

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

A Project of the AVI CHAI Foundation

Pushing Against the *Tefillah* Ceiling

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“What melody shall we sing for *Adon Olam*?”

Rob Portnoe knew that he never failed to get some kind of positive response to this particular question. A cynic would say that was because the 8th graders were simply happy that *tefillah* was almost over for the day. Portnoe, however, believed that the kids actually enjoyed a final song before they headed off to their first class, or at least they enjoyed it when they weren't being too self-conscious.

“How about the Minnesota chorus?!” called out Jake.

That got some smiles from the group. There were shouts of, “Good choice!” and, “Sure thing!”

And then they were off:

“Adon olam, asher malach... yum ti tum... b'terem kol, ysir nivrach...yum ti tum...”

As the 20 or so 13-year-olds got in to their stride, Portnoe, HMJDS Head of Jewish Studies, had to laugh. This was a motley crew, but essentially a good group of kids. It wasn't “souls on fire” territory, but it was about as functional as 8th grade *tefillah* had ever been since HMJDS had opened up a middle school section five years previously. Although it was still rare that more than half the group was engaged at any one time, at least now there were no students slumped in their chairs acting as if they were trying to catch some sleep.

Portnoe looked around the room.

Dan, at the front, tall for his age, and always an enthusiast, was giving the chorus full throttle. He had a lilac-colored silk *kip-pah* clumsily perched on top of a San Francisco Giants baseball cap. The *kip-pah* had somehow stayed aloft even when he'd put on *tefillin* for about ten minutes towards the end of the service. Portnoe hadn't thought it fair to challenge Dan on his odd mix of head-gear the day after the Giants had swept the World Series.

At the back of the room, Danny, a big boy, already a foot taller than his mother, was ostentatiously unwinding his *tefillin*.

Danny came to the school from a traditional-Conservative family, and made a point of displaying his “piety.” He was the only other student — boy or girl — who had chosen to wear *tefillin* that day.

Off on the side, Melanie, looking less “preppy” than her usual wont, was sitting quietly. She hadn't found a good enough

reason to open her *siddur* during the previous half hour, but she hadn't disturbed anyone either. Looking at her now, who could guess that she was more than capable of coming to life as a wonderful *tefillah* aide with the younger grades.

With moments to go, most of the students were finally singing along. As had usually been the case since the school had tweaked 8th grade *tefillah* arrangements at the start of the year, the majority of them had somewhat participated today. They led competently when called upon, and most responded appropriately when expected. One student, Mike, had chanted a piece of the Torah portion quite fluently. Impressively, by the time he graduated, Mike would be close to having chanted *Rishon* of perhaps half the portions in the Torah. Several students had participated knowledgeably in a post-Torah reading discussion about the relationship between religion and politics, a topic Portnoe had picked as a gesture towards the mock presidential debate that the 8th grade would lead later in the day. Overall, the group had been respectful and good-humored. Their attention had drifted in and out. But with only limited prompting from Portnoe, the “advisory group” of six students whose turn it was to lead *tefillah* that day had got the job done smoothly and proficiently.

When the service was completed and Portnoe had complimented all involved on their performance, he picked up the *Sefer Torah* to return it to the *Beit Knesset* where the 7th graders were just finishing their service. Since the start of the year, services for the 7th and 8th grade had been convened in separate locations rather than continuing with the two grades together. It meant that the 8th grade had to make do with holding services once a week in an anonymous multi-purpose room in the JCC section of the building rather than in the aesthetically decorated *Beit Knesset* at the heart of the school. With 7th and 8th grades separated, it was harder for students than in the past to sit passively on the sidelines. Students were now required more frequently than before to take roles in leading services. That's why Portnoe was heading to the *Beit Knesset* after *tefillah*, and not coming from it.

The ongoing tinkering with *tefillah*, and the ceaseless attempt to get it right, was fully consistent with the leadership style of Ray Levi, Head of School for the last 14 years. Portnoe, who had been an internal appointment as Head of Jewish Studies

five years previously, after teaching both Jewish studies and advanced math for 15 years prior, was completely comfortable with Levi's search to do better in all things. That's why he had been pleased at the idea of focusing their efforts this year at reenergizing *tefillah*. He especially liked their decision to shift responsibility for preparing and leading middle school *tefillah* to the "advisory groups" in which all the 7th and 8th grade students were organized twice a week for a range of matters. It was appropriate that the students took responsibility for their own experience of prayer.

