

**How Schools Enact Their Jewish Missions**  
20 Case Studies of Jewish Day Schools

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A Project of the AVI CHAI Foundation

Align the Board,  
Preserve the School's  
*Neshamah*

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**Naomi Reem had been anxious** about this board meeting for weeks. She was very proud of her accomplishments at the Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital. Since coming from Massachusetts in 2005 to head the school, she had achieved many of her goals. It was not easy following in the footsteps of the beloved founding head, who had recently retired after 15 years at the helm of "JPDS-NC." But the board had charged her with moving the school from a "mom-and-pop operation" to a more professionally run organization — all the while preserving the school's Jewish soul — its *neshamah*.

In her five years, Reem felt she had succeeded on many measures — teaching and learning, faculty caliber and culture, finances, development, and governance — all these things had improved under her steady yet compassionate hand. All she had to do was point to enrollment, which was up significantly, even into the third year of the Great Recession — ample testimony to her effective leadership and the school's growing reputation in a city with many excellent options.

Indeed, this was the problem that Reem and the board were planning to address. With high retention and increased interest from young Jewish families, Reem was convinced that the school could no longer ignore the fact that within a few years, the school would not have sufficient space to meet the demand. In Washington D.C., the culture of private school was strong, and the school was even now turning away a few new families who had children in grades that were already full. To maintain class size, educational quality, and a commitment to the growing community, the school had to come up with a plan for additional space. In Reem's view, JPDS-NC's mission of inclusiveness and serving the Jewish community demanded no less.

Over the previous few months, Reem and the strategic planning group chairs worked on presenting the board with three options to cope with the school's growth: secure a second campus; hold the current numbers; or decrease enrollment to fit comfortably in the school's current space. Two of three options meant turning away families. The financial and educational implications of each option were clearly spelled out. As she and the board chair envisioned it, board members would hear the pros and cons of each scenario, debate them, and choose the one that in their estimation was best for the school.

But as the October 2010 board meeting neared, Reem was increasingly uncomfortable with two of the options. She and her admissions director met families regularly, and there were many young committed Jewish families who had moved to the area because of the school, as well as families for whom involvement in the school would make all the difference in their connection to Judaism and their children's Jewish identity. Reem was losing sleep thinking that she would need to decide between these families who would get the limited spots in the school. Not only did both these groups greatly enrich the make-up of the school, but in her view, this is exactly what it meant to be a "Community" day school — putting the needs of the community first. After mulling it over in her head countless times, Reem decided to lead the presentation herself and offer the board only one option — the need to extend to a second campus, immediately. Ken Weinstein, her current board president who had worked closely with Reem for several years and who trusted her totally, agreed with the plan.

The board's reaction was unexpected — and surprisingly negative. Many board members felt the presentation was not thorough enough on the financial and educational impact of such a move, and Reem had not addressed how JPDS-NC's intimate, nurturing culture that was its signature would be preserved in a much larger school. In general, they were shocked that those who planned the meeting assumed that such a momentous decision would be decided in a single meeting! Newer members felt that governance was essentially being by-passed, with the board expected to rubber-stamp the plans of an admittedly successful head of school and only a handful of veteran board members — not even the entire strategic planning committee — around her. The board meeting ended with plans for expansion tabled, and many people feeling disappointed, frustrated or shocked — not the least of whom was Reem herself.

In many schools, this episode would sadly have led to a genuine school wide crisis. Loss of confidence in the head of school, grumbling against those on the strategic planning team, rumors and speculation among parents or donors — all this could have easily ensued. Instead, Reem and the strategic planning team immediately accepted responsibility for what happened, and began reflecting on what went wrong. They

sought out expertise, engaged many more school stakeholders in the thinking process over the following months, and did more homework on the financials of the proposed plan. For her part, Reem consulted with other professionals and the faculty on how to maintain a warm, nurturing culture in a growing school. These ideas were shared first with the full strategic planning committee — not just the chairs — and then the board. In February 2011, a mere four months after the “botched” board meeting, JPDS-NC’s board met to set out the school’s six strategic goals to fulfill its mission for the coming five years. Action plans with dates and responsible parties were determined for each goal, including optimizing enrollment.

