

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

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How a Day School Does Community Outreach

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“Good morning, *boker tov* as we say in Hebrew. Welcome to Contra Costa Jewish Day School. It was so nice talking with you on the phone, and I am so glad you scheduled a tour of our wonderful Jewish school.”

With a very warm smile and a welcoming handshake, Amy Wittenberg, admissions director, greets Susan and Jeff, prospective parents, outside the front door before their two and a half hour private tour. Individual attention is a selling point for CCJDS, and Amy’s tour is structured to convey this message from the initial interaction with her and through the way the tour of the school unfolds throughout the morning visit. Crossing this threshold into a Jewish day school is a big and unfamiliar step for most CCJDS prospective parents; this is a school that is deeply Jewish, and some may experience the initial encounter as a visit to a foreign culture. Jeff and Susan will hopefully learn that many roads lead families to choose this education; the school itself is a pluralistic portal into diverse ways of Jewish learning and being.

Meanwhile, always-smiling office manager Rebecca Murray is waiting at the office window inside the entrance. With the same warm and kind presence she shows to kids with scraped knees, Rebecca invites Susan and Jeff to fill out a brief form.

Located only 23 miles from downtown San Francisco and a short eight miles from Berkeley, Lafayette is a small, central city in expansive Contra Costa County. Psychologically, the small distance seems greater, since access from the West by car is restricted to the three-bore Caldecott tunnel that cuts through the Berkeley Hills. Considering only about 10,000 Jews (out of 100,000 in all of the East Bay) live in this part of the county and that Oakland and Berkeley already have Jewish day schools, it is quite surprising that a small group of leaders choose this location for a third East Bay Jewish Day School option 12 years ago, somewhat of a demographic marvel that the school got established, but virtually a miracle that the school manages to maintain its commitment to its uniquely Jewish mission.

The recent population study issued by the East Bay Jewish Federation underscores the challenge and the opportunity for Jewish life in this area:

Amy is quick to brag about how Rebecca insures that each family is more than an email address or emergency mobile number in the school directory. While Susan and Jeff complete the form and chat with Rebecca, Amy reminds herself: “This is a very big decision — they’re not purchasing a car. This is emotional, it’s their child. And, they may not realize it right now, but this is going to be a \$200K investment over time — they are potentially making one of the biggest purchases in their lives.” Amy also reviews what she already knows about them. Neither Susan nor Jeff has personal experience with Jewish day schools. Their son, Max, is in the preschool at the Temple, on whose campus CCJDS sits. For months, they saw how nicely the older students at CCJDS played with the younger ones at the end of the day. They asked another preschool parent, whose older daughter is in the 2nd grade at CCJDS, and she confirmed that this was no accident — students at CCJDS learn about and practice being a part of a caring community. And, although Susan and Jeff stretched to purchase an expensive home in the city of Lafayette in Contra Costa County — justifying the investment by knowing that here public school education is first-rate — the Temple preschool experience had been so very good that they became quite curious about that mysterious Jewish day school on the top of the Temple’s hill.

The reality for the Jewish community is that the majority of its Jewish residents do not come from “traditional” Jewish backgrounds that include the predictable rhythms of Jewish life ranging from formal education to synagogue membership. Many of the Jewish households in the community — and the issue will be more acute as new generations emerge — are not steeped in the vernacular, rituals and customs of Judaism. Moreover, many Jewish residents who are not currently affiliated do not want to be part of the traditional, institutionalized Jewish community.

While this situation poses a real challenge to the Jewish community, it also presents an opportunity. There are Jewish residents both inside and outside the organized community who want something different; they are looking for experiences that allow them to integrate Jewish values, culture and traditions into their lives but in a different manner than the generations that came before them.

The approach is not “build it and they will come,” but rather beginning to meet Jewish residents where they are, understanding the role they want Judaism to play in their lives and determining if the community can meet that need. [Emphasis added]¹

From the beginning, the founders had a community agenda. Atypically, the school was not founded by a group of parents. CCJDS was founded by leaders who were motivated by a broad communal vision. As founder Karla Smith intuited, a day school could be the very gateway into Jewish life needed for Jews in this area of the East Bay, and she believed this school would need to be “unabashedly Jewish” to address “the

With the founding narrative of the school in mind, Amy commences the tour, confident that the stellar academics will be readily apparent. But she is also aware that the school’s pride and enthusiasm for the benefits of **Jewish** education may not be enough, in the words of Dean Goldfein, the founding and current Head of School, to convince them “to pay \$16K in tuition compared to \$0 for the best public school education.”