Portnoe knew that there were those outside the school who couldn't understand why the school even bothered. As one of the local rabbis had said to him, they could be using the energy and time they expended on improving the quality of middle school *tefillah* to instead develop Jewish programs to which the students would be more receptive. Portnoe knew also that quite a number of parents wouldn't have complained if the school had decided not to hold *tefillah* at all after 6th grade. Few of the parents went to synagogue services during the week; frequent communal prayer was not a priority for them at this point in their lives. In fact, when parents were invited to join their children in school for special *tefillah* events such as the 6th grade *tallit* program, where the students all got to wear personally designed *tallitot* they'd made, few fathers chose to wear their own *tallitot*. Portnoe appreciated that parents came in to the school with diverse Jewish commitment and goals. Many were feeling their way towards the modes of Jewish practice with which they felt most comfortable. In the meantime, however, a sizeable group did not model the religious behaviors that the school sought to inculcate. Among the broad range of families with children in the school, it was only the most vocal Modern Orthodox and traditional Conservative families that might have been troubled by a complete removal of required *tefillah* from the middle school schedule, and those families would likely have

been satisfied with the scheduling of optional *tefillah* before the start of the school day. That was a strategy that seemed to work for other Community day schools wrestling with the same forces. There was no reason why that approach wouldn't work in Minneapolis.

As Portnoe saw it, however, cancelling middle school *tefillah* was not an option. For many reasons, he and Levi agreed that cancelling *tefillah* would fly in the face of HMJDS's mission as a Community day school. As he heard someone once eloquently put it, the beauty of the Jewish Community day school as a setting for Jewish education was that it called people to pray together who wouldn't otherwise do so. That was why — a few years after Levi had come to HMJDS — the school had designed and published its own *siddur*; one that a number of other schools had ended up purchasing for their own students. Beyond being a powerful expression of the child-centered school culture that Levi sought to cultivate, the HMJDS *siddur* enabled the creation of a shared liturgy with which all students and their families could feel comfortable. Containing beautiful drawings produced by students of all ages, it served to inspire future generations of students to experience *tefillah* enriched by the efforts of their peers. In the older grades students learned about the diversity of denominational liturgies through being exposed to the different *siddurim* used by various local synagogues. In the younger grades, through using a communally created *siddur*, the students came to appreciate what they shared. This balance between unity and diversity gave full expression to the first of the school's ten core values: *Kol Yisroel areivim zeh ba'zeh*: "All Jews are responsible for one another." As explained in a gloss in the school's promotional literature, this meant, "The Jewish people are one people. We respect each other's differences." Unity and diversity, this implied, were flip sides of the same coin.

That was the theory, anyway.

Portnoe lingered in the *Beit Kneset* in order to observe the incoming 4th grade. Their *shacharit* service started immediately after the 7th grade had left. The contrast with what Portnoe had just experienced could not have been more pronounced. The proceedings were structured around the same educational principles and similar organizational practices that underpinned 8th grade *tefillah*, and yet the effect could hardly have been more different.

As in the middle school, the service was led by a group of just three students, this time prompted by Helen Siegel, Lower School Director, to select which *tefillot* to read and which melodies to sing. As in the middle school, prayer was also enriched by *sicha* (conversation), an opportunity to connect some aspect of that week's *parasha* to concerns in the students' lives; in this instance, Siegel invited the students to think about what might have led Avraham to open up his home to so many guests, and what might have made that challenging.

While the educational practices employed were consistent, the mood was completely different. Instead of students seeming to suffer politely through a painful chore, with hardly any exceptions, the 40 or so 4th graders sang the melodies with gusto, and read through the silent parts of the service with attention and intent. Some even seemed to linger over the silent *shmoneh esrei*, apparently luxuriating in their ability to competently engage in adult activity. When Siegel asked

the *tefillah* leaders to pick out some *brachot* on which they wanted to focus during the repetition of the *amidah*, impressively, after briefly conferring, they selected *brachot* which, they said, “people don't usually read.” Throughout the half hour of the service there was little need for any of the teachers spaced evenly around the outside of the circle in which the students sat either to intervene or refocus the participants' attention.