In some sense, the school’s lay leadership had anticipated this day years earlier, when it seriously undertook to improve its practices and governance. Like many young schools, JPDS-NC’s board was made up primarily of parents who were involved in the day-to-day operation of the school. Those individuals who spent the most time in the school, were most invested in the school, and also were most dedicated to seeing it succeed made decisions according to their own well-meaning yet individual lights. However, after becoming independent of the synagogue in which they had opened and then renting a different space in the area, an opportunity for a permanent home presented itself in 2002, backed by a major donor who expected the school to raise serious funds to renovate the building. Several key board members — some of whom had been together since the school’s founding — understood that the time had come for JPDS-NC’s board to mature. Led at first by members with experience in financial modeling and projecting, the board undertook to learn how a good private school board is run, what its best practices are, and how to get out of the day-to-day management of the school. The 2004–05 search for a new head — the school’s founding head Sue Koss was retiring after 15 years — was another catalyst in the process of helping the board focus on its mission and improve its functioning. In other words, the transition to a new head was in fact embedded within a larger change: The institution **as a whole**, in both its lay and professional dimensions, was improving in tandem.

This time, the board voted overwhelmingly to identify and secure a second campus to meet the school’s growing demand. To Reem’s surprise, some of the most vociferous opponents earlier were now in full support of the decision.

In other schools, this issue might have ripped the school community apart, but at JPDS-NC, the failed board meeting was treated as a mere bump in the road, handled calmly, intelligently, and professionally. What was it about the school that enabled it to get through this setback, and in fact emerge even stronger and with more support for the ambitious plan to expand?

Indeed, Naomi Reem noticed this right away when she had her first discussion with the head of the search committee. Reem had dedicated a good portion of her job at her then current school to developing the board, and she could hear in JPDS-NC’s leaders an eagerness to develop themselves to be a stronger, more strategic board. Given her experience, she knew she could educate and help the board understand how to govern, not manage; how to act based on the mission and the institution’s needs, not on personal interest; how to plan strategically, and not make decisions reactively. It was a match made in heaven.

This, in a word, was the main source of JPDS-NC’s strength and resilience: the understanding that **a school’s culture must extend both to its professional staff and to its lay leadership**. One cannot invest in one while neglecting the other, and expect a day school to thrive. Let’s examine how the school has carried out this dual work.

## Being Mission-Driven

Above all, JPDS-NC is committed to be mission-driven. By being committed to both general and Judaic studies, all day schools are inherently involved in a balancing act. A pluralistic day school, conceived to respect diversity and promote inclusiveness, faces an even greater challenge to ensure its delicate mission is properly executed and goals achieved. JPDS-NC articulates its mission clearly and unapologetically:

The mission of the Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital is to provide a strong foundation in Jewish and secular learning, laying the groundwork for our students to become knowledgeable, responsible Jews and citizens, deeply committed to the community at large, to Jewish living and values, and to the people and state of Israel. Our school strives to create an environment filled with warmth, joy, and intellectual excitement that celebrates the unique qualities of each student, respects varied approaches to Judaism, fosters a strong sense of ethics and of self, embraces diversity, and builds a community of lifelong learners.

The Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital is an independent, pluralistic Jewish day school that offers a dual curriculum of general and Judaic studies for students in pre-kindergarten through 6<sup>th</sup> grade. The school is coeducational, and welcomes students from the entire spectrum of Jewish observance, both affiliated and non-affiliated. Upon completion of our program, students are well-prepared for further study at area public, private or Jewish day schools.

Susan Koss, the founding head who was herself Orthodox, had created a unique environment that honored many ways to be Jewish without diluting Judaic content; while at the school, most students and families developed a love of Jewish traditions, Jewish learning and the Jewish people and Israel embedded in a strong culture of respect, concern, and mutual support. These values, originally called “guiding principles” but now referred to as the school’s “core values,” were articulated before Reem’s arrival and reviewed as part of the strategic planning process the school embarked on when Reem first arrived. They are clearly stated following the school’s mission statement as the “core values that inform and inspire the daily life of our school,” and can be found on large posters in every classroom and throughout the school:

### בצלם אלקים

#### **In God's Image (*B'tzelem Elohim*)**

We recognize all living beings as unique creations, celebrating every member of our community and individualizing our approaches to learning to foster the growth of each student.

### תלמוד תורה

#### **Study of Torah (*Talmud Torah*)**

We provide a challenging educational program grounded in the precepts of Torah, inspiring our students to develop a personal connection to Jewish life and a commitment to lifelong learning.

### דרך ארץ

#### **Thoughtful Conduct (*Derech Eretz*)**

We instill in our students *middot* (values) to guide their behavior, expecting all members of our community to treat each other with honor and respect.

### עם אחד

#### **One People (*Am Echad*)**

We celebrate the unity of the Jewish people and the diversity of our approaches to Jewish life.