Amy began her marketing career as an *olah* living in Israel. Her strong commitment to Jewish peoplehood combined with a straightforwardness honed in Israel and a strong belief in transparency leads her to the tour’s opening question: “So, Susan and Jeff, what’s your connection to Judaism? What’s your connection to Israel?” Aligned with the vision of the school, this question is communicated in a way that is both nonthreatening and unapologetic. She half-jokes with some

CCJDS is recruiting from a population that doesn’t know it needs what the school offers. Not only is this the first Jewish day school in a county with relatively new Jewish institutions, but young Jewish families who are moving here by and large come with little previous experience with Jewish day schools. To create Jewish life for such a market requires leaders who

absence of Jewish life in this county.” Outreach and openness, on the one hand, and a strong sense of Jewish identity, on the other, need not become a self-defeating prophecy. From the beginning, according to board members, there was a confidence that successful “marketing will be fueled by sticking to who we are.” Today, Contra Costa Jewish Day School, a beautiful, mortgage-free two-story building located on top of a Reform synagogue’s campus, has breath-taking views of mountains and a reservoir. The building bustles with 150 students K–8. There are plans to build out this campus by adding a multipurpose gym building with a rooftop play area, and another building for more classrooms.

prospective parents that if the Jewishness of the school already seems too much, she would understand if they chose to finish the tour even before it starts. Even though making the case for a distinct and richly Jewish curriculum is counter-cultural for a county like Contra Costa, Amy strives for language that does not alienate, but importantly, she also does not tip-toe around the core Jewish values of the school. Susan and Jeff feel comfortable telling their story and, as is typical on a tour with Amy, they will continue to speak more than half of the time, relating to Amy important insights into what they hold dear and what hopes and aspiration they have for Max. Amy ushers the couple into a 4th grade class. On cue, the two boys on greeting duty that day appear eagerly before them and in a stage whisper explain what they are learning today. Amy reads into the smile on their faces: Susan and Jeff are imagining their Max growing into this kind of little *mensh*...

can take a somewhat detached view from the balcony and at other times engage as a participant observer on the dance floor (to borrow Ron Heifetz’s metaphor). And this dual leadership challenge is precisely what attracted Dean Goldfein to Jewish day schooling.

Goldfein is a 40-something San Francisco native who received a Reform religious school education at San Francisco’s famous Temple Emanuel. He recognizes that this education and a high

¹ *East Bay Jewish Community Study 2011* (http://jfed.org/2011_community_study.html), p. 2.

school trip to Israel lit some sparks in him, even if it didn't for most of his peers. The challenges facing Jewish education for his generation were crystallized in a pivotal conversation he once had with his father's contemporaries, Depression Era self-made men, usually first or second generation. He retells the story often as a way of sharing his philosophical approach to contemporary Jewish educational challenges, saying:

They asked me, "Are you sure you want to work in a Jewish school; you want that headache?"

I said to them: "Let me ask you, when did you choose to be Jewish?"

And that's all I had to say, they got it. None of them "chose" to be Jewish...

For Goldfein, what marks today's Jews is the option to vote with their feet and affiliate with Jews, or not. And CCJDS offers a powerful example of a school where choosing to opt in is central.

Goldfein understands that a rich Jewish life cannot be chosen in a vacuum. In his experience, three components are key to people's Jewish identity: a shared Jewish idiom [Hebrew is a core value, but here he includes an English rich in both Hebrew and Yiddish words], sustained experience with other Jews, and keeping basic Jewish rituals. How you communicate, with whom you spend meaningful time, and what Jewish practices mark your life have also become the foundation for CCJDS' core Jewish mission. It is the way CCJDS is creating a culture and community for a population that is largely devoid of that, providing them with a gateway into Jewish life. Eden Bruner, Development Director, believes that the Jewish communal outreach agenda in this area reaps the benefits from the presence of CCJDS. Turning the demographic struggle on its head in a way, she offers the following intriguing insight, "Parents need a school; they don't always need a shul."

