

## "New Thinking on the Day School Affordability Crisis"

Posted At : July 8, 2010 11:41 AM | Posted By : Tara Bognar

Related Categories: education, fundraising/philanthropy

In this newly published [article](#), Allen Selis and Elena Weinstein, self-described "loyal supporters of Jewish day schools," offer two main suggestions for dealing with the cost of day schools:

1. Bail faster - get more money into Jewish day schools
2. Focus on where it matters - if twelve years of Jewish education are not affordable, focus on the six years of middle school and high school

I wonder - who is this funding really for? Is our goal universal day school education or is it to create a cadre of educated, committed Jews who will be in the position to provide leadership to their communities?

The conventional wisdom is that Jewish day school education has a positive impact on future Jewish commitment, which seems plausible even though so far the research on the ground is thin: [A Study of the Effects of Intensive Jewish Secondary Education on Adult Jewish Lifestyles: Secondary School Graduates, Philadelphia, PA, 1976-77](#).

Even if so, it seems that children of parents so highly motivated as to choose financially lucrative careers \*and\* to choose to spend their remuneration on day school are the most likely to be able to take advantage and reap the benefits of what Steven Brown called '[other forms of gateways into Judaism](#)'. If liberal and modern orthodox communities (because right wing orthodox communities are already the most successful at achieving universal or close to universal day school education) really believe in the day school system as the solution to creating 'mass', continuity, it doesn't make sense to direct our attention to already highly invested families - where is the public relations campaign to marginally affiliated families? Where is the theoretical work on what it would mean for American Jews to segregate themselves out of the public education system?

Are we in a chicken and egg situation, where, given the high expense of day school, we've just given up on the possibility of persuading rank and file Jews to invest in Jewish educations, yet as long as there's not broadbased participation, we'll continue to lack the funding to make a day school education attractive and feasible for that same community?

The authors offer anecdotes of parents who are highly motivated to send their children to day schools and willing to make significant financial sacrifices to do so. The implication is that such families shouldn't be excluded from the benefits of the day school system. But what about children whose parents don't care that much? In an admittedly different financial climate, Yosef Abramowitz suggested that day schools get funding by [borrowing](#) against future Jewish giving (Federation endowments) on the bet that increased funding for day schools now will increase donations later. Yet even in that article, the 'progressive' school financial aid policy to not permit cost to be a barrier to Jewish education leaves his family in the position of not saving enough for the future, which is acceptable to him because "the investment we're making in our children's souls is priceless." I don't see that balancing equation easily finding broad

universal acceptance among less affiliated Jews.

The funding option that seems to offer the most potential for broadbased participation in Jewish education by families who don't already prioritize their children's religious education over their retirement funding is 'school choice', government funded vouchers for private religious schools. As it is, however, Jewish political support for public funding for religious education is found, nearly exclusively, in the same elements of the Jewish community that already spend their own assets on day schools. It will be an uphill battle to persuade the broader liberal Jewish community that not only are vouchers for religious schools not problematic from a religion and state angle but that it is also in their own interest. Again - where is this theoretical and persuasive material? Where are standards of 'affordability' and 'accessibility' that will feel progressive to parents not willing to consider jeopardizing their vacations, let alone their retirement, for a Jewish day school education for their children?

The reality underneath the rhetoric seems to be that a relatively small portion of the liberal Jewish community is working very hard to create and fund a Jewish educational system that is capable of creating a Jewishly-educated elite drawn from families that are already (at least mostly) on the wealthy side of the spectrum (some families don't have vacations or luxuries to give up) and already highly committed to Judaism and full time Jewish education. In fact, there's nothing wrong with that. It's possible that that is in fact the way forward to getting the most efficient return on investment in full time Jewish education. It would be nice to have an open conversation about what that means, and how day schools and the communities that support them could best be organized to get maximum benefit from that model.

For more information, see the BJPA **materials** on day schools, the YU Institute for University-School Partnership resources on **day school affordability**, and the **PEJE series** on affordability.