

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

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A Project of the AVI CHAI Foundation

# School Resilience Under Pressure

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**There were times** when Dan Weiss asked himself whether he might one day make it into the Guinness Book of World Records: “Most years spent in a Jewish elementary school!”

Weiss wasn't the only Gross Schechter graduate able to claim such a title. One of his former kindergarten buddies was now a colleague in the middle school; some of his former classmates were parents of fourth and fifth graders.

Many times he had asked himself what drew so many of them back to Schechter. What was it about the school? What was it about Cleveland? Many of his friends, it seems, could vividly remember Mrs. Jones in the cafeteria and the interesting color of her macaroni and cheese. Few could forget — or comprehend — one of their general studies teacher, Mrs. O'Brien, had once invited her class over for a Christmas party. Weiss and his peers shared numerous fond memories like these, but the reasons for their loyalty, he knew, ran a lot deeper than these quirky recollections from the past.

Weiss had been enrolled as a student at Schechter from kindergarten to 5<sup>th</sup> grade. He'd come back as a beginning teacher for five years from 1999, and then returned for a third time in 2008 as principal for middle school Judaics. Often, in the run-up to open-house events for prospective parents, he found himself reflecting on what it was that drew some families — what drew him — to return to the school. He knew that it had much to do with the fact that, despite five changes in location, and despite enrolling a much more Jewishly diverse population than when he was a child, the school felt more or less like the same place it had always been. Of course, he realized, that just begged the question: How was it that this school had changed so little, when other day schools — in the Schechter movement especially — were so different today from what they had once been, if indeed they were still in operation?

His peers from out of town always assumed that it was something to do with Cleveland. Conservative Judaism in Cleveland, they said, has always been more traditional. People in the Mid-West preferred not to challenge the status quo. They weren't going to make waves at school, and they weren't inclined to move away. If they could find work in the city — no easy matter in recent years — why wouldn't they want the quality of life on offer? That's why a recent Federation study

found that about 60% of adult Jews in the city had been born there. People didn't stray far, geographically or religiously.

The more time he spent at the school, the more he realized that the answer — Schechter's secret, as it were — was more complex and more significant, and maybe more personal as far as he was concerned.

## A Founding Story

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Weiss's parents had been active members of one of Cleveland's four Conservative congregations. In fact, Weiss's father had been quite involved in Cleveland's first non-Orthodox day school: Agnon. Founded as a Community day school, Agnon was created in 1969 to be an alternative to the strictly Orthodox Hebrew Academy, a school that for more than 25 years had been the only day school option in town.

During Agnon's early years, some of its more traditional — essentially Modern Orthodox and Conservative — board members became disappointed with the amount of time devoted to Jewish studies. The school's integrated curriculum was falling short of the 50:50 split they had desired. Over time, these board members, most of them parents in the school, came to conclude that a different kind of day school was needed in Cleveland. This was the group that launched Schechter. During this time, Weiss's parents actually withdrew his elder brother from Agnon, preferring him to spend a couple of years in public school before transferring him to the newly established Schechter at the same time that Weiss started kindergarten.

The people who founded Schechter in 1980 were, then, a group of observant Jews committed to providing an alternative to the Jewish school options that existed both on the right and the left. In a sense, they had the luxury — before the school's opening and thereafter — of not having to appeal to all-comers. They could stand for something distinct and different.

The school's planning group drafted a six-page “Statement of Philosophy,” in which they outlined the religious orientation of the soon-to-open school. The intention was unmistakable: a traditional Jewish day school affiliated with the Conservative movement. The philosophy included clear statements about *kasbrut*, Shabbat, and *tefillah*, and an unapologetic stance about how the school would handle diversity within its community.

“While the school’s religious and educational commitments are articulated herein, we recognize that the families which comprise the school community may not subscribe to every statement. We welcome the opportunity to involve the families of the school in understanding the school’s philosophy and exploring its application in their own lives as Jews.”