Goldfein has given a lot of thought to what it means to be a gateway institution into Jewish life. Explaining the school's tagline, "Academic excellence within a strong Jewish community," Goldfein reflects on his eight-year stint teaching history at an excellent private Catholic school after completing his BA at UC Berkeley: "I gained a deep respect for small schools with high academic standards and cultural-spiritual purpose; and how spiritual purpose could temper and guide the academic as a moral compass."

He believes that they are "selling the best preparation for life" and at recruitment meetings he proclaims with full sincerity: "Let me tell you why you don't want to miss out on this education." Indeed, the "strong Jewish community" referred to in the tagline is propelled by what Goldfein sees as the interplay among language, sustained interaction among Jews, and ritual. And, this interplay is shaped by the unique demography and geography of this school community.

Creating Shared Language

CCJDS is very conscious about helping members of its community internalize a Jewish idiom in order to introduce the use of Hebrew words that describe Jewish values among a significant majority who did not know these concepts before. One of the most praised community-building programs in the school is the pairing of older and younger students in a buddy program. When listening to parents describe this program and naturally using words like *mitzvah* and *mensch*, one understands that for them "buddy program" would not adequately convey the depth of what is going on here. Yet, *mitzvah* and *mensch* just scratch the surface of "Jewish-speak" at CCJDS. When a group of students was asked about how the school builds community, a 5th grade boy began to recite, without any adult prompting, the school's core values using the Hebrew and not English terms: *koach hadibbur*, *lishmoa*, *shalom bayit*, *derekh erez*, and *chaim ruchaniim* (which for CCJDS translates as: speak with care, listen carefully, support a safe and peaceful community, act with kindness, and foster meaningful spiritual practice).

Moreover, the school remains strongly committed to Hebrew language acquisition as a necessary component for a student's access to the fullness of Jewish tradition and contemporary peoplehood, and as a shaper of identity. Making the case for Hebrew can meet with resistance among some potential and current parents who are biased towards learning a language that is more globally useful. CCJDS believes that these challenges can be answered by greater alignment between second-language proficiency standards and student outcomes — thus rendering the knowledge of Hebrew a source of pride, rather than a superfluous burden. Evidence of the centrality of Hebrew usage is seen even before one enters a Hebrew class:

Hebrew and English coexist on signage, and bulletin boards display student work showing sophisticated Hebrew language composition that demonstrates the ability to express one's own ideas in Hebrew. In classrooms, one can see indications that Israeli teachers are succeeding in making Hebrew the default language of teacher-student communication, and Judaic studies teachers praise their Hebrew instructor colleagues for providing the necessary linguistic foundation for text study at this school. Even middle school students are clued into why Hebrew education is so central to their intellectual and personal Jewish development. According to Josh, an 8th grader, "Hebrew is very good because it helps us learn other languages and helps us connect to Jewish community." And Sasha, who transferred to CCJDS in 4th grade from public school, reflects: "I don't like to slam the religious school, but at mine I learned the *alef-bet* for four years and little that could help me build a Jewish identity."

Creating Sustained Jewish Interaction and the Role of Jewish Ritual

At CCJDS, sustained interaction among Jews is not about recreating the same ethnic allegiances that motivated an earlier generation. Today, CCJDS contains a broad range of families: Some students have parents who were born Jewish or converted, and others have a parent who professes another religion; there are same-sex couples who send their children to the school; some families consist of recent immigrants from Israel or the Former Soviet Union; there are families, too, whose children are racially diverse. Especially given the many families that only recently have connected to Jewish life, it is all the more striking to observe how communal celebrations of ritual serve as a binding force at CCJDS; much credit is due to the school for fostering this involvement. Daily *tefillah* familiarizes students with the structure of Jewish prayer (*matbea shel*

tefillah); and equally important, prayer has become a setting for the expression of personal and collective concerns within communal space and time. And, because it is recognized that many parents begin a transformative Jewish journey along with their children, the Parent Association plans holiday programs; these play a pivotal role in the lives of families. Rather than succumbing to fears about pushing a message that is "too Jewish," the school creates the very warmth and intimacy which Jewish communal life at its best can offer.