Wrapping up the service with *Adon Olam* — again the Minnesota melody, selected by popular choice — the students then headed back to class in the same good spirits with which they had entered the *Beit Kneset*. Portnoe looked on, mulling over the differences between the two services he had seen that morning. The next afternoon, the school's Leadership Team was due for a check-in on how the recent changes to *tefillah* had been going. Now, he wasn't sure what to say. The 8th grade experience had been satisfactory, but not in comparison to 4th grade. He wasn't sure if this contrast was above all a consequence of developmental differences such that they would always be fighting a losing battle with the older students. Did it mean that the best they could hope for was a stalemate in which the students were informed of what the school valued without ever truly buying in to those values themselves? After nine years at HMJDS, would they understand that there are many Jews who find it meaningful to engage in *tefillah*, with few of them wanting to do so themselves with any regularity?

Outsiders not familiar with HMJDS were often surprised by how its Leadership Team functioned. This group of nine people was made up of the school's senior educators, many of whom had taken up administrative responsibilities on top of substantial teaching loads. The group included: the Head of School, Head of Jewish Studies; Heads of Upper and Lower School; curriculum coordinators for the Upper and Lower Schools; two professional development coordinators; and an additional member who served as the team's secretary. The group's composition was not unusual; how they spent their time was.

For Ray Levi, this group was the beating heart that gave HMJDS its vitality and personality. Together, the group weighed important educational question that faced the school. The consequences of its deliberations cascaded back through different grade-level and departmental teams to individual teachers across the school. At first blush, this looked like a top-down decision-making structure; in fact, it was the school's central vehicle in sustaining a culture of distributed leadership that respected and involved individual teachers, much as the teachers themselves had learned to involve and engage students in a strongly student-centered school culture.

The deliberative and inclusive composition of this group was reproduced at all levels of the school's organizational structure. It was echoed in the time devoted each week to collaborative planning between Jewish and general studies faculty at each grade level; in a peer-led approach to professional learning and development; and in the deliberative quality of professional conversation during faculty-wide planning days. The blueprint for HMJDS's organizational architecture was found here at the Leadership Team.

One of the things that made the functioning of the Leadership Team unusual was the range of issues it discussed as a group. Intentionally, these matters were not tackled in smaller sub-groups composed of those directly concerned with an issue at hand. In Levi's first years as Head, when there were just over 200 students between kindergarten and 6th grade, the Leadership Team had been quite small, with sufficient spare capacity to talk through a wide range of issues at a measured pace. As the school grew over the following years, it gained a reputation for the quality of its general studies program and for a much improved Jewish studies program. Then when they opened a middle school, this group expanded in size. The range of matters it needed to discuss duly increased.

Despite this growth and despite the increased complexity involved in running a school of almost 400 students, Levi remained committed to a deliberative approach to decision-making, in this forum and in others. Over a two-year period that coincided with the opening of the middle school, the Leadership Team worked hard to develop a set of practices — clinical case-study writing, deliberative protocols, and data-informed decision-making — that enabled the group to function efficiently but no less reflectively.

Another feature of the Leadership Team was not just the quantity of ground it covered, but also its inclusivity: the involvement of all its members in discussing matters that didn't always relate to their own expertise. All of the members had been involved, for example, in weighing questions related to the school's ISACS accreditation¹, student recruitment and retention, teacher learning and professional development,

the integration of technology, and many other issues. And, although a third of the group's members were not Jewish, and fewer of them would describe themselves as Jewish educators, all of the team had weighed in on the adoption and development of Tanakh Standards and Benchmarks; refinements to the Hebrew program; whole school Jewish programming; and, of course, *tefillah*.

The inclusion of all members of the group — whatever their Jewish background — was echoed outside the Leadership Team in the active contribution of general studies faculty to the development of the school's Jewish life: for example, to the school's once-a-month *Rosh Chodesh* programming that highlighted all of the school's ten core values over an annual cycle; to the weekly *Kabbalat Shabbat* that consistently connected Jewish themes to the students' lives; as well as to beloved holiday and life-cycle programming such as the lower school's *Tashlich* program, and a once-a-year *dor l'dor* multigenerational event. This inclusivity was consistent with the way Jewish members of the faculty, who came to the school not specifically thinking of themselves as Jewish educators, now played key roles in the development the school's signature Jewish programs. That was how Siegel, an experienced language arts educator and also an engaged Jewish layperson, found herself leading lower school *tefillah*. At Levi's prompting, she found that it was something she enjoyed and accomplished effectively.