In actual fact, most of the families in those early years came from four Conservative congregations and from a couple of Modern Orthodox ones. Some of the Modern Orthodox families stayed, even after 1983, when Fuchs Mizrahi, a Modern Orthodox day school, was opened with the support of some of those who had founded Schechter. It was a relatively homogenous group: most families kept kosher at home and attended shul on Shabbat. As the statement of philosophy promised, there was a strong commitment to *tefillah*, and to children — girls and boys — learning how to chant Torah and lead services. The services were fully egalitarian, but it was rare to see girls wearing *tallit* or *tefillin*. That was in line with norms in Cleveland’s Conservative synagogues. Actually, one didn’t see Schechter’s women teachers in *tallit* or *tefillin* either; most were religiously Orthodox.

The founding group appointed a Head of School who was fully aligned with their mission. Somewhat unusually for a start-up school, he stayed with the institution for as many as ten years. The head, MK, had a reputation as one of the most traditional Schechter heads; the students assumed he was Orthodox. He ran the school much as the founders had wanted. He established a firm commitment to a half day of Judaic studies in which text study featured prominently, where there was a strong Hebrew language program, and where students prayed every day and recited *birkhat hamazon* after meals. In USY and Camp Ramah circles, it was known that you could trust Cleveland Schechter kids to read Torah and lead services.

If families didn’t serve kosher food at a child’s birthday, the Head made sure that they knew it wasn’t acceptable. If a *bar mitzvah* party was due to start on Shabbat or too soon thereafter, the Head would push to get the timing changed. It was assumed that the school should not only be teaching norms, it should be enforcing them.

This was an approach that didn’t appeal to a great many people. “If you weren’t in the choir, you probably wouldn’t sign up for the preacher,” that’s how one of Weiss’s friends put it. In those first years, one could never be sure if enough kids would stick around for middle school. Weiss’s class fizzled by the end of 5<sup>th</sup> grade, although thereafter there were always enough kids to populate the higher grades. That was a sign of a maturing institution. Like other start-ups, the school had experienced a shaky start, but due to the continuity of senior leadership it set a course from which future generations of volunteer and professional leaders would not readily depart.

Why they didn’t depart from this formative template was something that Weiss came better to appreciate during his next stays in the school, when he returned first as teacher and then as a member of the administrative team.

## A Story of Growth

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While Weiss was in public high school, he already made a decision to pursue a career in Jewish education. He majored in Jewish studies at Ohio State, and spent a year at the Hebrew University. He applied to rabbinical school, but then had a change of heart. That was when, in 1999, not for the last time in Weiss’s life, Rabbi Jim Rogozen, now Head of School at Schechter, prompted him to set off down another path.

Rogozen had become Head six years earlier, in 1993, after two short-lived, essentially interim, appointees had filled the position for a total of three years following the departure of MK. “The Rabbi,” as his faculty came to call him, had come to the school from the West Coast, from a position at the North Peninsula Jewish Community Day School.

By the time Rogozen was appointed, the school’s demographics had started to change. The Cleveland community had been active in absorbing Russian families who were now able to make it to the West, and Schechter had taken in a number of these children. Their absorption was seen as a strong expression of the school’s Jewish mission. It also helped to fill the classrooms. But it posed organizational and educational challenges. There was also a more fundamental enrollment challenge. Over the course of more than ten years, Schechter had carved out a niche in the day school market, but it was still not a stable

situation. Schechter was known to be more traditional than Agnon, educationally and religiously. For example, parents often commented on how at Agnon children called their teachers by their first names, something that wasn't done at Schechter. The school attracted a number of religiously liberal parents who were also interested in a more traditional education. And yet, although in religious terms Schechter was more liberal than Fuchs Mizrachi, the local Modern Orthodox school, it was seen as being too *frum* by many potential enrollees. It may have been committedly egalitarian and generally more critical in its approach to Judaic studies, but by devoting half of the day to Judaic studies and by insisting that boys wore *kippot* and that everyone keep kosher in the building, it turned off more than a few religiously liberal families. By the same token, of course, it was precisely these policies that appealed to a small number of Orthodox families, especially those interested in a strong Hebrew language program. It was especially attractive to Orthodox families who felt that their daughters would have access to Judaic instruction not available to them at the Orthodox schools.

