Cultivating Families through Community Programs

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On a chilly morning in December, a family of four walks into a day school for a Chanukah program. The school’s art teacher leads a candle-making workshop, assisted by a few eighth-grade volunteers. After donuts, apple cider and shmoozing, the music teacher leads the group in Chanukah songs and stories. This scene might be found at hundreds of day schools. The difference: At this lovely Chanukah program, most of the families participating do not have children enrolled at the school.

Why would a day school invest valuable time and resources in running community programs for non-enrolled families? As a number of schools have discovered, a strategic, targeted approach to community programs can be a fantastic investment for a school while also providing a much-needed service to the community. Community programs allow a school to showcase its dynamic teachers and educational philosophy, provide participants with a taste of what their school has to offer, and cultivate relationships with prospective families and donors.

One initiative that has been seeing positive results from this approach is the PJ Library-Prizmah Day School Engagement and Enrollment initiative (DSEE), supported by The AVI CHAI Foundation and PJ Library Alliance. This initiative aims to make day schools into community engagement hubs, with the dual goal of serving under-affiliated Jewish families and cultivating relationships with new families for day school enrollment. Working with 16 schools in its first two years, DSEE programs inspired 43 families who were completely unfamiliar with the school to enroll, and influenced another 144 families to enroll as well. The Brandeis Marin school in San Rafael, California, considers these programs their “single best marketing and outreach effort,” and the Ronald C. Wornick Jewish Day School in Foster City, California, reports these events “effectively nurture ongoing relationships with new and known families, while also showcasing the school’s inquiry-based approach to education.”

Whether they are part of DSEE or not, many schools have discovered the benefits of becoming a community engagement hub. For schools interested in running programs for the community, here are some key questions to consider.

Who is our target audience, and what are they looking for?

When designing programs, it’s easy to jump straight into brainstorming activities before thinking through the needs and interests of those you are trying to attract. We caution against the “If you build it, they will come” approach, especially when trying to attract an audience that is different from the families you typically serve. It’s critical to pinpoint who you are trying to reach, understand their interests, and identify where the gaps are in programs currently offered in your community, so that you can design programs liable to be successful.
Your target audience will vary based on your goal for offering community engagement programs, and the particular makeup of your community. For schools that want to cultivate new families for enrollment, their target audience could be families in a particular neighborhood with a growing Jewish population, families with children in a particular age group or families with a stay-at-home parent. For schools designing programs to cultivate new donors, their target audience could be individuals working in a particular industry or friends of the grandparents of current students.

Once you’ve identified a target audience, you can begin to explore their needs. Ideally, this involves reaching out to members of the target audience to ask them about their needs and interests. Is your target audience families with young children, who might attend your kindergarten in a few years? Perhaps they need a place to go on a Sunday morning with a fun program for their three-year-old that is over in time for a morning nap. Is your target audience Israeli families? Maybe they would appreciate a program with strong Hebrew content and opportunities for parents to socialize. Are you doing outreach in a particular neighborhood? Perhaps your school can host some programs in that neighborhood or even in someone’s home. Although it can seem counterintuitive to host a program away from your school, it can actually be a great way to introduce new families to your school community in a neutral setting.

Schools such as the Hannah Senesh Day School have looked to their own neighborhoods to uncover what the local needs are. Sundays@Senesh is open to anyone in the neighborhood, providing a Brooklyn-friendly playspace for newborns to five-year-olds, with bagels and coffee for the adults. By providing this service to the community, they have created a space for families to socialize and get to know the school at the same time.

Once you have some ideas of what families are looking for and how you might help with that, it is equally important to make sure you are marketing to those families in a way that will actually reach them. Be sure to go beyond the usual synagogue newsletters and other Jewish venues. Consider social media parent groups, family sections of the paper or even flyers at that favorite yoga studio.

**What makes our school attractive?**

Now that you’ve identified your target audience and thought about their needs, you can focus on the aspects of your school that you would like to showcase. What makes your school unique? Which aspects of the program or school resources are sources of pride? Whether it’s an exceptional music teacher who integrates music throughout the curriculum, a school garden where children make connections between Jewish holidays and nature, or a group of eighth grade students who model the traits that your school seeks to cultivate, think about what makes your school shine and how you can highlight those strengths through programming. Ideally, program ideas emerge out of the intersection of what families are looking for and what your school has to offer.

At Golda Och Academy in West Orange, New Jersey, Lower School Director of Admissions Mara Suskauer designed a “STEM Extravaganza” program for young families to showcase their recently built STEM center. Families rotated through a series of activities, including making
LED light-up pins, playing a coding challenge game and listening to a PJ Library book about Albert Einstein. Mara had to close registration due to overwhelming interest, demonstrating that they successfully identified an activity that parents were excited about.

At Silver Academy in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, Director of Admissions Jaclyn Rubin created a “Groovy Art Party in the Hut” program for Sukkot, led by the school’s art teacher. Families created sukkah decorations and tie-dye shirts, and ate dinner together in the sukkah. The program was held on Columbus Day, when schools are closed and parents seek out activities for their kids.

**How do we make families feel welcome?**

When designing programs for the community, it’s critical to consider all of the details that go into creating a welcoming environment.

**Marketing**

A program flyer or advertisement is the first opportunity to make a family feel welcome and excited about your school. Your program name should be catchy, appeal to the interests of your audience and focus on the core activity that will draw families in. The language that you lead with can have a pivotal impact. We advise participants in DSEE also to use Hebrew sparingly in flyers, given the audience they are trying to reach. For example, a flyer with “Come to the Torah School Tu Bishvat Party” in large font, with smaller text below that describes the activities, could turn away someone who doesn’t know much about Tu Bishvat and has no relationship with the school. In contrast, “Join us for Nature Songs, Stories and Crafts” in large font, with smaller text below that describes the connection to Tu BiShvat and the school, may be more effective in drawing in families. Cost of attendance should be minimal so that programs are accessible to all.

**Creating welcoming spaces**

Designing a welcoming space involves thinking through the attendees’ experience from the moment they drive into the parking lot to when they leave your program. Important elements include clear signage that points attendees to where they need to go, staff or volunteers serving as greeters, a registration table and name tags. The staff members and parent, student or alumni volunteers who help out at your program are ambassadors of your school and social connectors. They are instrumental in setting the tone for the program, engaging with families and introducing families to one another.

**Providing accessible content**

When designing programs for the community, consider how you will showcase the rich Jewish learning that happens at your school, while ensuring that the content is accessible and engaging for families with varying levels of Jewish knowledge. For example, if you’re going to be singing songs, print out copies of the lyrics, and include transliteration and translations of Hebrew songs.
Fostering social connections

When designing activities, think about building in opportunities for families to connect with one another, such as a collaborative volunteer project or a communal meal. Pamela Welner, director of admissions at Brandeis Marin, shared, “We have noticed that many families are attending more than one event. The feedback is that the events are thoughtful, engaging, friendly and fun for the entire family. Not only do families come back for more than one event, they are bringing their friends with them.”

The idea of creating community-building opportunities for non-enrolled families can seem overwhelming and maybe outside of the school’s mission. After all, day schools can feel stretched to even provide community-building opportunities for their currently enrolled families. This long-term investment must be weighed against short-term staffing capacity. Consider trying something small but which your target audience would really appreciate. While large events can bring in a lot of families, in the long run, what’s most important is building relationships and showcasing your school.