It was for these reasons that the Leadership Team as a whole, and not a Jewish sub-committee of this group, took up the question of *tefillah* on numerous occasions over many years. The message was clear: *tefillah* was everyone's responsibility.

However, that week's Leadership Team's meeting, like all others, did not begin with discussing the primary substantive matter on the agenda: a review of changes to the *tefillah* program. Instead, it started with 10–15 minutes of text study. This practice was yet another signature activity that had come to inform the school's culture. Thus, what happened at Leadership Team meetings happened at whole-school teacher meetings too. Every time that all the faculty met for professional development and workshop days, these sessions also began with text study by the whole group.

¹ ISACS. The Independent Schools Association of the Central States

Newcomers to the school often found themselves frustrated by this commitment to text study as something that seemed like a distraction from the main order of business. But the longer people spent in the school, the more they came to appreciate the appropriateness of learning together as adults before they

deliberated on matters that affected student learning. The texts for study were not always Jewish, but the frequency with which Jewish sources were explored again emphasized how all members of the community were invited to contribute to shaping the school's distinctive Jewish character.

On this particular Tuesday afternoon, as the Leadership Team gathered around the table at the end of a long day, Levi led off the text study with a question triggered by the next week's *parashat hashavuah*, *Chayei Sarah*. In this text, to the surprise of many Torah commentators, Ishmael, Avraham's estranged son, appeared at Avraham's funeral apparently on good terms with his brother Yitzhak. Typically, Levi provoked the group by taking the issue in an unexpected educational direction by framing this episode as one in which the consequences of our actions — and especially our teaching — often surface only many years after a given interaction.

Levi didn't need to say much more. The group, accustomed to feeding off one another's thoughts, dived in, taking the discussion to matters that were both personal and professional. After a quarter of an hour of lively discussion, Levi invited closure and turned now to Portnoe to bring the group up to speed and to frame his presenting question.

Portnoe had given a good deal of thought overnight to what he was going to say. He began by reviewing the changes they had made to *tefillah* at the start of the year: the separation of 7th and 8th grades; the mobilization of more faculty to participate in services each Monday morning; and their continuing to provide multiple *tefillah* options on two days a week. He highlighted the insertion of *tefillah* preparation into the tasks of the advisory groups: for three weeks every three months, different groups of students would devote their twice-a-week advisory session to preparing to lead *tefillah* for a series of three Monday mornings. This had been a comfortable fit with the advisory groups' other foci: health education; leadership learning; and *dugma*, ongoing work with younger students. Portnoe also reminded everyone of the fabulous workshop led by the school's new rabbi-educator on one of the teacher days before the start of the year. There, all the faculty had really

engaged with a walk-through exercise that had provided an opportunity to explore the structure of *tefillah*. This educator, Rabbi Joseph, was employed in the Nadiv initiative where his time was shared between the school and a local Jewish residential camp. This model shared the same spirit of Jewish educational experimentation. It was an important attempt to narrow the gap between school and camp.

As Portnoe saw it, these moves had gotten the faculty motivated and had served both the students' needs and desires: they'd given the students more responsibility and ownership; they'd introduced more variety into the experience of *tefillah*; and they'd given students opportunities for inquiry during the preparation of *tefillah*. Operating a divide-and-conquer approach with the 7th and 8th grades had worked quite nicely too.

Portnoe then shared something of what he experienced from the depressing juxtaposition of 4th grade *tefillah* straight after his time with the 8th grade. He wondered out loud, "Our practice could not have been much better; it has been incredible. All of our moves have contributed to small improvements. But, as I see it, it's as if we've hit a glass ceiling."

Portnoe looked around the table, and seeing some of the puzzled expressions of his colleagues, he continued. "What I mean is that we've experienced improvement, but it seems that we've hit up against some invisible, unspoken cultural assumptions in our students' lives. It stops them from going higher when they're with us. You know, some of us have seen these kids fly when they *daven* at camp, at Herzl or Ramah, but it seems that when they're in school, the shutters come down." Sheepishly smiling, he finished: "You know me, I'm the last person to make a drama, but I wonder if we've gone as far as we can go."

