

New Thinking on the Day School Affordability Crisis

The crisis

There is little doubt that Jewish day school education in America is at a crossroads. Despite the most recent census, which shows continued expansion of day school enrollment overall, it is clear that this trend is limited to the most right-wing Orthodox schools.¹ Non-Orthodox schools enrolled 38,572 students in 2009, roughly 2.6% fewer than the high-water mark of 2004, and anecdotal reports from the directors of both Solomon Schechter and Community day schools point to even further contraction in 2010-11. While the overwhelming majority of families affiliated with these schools remain committed to Jewish day school education, a small but important group of parents increasingly feel themselves to be priced out of the day school market as tuition climbs into the high teens and low twenty thousands of dollars...for Kindergarten. In the Orthodox community, the notion of an “affordability crisis” has become an accepted fact.² For the first time in two decades, Jews across all denominations share a palpable sense that we are in crisis, with some sectors poised to disinvest from day school education while others continue to buy in, but wonder how long their institutions will remain viable. Before exploring new approaches to this challenge, we’d like to share a few anecdotes that highlight the depth and breadth of this crisis in a very personal way.

A question of values

Our collaboration began when Elena wrote a piece for the Wexner Foundation’s weekly newsletter detailing how the day school crisis had impacted her family. Elena, her husband and three children were living in the suburbs of New York City. Despite the combined incomes of two working professionals, both of them physicians, the cost of day school education became so prohibitive that they uprooted their family, left busy practices, and relocated to a more affordable community in Colorado so that they could continue sending all three of their children to day school for the foreseeable future.³ Allen, the Head of School of a Solomon Schechter Day School, reached out to see what he and Elena could learn from each other.

Our conversation went on to include other equally compelling anecdotes. At Allen’s Midwestern Schechter, the day after the coming school year’s financial aid award letters went out, he sat down with a parent in tears over her family’s inability to make their household budget work to include day school. There were no expenses left to cut, and the family began to consider the previously unthinkable option of pulling their kids out of school.

At a bar mitzvah in New Jersey, a conversation with a twenty-something day school alumna went something like this: Alumna: “I had such a marvelous experience in day school -- it really shaped my life and my Jewish identity.” Rabbi: “Wonderful, you must be being planning to send your children there.” Alumna: (heavy sigh) “Well, unfortunately, it’s hard to say if we’ll be able to afford it when the time comes.”

¹ See Marvin Shick’s 2009 Day School Census, available online at www.avi-chai.org/census.pdf.

² The most recent call to action was Dr. Jack Wertheimer’s article “The High Cost of Jewish Living” in the March 2010 issue of *Commentary*.

³ For the full text of Elena’s piece, see <http://tinyurl.com/23jeef9>.

There are so many more stories. We know other parents who have had to choose among their children because they can't send them all to day school. Others chose a "cut-off" point and made plans for when they would have to pull their kids out. It goes without saying that there is often extensive personal sacrifice -- limited vacations, smaller homes, longer work hours. No matter how high the level of parental commitment to the concept of day school, at some point it becomes easy to ask oneself "Is it really worth all this?"

We propose that the answer is a resounding "YES!" However, the entire Jewish community, including but not limited to educators, synagogues and parents, needs to address the issue in a comprehensive and creative way. We need not only revisit older ideas like increased Federation and national funding, endowments and (yes) advocating for public subsidies. We also need new ideas to help parents give their children a strong Jewish education, and propose strategies that may even make us all a little uncomfortable.

Bail faster

We consulted with two national experts in the field of Jewish education. Was there a better approach to day school affordability, some silver bullet that had worked in one community and might be adapted to ours? Dr. Jack Wertheimer, a professor of Jewish History at the Jewish Theological Seminary, and Dr. Jonathan Woocher, the Chief Ideas Officer of JESNA, were both generous with their time. Both left us with the impression that we are still early in the process of moving from strategies to implementation. Dr. Wertheimer argued strongly for the contribution of public funds to Jewish day schools. Dr. Woocher suggested that a multi-pronged approach, including significant fundraising, would be needed.⁴

On the ground, the most prevalent response to the day school affordability crisis boils down to a single idea: raise more-spend less. Some communities, such as Chicago, have embraced legacy initiatives like the Operation Jewish Education campaign to designate five percent of every Jewish estate for education. Others, like Detroit and Boston, have seen important mega-gifts by a small number of philanthropists, while Metro-West has built a fund to provide scholarships for middle-class families. In the foundation world, the Legacy Heritage Foundation and the Jim Joseph Foundation have targeted impressive sums to meeting families' emergency needs for a limited amount of time. While these initiatives are impressive, even if they were replicated across the country they still might not address the underlying dynamics of the day school affordability crisis. Short term responses simply don't reduce the fixed overheads of day schools or change the macro-economic reality that many families have lost ground financially and cannot shoulder the burden of a thirteen year commitment to day school education. Adding more money helps, but it is akin to the captain of a leaky boat commanding his crew to "bail faster." The reality is that even after raising a tremendous number of dollars, our system is still precarious. Bailing faster will help, but it might not stave off the inevitable need to change boats.

