NJ)

To learn more about this initiative, contact Nili Simhai, Engagement Officer at PJ Library, at nsimhai@hgf.org.

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