

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

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A Project of the AVI CHAI Foundation

Small-City  
Commitment,  
Resourcefulness, and  
Interdependence

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## Overview

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**Confronted with the need to meet the needs of families across the denominational spectrum, a small Southern day school realized that the only way to serve its interdependent community was to undergo a major change. This case study covers three issues the school faced boldly: How to work through thorny problems and come to compromise; how to grapple with dilemmas that arose in unexpected places, such as homework assignments; and the role of the school leaders in setting a productive tone.**

In 1998, the Jewish community in Charlotte, North Carolina faced a profound and difficult challenge: how to offer a day school education for the widest range of families in what is, after all, a small Jewish community. The only day school in Charlotte was a Chabad-sponsored institution in existence since 1988. But some leaders in the community wanted to figure out ways to increase the outreach to families seeking a non-Orthodox education. An outside consultant categorically ruled out the option of opening a second school after concluding that the community was simply too small to sustain two day schools.

What ensued was a community-wide conversation during which many leaders — volunteers and professionals — faced the challenge squarely. They had to determine how to chart a path whereby the school would morph into a Community school (affiliated with RAVSAK) while continuing to be an acceptable vehicle for the Orthodox community. All parties at the table had to ask themselves: What are we willing to give up to sustain our school and ensure its attractiveness to the widest possible population of Jews?

In answering that question, communal leaders exhibited great resourcefulness. Each group around the table gave up something to forge a compromise and make the school acceptable to families across the denominational spectrum. Without watering down the Judaic program, school leaders dedicated themselves to shaping what they have called “common denominator Judaism,” which would be both as welcoming and as rich as possible.

On the one hand, the Chabad leadership agreed that the school would become independent. It would be board-driven

with transparent governance. In addition, students with Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers would be accepted into the school. Girls would no longer be identified as the only ones lighting Shabbat candles, and boys would not be required to wear *tzitzit* under their clothing, as they had been when the school was under Chabad auspices. The Jewish life that would be taught would focus on the positive *mitzvot* instead of the negative ones.

On the other hand, some things had to remain in place, Chabad leaders and the day school task force agreed. Foremost among them was maintaining the leadership of Mariashi Groner, wife of the Chabad rabbi. Of equal importance was that the Judaic studies teachers would be observant Jews, keeping Shabbat and *kasbrut* diligently.

This school’s experience teaches that a community can forge a seemingly impossible compromise *if* the focus remains on common goals. Leaders of different outlooks found a way to move forward in Charlotte. The smallness of the community and the interdependence of all its segments presented an unusual opportunity for building a sense of *Klal Yisrael*, all under the roof of one day school. Those who have reflected on the decision and how things have unfolded subsequently acknowledge that the community charted the best route possible at the time. It is a lesson in the challenges and opportunities inherent in working across the usual denominational lines. In some communities, the only option may be to figure out how to make the school work for everyone. Fortunately for Charlotte, the school leaders’ resourcefulness has not waned over the years.

## From the Top Down: A Commitment to Diverse Backgrounds and Views

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Mariashi Groner, Head of Charlotte Jewish Day School (CJDS) since its inception, is a tireless leader. She is constantly engaged in overseeing many aspects of the pre-K through 5<sup>th</sup>-grade school. On a typical day not long ago, she had multiple interactions with faculty, students, parents, and board members. She was also in touch with a number of alumni, an integral part of the CJDS narrative. She even took a minute to taste-test the soup being prepared for the hot lunch that

day; indeed, it needed more salt. She spoke to the head of the preschool that is one of CJDS's main feeder schools. Later she connected with the executive of the local federation about some benchmarking that the small intermediate communities of North America (of which Charlotte is one) are doing around day school finance and operations. Mariashi stays close to this process.