There was silence when Portnoe finished. Levi, who had known ahead of time most of what Portnoe had intended to

share, did not jump in. He knew that the group would have plenty to say.

It was Siegel who spoke up first. “I’m not sure I have an answer to Portnoe’s question, but I should share another data point. I think most of you have heard what happened when my advisory group of 8th grade girls led *tefillah* for the first time last month. By bringing in their musical instruments, the guitar, the piano, and that portable harp — wow! — it was one of the most beautiful *tefillot* we’d ever seen. They were incredible. They planned so carefully, and they were so proud of what they had done. What most of you probably don’t know is that then when I sat down with them two days later and asked what they thought of doing the next week, they were wiped. It was like, “You can’t be serious! Again?” That was why, the following week, they reverted to leading a completely conventional service, the kind they could do in their sleep and that probably put everyone else to sleep.”

Siegel paused, catching up with her own train of thought. “I think, what I’m saying is that the problem is not that the kids aren’t ready to break through the glass ceiling and take risks. The problem is routine. It’s routine that turns off the power and brings them down to earth.”

Over on the other side of the table, Yoni Binus, Head of Middle School, nodded. Binus was one of the newest members of the leadership team. He took up his position the previous September, a couple of years after coming to the school as a guidance counselor. He was probably the only member of the team who had actually attended a day school himself. He remembered it having been a wonderful school; he even worked there for a few years himself, but it was one where, by Binus’s own admission, he’d spent a good deal of time standing in the corridor, outside the classroom door. As a teen, *tefillah* did not exactly light his fire. As an adult, it still burned at a low light.

Binus started to speak slowly, as if thinking out loud: “I agree with Portnoe. I think we’ve done an incredible job. But I’m not sure how much further it takes us. You know, our students have learned an impressive civility. They respect one another’s religious differences, and they look out for one another’s religious needs. I’m always blown away when I go to their *bar* and *bat mitzvahs* and school friends do half of the *leyning*. I mean, that’s remarkable. So, yes, we’ve created an

environment, a community, where even the most challenging middle-schoolers are willing to play the game by agreed rules. There’s no question that they’ve learned how to act appropriately in *tefillah*, and more. But, we also know that their parents appreciate that we don’t push them to put on *tefillin* or even to wear a *kippah* at *minyan*, if that’s something they don’t do in their own congregations. They like that. So, I think we need to be careful here not to push too hard either. “

Binus continued, “I wonder whether there isn’t an undercurrent of resentment among some parents that we try too hard to cater to a minority students, over *kasbrut* say, or over what’s appropriate for *b’nei mitzvah* parties. We don’t want to overstep the mark here. *Tefillah* might be depressing at times, we all feel that, but it’s a lot better than in most other schools like ours, and it’s certainly preferable to pushing kids to a place where they end up letting out their frustrations at other times of day... outside my office! If we want to raise the bar further, we should explore ways to help those individual students who want to jump over it, voluntarily. We did something similar by offering **optional** Rabbis as the last class at the end of the day. We want to make it available to those who want it, but we don’t have to require it of everyone. Ultimately, we want to make religious life attractive to each in her or his own way.”

“It’s funny,” David Shaw jumped in. He was HMJDS’s long-standing music teacher and professional development coordinator. “Obviously, in my faith there’s no requirement to pray every day. We got a nice deal there, I suppose. But I have to tell you, thinking about this as someone who as a teen often hated having to sit down every day to practice the piano, I know that I wouldn’t be playing now if it wasn’t for those hours I put in. Looking back, I can see now that it was worth the grind. But, Lord, did I give my parents a hard time about it at the time. I made them miserable.”

Shaw turned to Levi. “Heh, is that what you were thinking about when you chose that text study? You know, the idea of deferred pay-off on a long-term investment. Abraham sowed seeds that only bore fruit after he died.”

Levi laughed. He loved it when people found connections back to the text-study that he hadn’t considered. At this point, he didn’t want to jump in to the conversation since there were others who wanted to speak. It was only after almost everyone

in the room had contributed that he shared his own thoughts. By then it was clear that the consensus around the table was that they needed to hold steady; that they should certainly stick with the course they had set at the beginning of year. They should see where it took them, say, by February or March, when most people's levels of tolerance were being tested by the Minnesota winter. That's when they'd know how far they'd gotten, and how far they might yet go.

