

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

A Project of the AVI CHAI Foundation

Small-City Day School, New Head, Daunting Challenges

Cheryl R. Finkel



Overview

When considering a position as the leader of a K–5 day school in a new part of the country, a first-time head initially faced the challenge of making sure she was a good match for the school’s needs — and vice versa. As she settled happily into her new role, extensive meetings with the school community convinced her that she should concentrate on the best way to modernize the school’s pedagogical approach while maintaining its rich traditions. Then she encountered a more urgent problem: a 15-percent drop in enrollment.

This case study covers three significant challenges many schools and their school heads grapple with: finding the right leader; striving to mix timeless teachings with timely approaches; and remaining financially viable while meeting the needs of families and community.

Challenge No. 1: Ensuring The Right Fit

Looking back, Hadar Dohn recalled the interview process with the Hebrew Day School of Ann Arbor as extremely thorough. The search committee had designed the interviews with great care, asked many questions, and made multiple calls to her references even before she met anyone in person. “It was stimulating and overwhelming,” she said, “and I wondered whether or not I was a good match for them.”

Raised in Israel, Hadar came to Los Angeles as a teenager. She worked at Temple Israel of Hollywood (TIOH), a Reform day school, for 19 years. There she served first as a Hebrew teacher, then as head of Judaic Studies, and finally as principal of the school, which had 200 students in grades K–6. Supporting the head of school as principal, she helped create the instructional system and was up to date on all educational aspects of day school leadership: pedagogy, content knowledge, student development, faculty professional development, and parent relations. Further, spending 14 months at the Day School Leadership Training Institute (DSLTI) prepared her to manage less-familiar operational functions: governance, strategic planning, finance, human resources, recruitment, and fundraising. By winter 2012, Hadar was ready for the big transition to a new school where she could apply her experience and Jewish educational vision in her first headship.

The school she was looking at was a K–5 institution of 85 children in a famous university town with a Jewish population of 8,000. Hebrew Day School of Ann Arbor (HDSAA) had a proud history and well-established culture closely linked to the University of Michigan, which began to attract significant numbers of Jewish faculty in the 1960s. From 1918 to 1964, Ann Arbor had one synagogue, the Conservative Beth Israel, plus the University’s Hillel organization. By 1965–66, the town’s Jewish population had grown large enough, diverse enough, and demanding enough to require three additional congregations: the Orthodox Minyan, the Jewish Cultural Society, and the Reform temple, in that order.

In 1974, 13 founding families, all parents of “*Gansters*” (kindergartners), started the Hebrew Day School as a place for intensive elementary Jewish education. In the early years they affiliated HDSAA with the Conservative Solomon Schechter Day School Association. With founders and a parent body that included nationally famous Jewish intellectuals and academics, it is no wonder the school’s graduates were talented and accomplished professionals, artists, and entrepreneurs, all with strong Jewish identity and educational foundation.

In recent years, the school had enjoyed able organizational leadership; in its current search for a new head of school, the board specifically sought an instructional leader. Before her first interview, Hadar read about the program and had some reservations about certain elements that seemed out of sync with her practice.

- **Educational structure.** The children spent the day in two separate classrooms, half a day with their general studies teacher and the other half with a Jewish studies teacher who taught in Hebrew. While this was typical of Solomon Schechter schools, Hadar was a little apprehensive: Could such a structure maximize integration and the use of learning time? In her Reform day school, students stayed in one classroom all day as the general and Jewish studies teachers moved in and out of the classroom.
- **Instructional language.** Hadar wondered if discussing Jewish texts *Ivrit b’Ivrit* all the time to achieve Hebrew fluency might sacrifice understanding and critical thinking for some students who could grasp deep content only in their native tongue.

- **Denominational affiliation.** The search committee insisted that although HDSAA was a Schechter school with Conservative standards, it had always reached out to the entire community, expecting and respecting a wide range of family practice. But she suspected that in a small community with only one school, some prospective parents might not feel fully connected. Wouldn't a non-denominational mission and a community day school (such as RAVSAK) affiliation make the school's pluralism more evident and send a more welcoming message to everyone?

Acknowledging in herself some bias against school practices that seemed a little old-fashioned, Hadar persisted through the interview process and went for a visit. What she saw surprised and excited her. "I had that good gut feeling," she said. "It was very different from my former school, but I felt a connection and a sense that I could be at home here and contribute."