This mix was not an easy sell, even to those who were members of Conservative congregations. In Cleveland's suburbs, where the great majority of Jews were located, parents could find some of the best public schools in the state. If they chose day school, it was not because they were in flight from public education; it was because they didn't feel that they were compromising their children's general education while also gaining Jewish values and content. Many wanted to be sure that when their children made their way through middle school, they would be no less well prepared for competitive high schools than if they had been in the public school system. This anxiety was invariably expressed in agitation to change the balance of the Judaic and general curriculum, or to devote less time to Hebrew. These pressures were hard for the school's leadership to resist when, as board members put it, they needed tushies in the seats.

Faced by these challenges, the board could have chosen to chase the market. Instead, they decided to double up on those things that were most important to them. With the great majority of board members continuing to be members of the city's Conservative congregations, they appointed a Head who

they saw as fully committed to the school's Jewish mission but who was at the same time comfortable within its diversifying communities. They saw Rogozen as someone who wasn't going to change the school's core commitments, but who would find ways to communicate those commitments more compellingly and appealingly. Rogozen, it was believed, could establish what they called "highest common denominators."

By the time Weiss started to weigh his career options, Rogozen had established some signature programs that conveyed what some of those common denominators were. During his first five years as Head, the school introduced the TaL AM Hebrew program in the lower grades as a way to solidify its Hebrew focused Judaics program. It launched an 8<sup>th</sup> grade Israel trip that not only expressed the strong Zionist values that permeated the institution; it also gave new focus to the middle school Judaics program. Rogozen was the moving force behind an annual "totally kosher rib burn off" that quickly became a major event, celebrating the school's commitment to maintaining a strictly kosher institution while being fully open to the community.

It was another of Rogozen's moves that led him to invite Weiss in for a chat when he had learned of Weiss's career deliberations. Weiss had thought, when Rogozen invited him in, that, knowing of his youth movement background, his Judaic studies degree, and past connection to the school, the Rabbi was going to offer him a job. It turned out that he was, and he wasn't.

The Rabbi explained that, educationally and religiously, he set the bar very high in terms of who they were recruiting to teach in both Jewish and general studies. Since Weiss had no classroom experience and no teaching qualification, he couldn't offer him a classroom position. Instead, Jim wanted to invest in Weiss. He proposed that Weiss start at Schechter as an assistant and get experience in different grades. At the same time, he would coordinate with the local college of Jewish studies so that Weiss could complete a Masters in Jewish Education while he was based in the school. This wasn't just a financial investment. The Rabbi proposed to serve as Weiss's mentor, and meet with him each week to process what he was learning. Hearing that Weiss hoped one day to become the Head of a Jewish day school, he proposed an in-house apprenticeship in Jewish school leadership.

Weiss was flattered by the proposal, one he readily accepted, but he was not entirely comfortable coming back to an institution heavily populated by teachers who had known him when he used to wear short pants; he probably brought down the average age of the faculty to somewhere around 40. In that first year, he assisted a first-grade teacher, an older woman, who was herself teaching first-grade for the first time. That required some humility. But as he started to accumulate hours in the school and to spend an hour each week in conversation with the Rabbi, he began to appreciate the method behind his madness, and the strong nerves and clarity of vision it required, especially when it might result in occasional Labor Day surprises (last minute scrambles on the eve of a new school year so as to find appropriate staff).

In early June, towards the end of Weiss's first year in the school, Weiss shared with Rogozen how it had taken him time to appreciate the good reason behind this approach to staff recruitment, not least on those winter days when he found himself doing yard duty alongside those who had classrooms of their own. In response, the Rabbi revealed that of all the measures he had introduced, his approach to teacher recruitment was perhaps the hardest to sustain, but it was nevertheless a key to sustaining a strong Jewish vision for the school. For many board members and most parents, it was enough that a teacher could engage their children. They couldn't understand why he insisted that Judaic studies teachers be qualified educators, able to run a class in Hebrew, and that they **also** be observant Jews. For most it was sufficient that teachers be capable educators; better that they could teach about *kashrut* than keep kosher. For the Rabbi, it was all or nothing. However, it required great resoluteness to explain again and again why such principles made a difference to the legitimacy of the culture they were creating.

