

A CENSUS OF U.S. DAY SCHOOLS 2003–04

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This census of Jewish day schools in the United States covers the 2003–04 school year. It is a follow-up to the comprehensive 1998–99 study of these schools that was sponsored by The AVI CHAI Foundation.

The enrollment statistics in this census include all schools on the membership lists of Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Community day school associations, as well as perhaps an additional 100 schools that were located through an examination of governmental and Jewish community records. For nearly all schools, the data and other requested information were provided by school officials.

NUMBER OF STUDENTS AND SCHOOLS

There were 205,000 students in Jewish elementary and secondary schools—the four-year-old level through grade 12—in the 2003–04 school year (see Table 1). This represents an increase of a bit more than 20,000, or 11% from 1998–99 (see Table 2). Without any doubt, a growth rate of 11% in five years is impressive. If this rate is extrapolated over a decade, we can project a nearly 25% increase in day school enrollment in the ten years between 1998–99 and 2008–09.

The census puts the number of schools at 759, about 80 more than five years previously. The increase reported here results mainly from the establishment of new schools, notably in the Community, Chabad and Special Education sectors.

ENROLLMENT BY AFFILIATION

A bit more than 80% of day school students are in Orthodox schools, representing a slight increase over the 1998–99 distribution and consequently also a slight dip in the non-Orthodox share. In the five-year period, Orthodox schools grew by about 12%, as compared to a growth rate of a bit over 7% in non-Orthodox schools. For the Orthodox, a

virtually mandatory all-day, dual curriculum education in a Jewish school, coupled with a high fertility rate ensures continuing enrollment growth. For the non-Orthodox, though, rising tuition charges combined with the condition of the economy over the past five years and other factors may negatively impact on day school enrollment. As a result, the growth in the non-Orthodox schools should be viewed as significant.

Orthodox enrollment is spread across six categories, they being Centrist Orthodox, Chabad, Chassidic, Immigrant/Outreach, Modern Orthodox and Yeshiva-World. There are three non-Orthodox categories—Solomon Schechter (Conservative), Reform and Community. Special Education institutions are treated separately, although nearly all are under Orthodox sponsorship.

Because a day school education is virtually mandatory among Orthodox Jews, the enrollment growth in their schools is attributable to a high fertility rate. For the non-Orthodox, enrollment growth is predicated on several factors, including the creation and expansion of schools in areas where the non-Orthodox were underserved and also changing attitudes toward day school education in a relatively small number of Conservative, Reform and unaffiliated families.

TABLE 1: ENROLLMENT IN JEWISH DAY SCHOOLS, 2003-04

Classification	# of Schools	4 Yr. Olds	5 Yr. Olds	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
Centrist Orthodox	78	1,293	1,602	1,479	1,451	1,292	1,307
Chabad	54	642	900	759	779	688	675
Chassidic	101	3,985	5,126	3,956	3,936	3,643	3,420
Community	95	752	1,782	1,731	1,762	1,658	1,603
Immigrant/Outreach	30	263	343	329	288	313	312
Modern Orthodox	87	1,872	2,376	2,383	2,316	2,231	2,287
Reform	19	396	573	559	545	533	460
Solomon Shechter	57	779	1,821	1,898	1,978	1,863	1,850
Special Education	43	-	-	-	-	-	-
Yeshiva	195	3,125	4,958	4,496	4,119	4,101	4,007
Total	759	13,107	19,481	17,590	17,174	16,322	15,921
Percentage of Total	-	6.393	9.501	8.579	8.376	7.961	7.765

TABLE 2: COMPARISON OF 1998-99 AND 2003-04 DATA

Classification	1998-99		2003-04			Variance		
	# of Schools	Enrollment	# of Schools	Enrollment	Change in # of Schools	Schools % Change	Change in Enrollment	Enrollment % Change
Centrist Orthodox	80	20,504	78	18,570	-2	-2.50%	-1,934	-9.43%
Chabad	44	7,438	54	8,595	10	22.73%	1,157	15.56%
Chassidic	81	39,059	101	48,446	20	24.69%	9,387	24.03%
Community	75	14,849	95	17,415	20	26.67%	2,566	17.28%
Immigrant/Outreach	31	5,136	30	4,774	-1	-3.23%	-362	-7.05%
Modern Orthodox	92	26,961	87	28,634	-5	-5.43%	1,673	6.21%
Reform	20	4,485	19	4,462	-1	-5.00%	-23	-0.51%
Solomon Schechter	63	17,563	57	17,702	-6	-9.52%	139	0.79%
Special Education	18	695	43	2,111	25	138.89%	1,416	156.12%
Yeshiva	172	47,643	195	54,326	23	13.37%	6,683	14.03%
Total	676	184,333	759	205,035	83	12.28%	20,702	11.23%