For example, she said, "*Tefillah* blew me away. Expecting rote mastery or reluctance, I saw joyous participation. Another thing that touched me... I saw a second-grade *Pesach* play all in Hebrew that gave evidence of the children's high level of Hebrew mastery. The children's achievement showed the payoff of the school's half-day of Hebrew.

"And then there was the warm feeling of the community, from the children as well as the adults. Before my interview I had dinner at the home of Alex, a third grader. The next day, unprompted, Alex introduced me to all his friends. It was a natural instance of *hachnasat orchim* [welcoming guests], clearly part of school culture."

The search committee did its due diligence. Hadar continued to visit other schools as part of her job search. In late winter 2012, they chose each other.

Although her previous school had a Reform orientation and religious philosophy, HDSAA felt gratifyingly similar. "What stood out was a real sense of community, a sense of joy, and a feeling that we're really living Jewishly," Hadar said. "Like my old school, HDSAA was a school not just 'about Judaism.' It really *was* Judaism."

Challenge No. 2: Balancing Tradition and Timeliness In Pursuit of Educational Excellence

Hadar knew that the board members hired her because of her expertise in teaching and learning. In 2011, they had spelled out their vision in a document titled *Four Sets of Ambitions for HDSAA*, which included their hopes for students, for the broader Jewish community, for Ann Arbor, and for the institution itself. Although the document started with a paragraph on "excellent general education," it went on to devote five pages to spelling out Judaic aspirations for students as literate Hebraists and confident, joyful, and "generative" Jews. [Read more about the document's specifics in the section below called "The program's foundational document."]

Hadar saw her first assignment as assessing the school's educational performance with this document's ambitions in mind. That first summer was full of conversations with teachers, parents, and trustees — anyone who could give her insights into two questions:

What does this school do well?

What could it do better?

Gaining the Parents' Perspectives

In her discussions with former and current parents, Hadar found it gratifying to learn how well their commitment and ambitions aligned with those of the school's founders.

For example, parent Anna Gilbert, a computer science professor at the University of Michigan, noted that her husband came from an observant Conservative family and himself attended Golda Och Academy in New Jersey from K–12. "A condition of our coming to Ann Arbor was the existence of a Jewish day school," she said. "This was a natural, comfortable part of our lives."

Although Anna's daughter has graduated and gone on to the public middle school, "I see how secure she is in her Jewish identity and how capable she is of interacting with children from different backgrounds. We are pleased our children are both proud of and comfortable with Judaism, that they have a sense of community, and that they can participate in the rituals of our extended family, especially at holiday times."

Monica Vaisman, a dentist and mother of two sons in 4th and 1st grade, contrasted the depth of her children's Jewish education with her own experience at a Jewish day school in Venezuela. "We had just a couple of hours of Jewish studies a week, not a half day like here," she said. "Boys didn't wear a *kippah* except for prayers."

At HDSAA, Monica said, "I love how my kids are learning Hebrew and how they participate so enthusiastically at Shabbat dinner and the holidays. We went to Israel for Passover, and they were right at home. Just as much, I appreciate how they feel they belong to a special identity. It is such a positive way of relating to religion. It's not a burden. It's fun, they enjoy it, and they are proud of it. They learn that to be a Jew you have special responsibilities, like giving *tzedakah* in their classes. My older son got a gift of money from a relative and he came to us to discuss how much of it he should be giving to *tzedakah*. This definitely came from the school."

Gil Seinfeld, a faculty member at the University of Michigan law school, was educated in New York Modern Orthodox day schools from kindergarten through 12th grade and even spent his gap year before college in an Israeli *yeshivah*. For his wife and himself, he said, "Judaism is in our bones. I also want our kids [three boys, ages 3, 6, and 9] to have a really rich sense of Jewish identity in their bones. This school allows them to immerse themselves every day in something unique and special. At the same time, they are engaged in a vibrant community living and learning Judaism. There's a sense that the school serves all different kinds of Jews. Parents feel comfortable here, and parents and kids look out for each other."

Asked what the school does well, Anna spoke highly of how the education in Hebrew speaking and writing helps with English literacy. She also praised the school's strengths in instilling general competencies, saying, "The children learn to pull together a project, in a group or as individuals."

Gil characterized both the Hebrew language instruction and the teachers as "excellent." Then he added, "It's a cliché to talk about the benefits of a small school, but here it is deeply true that kids get individual attention. When I volunteered in the class, I saw how each child was treated as a universe unto himself."