She has to manage even more constituents, including the rabbis and volunteer leaders of the two synagogues housed on the same campus as CJDS. She and her board leaders spend a substantial amount of time building positive relationships with the Reform and Conservative synagogues. In addition, she attends monthly meetings of the executives of all the agencies that share the Shalom Park campus. Around that table, participants negotiate, and mostly resolve, communal fault lines before they get too contentious.

It is clear that Mariashi is the public face of the school. On that recent day, she had an appointment with a family considering the school. She presented the school as the essence of a “common denominator” approach to Judaism — reassuring parents that the CJDS can and does accommodate students from across the Jewish denominational spectrum.

A meeting with members of the board made it clear that the board reflects the diversity of the school's constituencies. Regardless of the background of any individual, everyone acknowledged how adept Mariashi is at forging trusted relationships with all members of the board and with other communal leaders. Her passion for the school, as well as her longevity, position her to balance the many different perspectives with which she comes in contact.

### **What is “Common Denominator” Judaism?**

As the Charlotte Jewish Day School morphed from an Orthodox to a Community school, it was clear to all that:

- This would be the sole day school in town, so it had to be an acceptable vehicle for the Orthodox community.
- Everyone had to commit to the core of what all arms of Judaism affirm. The school had to be warm and embracing toward the full range of Jewish children and families who might show up at the door.

Mariashi speaks constantly about “what we have in common,” or common denominator Judaism. But she is determined to avoid watering down the content; rather, she strives to build a rich Judaic program and atmosphere.

According to one longstanding board leader, the school has to appeal to three broad groupings:

1. An Orthodox constituency,
2. A group that mainly sees the school as a bulwark against assimilation, and
3. A group that is running away from the public options and choosing CJDS over other private schools.

Creating something in common among these groups is a tall order. Yet the constituencies consistently say the school is remarkably effective at creating an environment where all students and their families are embraced and affirmed, whatever their affiliation or observance pattern might be.

To be sure, the school can and should develop more messaging to reach the highest number of families possible with its emphasis on a common core of Judaic knowledge and identity. Actually realizing a common-denominator approach is no easy task; there can be significant bumps along the way which require careful listening, resourcefulness, and flexibility. The following anecdote is a case in point.

### **A Vivid Example of Unexpected Difficulties**

Mariashi has always made it her business to check in regularly with parents. Their commitment is the lifeblood of the institution, and she continuously strives to ensure that the school is responsive to their concerns and needs. At a parent breakfast, she heard something that reinforced what several others had told her privately: The Judaics homework was causing stress in households where parents couldn't help their children with their assignments.

Mariashi appreciated how serious the problem could be. In a typical school, the nightly homework ritual is a way for parents to connect with their children, learn what happens in school, help think through problems or questions, and also show children they can rely upon their mothers and fathers for support. Beyond reinforcing and furthering what students

learn at school, homework is an opportunity for parents and children to bond.

At CJDS, most parents were proud that their sons and daughters could read and understand more Hebrew — often much more — than they could. But if the students needed assistance, many parents were helpless. The same situation arose in connection with other Judaics material: Children came home singing and talking about holidays that some parents had never heard of, like Hoshana Rabbah or Shavuot. To make matters even worse, jealousy and resentment surfaced among students when some received help from their parents and others could not.

Although Mariashi had not previously realized the extent to which Judaics homework was causing tension at home and among families, at that breakfast she heard it loud and clear. She did not want resentment over homework to be a barrier to students' and families' connection with Judaism.

Mariashi first convened her leadership team and then the teaching staff to discuss the matter. Many argued that homework was important to learning; after all, the general studies teachers insisted on it, and parents had no objections about that. Building skills for children's next steps in their educational process was crucial, so shouldn't the goals be the same for Judaics?

But to alleviate the tension in so many homes, and to foster positive feelings about Judaic studies and Jewish life, the faculty and administration decided to experiment with suspending mandatory homework in Judaic studies. This idea was first suggested by Walter Ackerman in a seminal essay, "The Jewish School System in the United States," in the 1969 *American Jewish Year Book*. Ackerman sought to restore the *Torah li-shma* ("Torah for its own sake") value to the day school's Judaic program.