During those two years of apprenticeship, Weiss got to see up close the artistry involved in maintaining firm and not always popular positions without becoming, or being seen as, strident, exclusivist or judgmental. If, for the board, the lightning rod was teacher recruitment, for parents it was the school's policies on birthdays and *bar mitzvah* parties. As someone with extended family in the community, Weiss knew that many parents were frustrated that the school administration — the Rabbi, most often — continued to police a policy

that was established many years before. But as he learned from his time with Rogozen, this was not about enforcing conformity but rather creating a community where people cared about each other. It was not about insisting that people had to be something they were not, or feel judged as less authentic, but rather making sure not to exclude any member from the community. When people were approached respectfully and reasonably, they usually ended up respecting the school's consistency of purpose, and the Rabbi's steadfastness in sustaining that purpose. If people weren't happy with the school's stance on these things, Weiss found that they made a stink and then left. In some respects that was the beauty of having multiple day school options in town. There was always a safety outlet through which discontent might be released.

## Back to the Future

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After two years of apprenticeship, Weiss continued to work in the school for a further three years, steadily assuming greater responsibility for programs beyond his own middle school classroom, such as *tefillah* and informal programming. But early in that fifth year, the Rabbi made clear to him that if he wanted to go to in to administration he would need to spread his wings and explore options elsewhere. There simply wouldn't be any opportunities at Schechter in the immediate future, even though the school was now located on its own beautiful campus and enrollment had stabilized. At the time of the campus move, the school was renamed Gross Schechter, in honor of one of its top donors.

With mixed feelings Weiss dipped his toe in the job market. To his pleasant surprise, he found that there was no lack of opportunities out there; evidently, there was more turnover in other schools than at Schechter! Married now to an Ohio girl, he and his wife liked the look of an opportunity at a community day school in Florida, even if it would mean leaving behind their extended family in the Midwest.

Before accepting the offer, Weiss thought he should see what the Rabbi thought. He was hoping that Rogozen would give him a reason not to take the job. The Rabbi's response didn't really surprise him: "Go there, make your mistakes, and come back," he said. Actually, Weiss wondered whether they would ever come back.

Florida suited him, his wife and his infant children. They quickly built a wonderful social circle, and as director of Judaic studies, he was given a chance to stretch, to develop new programs and to join an administrative team. The move was everything they had hoped it would be. In fact, Weiss wasn't expecting it when, in April of his third year in Florida, the Rabbi called him out of the blue. He wanted to see if Weiss might be interested in an exciting opportunity on the administrative team at Schechter as K–8 program coordinator. It would indeed be a great opportunity and a chance to come home, but, after much discussion, Weiss and his wife agreed that it wasn't fair to his current employer to leave at that point in the year. (Maybe it was true that Clevelanders aren't great at sudden change.) The Rabbi was respectful of his decision, but Weiss wondered whether a move back to Schechter might just not to be in the cards.

These events set something in motion, however, and at the start of his fourth year in Florida, Weiss started to explore further senior day school positions across the country. It turned out that the administrative position was still available at Schechter. He threw his hat in the ring and went through a thorough application process. He also looked at other opportunities. One that proved especially attractive was as Head of Jewish Life in a Community day school in another part of the Midwest. Although Weiss was indeed offered the position at Cleveland, this other position seemed too good to turn down; it really looked like a stepping stone to a headship. After a successful interview, he and his wife were invited to come back to talk through contract details and to look at possible places to live.

It was an exciting trip, even if they didn't yet find a house. Weiss left, agreeing with the school that within a week he would return to them with a firm decision on their offer. He and his wife were sitting in the airport on their way back to their kids when a call came through from Rogozen. Rogozen had known about Weiss's negotiations with the other school and was now coming back to him with a substantially improved offer of his own: Principal for Judaics in the middle school and an improved compensation package.

Returning to Florida, Weiss and his wife realized that although the Schechter job was less senior than the other one he was

being offered, coming back to Schechter meant that their children would be in a school that the two of them would have wanted them to be in, rather than one they had to be in for lack of choice. That was the clincher, perhaps even more than having the chance to be closer to family and to work with colleagues he so much admired.

They decided to come home. But, as Weiss quickly learned, when you've been away even for a few years, the home you return to is never what it was or what you remember it as being. The organizational fundamentals at Schechter about which he had learned during his last stint in the school were still in place. This was still very much the school he had attended as a child. However, it became quickly apparent that the school was in the midst of a challenging time. It didn't look that way from the outside — student numbers were higher than ever; Schechter alumni were winning prizes and awards; and the faculty continued to be stable — but there were acute financial pressures destabilizing every aspect of school life.