But when asked what could be better, Gil spoke of his worries

about what he referred to as the school's structural challenges. "It lacks a large captive audience; public schools are pretty good; the economy is crushing us. I would really like more people drawn to the really moving and thrilling education our kids get. How can it go viral?"

Along the way on her listening tour, Hadar shared her findings with her two leadership partners, Richard Primus, president of the board, and Jen Rosenberg, who was to become the school's principal. Both would play a big role in any needed changes. When the students came back in September, Hadar was ready to observe the school in action and to form her own judgments.

The New Head's Initial Assessment

As she had glimpsed during her initial tour, Hadar found the school's Jewish life and education content-rich and joyful. Although she brought a fund of excellent and different practices from her old school, she began to see her challenge less as revolutionizing and more as modernizing pedagogy. She pondered ways to differentiate and customize the instruction to allow all students to benefit from the ambitious Jewish studies program. Among the questions she considered:

- **Should all Jewish studies subjects be taught in Hebrew?** She could see for herself the school's high standards in Hebrew and the teachers' dedication to providing the children with small-group support and individual reinforcement. But she worried that less competent students were failing to comprehend the material fully. Some text study might be stronger if discussions took place in English.
- **What is the best methodology for Hebrew language instruction?** Because she was a native Hebrew speaker with a background in Hebrew language pedagogy, Hadar knew that best practice was moving toward the Proficiency Approach to instruction. As promoted by Hebrew at the Center, the approach involves having teachers find and create language materials to support the current issues students are exploring. Adopting the Proficiency Approach might make Hebrew immersion at the school even more powerful.

Even so, the Proficiency Approach would be new to HDSAA faculty members, who were already getting good results with the program they had long used, TaL AM. It's

a comprehensive Hebrew language arts and Jewish studies program developed mostly in the 1990s. TaL AM teacher development is intensive and represented a significant professional and financial investment by the school over many years. What's more, a change in language methodology would be a major agenda item that would bring up conflicting assumptions about best practice as well as the need for extensive professional development.

Considering the magnitude of this issue, Hadar decided it was both wise and safe to hold herself back from tackling the methodology question in her first year. Given parents' commitment to the school's role in making their children Jewishly literate, she knew that at least she didn't have to convince families of the value of intensive Jewish learning. Rather, she said, "I want to make sure they are actually getting the best and what they have asked for."

- **What is the true role of pluralism?** The school's formal statement about pluralism claimed, "Authentic Jewish life is woven from many strands and always has been...." It then went on to explain the relationship between pluralist values and formal affiliation with the Solomon Schechter Day School Network, saying, "We understand that affiliation to be enabling rather than limiting.... The pluralism we celebrate is entirely compatible with the intention to transmit... a Judaism that is engrossing and even demanding.... Parents of any denomination or none should send their children to HDSAA confident that the traditional Jewish learning we offer will be rigorous, substantive, and presented consistently with the idea that Jewish heritage belongs to all of us... a Jewish education that is robust and pluralistic at the same time."

From her close observation, Hadar found this claim to be a reality. "It's a Schechter school which is really, truly welcoming to all practices. This is not about tolerance — putting up with differences — but about expecting and accepting a variety of practices. There is an understanding here that we're going to learn what the tradition says, and then our families are going to make their own choices. People are never made to feel badly about the fact that their practice is not traditional. Their family choices are seen as valid and are respected."

The Program's Foundational Document

It was useful to Hadar to be able to review the school's aspirations and her own observations in the context of *The Four Sets of Ambitions for HDSAA*. The document is organized into four sections:

- A. Excellent General Education
- B. Hebrew as Judaic Access and as Second Language
- C. Confident, Generative Jews
- D. Confident, Generative People

The entire document — but Sections B and C, in particular — develop a nuanced and sophisticated Jewish educational philosophy.

- **Hebrew's role in the program.** Section B on Hebrew takes a maximalist position: "Many people are proud and happy Jews with only the most passing acquaintance with Hebrew.... People who speak Hebrew very well have full access to traditional texts, to religious liturgy, to centuries of literature, to folkways and art and humor, and to the discourse of modern Israel. Hebrew is a passport that lets people enter the deep Jewish world... to engage that world as citizen-owners...."