Articulating a Philosophy of Inclusion

The grand vision of Jewish life in CCJDS is articulated by key members of the staff. One influential shaper of this vision — as readily acknowledged by all stakeholder groups — is Daniel Kohn, or, as he is known by all, Rabbi Dan. Dan is the rabbi-in-residence and teacher of Judaics in the upper grades. He supervises *tefillot* and has written most of the Judaic studies curriculum for the entire school, tasks one might expect to be listed on his job description or C.V. Dan's additional contribution to the school culture stems from his ability to frame the school's values and philosophy for students, first and foremost, and parents and teachers as well. If it lacked the right Jewish language, CCJDS could not be successful with its ambitious agenda. Dan's carefully "canned speech," as he calls a *shtick* or sound bite he repeats often, is designed to contextualize Jewish learning for his students in grades 5–8. The pervasiveness of this message is evident in the ease with which his students can repeat it verbatim, complete with Talmudic sing-song tone and all, and by how widely it has trickled from his classroom into the mouths of other faculty members — especially Judaics teachers in younger grades, parents, or even prospective parents who might by chance hear Rabbi Dan for themselves on a tour of the school.

Amy chaperones Susan and Jeff up the stairs to the second floor. Jeff feels comfortable enough with Amy to relate that, growing up in San Mateo, on the other side of the Bay, he never had a *bar mitzvah* and his first *seder*, a Reform *seder*, was with Susan's family in the city. "This is light years beyond what Max and we are getting from his preschool experience," Susan adds. They had just left a kindergarten model *seder* — in preparation for Passover which is one week away, where they were astounded and impressed by the ability of five-year-olds to respond to their Israeli teacher who speaks entirely in Hebrew. They appear to be happy when Amy takes them into Rabbi Dan's class, where everyone is speaking mostly in English with Hebrew words thrown in. They quickly learn from the official greeters that the subject of today's lesson is also Passover. When one of the students expresses concern over her family's ability to follow the traditional requirements, they hear Rabbi Dan begin a speech — they intuit that this isn't the first time he has uttered these words, and based on

the students' ease at joining in, it wasn't the first time they've heard it either: "JUST because I'm a rabbi and this is a Jewish studies class, and JUST because this is a Jewish day school, doesn't mean that whatever we are studying — *mitzvot* or Jewish beliefs — should you feel you have to believe it or that you and your family have to observe this commandment. And IF you and your family believe or do this custom, that doesn't make you any better, doesn't make you a 'good' Jew or a 'bad' Jew. There are only good people and bad people." Back in the hallway, Jeff tells Amy: "Well, if what this rabbi is saying about being a good person is the bottom line here, you know, Amy, this is the most important thing to Susan and me about Max's education." Amy nods, knowing that if Susan and Jeff are like the majority of other families who come to CCJDS, over time they will come to find the school to be a safe environment accepting of diversity, even as it gradually draws families into its more particularistic Jewish community, one focused on a common Jewish idiom, ritual, and communal practices.

Making Jewish Learning Real and Authentic

Goldfein believes that future Jewish leaders will come from day school graduates, and Rabbi Dan believes that leaders are judged by their public Jewish skills. Accordingly, the Judaics curriculum is composed of Hebrew language instruction, a topical approach to Jewish texts, the lifecycle, Jewish history, and daily *tefillah*. There is a heavy emphasis on building skills — such as leading *tefillot*, learning to read Torah, and writing *divrei Torah*; all are taught and experienced in highly personal and creative ways. Judaism is further enacted through the school's adherence to *kashrut* in the building and on trips and the observance of Shabbat on school trips over a weekend. To be sure, some parents occasionally pressure the school to do less or be more lenient, either to give more time to general studies or make life easier for kids from non-traditional homes. Most stakeholders understand, however, that the entirety of the Jewish program is intended to educate students to make informed choices. The school knows it cannot control future behaviors of either students or parents.

But maybe something more important and enduring takes place: Not only do students come to understand how to observe Jewish rituals and customs, but they also develop positive associations with them. As Sivan, a middle school student, observes: "We keep kosher here, of course. I don't know if I'll keep kosher when I get older, but it's a really cool practice." The school is truly educative, not coercive, and that may be the most effective tool leaders can use with this population.