Under the terms of the experiment, students still did homework on a voluntary basis; in fact, in one class, 50 to 75 percent of the students regularly completed the voluntary homework. In addition, students brought home examples of work they have completed in class with the expectation of reviewing their accomplishments with parents. Some students arrived home for the weekend with guiding discussion questions designed to help review what they learned and serve as prompts for family conversations about what is taking place

in school. To ensure positive student and family attitudes toward Judaic studies, the faculty agreed that only the general studies teacher would initiate any needed conversations about behavior issues.

At the end of the experiment's first year, faculty and administration were so pleased with the results that they continued the voluntary homework policy. Tension surrounding mandatory homework assignments had diminished even as commitment to serious Jewish learning and Jewish life increased. The great Judaics homework experiment proved to be a success.

## The Keys to Managing and Implementing Change

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What about other changes in the life of the school?

Conventional wisdom says that managing change in a small community and within a small school is relatively easy. However, when the school has a 25-year history and professional leadership and faculty with great longevity, any size advantage can easily evaporate if they're too set in their ways. Fortunately, this is not the case at CJDS.

The school does not rest on its laurels. Starting right at the top with the Head of School, there is a culture of constant self-improvement. Every year, Mariashi strives to add something new and fresh to school programs. The theme for each school year is different, which forces all members of the community to step out of their comfort zones. Mariashi even refuses to repeat holiday programs from year to year; in fact, one can see the diversity and creativity of programming on YouTube. She wants students to feel the freshness of new events, whether a *Pesach* preparation day or a celebration of *Yom Haatzmaut*.

The striving to achieve higher standards extends to general studies as well. A number of years ago, the director of general studies concluded that the standardized testing administered each year was not sufficiently geared to higher-functioning students. She courageously adopted Educational Records Bureau, or ERB, testing, which is widely used in the independent school world. Initially the scores were lower than expected, but with perseverance, CJDS students were able to score at much higher levels in just a year.

An example from Judaic studies helps round out the picture. The TaL AM program of Hebrew instruction is widely used in the school; however, the program is adapted for CJDS's idiosyncratic use. Teachers are expected to work over the summer to modify Hebrew reading pamphlets to reflect their own classroom needs.

It is impressive to note, too, that the CJDS leadership is concerned about both social and emotional development and intellectual and spiritual growth. Over the life of the school, there has been an increasing focus on character and *mentschlichkeit*. In addition, the faculty models how students should speak to each other. For example, teachers are trained not to yell, and perhaps for that reason, students also do remarkably little yelling in school.

### Three Vital Parts of the School Community

- **Talented teachers.** Most heads would agree that even more than money, a school that intends to thrive needs talented staff members; they are the core ingredient that brings families in and then retains them. CJDS is blessed with a highly dedicated cadre of teachers who not only learn from each other but who are also open to learning from others, such as the day school in Columbia, South Carolina.
- Mariashi invests heavily in her teachers' professional development by finding the budget to bring high-quality in-service sessions and follow-up to the entire staff. (In fact, a key local Reform rabbi praised CJDS and its leaders for their creative resource development, which helps ensure that teachers have what they need to be effective.) Chabad is fortunate in that its movement stresses the importance of education, and so there are many qualified Judaic teachers — usually young women — available to come from outside Charlotte to teach at CJDS.
- Most of the Judaic studies staff has been teaching at the school for quite some time: 10, 15, 18, and 25 years. The teachers are role models in how to live as a *shomer Shabbat*, as was stipulated when the school morphed from a Chabad to a Community school. Although the faculty longevity is unusual, it should not obscure the importance the school places on planning for inevitable

turnover, a challenge that is all the more pressing in a small Jewish community.