"We commit to giving our students that passport.... The degree to which our students' knowledge of Hebrew succeeds in giving them full Judaic access will be substantially a function of the degree to which our Hebrew program achieves excellence as that excellence would be measured in any language-fluency program."

As noted earlier, HDSAA gives Hebrew study prominence by devoting half of every day to Hebrew and Jewish studies, taught in Hebrew by native speakers. Students' Hebrew writing adorns classroom walls; their artwork displays Hebrew signage. So that the children will hear Hebrew inside and outside the context of direct instruction, the school encourages all adults who can speak it (not only native speakers) to use it in daily school interactions.

- **Skills and attitudes to develop "confident, generative Jews."** Section C envisions HDSAA students receiving "the raw materials needed to be confident and generative participants in Jewish life, rather than merely what they need to receive Jewish culture passively or to participate in activities that other people orchestrate."

“This is partly a matter of skills, and it is partly a matter of attitudes. On the skills side, it requires deep conversance with Jewish texts and practices.... On the attitudes side, it requires raising youngsters to believe that Judaism is something robust that they inhabit and shape, not something brittle and mysterious that must be preserved in the form in which it was made by other people elsewhere.”

Morning prayer services for the three oldest grades illustrate that philosophy of the entire Jewish studies program by providing an experience at once rich in tradition, text, use of Hebrew language, skill building, and student empowerment. The following description uses the school’s terminology (with parenthetical translations added).

Grades 3–5 *daven shacharit* (pray the morning service) together daily at 8:15 am. The children hold their personal copies of *Siddureynu* (Our Prayer Book), beautifully decorated with covers their parents made for their first grade *chagigat siddur* (siddur celebration). Boys wear large, gaily embroidered Bukharian *kippot*, also given by the school on their first day of *Gan* (kindergarten). In addition to a reader’s table and an *aron kodesh* (ark) with a Torah, at the front of the room a pocket chart with Hebrew cards displays each section of the service and its page number (i.e., *Barchu* p. 41; *Shma*, p. 43; *Amida*, p. 50.). Further visual cueing comes from color-coding the cards into three sections: The *Shma* and Its Blessings has orange cards; the *Amidah*, pink; the Torah service, blue.

Teacher Bev Warshai sets the mood with a *niggun* (wordless chant) and her guitar, but the boys and girls lead the service independently. When she does give instruction, it is mostly in Hebrew. On Thursdays, there is a Torah procession. A student *gabbai* (organizer) calls up children by Hebrew name for three *aliyot* (Torah honors). One chants the blessings and another chants the first sentence of each portion. Students are called up as *hagbah* (lifter) and *gelilah* (dresser) to lift and dress the Torah before the closing procession. One child, reading from a prepared paper, delivers a *d’var torah* (mini-sermon).

Students participate eagerly, chanting, singing, and responding *Amen* in full voice. Children have frequent turns to lead because each service provides active roles for five to seven people. By the end of 5th grade, these children know their way around a traditional *siddur* and are competent and confident participants and leaders in the standard template of daily morning prayer.

The children start assimilating prayer much earlier, and they even use it to punctuate everyday experiences. A heartwarming example came in May, when the kindergarteners (*Gansters*) gathered every morning at their classroom’s incubator, waiting eagerly for their duck eggs to hatch. Because the baby ducks were long overdue and teachers were beginning to give up hope, Hadar usually dropped by to check in, too. At last, a crack appeared in one egg. The little girl who spotted it spontaneously burst into “*Adon Olam*” (the classic hymn “Master of the Universe”), and the rest of the children joined her, belting it out and waving their arms in excitement. One of the teachers whipped out an iPhone to capture this evidence of 5-year-olds whose *tefillah* life had already seeped into their young personalities. Jewish tradition informed their everyday expression of joy and wonder.

- **The importance of pluralism, social values, and joy.**

In addition to Judaic content and skills mastery, “The Four Sets of Ambitions” statement of Jewish educational philosophy emphasizes pluralism, social values, and joy as key elements in developing confident, generative Jews. The example of kindergartners celebrating life with prayer illustrates the school’s belief that “Judaism lifts our spirits.” This enthusiasm for rich Judaic education is exemplified in prayer and in Hebrew language instruction. It’s also echoed in Bible instruction, in holiday study and celebration, and in treasured school traditions like the first grade *chagigat siddur* (siddur celebration).

Social values education at HDSAA (part of section C) “teaches ...students to identify ethical and socially responsible behavior as expressions of authentic Jewish values....