### עין לציון

#### **Looking toward Zion (*Ayin L'Tzion*)**

We promote a deep connection to Israel, to its history and culture, to its people, and to the Hebrew language.

### מדור לדור

#### **From Generation to Generation (*M'dor L'dor*)**

We value the continuity of Jewish life, forging our students' links to an ancient tradition and inspiring their commitments to uphold that tradition in the future.

### תיקון עולם

#### **Transforming the World (*Tikkun Olam*)**

We prepare our students for responsible citizenship in the broader community, encouraging them to sustain and improve the world around them.

This mission statement and set of core values are a real northern star for the board and the school at large; they are regularly referred to in conversations and discussions, both among staff and board members. It is proudly displayed on the school's recruitment material, and even serves as the organizing frame for the annual report that all current and prospective families receive. Administrators refer to it when handling many situations, such as the need to maintain kosher standards that maximize inclusiveness, or establishing the policy of head covering for boys that would honor those who prefer an alternative to *kippot* (caps are now allowed as well). As part of

their orientation, new board members study the mission, and at the opening of each board meeting, a different member offers a Dvar Torah that focuses on connecting the text to the mission and values of the school, and ends with what the school is doing to realize that value and how it can improve. When involved in its most strategic thinking, the board always goes back to the mission and the core values to determine the course it needs to take — as Reem had done when the opening of a second campus was first broached. Though the presentation had been too short on details for the board to give automatic approval, Reem’s instincts proved correct — the commitment to JPDS-NC’s mission made it a relatively straightforward decision that enabling more families to attend the school was the right thing to do. Therefore, it is no surprise that the lengthy, detailed five-year action plan approved by the board in February 2011 and affecting every aspect of the school, from the professional staff to the board (see sample in Appendix A), did not even suggest re-examining the mission statement — it is part of the school’s soul, its *neshamah*.

### “Getting the Right People on the Bus”

Second, JPDS-NC works hard, as Jim Collins states, “to get the right people on the bus.” Once again, one finds remarkable parallelism between the professional staff and the board. Reem and her team of administrators carefully choose faculty who can bring the mission to life; they deliberately seek out individuals who are not only competent, but who reflect diversity and deal respectfully with others. For instance, in her second year, Reem hired Sharon Freundel, a long-time resident of DC and the wife of a local Orthodox synagogue rabbi. Sharon’s deep knowledge of the tradition, creative approaches to education, years of day school experience, and the fact that she so deeply believes in the school’s mission make her an invaluable asset at the school. In addition, her affiliation complements a leadership team in which several paths to Judaism are represented. Thus, shortly after arriving, Sharon began to work on crafting JPDS-NC’s own *siddur* which the students now use regularly, reflecting its unique values and take on Jewish prayer.

The board as well is very conscious of its own make-up. The Committee on Trustees has become perhaps the most critical committee on the board, identifying “gaps” in the board’s

make-up and individuals who would be appropriate to fill them. Does the board reflect the geographic, religious and cultural diversity of the community? Is there expertise on the board in the areas that the strategic plan calls for addressing in the coming years? Not surprisingly, many board members are past or current parents of students, and it’s not hard to figure out why: Not only are they passionate supporters of JPDS-NC. Being a board member is a demanding role; they also understand its mission and the unique way it’s implemented, having lived it themselves over many years. This is obviously part of being “the right people” — the unique Jewish mission of the school is maintained through delicate balance and sensitive application of its core values, and having those who understand it serve on the board ensures the board’s alignment with the staff and the continuation of its culture. Remarkably, JPDS-NC now has an application process to join the board while some are invited to apply, the thorough vetting process increases the likelihood that the appropriate people will lead the school on the lay side.

If the board and the school are so closely aligned, it’s not surprising to learn that the board has actually served as a pipeline for school staff. David (pronounced *Da-veed*) Zimand, a day school product himself, was a social studies teacher and department chair at a local private school who sent his children to JPDS-NC. Because of his strong educational background and Jewish commitments, and his extreme satisfaction with the education his children were receiving, he was a good fit for the board. He was invited to join it in 2006–07. Coincidentally, the school was looking for a new general studies director that year, and the job description called for someone with strong academic and educational credentials who would also be able to support the integration of general and Judaic studies which Reem wanted to advance in the school. Seeing his contributions on the board, his dual expertise, and his strong commitment to the school as a parent, Reem felt Ziman would make a great addition to JPDS-NC’s administrative team. When she heard rumors that Zimand was considering applying for the job but hesitating because his background was in secondary education, Reem actively encouraged the application, eventually hiring him eagerly. Nurtured by Reem, Zimand has helped implement the school’s view that everyone on the staff is a “Jewish educator,” helping to constantly seek

and create bridges between the two parts of the curriculum. Because of his embodiment of JPDS-NC's mission, Zimand was recently appointed Assistant Head of School to help manage the growth of the school and the move to two campuses.