5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th	Special Ed.	Total
1,328	1,313	1,266	1,341	1,261	1,302	1,245	1,090	126	18,696
675	623	635	569	533	431	399	287	14	8,609
3,313	3,377	3,066	3,210	3,470	2,862	2,739	2,343	-	48,446
1,554	1,405	1,192	1,161	848	805	638	524	1	17,416
327	337	338	343	445	402	392	342	49	4,823
2,280	2,109	2,181	2,138	1,719	1,609	1,637	1,496	86	28,720
462	366	300	268	-	-	-	-	-	4,462
1,877	1,540	1,439	1,372	361	328	348	248	-	17,702
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1,780	1,780
3,921	3,914	3,714	3,703	3,784	3,705	3,606	3,173	55	54,381
15,737	14,984	14,131	14,105	12,421	11,444	11,004	9,503	2,111	205,035
7.675	7.308	6.892	6.879	6.058	5.581	5.367	4.635	1.030	-

Within the Orthodox sectors, the enrollment pattern varies markedly. Yeshiva-World and Chassidic schools account for one-half of all U.S. day schoolers, with the Yeshiva-World having the larger share. But the growth rate is higher for Chassidic schools with enrollment rising by 24% in five years, while Yeshiva institutions increased by 14%. Here, too, fertility is the dynamic factor as Chassidic families are larger than Yeshiva-World families.

By day school standards, Modern Orthodox (co-educational) schools are large and while there are fewer such institutions than there were in 1998–99, enrollment in them has grown by 6%, with more than 1,500 more students, a development that counters the claim that Modern Orthodoxy is in a weakened state. At the same time, Centrist Orthodox (single-sex) schools have lost nearly 2,000 students, nearly 10% of their enrollment, a result that is largely attributable to the vulnerability of these institutions as they face competition from newer day schools. Another factor is the tendency of young Orthodox families to move away.

Chabad or Lubavitch schools tend to be small and many of them are new. This sector has grown by a robust 15% over five years, a pattern that is likely to continue because there is a substantial impetus within this movement to create additional schools, even in areas where there are existing Orthodox institutions. Newer Chabad schools invariably have an outreach orientation. Their healthy picture is in contrast to the enrollment loss in Immigrant/Outreach schools, many of which once served Jewish immigrant families from the former Soviet Union. This pool of potential students has diminished.

Among those who prefer non-Orthodox day school education, the recent stress has been on Community or transdenominational schools. There are 20 more such institutions than there were five years previously, and they are responsible for the strong Community enrollment growth of 17%.

There is evidence that Solomon Schechter schools are struggling, including a slight dip in enrollment. As for Reform day schools, a category that has but 2% of all enrollees, here too there has been a slight decline in the number of students.

Non-Orthodox enrollment is concentrated in the preschool and lower grades, with student population declining sharply as the high school grades are reached. However, the enrollment growth at high schools that began a decade ago continues impressively. In 1992 there were 1,500 students in non-Orthodox high schools, a figure that rose by nearly 50% to 2,200 in 1998–99. In the current census, there is a further increase of nearly 100% to 4,100 students. The growth trend is certain to continue because additional non-Orthodox high schools have been established, and some do not have as yet their full complement of grades.

THE SMALL SCHOOL PHENOMENON

For all of the enrollment growth, day school education is in large measure a small school phenomenon, as 200,000+ students attend 760 schools. One-sixth of all day schools have fewer than 50 students and many of these enroll fewer than 25. Nearly 40% of all day schools have fewer than 100 students. This situation arises from two intersecting factors: the geographic distribution of American Jews and our denominational diversity.

The existence of a great number of small schools has educational and financial implications. It is difficult and often impossible to offer a varied curriculum that meets the needs of students of different capabilities and interests when classrooms have but a handful of students. The financial difficulties are self-evident.

In some measure because of their small size but also as a result of other factors, a significant number of day schools are struggling to stay afloat. While enrollment has increased overall, a significant and perhaps surprising proportion of U.S. day schools have suffered a loss of students. Of the institutions included in both surveys, at least 173 have experienced enrollment declines. Demographic shifts have contributed to this development, as has the establishment of competing schools. Although the new schools may be justified and needed on educational or denominational grounds, competition inevitably results in the weakening of existing schools. At least 30 day schools have closed in the five-year period between the initial census and this current one.

NEW YORK DOMINANCE

New York continues to dominate the day school scene. In New York City alone there are 82,500 day schoolers, a number that is but 7,000 shy of the enrollment of all day schools outside of New York State. Many thousands more are educated in schools in the New York metropolitan area. New Jersey ranks second in day school population. When its numbers are added to New York's, the two states have 139,000 students or 68% of the U.S. total. All other day schools in the country enroll 66,000 students, a statistic that suggests that communities outside of the New York region should be able to focus financial and communal resources on local day schools.

The picture that emerges from this second census is of a measure of change within a pattern of overall stability. Over time, there will be additional changes and challenges, and for this reason alone it is to be hoped that, in due course, there will be a third comprehensive survey of these institutions.



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