When our graduates think about what it means to be Jewish, they should of course think about Jewish holidays and rituals and the Hebrew language and the many tropes of Jewish history. And just as quickly, they should think of the imperatives to give *tzedakah* to the needy, and to support the fallen and heal the sick and comfort the afflicted, and to love their neighbors as themselves, and more generally to proceed always on the understanding that every human being is equally created in the Divine image....”

These values are actively stimulated by encouraging empathy and kindness, by teaching children to recognize and name their own feelings and take responsibility for the impact of their own behavior on classmates, family members, and others in their world. The values appear on a large piece of student art for which students chose and crafted Hebrew words and symbols that exemplify the kind of Jewish community they believe in: *tzedakah* (righteousness, charity), *dibuk chaverim* (loyalty), *tefillah* (prayer), *torah*, *tzedek* (justice), *shituf* (cooperation), *teva* (nature), and *zochair* (remember).

Although children ages 5 to 12 have fewer opportunities to take action in the greater world, HDSAA still finds ways for students to have an impact on their community. For example, the Ann Arbor Youth Council sponsors a citywide philanthropy project, primarily for teenagers, in which groups apply for \$100 mini-grants to develop a service project or support a specific community need. As part of their study of *tzedakah*, the HDSAA 5th grade won such a grant in the 2013–14 school year with a commitment to support the local Big Brothers and Big Sisters program.

With characteristic zest, these 10- and 11-year-olds leveraged the \$100 grant to raise a total gift of \$770 for their cause. They won themselves special recognition and their teacher an award and an additional \$500 to donate to a nonprofit of the class’s choice.

Combined with her wide-ranging conversations with trustees, parents, and teachers, Hadar’s close observations taught her something else as well: Although its leaders had ambitions beyond its current accomplishments, HDSAA actually delivered the Jewish education it promised. As she was to say later, “The challenge is finding enough people who are open to this kind of old-fashioned Midwestern sweet Judaism.”

Challenge No. 3: Addressing an Enrollment Drop

When “Four Sets of Ambitions for HDSAA” was written in 2011, it mentioned enrollment only at the end, where it spelled out the leadership’s optimistic view of growth this way:

“With a little luck and the right circumstances, HDSAA can grow to be a somewhat larger school than it currently is. Our enrollment now, K–5, is in the 80s. Enrollment was in the 90s before the economic troubles of the last few years [starting with the financial crisis and recession that began in 2008], and there have been times when it exceeded 100. If the school’s educational product is sufficiently attractive, and when the economy gets better, the school might well be able to enroll 100 students again, or maybe more. Moreover, the school would probably be a better school at 100+ than at 85: more robust, more energetic, perhaps more diverse. And if the school produces confident and well-educated Jews, then there is every reason for us to want it to educate as many people as possible.”

But fewer than two years later, the report’s hopeful outlook was replaced by anxiety on the parts of Hadar, the board, and even devoted parents.

Between the time Hadar was hired and her arrival in Ann Arbor, the school’s enrollment for 2012–2013 dropped from the previously stable 85 to 73. Several factors played a part:

- The graduating 5th grade was larger than the incoming kindergarten.
- A couple of families moved out of town unexpectedly.
- A few wavering families left, citing insecurity about the transition to a new Head of School.

The school’s projections indicated that enrollment would be no higher than 73 in 2013–14, with the possibility of a further decrease in the following year. Because of smaller cohorts in the JCC preschool (a major HDSAA feeder), the smaller numbers would show up in the *Gan*, the foundation for the HDSAA’s entire K–5 population.

Suddenly Hadar was forced to expand her focus from the primary issues she’d been hired to address — educational excellence and Judaic studies — to serious questions about managing enrollment and a larger-than-planned budget deficit.

Fortunately, Richard was an active and responsible board leader who took charge of addressing the financial crisis. He made it clear that although eventually the board would expect Hadar to take financial leadership, it was unreasonable to require that so soon. But enrollment and budgeting quickly became central preoccupations for her.

Comments from two parents encapsulated some of the problems the school faced.

When asked what he'd like to see improve at the school, one father had only praise for the Judaic and secular learning. However, he said, "I'm always worrying about the small class size. I worry about the school's institutional fragility; this hovers over my experience here."