David Zimand was not the only person to make a transition from board to school professional. The tight alignment of the lay and professional leadership has enabled others to make the move into the school as well. Adina Kanefield, a former lawyer who had shifted to nonprofit work, is the current Director of Institutional Advancement. Her long history with JPDS-NC began when her oldest child enrolled 22 years ago, and she moved through many positions in the school — room parent, PTA leader, chair of the school's Purim Ball — until she joined the board in 2000. Perhaps the most pivotal board role Kanefield has played was to chair the search committee that hired Reem. Guided by helpful advisers, she strategically used that opportunity to conduct a self-study of JPDS-NC and affirm the school's pluralistic Jewish mission with the entire school community at the start of the process. After rotating off the board as the by-laws required, she was asked by the lay leader of the Development Committee to help find a director of development, and she decided she was interested. Her success is a clear outcome of her knowledge of philanthropy and her professional yet warm and welcoming manner. Moreover, this is coupled with a deep and long attachment to the school and its many volunteers. To use Malcolm Gladwell's term in *The Tipping Point*, Kanefield is an ideal "connector" who can bring together parents, alumni, and community members to understand and support JPDS-NC and its mission.

Similarly, Sindy Udell, a former parent and board member, was tapped by Susan Koss 11 years ago to be the Director of Admissions. Given her welcoming demeanor and personal knowledge of JPDS-NC, Udell was asked as a board member to help out in admissions. When the school moved into its current facility, it was clear that a full-time professional was needed. Udell was the perfect choice. Like so many families at JPDS-NC, she experienced and understood the school's "Jewish *neshamah*." She was particularly adept at helping prospective parents understand the choice they were making with respect to the Jewish journey they would be undertaking. Udell's message to all parents — from secular Israelis to Modern Orthodox — is the same: the Jewish components are not an "add-on" to the school's program,

but core to its very identity. Thus, on their tour, Udell takes all parents to look at *tefillah* in various grades and even 6<sup>th</sup> grade Judaic studies so that they see what a "product" of JPDS-NC looks like, that way they understand going in the school's standards on the one hand and inclusiveness on the other. For Udell, realizing the mission statement's commitment to diversity means admitting families from across the Jewish spectrum at the entry point. For Reem, it means creating a multi-year, developmentally appropriate school program that welcomes the varied forms of Jewish living and respects personal choices. It is this positive experience that enables families to imbibe JPDS-NC's Jewish mission so thoroughly. In the words of one Orthodox family, "We would sooner move to an Orthodox school before trying to do anything which would disenfranchise the mainstream population here at JPDS-NC and compromise its mission of inclusivity."

These three examples — David Zimand, Adina Kanefield, and Sindy Udell — show how the close alignment of school and board at JPDS-NC enable each to serve (incidentally, of course) as a pipeline to the other. Leaders on "both sides of the aisle" are always on the lookout for talented, high-caliber people committed to the school's mission whom they can identify and groom to assume leadership positions at the school.

## A Culture of Learning

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The openness to consider and bring in people with strong potential is linked to the third principle evident at the school: a strong commitment to learning. All schools realize the importance of professional development for teachers, even if they do not always have the resources to provide it. Educators, like other professionals, need to stay current with the best thinking in their field; learn new techniques; and share their experiences with colleagues. **Yet just as the professionals must develop themselves at every level, so too must the board.** As noted above, over the last nine years the board has undertaken to learn best practices: to read books on board governance; to invite presenters and consultants to advise them as needed; to send board members to conferences to learn from experts and meet other day school and independent school board members; and of course, to learn from Reem the proper way to think about and handle various issues and concerns.

In addition, the commitment to learn entailed a concomitant openness to evaluation. Both individual board members and the board as a whole accepted the need for thorough critical review of their performance — were they achieving their goals? Why or why not? Were these the right goals? Not unlike teachers, regular self-evaluations enabled the board to target the areas for improvement and plan for them. From its inception, JPDS-NC has prided itself on its faculty culture of ongoing evaluation and learning. Now it was a feature of the board's culture as well.