- **The Head of School.** It's impossible not to note the remarkable longevity of CJDS's Head of School, a tenure all the more stunning in light of the rapid turnover among heads in many day schools. Mariashi Groner was there when the original Chabad school opened its doors in 1988. She has remained at the helm through the transition to a Community school and then up to the present — a total of 25 years.
- In addition to her longevity, the quality of Mariashi's leadership is important to the school's success. Despite some initial concerns about a Chabad person leading a Community school, it is widely acknowledged that Mariashi is a remarkable educator who works tirelessly. Her influence extends throughout the institution. She sets very high standards and expects everyone to follow suit.
- **Board leadership.** Although finding mission-appropriate leaders to sit on the day school board is not an easy task in any city, it is all the more difficult in a smaller community. It is not unusual for multiple organizations to keep approaching the same people to fill key slots. It is also not uncommon to find day school board members who serve in volunteer leadership positions at their synagogue and even in the federation. This reality can and should be seen as a positive development, as crossover leadership means that there are people who see the totality of the community and who adopt multiple perspectives as they work on issues, solve problems, and plan for the future.

What strategies can a day school develop to retain volunteer talent willing to invest time, energy, and financial resources? Mariashi has come up with one solution: Keep past presidents of the board engaged and involved in the school. They may jokingly complain about their longevity, but they also know that this kind of continuity helps secure the school for the long run. Because term limits are spelled out in the bylaws, CJDS is able to maintain continuity without foreclosing opportunities to recruit new volunteer talent for the board.

## Instilling Jewish Pride

It is not common to hear schools speak openly about Jewish pride, especially in northeastern and far west communities with large concentrations of Jews. However, pride seems to be an important concept in smaller communities, and Charlotte is certainly no exception. Volunteer and professional leaders speak about the importance of instilling pride within the minds and hearts of day school students. One major asset the day school shares with the community is the Shalom Park campus, which covers more than 60 acres and houses a substantial number of the Jewish communal organizations, including two synagogues, the day school, the JCC, the federation, and a community preschool. Day school students and their families point with pride to their remarkable campus. It enlarges the footprint and the visibility of the Jewish community; it also serves as an incentive for some families to move to Charlotte.

Jewish pride surfaces in other ways on campus. For example, CJDS students confidently handle loudspeaker announcements at the start of each day. In short order, the announcements welcome the students with a routine that includes the Hebrew date, the pledge of allegiance, a prayer for Israeli soldiers, a school poem based on the theme for the year, a reference to the weekly Torah portion, the number of days of counting the *Omer*, and, finally, the number of days remaining until *Shavuot* and the giving of the Torah. The tone of the brief announcement is upbeat and positive, conveying students' sense of ownership and, yes, pride.

## Forging Links to Other Organizations

The day school's location in Shalom Park puts it in close proximity to many other parts of the Jewish community and enables the school to build relationships with the other organizations. For instance, CJDS students bake *matzah* with the students in the preschool, located right next door. CJDS gave a musical performance at a recent community-wide observance of *Yom Hazikaron* for fallen soldiers in Israel. This was a great example of the day school deepening emotional connections with the other resident organizations of the campus.

Two other examples of campus-based collaborations stand out. The day school has a partnership with two preschools, the one next door and another a mile away at the Chabad facility. The collaboration, called JIE (Joined in Education), provides

a vehicle for the three schools to raise funds to support their program. Their joint efforts yield greater returns than three separate programs would.

The campus also provides a special setting for intergenerational programming, with the day school students regularly visiting senior citizens at the JCC on the campus. The organizations' physical proximity makes this kind of intergenerational activity natural and organic to the educational enterprise. Though the community may be small, it is tight and interdependent, and it strives to create something larger than the sum of its parts.

## Dealing With Future Challenges

The work of sustaining and strengthening CJDS never ends. This selective portrait would be incomplete if it neglected to point to some of the healthy challenges the school faces as it navigates further into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Although the following list is not exhaustive, it does enumerate some of the core areas that will benefit from increased and strategic attention.