One of the most potent examples of the Judaic curriculum's goal of making learning authentic and ensuring that the Jewish experience never becomes compartmentalized for students is *Shir Halev* — the K–8 community service program which is school-wide and cross-curriculum. Israeli-born Hadas Rave, the Judaics teacher for lower grades, coordinates this program. She grew up in Ohio, where her father took a job as a university professor and developed positive connections to Judaism through the Reform movement. As a young adult, she returned to Israel and worked in an alternative school that emphasized Hebrew and Jewish culture. Five years ago, she returned to the U.S. with her

secular husband. After meeting Amy Wittenberg at a women's *seder*, Hadas came to CCJDS to teach Hebrew and Judaics, and later enrolled her own children in the school. The literal meaning of *Shir Halev* is Song of the Heart, and the notion is strengthened by the fact that the Hebrew word *shir* (song) in this case is used as an acronym for *shirut ruchani*, or spiritual service. The title embodies Hadas' own experience of how Jewish ethical values are relevant to secular society-at-large: An inclusive spirituality can be both a personal motivator to do good and a meaning-provider for the experience and effects of service.

The CCJDS website describes *Shir Halev* as follows:

As participants in the *SHIR HaLev* program, CCJDS students will apply academic, social and personal skills to improve the world around them on three levels: local, national & international. The students will make decisions that have real results and gain a deeper understanding and respect of themselves, their peers and their role in their community and society. They will also develop as leaders

Susan tells Amy that her career started in public health, and she now works for a medical software company whose focus is on global health. That's where she met Jeff, who is a software engineer. Like many Bay Area couples, they enjoy the outdoors and being active. As if on cue, Amy takes them into Dr. Michele Spitulnik's science lab — she has no doubts this will impress them. As in the other classes, two polite, articulate, and enthusiastic 6th graders leave their microscopes and tell their guests about the water conservation unit. From across the room, Michele proudly listens to how the students are presenting the unit and its *Shir Halev* component, and takes a break

Individual Attention for Students: Turning a Value into a Marketing Strategy

Shir Halev, along with many aspects of the Judaics curriculum and program, helps students become responsible members of a caring community so that they will carry these lessons into their adult lives. To model caring adult behavior, CCJDS embeds the notion of being a caring community into the very structure of how the institution relates to students and parents

who take initiative, solve problems, work as a team and demonstrate their abilities while and through helping others. We strive for our students to become empowered to adopt a lifelong ethic of service and civic engagement.

Grades K–7 are assigned themes such as *Tzaar Baalei Chaim* — Caring for Animals (in kindergarten) or *Kol Tzameh Lechu LaMayim* — Water Conservation (in 6th grade). 8th grade students are empowered to select their own cause. Faculty and staff volunteer for a homeless shelter, which is tied to the Jewish value of *yishuv ha-aretz*, or how communal norms are established in a place of settlement. Hadas explains *Shir Halev* to prospective parents: “As ambassador of the school, I’m ‘selling’ Judaics rooted in the *mensch* curriculum. That is what you get here and won’t get somewhere else... What I am most passionate about is values and how we bring them to application through service. And it sells... The dual curriculum runs the risk of being seen as ‘duel’ and this way we are making a more holistic education.”

from supervising lab work to chat briefly. After an exchange of names, Michele explains that in addition to teaching part-time in the middle school, she directs the school's Center for Science Education. A Ph.D. in Science Education from University of Michigan who serves on the faculty of the Graduate School of Education at UC Berkeley, Michele was drawn to CCJDS as a way to apply her thinking about community-based science education, which she can do in a school that values *tikkun olam* across the board. At CCJDS, Michele says, she can combine professional vision with the Jewish values she acquired during her Conservative-Orthodox upbringing.

— when it comes to values, the school talks the talk and walks the walk. This approach is the major selling point when recruiting parents who will make the choice between this small school and large public schools. When the school boasts academic excellence — which means highly skilled teachers, cutting-edge curriculum in general studies, and individual attention for each student — it is communicating concern for children and their personal and moral development.

To deliver on this promise requires finding the right teachers, skillful oversight of the academic program, and meticulous financial planning given the size of the school budget. The CCJDS administration claims it will not tolerate mediocrity, and Lisa Friedman, Dean of the Faculty, provides very close supervision of each teacher, which includes observations, one-on-one meetings, and team meetings. It helps that CCJDS is flexible to offer part-time schedules in order to attract top educators like Michele Spitulnick or Galit Franbuch, a psychology Ph.D. who teaches kindergarten.

