

Stop Waiting for Superman

KIM HIRSH

One way to understand the day school affordability crisis is to envision splitting a day school family population into three groups. In terms of income, roughly one third of families are at the top and can therefore afford today's tuition levels, which, in many areas, range from about \$15,000 or more per child for kindergarten and more than \$20,000 at the high school level. Another third of families are at the lower end, and continue to be supported, as they always have been, through traditional tuition assistance programs (a combination of annual fundraising, federation support, and other revenue).

It is in the middle tier where the crisis really lies. The income of these families is too high to qualify for traditional tuition assistance programs, but not high enough to pay tuition bills that can exceed \$60,000 a year for families with several children. By American standards, these "middle income" families are doing quite well indeed — earning roughly \$150,000 to \$250,000 annually. But in most major metropolitan areas, that level of family income doesn't buy a private school education — not if a family wants to set aside money for college, family vacations, medical emergencies, and the like. The choices these families are forced to make in order to send their children to day school are unfair and, in many cases, untenable.

But it is not just for the sake of these middle-tier families that we need to resolve the affordability crisis. We need to do so for the Jewish people. An abundance of research has shown that Jewish day school education is one of the most effective ways to create a cadre of educated, committed Jewish adults who can help lead our community in the future. What will happen if this critical form of Jewish education and Jewish identity-building is available only to the wealthy and to lower-income families? And will the other two tiers of families — the top and the bottom — continue to want to enroll their children in day schools if the vast "middle" disappears?

In order to begin to resolve this crisis, it is first important for the day school community to get past the rescue fantasy and stop "waiting for Superman," as the recent movie on the charter school movement implied. We can resolve this crisis over time, but it will take many years, even decades, of hard work, leadership,

and the involvement and support of vast networks of people who have been touched by day school education, including parents, alumni, and grandparents, as well as community members who care deeply about our Jewish future.

In our community in MetroWest, N.J., our three Jewish day schools — Modern Orthodox, Conservative, and a community day school — have worked closely for years with our federation on a community-wide campaign to raise \$50 million in endowment and long-term funds to support affordable, excellent day school education.

Now entering our sixth year, we are well on our way to hitting — and then exceeding — our \$50 million goal to build the sustainable affordability programs and excellence enhancements that will make these three schools welcoming, attractive options for Jewish families from across the spectrum for generations to come. We realize now that achieving this vision will take at least a decade. The work never ends, as individual day schools must continue to build support, each and every day, well into the future.

In MetroWest, we have adapted a model from the private independent school world. This model garners self-sustaining support through strong leadership and professionally driven, comprehensive fundraising that combines annual, endowment, and capital needs. Over time, and with a tremendous amount of hard work and focus, Jewish day schools, like their secular counterparts, can achieve transformative institutional change through this model. Here are some key elements:


- 1) **A Big, Unshakeable Vision:** We began our efforts in 2005, and continue today with a vision for creating broadly affordable, excellent Jewish day school education in order to build a strong and vibrant Jewish future for our community and the Jewish people. Affordability and excellence must go hand-in-hand: Affordability without excellence does not work, because families will not choose day schools if they are not attractive (public schools are still free); excellence without affordability is unfair and will not sustain enrollment in the long term. This is the vision that drives our work every day — and inspires donors to give.

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- 2) **Strong Leadership:** Critical to our success are the lay and professional leaders who are fully committed to achieving this vision and working toward it — with their heads, hands, hearts, and pocketbooks.
- 3) **Professional Development:** Similar to private, independent schools, Jewish day schools must have high quality development professionals, database systems, ongoing database management, alumni relations, marketing, and more — all geared to building sustainable support for the institution.
- 4) **A Culture of Generosity:** Private, independent schools have nurtured a culture in which many of those who are touched by the institution feel privileged to give back, and that support is carefully nurtured over generations within families and among individuals.

It is ironic that while Jewish schools teach *tzedekah*, most have not developed an institutional culture of giving in which families associated with the school appreciate the value of giving back to the very institution that transformed the family. In our community, the day schools — with federation support as well as a critical grant from

- the AVI CHAI Foundation — are building an essential alumni relations infrastructure that will help to transform the culture of the school communities today and for generations to come.
- 5) **Collaboration, but with an Individual Day School Focus:** In building a community-wide campaign, we have found that working through a central partner — the federation — is helpful. The three schools collaborate while still capitalizing on the strengths that exist within each unique day school community. Thus, we have established four sets of funds — one for each school and one “community day school fund” for all schools — and we continue to progress on all fronts.

We can achieve broadly affordable, high-quality, financially sustainable Jewish day school education. But communities must be committed to hard work and a long haul. Through a combination of vision, leadership, investment in professional development, and a changing culture — as well as a big dose of patience, persistence, and passion — it can be done. 

Educating ‘Prophets’

CHARLIE SCHWARTZ & RUSSEL NEISS

Wandering through the desert, the Israelites were tasked with building a mobile house of worship, a *mishkan*, in which God’s presence would dwell. In an intriguing narrative twist, it was not Moses, Aaron, or Miriam who were given the responsibility of crafting this proto-temple; rather, it was the artisan Betzalel. A previously unknown character, Betzalel the artist, a creator of material culture, was “filled with the Spirit of God,” which enabled him to envision and construct this holy work.

It is this model of prophecy, the prophecy that comes through cultural production, the prophecy of Betzalel, that provides an insightful metaphor for today’s Jewish educators. As we make our way through the 21st century, the way art, culture, and even ideas are produced and distributed has been radically changed. No longer is the ability to create and distribute cultural content limited to the elite, to figures like Moses, Aaron, or Miriam. It is now in the hands of anyone with a vision and a laptop. The role of the Jewish educator, then, must be to harness

the possibility of this revolution by helping Jews realize their potential to become the “Betzalels” of the digital age.

Oftentimes, the technological advances of this era are praised for how they have helped to democratize knowledge. But equally important has been the democratization of technology. Relatively inexpensive and free programs like iMovie, Audacity, and Garage Band allow their users to produce high quality music, video, podcasts, and more. Whereas ten years ago high school bands (ours included) were struggling to record demos with four track recorders to cassette tapes, today, with not much more than a MacBook, high school students can record near studio-quality tracks, remix them, and release them with ease.

Our students are already taking part in these forms of creative expressions unique to the 21st century. Many are shooting videos on flip video cameras and other high quality, inexpensive digital video cameras. Others are dabbling in blogging, photo sharing, and other innovative endeavors. Yet our students rarely

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