1. **Marketing.** The strategic plan for 2012–2018 clearly points to this as a priority for the foreseeable future. Though the Jewish community is not large, many of the non-Orthodox families have still not had the opportunity to see the school in action. Misperceptions abound; some feel that the school is too Jewish or that it never really became a Community school. Plenty of evidence indicates that the school has indeed been successful in attracting Conservative, Reform, and unaffiliated families. However, there are still more people to reach.

Part of the marketing efforts' success will need to rest on the school's great selling points. Overwhelmingly, the constituents indicate that the school is outstanding in many respects: the individual attention students receive, the small classes, a responsive and enthusiastic administration, a deeply dedicated faculty, a strong sense of community, academically rigorous general studies, and a rich and multifaceted Judaic program.

2. **Synagogue affiliation.** Though most CJDS families are affiliated with at least one synagogue in Charlotte, 29 percent are unaffiliated with any synagogue. Given that two key synagogues are located on the Shalom Park campus and the Chabad community is just one mile away, the

school has an exciting opportunity to fortify its relationship with the synagogues for the benefit of all. The synagogues could reach more families, and the day school could attract more students.

One of the current realities is that teachers who are non-Orthodox, including rabbis, are not able to teach in the school; this was the arrangement the school made when it ceased to be under Chabad auspices. Given this challenge, and given that Charlotte has only one day school, it behooves all parts of the community to work at increasing representation by all sectors, despite the imperfections of the compromise forged.

3. **Leadership succession.** This perennial challenge is perhaps even more acute in Charlotte, where one highly gifted school head has made the school work for decades. As the school's leader since its inception in 1988, Mariashi is keenly aware of the succession challenge. After 25 years, she does not want to continue indefinitely. This is a topic that is freely discussed; the leadership — both volunteer and professional — understand the critical nature of the challenge.

The school must also continue to renew its volunteer leadership by identifying and cultivating the next generation who will sit at the board table and secure the school's future. Needless to say, the school will have to recruit new faculty as well to replace teachers who have been at CJDS for many years. None of this is a simple task, in a small community or elsewhere.

## Learning from a Smaller Community's Success

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CJDS's progress invites us to reflect on pieces of the puzzle that must be in place if a school is to achieve success and sustainability.

1. **Clarity of vision.** This is first and foremost, as it animates the highest levels of Judaic literacy and commitment. CJDS is candid and unapologetic about its dedication to creating the richest Judaic environment possible.
2. **Leadership of the school on both the professional and volunteer sides.** Each plays a vital role, but the synergy among these partners in leadership propels the school forward and enables it to remain mission-driven and true to its core values.
3. **The level of community support** — from the federation, from the synagogues, from the preschools, and from donors and past leaders. Although there is always room for increasing levels of advocacy, the current levels are impressive and critical to the school's ongoing strength.
4. **CJDS's refusal to be complacent.** It remains perpetually dedicated to the highest standards. Here is a lesson for all who care about the continued strength of day schools: A constant and self-conscious commitment to self-improvement and enhancement is vital to sustain a day school's Judaic richness and depth.

## Questions for Further Consideration:

1. One rarely sees a day school change its denominational affiliation; most such efforts do not succeed. What factors enabled CJDS to transform itself? How exactly did the school go about accomplishing this challenging goal?
2. How did the relationship between the board and the Head of School work to the school's advantage? What insights can you extract from their relationship for the benefit of the board's work at your own school?
3. Why did suspending mandatory Judaic studies homework have a positive impact on CJDS? Would this work in your own school?
4. Jewish community campuses with multiple organizations are becoming more prevalent. What role can day schools play in these new physical arrangements? Is this trend beneficial to day schools?
5. Leadership succession is a fundamental challenge for CJDS. What would you recommend to CJDS as a strategy for beginning to grapple with the succession dilemma? What is the status of leadership succession planning in your school?