A mother who enrolled her child in HDSAA's kindergarten for one year to bypass the public school's earlier birthdate cut-off also praised her daughter's teachers, the school's community, and the way parents and kids looked out for each other. But she saw no reason to continue in the program. Her orientation, like that of most Ann Arbor Jews, was strictly to public school. As she said, "We belong to the Reform temple, and I don't know people like me who even consider day school."

Hadar had to weigh the possibility that the school would stay smaller than before, more in the range of 70–75 students. This meant that some classes — such as the 3rd grade that would have only eight students in the following year — would not be sustainable.

Trying to think of ways a smaller school could cut costs without cutting quality, Hadar and Jen started studying schools structured around multi-age classrooms. Their research excited them tremendously; the multi-age approach might be beneficial regardless of the school's size. Hadar even developed a plan for 2013–14 and was prepared, for the school's academic and fiscal good, to roll it out in February. However, Richard considered the change through a diplomatic lens and urged Hadar to slow down and allow more time for research and careful planning. By implementing a new plan too early, he warned, she could derail the relationship building she had done so successfully in her first months.

Hadar was relieved to have Richard's support during what promised to be another year of budget stress. But she also

knew this problem wasn't going away quickly. She would have to pursue two possibilities simultaneously:

- Plan 1: Enrollment growth
- Plan 2: Enrollment stabilization or, possibly, decline

An Urgent Question: How Many Students Are Needed for a Viable School?

By June 2013, all board members were fully aware of the low enrollment projections. They asked Hadar to bring a report on "your enrollment plan" to that month's board meeting. Certainly she had been sharply aware of the enrollment issues all year and had not avoided them. But did board members somehow blame her for the drop in numbers for last year and next year? Was the problem hers to solve alone? She had to overcome these doubts and turn more attention to strategic thinking.

As part of her fact-finding, she considered what the numbers said about the school's enrollment make-up and pipeline:

- 55 percent of HDSAA students come from the Beth Israel Congregation, a Conservative synagogue of 450 families.
- 16 percent come from Temple Beth Emeth, a Reform congregation of 650 families.
- 5 percent are Orthodox-affiliated families.
- 3 percent affiliate as Reconstructionist/Renewal.
- The remaining 21 percent are unaffiliated families, of which 53 percent were American-born and 47 percent were born in Israel or another country.

Then she framed and addressed questions that might actually lead to strategic actions.

- Could the school attract families outside its traditional base?
- How big could it actually become?
- What could make it possible to reach a bigger target audience?
- How could the school remain true to its maximalist Judaic ambitions while reaching that hypothetical new audience?

To answer these questions, she realized she had to close important information gaps.

- How many Jewish children did Ann Arbor have in the target recruitment ages, birth to 4 and 5 to 11?

- Assuming the school could become more effective at recruitment and re-enrollment, what percentage of the total could HDSAA reasonably hope to attract?

To prepare herself to raise these big questions at the June board meeting, Hadar collected input and ideas from people she trusted. They bombarded her with observations and recommendations, including the following:

- The school is excellent but its PR is weak, so just improve outreach and communication.
- The general studies program has a weaker reputation than Jewish studies, so improve general studies.
- Improve Judaic studies.
- Offer some “sexy” new specialties and become famous for them.
- Create a high-tech summer camp as a feeder.
- Change from Conservative Schechter affiliation to “community” RAVSAK affiliation.

But without time for study, Hadar was wary of jumping into programs that might not actually bring more students. She decided to take the logical interim step of strengthening the school’s recruitment practices. After the board meeting, she devoted part of her summer to developing a comprehensive recruitment plan.

Central to the plan was a new volunteer Recruitment Committee to help the staff carry out some of the ambitious agenda. In addition to the traditional ads, parent coffees, and tour dates, the plan included:

- Building a more robust prospect list through all of the school constituents’ personal contacts.
- Enlisting the help of current parents through the room-parent structure in the JCC Early Childhood Center.
- Connecting to and building relationships with other preschool directors in Ann Arbor.
- Reaching out to new sources, such as:
 - connections within human resources departments at the University of Michigan, Google, Toyota, and other companies that recruit nationally;

- University of Michigan Hillel;
- real estate agents; and
- public school teachers.

- Building stronger relationships with preschools and birth-to-age-6 program providers.
- Keeping relationships strong with traditional sources, such as:
 - synagogues, for which the school set a target of increasing inquiries from Reform temple;
 - the Jewish Federation; and
 - the JCC.