Despite its commitment to running the school on a lean budget, administrators work hard to maintain academic excellence. By having a lot of part-timers, including all of the administration except the Head of School, Goldfein is able to run “a lean and mean machine” in order to control the rise in tuition and to safeguard the distance between the costs of a CCJDS education and free public school. One board member says of Goldfein: “He always considers the bottom line and places a critical priority on sustainability.” With tuition at \$16K, CCJDS’s price point is about \$5–10K lower than other area private and Jewish day schools. Goldfein is adamant about bucking the trend that day school tuition should be set at 80 percent of independent school competitors, since he sees public school with its tuition of \$0 as the main competitor, especially in the Contra Costa market. Therefore, it is crucial that high quality faculty is retained. As Goldfein puts it, “We have no safety net

— we can’t suffer a poor program or hide a mediocre teacher, unlike a more established independent school with wait lists for each class and large endowments or sought-after public schools with sizable teaching staffs.”

CCJDS’s emphasis on professional development for teachers may stem from the vision of Lisa Friedman who, prior to the school’s opening in 2001, was a curriculum consultant and teacher supervisor at an established Oakland independent school. According to Lisa, “This is important as a core philosophy. We began with a mission of reaching individual students. It’s been a driving force, a cornerstone of why we’ve been able to carve out an identity of being here. Parents who come here want their children to be known and understood.” When the Hebrew-Judaics studies coordinator retired over a year ago, Lisa took over the supervision of the entire 17-member faculty so that she has become “the main point-person who triangulates with teachers and parents.” At her regularly scheduled meetings with each teacher, the focus is on two things: specific children and curriculum. Thus, Lisa’s role transcends the traditional portfolio of “dean of faculty”; she combines oversight and support for teachers with close tracking of how well each individual student is progressing: “I’m in and out of the classes a lot — observing a lot. This helps me when I speak to parents. I usually have a pretty recent snapshot of that kid.” This is not so easy to do in a school with 160 students.

Just as the tour was winding down, Amy catches a glimpse of Billy Gentry, a stay-at-home dad and co-president of the Parent Association. It’s not unusual to see Billy at school: at the start of the day he hands out late passes, and he is often back later for meetings to plan upcoming programs. Amy introduces Susan and Jeff to Billy. Jeff asks Billy about being a parent here and about the quality of education. Billy knows to be honest; prospective parents can detect a snow job. And, anyway, it’s not in Billy’s nature to be less than forthcoming. Susan and Jeff learn that Billy and his partner Mark Fickes, who is one of the few parents on the board of directors, have twins — a boy and a girl — in 2nd grade. As Billy tells it, “My partner is Jewish, I’m not. He was raised culturally Jewish but not religiously, and

he wanted more for our children. We live on the other side of the tunnel... We chose this school because boys and girls study together and the learning environment had the structure we were looking for. And I grew up going to private schools and I wanted a school with values. What’s great about this school? Small and excellent academics. I like the whole Judaic element — things I’m not able to give them even though I took an intro to Judaism class. They are learning things about holidays, for example, and I am learning more right along with them. We celebrate the Jewish holidays as a family.”

“This sounds great,” says Susan, “but what’s missing from this school? There are always trade-offs.”

Billy nods in complete understanding of the big choice they are facing. He responds, “I’d like to see the gym built faster.”

Billy was about to excuse himself in order to get to his committee meeting; instead, he hastens to add one more thing: “Let me tell you about a recent episode with my daughter that sums up what this school means to us as family. In Judaics they are also learning about being a *mensch*. My daughter and her friend from another day school were with me at our son’s baseball game. They decided to clean up the park, and I told her: ‘You are doing a *mitzvah* and you should tell

your Judaics teacher.’ The next day she told the teacher and received a *mensch* strip — she was beaming for three days!”

As Amy watched and listened to this conversation, she couldn’t help but think about how far Billy has come in terms of internalizing the school culture. Perhaps Susan and Jeff could become another success story for CCJDS as a gateway into Jewish life. Amy walks them back to the entrance and says goodbye with the background of students enjoying lunchtime recess in the cordoned-off parking lot. From a distance, she hears Jeff say something about if only there were a gym now...