## The Building of Trust

In one other critical area JPDS-NC's board has come to be aligned with the professional culture of the school: *the building of trust*. Reem has continued Susan Koss's emphasis on the educators within the school acting as a team: each teacher learns what the others are doing, each one shares their talents and tries to help out others who might need some help in a particular area, and all staff members feel responsible for one another's success. Through her own powerful yet humble example, Reem models in her regular admin-team meetings both creative problem-solving and vulnerability when tough issues come up. She is supportive of younger or less-experienced colleagues, offering mentoring as needed, and seeks input from novices as well as more seasoned professionals. She makes time in the schedule for collaboration and mentoring among teachers, and is interested in spotting talent and cultivating it rather than hiring only proven professionals. Reem communicates constantly — with parents, fellow administrators, faculty — to ensure full transparency. All this has contributed mightily to the building of trust among the staff at JPDS-NC.

As with everything else at the school, this trust is infused into the board culture as well. At the most basic level, the board trusts the school's professional leadership to run the school. Their confidence in Reem and her team has made it possible for them to withdraw from managing the school, as they had done for many years when the school was small and less-resourced. Thus, during the by-laws' revision several years ago, the longstanding Education Committee was eliminated. That trust is first and foremost rooted in a careful selection process of hiring high-quality people who will be able to deliver JPDS-NC's demanding academic and experiential program.

In a parallel way, the board works hard to find capable and committed people, and to assign them tasks that play to their strengths and passions. They extensively research what is meaningful to the person and involve them in those activities (a philosophy mirrored in the development department as well, as it seeks to match school projects with philanthropists' interests and passions). Not surprisingly, the parent body is a major pool of talent for board members and for the Committee on Trustees, which is always looking for qualified people who have already tasted the unique Jewish mission of JPDS-NC and pledge to preserve it. The extent of parent commitment to the school can be seen in the number that are willing to serve on the board or be involved as volunteers even after their youngest graduated. Indeed, board members are vetted through an application process that includes an interview — a rather rare process among private schools. Thus, the board has successfully shifted its culture to the point where it is perceived as a privilege to serve, and only qualified, high-caliber individuals are considered.

Board leadership, of course, is particularly crucial to a day school, and board members' character tends to complement that of the head of school. Like Reem, they are humble yet assertive; eager to learn and be evaluated; open and transparent, sharing successes and challenges; and unqualifiedly dedicated to the school. New board members are inducted with a thorough orientation and subsequently mentored until they are comfortable with the board culture. Like faculty and administrator meetings, board meetings are run to ensure that everyone feels heard. Reem meets regularly not only with the board chair, but with committee chairs and other members of committees. Reflecting the school's commitment to inclusiveness and mutual respect, she vigilantly watches for the emergence of factionalism, which in her words is a “weed to be rooted out.”

Like all day schools, JPDS-NC has its share of challenges. Aside from the opening of a second campus, it faces typical issues such as fostering greater alumni engagement, the opening of a Hebrew language charter school nearby, and how to increase its donor base to support its growing ambitions. Most significantly, many feel the school will need to tackle in the near future the question of whether or not to open a middle school to improve retention through the 6<sup>th</sup> grade.

But for now, JPDS-NC's board and professional staff are deservedly optimistic, owing to their impressive alignment — not only in their focus on mission, but in such critical operational and cultural features as recruiting appropriate high-quality, dedicated people to the team, commitment to ongoing learning and development, and the building of trust. All these enable the twin engines of the school to work in near-perfect coordination, putting the school in the enviable position to ably handle the challenges that will inevitably come its way.

There's an old saying in private schools: every board eventually gets the head it deserves. JPDS-NC proves that the slogan really works both ways: it is no less true that every head eventually gets the board s/he deserves. Therefore, every day school must work hard to ensure that both its professional staff and its board are aligned with the mission, and with each other. As the Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital proves, the more that goal is achieved, the more the school is resilient and stable, preserving its *neshamah* for future generations.

### Questions for Further Consideration:

1. Does your school pay attention to the culture of the board? Could you describe it? How does it evaluate its performance? In what areas might it be improved? What is done to orient and acculturate new board members to the way things are done?
2. When was the last time your school reviewed its mission statement? Were changes made and what were they? Did those changes translate into a difference in actual practice, either in the school among the professionals or within the board's activities? Does the board actively support the mission — and in a way that does not represent meddling? How might you use the mission statement to keep staff and board members riveted on the ultimate purpose of the school?
3. Take note of the way your board works, the way your administrators work, and the way your board and head work together. Is there a common culture among the two? What evidence is there that they constitute a "team"?
4. Describe a decision-making situation that you faced where deep disagreement arose between the board and professional leadership. How did you navigate your way through it? What did you do to restore trust?