⁴ For a wide-reaching discussion of options, see the JESNA's Lippman Kanfer Institute Working Paper titled "Day School Education in Challenging Times" available through www.jesna.org.

In search of a better model

The current day school system must change in order to survive. Some ideas, like the experiment with less expensive, no-frills yeshivot in the New York area, are valuable but have limited appeal outside the Orthodox community. Others, like the growing interest in school mergers or the back-office partnerships that the Avi-Chai Foundation has piloted, can save overhead costs but will never change the fundamental reality that high-quality independent schools are expensive to run and will likely continue charging tuition in the teens to twenties of thousands of dollars. Is there another way to go? We think so.

Our proposal borrows a page from the curricular notion of “backwards-mapping” by envisioning what outcomes we want our children to achieve and planning in reverse towards the beginning of their educational experience. We identify four crucial goals for Jewish education: 1) identity development and religious formation; 2) skill building in the language of Jewish text; 3) social and interpersonal development within a Jewish framework; and 4) the development of methods and habits of mind for thinking critically about Jewish tradition. We also assume a gradual shift of emphasis along a developmental trajectory, so that from early childhood to teenage years, children move from identity formation to skill building and finally arrive at a point of intellectual synthesis.

At the risk of telescoping a long and nuanced discussion into just a few sentences, we would like to imagine the following: If families have a limited budget to devote to Jewish day school education, they should spend it all during the middle and high school years. This is the developmental period when social issues like dating and relationships take center stage, but also a period in which students are most prepared for serious and thoughtful intellectual discussions. Our ideal school would also provide a solid grounding in the skills of Hebrew language and ritual leadership that have stood at the core of Jewish cultural and textual literacy for millennia. Instead of watching families invest in a day school education that tapers off after five or six years of primary education, we ask the larger community to imagine what our Jewish future could look like if we invested in the most complex, challenging and formative years of a young person’s life during grades Six through Twelve.

That leads us to one additional question: What to do for our children from grades Kindergarten through Five? Recognizing that great leaps forward sometimes demand looking backward, we ask what has become of the Talmud Torah that Samson Benderly once promoted with such passion during the early 20th century. We imagine the return of a learning space that would serve children on weekdays, four days a week. Tuition would be set at several thousands of dollars, a sufficient level to provide outstanding staffing and materials. A foundational and ongoing commitment to Hebrew language from Pre-Kindergarten on, combined with a curriculum that balanced experiential learning with serious and skill-centered textual instruction would offer students an ideal space to answer three questions. 1) What is unique about my identity? 2) What language, rituals and behavioral norms define me? 3) What knowledge and skills must I possess in order to demonstrate my belonging to a community? While we don’t (yet) endorse a specific, existing framework, the Boston based Keshet program is worth exploring as a starting point for discussion. We think that a network of high quality afternoon programs which fed students into

Jewish day school for grades Six through Twelve might consume fewer dollars while simultaneously expanding access to the highest quality Jewish education at precisely the time when it will make the most lasting difference.

Would this paradigm require a change in the way elementary school parents think? Absolutely. There certainly would be sacrifices, particularly in structuring children's afterschool activities. There is no question, however, that any solution to this growing problem will require a shift in our priorities and life patterns.

No Silver Bullets

At this point, a few caveats are certainly in order. First, we both are loyal supporters of Jewish day schools. One of us is the director of a K through 8 school who changed careers to enter the day school headship, while the other is a savvy community leader who has made important sacrifices to send her children to Jewish day school from grades K through 12. Neither of us wants to see day school enrollment decline, but we are both well aware that this phenomenon is already under way and escalating in parts of our community. As much as we want to see the current day school strengthened and expanded, we want even more to know that the coming generation of Jews will receive a serious and impactful Jewish education in whatever venues best serve their needs. We feel that the ground is shifting under our feet, and urge our community to get out in front of the change by creating new models that will complement or even reinvent, but not replace, day schools.

Add your voice

Ultimately, we hope that this paper will stimulate discussion and debate about how the Jewish community should invest its time, effort and dollars. We believe more than ever that citizenship in the modern world requires a high quality Jewish education for all children, for as many years as we can provide. We invite others to comment, to think aloud and ultimately to join us in tracing the next steps that our community should take.

We have set up a web-link to record feedback on this essay. Several leaders of national prominence have already weighed in. Your input, guidance and critique are all welcomed. To respond, [open this link](#).

Background

Allen Selis received his rabbinic ordination and an MA in Jewish studies from the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1994. He served as a rabbinic leader for congregations in Boulder, CO and Rockville, MD. Allen has led the Solomon Schechter Day School of St. Louis as Head of School since the fall of 2007, and recently completed a Ph.D. in Curriculum Theory and Development through the University of Maryland's School of Education Policy Studies. You may reach him directly at aselis@ssdstl.org.

Elena Weinstein is a Wexner Heritage alumna from Westchester, NY. Elena is a board certified rheumatologist in private practice in Littleton, Colorado. She has served in a variety of Jewish leadership positions, including those dedicated to furthering the cause of affordable Jewish day school education and is currently on the development committee at Denver Jewish Day School in Denver, Colorado. Elena can be reached at elenajonw@hotmail.com.