Bringing More Families through a Gateway to Jewish Life – The Challenges of Market Penetration

From the beginning, CCJDS’s governance structure was set up to be dominated by community members who do not have children in the school, believing that this would insure “big picture” thinking regarding financial and strategic planning. Unlike other day schools that were founded by parents seeking education for their own children, this school was initially founded by two community leaders, Mila Wichter and Karla Smith. Wichter took the first step as result of participation in the Wexner Heritage Program; she became convinced that a Jewish day school could anchor Jewish life better than any other communal institution in this growing suburb on the other side of the tunnel from the more established Berkeley and Oakland Jewish communities. Her first step was critical, enlisting Karla Smith, a fixture in the Contra Costa Jewish community, as her partner in the effort. According to many measures, they are seeing their vision realized. The professional leadership has been steady in the form of Dean Goldfein, who, for the foreseeable future, remains firmly committed to the school and to achieving its growth potential. Already, CCJDS has grown sufficiently to be able to support a middle school, and its successful fundraising led to the construction of a

building without needing to revert to tuition hikes or putting the burden on tuition.

Still, the narrative surrounding recruitment and retention is not told in the aggregate. After hours, Goldfein’s inviting office — where parents, teachers, and others can meet with him sitting on comfortable sofas — turns into sort of a “war room.”

Behind one door is a class-by-class chart through which Goldfein can tell you the up-to-the-minute status of retention and recruitment. Hidden behind paneled cabinet doors on the opposite wall is a whiteboard drawn by Goldfein himself showing graphs forecasting financial health as it relates to growth in student population. Staring at these charts, he is neither daunted nor deterred. Instead, he wonders how tinkering with the school program — like creatively fitting a Spanish elective into the middle school day — might strengthen the school’s attractiveness. Or, with so many success stories of families and their children becoming more visible in local synagogues, he wonders how CCJDS might now make headway with getting more rabbinical support. Finally, he wonders if they will raise the funds for the second building with a gym and additional classroom space before 2019 as planned in order to remove that potential decision-making obstacle from prospective families like Susan and Jeff.

Questions for Further Consideration:

1. CCJDS was founded as a Jewish outreach institution and not by parents looking for Jewish day school education for their children. In Contra Costa County, it proves to be a “leap of faith” for many families to embark upon the journey of Jewish day schooling. Even if the founding narrative of your school is different, to what extent might this challenge be present in your community and how do you address it? To what extent, if any, has your school become a gateway into Jewish life?
2. Do you think day schools have an outreach function within Jewish communal life?
 - a. What are the trade-offs a day school must make if it is oriented to a non- or loosely affiliated Jewish parent population? How does the aspiration to reach families currently marginal to Jewish life offer new opportunities and challenges to the type of Jewish education a day school can deliver?
 - b. When recruitment is also outreach, CCJDS believes in being bold and upfront about how the commitments involved in Jewish day school education will ultimately result in providing the “best education” for one’s children. Within their market, some families are convinced to sign on; others are not. As a self-reflective school, CCJDS is always asking itself: How can we reach more families while maintaining our core values? Look at your own school: How well is the school’s vision communicated to prospective families? What strategic thinking is needed so that more prospective loosely-affiliated families might become enticed by the Jewish vision?
3. CCJDS provides each family with a 2.5 hour tour. Calling this a tour doesn’t adequately convey what this meeting with prospective families is all about. What for you are the key elements behind this recruitment effort? How does the case of this tour allow you to reflect on the tour experience at your school?
4. At CCJDS, families become more aligned to the school’s vision of Jewish life over time. From their baseline entry point, what sort of Jewish journey do you notice families in your school take? How does your school nurture this journey for the family as a whole?
5. What part of your school culture embodies the school’s Jewish vision? Is it primarily in the head of the leaders; is it articulated explicitly by other stakeholders? CCJDS believes in a shared-leadership model. To what extent is shared leadership cultivated, and to what extent is it about “getting the right people on the bus” from the outset?
6. Students interviewed spoke about coming to appreciate Jewish ritual as cool even if they are not sure they will become observant of those rituals. What is CCJDS doing right to cultivate this appreciation? Is appreciation of coolness the best measure a K-8 school should strive for? Do you think CCJDS thinks this is enough? What Jewish observance outcomes are appropriate for your school in terms of vision and unique population?