Before turning to Portnoe to see if he had some final thoughts, Levi shared how, from his perspective, for all the frustration of not seeing something more inspirational emerge in Monday morning *tefillah*, it might be that the really important business — what some called the learning of prayercraft — was taking place elsewhere, in those preparation meetings on the other days of the week. That was where students were gaining skills and developing an understanding that would stand them in good stead later in life. The work that the students were putting in during those meetings was actually quite like what he had experienced in a *chavurah*. The Rabbi had served as a guide on the side, while the members rolled up their sleeves to create a more meaningful prayer experience for themselves. Putting the students to work in this way was neither job creation nor a simple strategy for avoiding painful routine; it might ultimately be the best way to help them find meaning in their prayer. Certainly, they'd heard from alumni that when they got to college, they were grateful for the Jewish skills they had (often reluctantly) learned in school.

Although Levi had turned to him now for his thoughts, Portnoe didn't usually like to have the last word, certainly not when he was so grateful for the thoughtfulness and generosity of his colleagues. He found their investment humbling.

Before the meeting, he had reflected on his own *tefillah* biography, and on how he had become a regular at daily *minyan* when, as a high school student with time on his hands, he had been asked to help make a *minyan* so that a member of his parents' community could say *Kaddish* every day. Once he had started, it had been hard to stop, especially when he got to college and found that he possessed the synagogue skills that many lacked. Since then, he had prayed in *shul* pretty much every day of the year. It was hard work, and he often hated it, but he had stuck with it; so much so, that his own children often thought that he was out of his mind. But occasionally that hard work resulted in moments of deep meaning.

He hadn't wanted to share this story with his colleagues for fear of imposing his own value system on theirs. From his perspective, as Head of Jewish Studies in a pluralist Community day school, there was no more fundamental principle than that of not promoting his own practices, particularly when he knew that the choices he had made in his own religious life were not shared by most of his colleagues.

So, when Levi asked Portnoe if he had any final thoughts, Portnoe simply chose to thank his colleagues. Not for the first time, through careful thought and deliberation, through study and discussion, they had reached a decision in a way that all found to be satisfactory, no matter their starting point. And not for the first time, their discussion had enabled them to commit to a choice that would continue to call for some resilience and hard work.

That surely was good enough reason to offer up thanks. Or, as some of his 8th grade students might reluctantly have exclaimed, "Halleluyah!"

Questions for Further Thought:

1. Various suggestions are offered as to why *tefillah* in 8th grade has been challenging. Based on your reading of the case, what do you think accounts for these challenges? Are these challenges generic to Jewish day schools, or do you see any as being contextually specific?
2. What do you think of the notion of a “glass ceiling” that accounts for why *tefillah* goes no higher than it does? Are there aspects of *tefillah* where this school might do better? Are there other strategies that could be more effective with the middle school, such as more choice or more study?
3. Do you agree that the best one can hope for in middle school *tefillah* is “a stalemate in which the students are informed of the school values without ever truly buying in to those values themselves”? Is that a reasonable expectation in a Jewish day school?
4. Binus’s comment at the Leadership Team frames this decision as one of knowing when not to push students too hard. What do you think? When should schools push their students and their families, and when should they ease off? How does one figure out the best balance?
5. Is it enough to hang tough with unpopular policies in the hope or expectation that they’ll bear fruit in the long-term after students have graduated, when they’ll arrive at a different appreciation of the school’s efforts?
6. What general features in the school’s culture enrich its approach to this particular challenge? Are there any features that complicate its approach?
7. One of the striking aspects of the Leadership Team’s deliberations is the contribution of its non-Jewish members to the discussion about *tefillah* and to other Jewish matters. Do you think this is a practice to be encouraged? When might it not be helpful?
8. Often the strengths of schools are found in their “plumbing,” mundane organizational features that enable things to function efficiently. What aspects of the plumbing at HMJDS, especially in the school’s culture of decision-making, seem worthy of comment and attention?
9. Do you agree with Portnoe that educators should avoid putting their own Jewish practices and beliefs on the table at school? To what extent should they?
10. What in your view came out of the process described in the case? What were the outcomes reached?