The new plan’s biggest goal was to transform the school’s parent body into ambassadors. Of course, turning parents into what was, essentially, a successful sales force would require training, explicit talking points, and practical suggestions about when and how to increase positive awareness of the school in an ordinary conversation. But the effort was vital to building the all-important word of mouth that the school hoped could help reverse its fortunes.

A Broader View: Perspectives on Other Small-City Schools’ Crises – and Who Must Help Solve Them

Across the country, without a doubt, the economic troubles that started in 2008 reduced many young Jewish families’ ability to pay for day school tuition. The fallout has expressed itself in various ways among various groups. Although one hears about Orthodox parents who turn to home schooling for financial reasons, on the whole, Orthodox families consider enrolling their children in day school a high priority. So the pressure in Orthodox schools appears not so much in enrollment loss as in a much greater need for tuition assistance. In the Solomon Schechter, RAVSAK, and other non-Orthodox schools, families have needed more financial help, too, but significant enrollment losses were widespread. Can it be that many of the families in these schools see day school less as a primary need and more as an option, albeit a precious one?

Regardless, to remain viable, many schools must enroll families beyond their natural core. The “optional” families provide

an enrollment cushion that makes the schools robust and diversifies their communities.

For small schools such as HDSAA in small cities such as Ann Arbor, it is important to consider a set of technical questions:

- How many available Jewish children live in the town?
- What percentage of that target population is a reasonable number to recruit?
- What is the minimum number of children in each age cohort who need to be enrolled to enable the Jewish day school to remain viable?
- Can the achievable percentage of children in the town meet that minimum?

Nevertheless, it is also important, and not at all a technical matter, to consider who is asking these questions. Is it only the day school board of trustees? Yes, legally and officially, that board alone is responsible for the school's mission, viability, and longevity. But in actuality, can board members safeguard a school's future without the wisdom and backing of a broader constituency? If a small city's Jewish community considers a Jewish day school a core element of its energy and appeal, shouldn't keeping a day school viable be an issue that concerns everyone?

One example of a community that took general responsibility for its school comes from Birmingham, Alabama. Twenty years ago, its community "elders" decided the N.E. Miles Jewish Day School needed to be strong and vibrant to attract new families to town and to woo natives back after they were launched into college and career. They took an unusual two-pronged approach: In the future they would raise endowment

money, but for the next few years, they would provide significant annual allocations from the Federation campaigns. These large annual subsidies, at times close to 40 percent of operating costs, allowed the school to offer artificially low tuitions without incurring deficits.

Under the leadership of Head of School Lynn Raviv, the school earned a reputation for educational excellence. Between the positive buzz and the affordable tuitions, 35 percent of Birmingham's identified Jewish children in grades K–5 and 18 percent in grades 6–8 attended the school during that time. (In contrast, booming Atlanta, even with its seven day schools, was enrolling only 11 percent of its eligible population during the same period.)

The Birmingham case is relevant to HDSAA and other schools like it not because of its actual funding solution. (In hindsight, being totally dependent on successful annual Federation campaigns is risky.) Rather, the case is relevant because of the entire community took responsibility for the school's well-being.

Hebrew Day School of Ann Arbor enjoys excellent relations with its Federation and the rest of the Jewish community. It also has a thoughtful and capable board of trustees working as active partners with a talented Head of School who was devoted to grasping the school's strategic priorities and creating plans to address them. Looking to the future, the school's leaders intend to hit the enrollment issue with everything they've got. If they can rebuild their numbers, they can provide encouraging evidence that exemplary recruitment practices and deep community support allow a good school to achieve enrollment health, even in a small city.

Questions for Further Thought:

1. Hadar's case offers a sense of the Head's perspective on the process of accepting an offer to become a school's next leader. How can both a prospective Head of School and a search committee figure out if they will make a good professional match?
2. Hebrew Day School of Ann Arbor brought Hadar to Ann Arbor because she is a strong educator. How can school heads like her maintain a focus on educational improvement even in times of great anxiety about enrollment?
3. What would help heads like Hadar maintain their schools' rich Jewish studies programs while trying to attract additional families outside the traditional base?
4. When trying to address important problems, school leaders are wise to seek input from others, but the result is often that they are swamped with good ideas. How can they judge which to act on, which to discard, and how to manage the disappointment of people whose ideas are not chosen? Looking at the original ideas Hadar collected about increasing enrollment, how would you respond?