A year earlier, the local Federation has launched a tuition roll-back initiative that was intended to increase day school enrollment. Day school tuitions were halved as part of a program where schools would approach families who could still pay full tuition to keep doing so. Some "angel donors" would then match the Federation in covering the rest of school's costs.

During its first year, in 2007, the program had been a great success, although it had taken an incredible amount of work to get those families who could afford it to keep paying full tuition voluntarily. At Schechter, enrollment did indeed increase by more than 20%.

By 2008, however, the problems in the initiative started to become apparent. The donor money was not as forthcoming as had been expected, and those who had once paid full tuition were increasingly reluctant to do so, especially once the economy started to tank. Most pressingly for the school's educational staff, the enrollment increase resulted in a host of difficulties: The drop in tuition resulted in a number of lateral entries that were difficult to absorb; the lower financial threshold drew a good number of families to the school who were not really mission-appropriate but who were no longer put off by the price; and because Schechter had gained a good reputation for meeting the needs of children with learning



challenges, a disproportionate number of the new enrollees called for above average support. It was a perfect storm: There was less income coming in, but the changed intake resulted in significant cost increases.

Weiss was not deeply involved in figuring out how to meet these financial challenges, although he, like everyone else, had to take a salary cut at the start of 2009 to help make ends meet. More directly, he was tasked with renewing the middle school curriculum so that it might better serve the far more diverse student body. *Tefillah* was in special need of an overhaul too. With so much of his time in middle school services being devoted to ensuring law and order, a new approach was needed. If ever there was a time to draw on some of the school's organizational fundamentals, this was it.

## Building from the Bedrock

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Over the years, one of Schechter's fundamentals had been a commitment to providing members of the school community with opportunities to voice their concerns and to be heard and engaged. At this challenging moment, the school's lay and professional leadership launched a series of focus groups in people's homes that enabled parents to express their anxieties about the middle school. These meetings also gave parents an opportunity to better understand what the educators saw as appropriate expectations for children of that age. The conversations resulted in much greater alignment between the various members of the school community.

Of course, stabilizing the environment was not just a matter of giving people a chance to vent or of finding ways to get a message across to them. The administration introduced structural changes to the middle school, including a highly developed advising program. They made substantial changes to the Jewish and general curriculum. Weiss devised various ways to freshen up *tefillah* and to give the students more responsibility for the experience. Finally, they determined to counsel out children they couldn't support even if at first sight that seemed to hurt the bottom line.

During these first years on the administrative team, Weiss probably learned more about school leadership than when Rogozen was personally tutoring him. He saw how on some

issues it was crucial to stand firm and to communicate what were foundational values for the school; to say what it stood for. He saw how squarely aligned the board was with these values even if, personally, all board members didn't fully subscribe to them. Rogozen attributed this alignment to a strategy of recruiting individuals to the board before they even had school-age children of their own. This proved a wonderful student recruitment tactic (almost all of these folks ended up enrolling their own children), but it was strategically more important. It enabled board members to become socialized to the school's values before their view of those values might be distorted through the prism of their own children's experience of school.

One of those core values was what the Rabbi called "a presumption of *halacha*," something that, he suggested, was being eroded in other Conservative institutions. Thus, although the school could have eased its budgetary challenges by more than \$200,000 a year if it allowed children to bring in their own lunches, the board continued to underwrite the kosher lunch program. This wasn't because of some nostalgia for Schechter's trademark macaroni and cheese, it was about communicating that *kasbrut* was a basic Jewish value for the community. That was something about which all board members agreed even if some of them didn't keep kosher homes themselves. Indeed, it was no coincidence that, because of the school's stance on this matter, the local Conservative Rabbis continued to hold their monthly meetings at the school. The school provided a neutral space for them to gather, and it was also somewhere they knew that a kosher lunch would be served.

At the same time, while holding firm on this issue — and thereby communicating an important message about its commitments — the leadership charted a different, more accommodating course on other matters. For example, one symptom of Cleveland's changing Jewish demographics had been the emergence of a non-Orthodox population that was increasingly connected to Jewish outreach organizations such as Chabad and Aish HaTorah. As some of these families became socialized into such communities, those among them who were enrolled at Schechter expressed increasing discomfort with their daughters reading Torah and leading services. For the school's leadership, however, a fully egalitarian approach to

Jewish ritual had been a signature of the school's Jewish culture since its founding; they were not willing to make exceptions on such a fundamental matter.

The resolution in this challenging situation was neither to hold firm nor to give way (indeed, it was to avoid approaching the situation as one of either/or), but to explore ways of satisfying all concerned. This led to the creation of once-a-month services for girls only, in which these young women continued to learn and employ liturgical skills while ensuring that these girls and their parents did not experience discomfort. Skillfully, the conflict was diffused while continuing to communicate the core values that underpinned the school.

Weiss was highly involved in another instance of nuanced leadership, one that attempted to come to grips with the school's changing demography in more proactive fashion. If, when Weiss had been a student, the great majority of Schechter families had been members of the same six congregations, today they were affiliated with close to 20, if they were affiliated at all. There was evidence of this diversity on the board too, where the board chair was herself an ordained Reform rabbi. Her leadership modeled how a diverse community could continue to subscribe to a set of shared values and principles.

Faced by this great diversity, and also by the increasingly non-observant profile of the population, the leadership came to appreciate an ever greater need to create programs that would build relationships among families who might not otherwise connect with one another. One promising strategy was to build what they called "Kehilat Schechter;" opportunities for families to come together as a community, to celebrate and engage in shared Jewish experiences. It made good sense to offer such experiences on Friday nights so as to provide families with an authentic taste of a Shabbat together. The challenge was that, since its founding, the school had maintained a policy of not running programs on Shabbat that would require people to drive.

The solution was to make sure that any new Shabbat programs also included *tefillah*. Conservative *halacha* makes provision, under precisely defined circumstances, for people to drive on Shabbat if they are attending prayer services. This was the new element that, through creative *halachic* interpretation, was introduced in to the community building programs that the school started to provide. Moreover, those who wouldn't drive at all on Shabbat were offered opportunities to stay with families near the school. Again, the strategy was strongly to adhere to core values while finding new forms with which to give those values expression. In Weiss's view, as one of the architects of this initiative, there was no better way to express what it meant to be a serious Conservative Jew.

## Magic and Mystery

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Five years after his return to Schechter, when Weiss reflected on those things that he most enjoyed seeing his own children experience at school — the Israeli songs they sung; their intellectual conversations about the *parsha*; and their comfort with prayer — he realized that these were not necessarily what many other Schechter parents had experienced growing up. It was possible that these things had never been a paramount value for many of the families enrolled in the school, perhaps not even for his own parents. And yet it was remarkable that due to the alignment of many powerful forces, and thanks to the steadfastness and openness of a small number of professionals and lay-leaders, many families had chosen to come along for the ride.

Despite their different reasons for joining the school community, these families were usually willing to accommodate its norms. How this came to pass seemed at once both magical and mysterious. As someone committed to spending a long and productive life as a Jewish day school educator, whether or not in the same elementary school, Weiss saw great value in other educators pondering this mystery.



## Questions for Further Thought:

1. During the period covered by this case, more than a dozen Solomon Schechter schools closed down or reincorporated themselves as Community day schools, constituting about one-fifth of this movement's day schools. How do you explain that despite its many challenges, this didn't happen at Gross Schechter?
2. What aspects of the school's resilience do you attribute to unique or local factors, and what do you think might be more readily transferable to other schools?
3. The term steadfastness appears a number of times in the narrative. What are the costs of such steadfastness?
4. It is not only Solomon Schechter schools that are being pulled by communal and parental pressures to the religious left and right. This school has been particularly adept at navigating such forces. Are there any special implications for other schools in how it undertook this challenge?
5. How do you understand the phenomenon of parents choosing a school whose religious standards are well beyond their own practice?
6. Schools frequently have to decide whether to "follow the market" or to hold to certain principles that many of their own parents don't share. How do lay and professional leaders decide which way to go?
7. What do you think of Rogozen's strategy of investing so heavily in a novice teacher?
8. One of Rogozen's most counterintuitive moves was to bring prospective parents on to the board before their children had even started at the school. What do you think of such a strategy?