

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

A Project of the AVI CHAI Foundation

Aligning All Stakeholders with a Clear School Mission

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First there was a school; then came a *shul*; and now there even is a community farm. Denver Academy of Torah — DAT — has gradually expanded its school from its K–8 origins to a kindergarten through high school program. As insiders are quick to concede, the process was neither linear nor foreordained. A mixture of creative school leadership and bold outreach to diverse parent populations, coupled with a self-confident understanding of its Orthodox mission, has propelled DAT forward and has enabled the school to face the tough challenges confronting most Jewish day schools in North America — rising costs, economic uncertainty, and shortages of qualified mission-aligned teachers. Slightly more than two decades after its founding, DAT serves as a case of how a Jewish day school needed to redefine and clarify its vision and mission to achieve sustainability, and how strategic thinking about alignment leads to the creation of the confident and bold school DAT is today.

DAT officially opened in 1993–94 with 63 students.

Today DAT enrolls 154 students due to steady growth of the elementary program (resulting in the elimination of the pre-K program due to space limitations) and the opening of the new high school three years ago in a separate facility.

Alignment around Purpose

DAT's history dates back to 1990, when parents from both the local Community day school and the centrist Orthodox day school concluded that the Denver community needed another option. Perhaps some already sensed that the area's Jewish community was poised for growth. Indeed, between 1997 and 2007, Denver's Jewish population increased from 63,300 to 83,900, a 33 percent increase. Driven by the belief that a Modern Orthodox school was needed to chart a middle course, Philip and Jan Lightstone (eventually DAT's first and fourth presidents, respectively) called an open meeting in their home during Sukkot, expecting 20 people; instead, 60 showed up.

According to the founding lay leadership, the new school would have six defining characteristics, each of which would differentiate it from one or both of Denver's other Jewish day schools:

- A strong secular studies program
- A deliberate identification with Modern Orthodoxy as the religious orientation of the school
- An approach to Jewish studies emphasizing the acquisition of knowledge and skills to enable students to become independent learners
- An unequivocal commitment to religious Zionism
- A principled embrace of co-education in all academic areas
- A commitment to making Hebrew the language of instruction in Jewish studies

During its first decade, the school experienced natural expansion through the addition of new grades. By 1999, it was ready to move to a new building on a nine-acre campus, an expansion facilitated by a lead gift from a local philanthropist who hoped the new facility would spur much needed growth. In its start-up phase, the school was created to meet the needs of a small group of founders who never imagined that their school's appeal would extend significantly beyond the Modern Orthodox community. DAT was slow to win a reputation as an academically solid school, but gradually it began to attract a wider range of families, spanning the spectrum from right-wing and centrist Orthodox to members of Conservative and Reform temples, and even some non-affiliated ones. During its first decade, DAT attracted a parent base committed to its traditional and nurturing environment. It struggled, however, to maintain consistent educational leadership — this was the key challenge facing the lay leadership at this crucial juncture.

Alignment of Leadership for Sustainability

Tammy Dollin became president of the school at the ten-year mark. Significantly, she was from one of the non-Orthodox families enrolling their children in DAT. Tammy and her Conservative rabbi husband chose DAT for its emphasis on skills-building in Jewish studies that respected families to make

their own religious decisions. Perhaps her status as somewhat of an outsider to the Orthodox community made it possible for her to take some hard decisions. Reflecting on her term as president, Tammy says, “I could facilitate tough conversations because I didn’t see other board members at Kiddush every week.” She embarked on a campaign to ensure DAT’s future by posing two questions about the ten-year-old school: 1) Do we still have a compelling vision? 2) Do we have the right leadership structure and systems in place to support our vision and grow successfully?

The ideal DAT graduate will embody the following behaviors:

- Aspire to be a Torah-observant Jew,
- Embody integrity, honesty and kindness,
- Be passionate about the pursuit of, and importance of education,
- Strive for further spiritual and personal growth,
 - Be respectful and tolerant of all,
- Identify with the people and land of Israel,
- Feel a responsibility for all Jews worldwide.

Although the commitment to the founding principles was still deep and strong, the Dollin board concluded that the school was still defining itself in a reactive mode: it operated as if its sole *raison d’être* was to be different from the other local day schools. In particular, the Jewish studies program lacked an articulated curriculum undergirded by a strong vision of the benefits Jewish learning would bring to students. What was needed, the board realized, was a vision that would provide a clear understanding of DAT’s uniqueness. The board proceeded to ask itself: What kind of graduate does DAT aspire to send into the world? Without knowing it, DAT’s leadership answered education professor Daniel Pekarsky’s essential vision question for schools: “What is an exemplary educational environment in view of our aspiration to cultivate certain kinds

of human beings?”¹ Pekarsky calls the answer to this question an “existential vision.” By forcing itself to address this question, the board developed a more coherent understanding of the school’s purpose.

If a rededication to the school’s vision was achieved during this process, much more work was needed to reorient the school’s leadership around best practices for growth and sustainability. Many board members were comfortable with the current informal style of decision-making, one that entailed a good deal of board intervention in the life of the school and an emphasis on keeping families happy, rather than challenging entrenched patterns of behavior. Dollin realized this was not going to be an easy transition.

Clarifying and Defining Leadership Roles

During this period, two practices became embedded in the school’s board culture: one was a concerted effort to hold up a mirror to current practices; and the second was an effort to learn from outside expertise, rather than rely solely on perspectives generated from within on DAT’s unique set of problems. A compelling vision needs a comprehensive and collaborative leadership model to enact it. Recognizing that individuals on the board engaged in decision-making without a clear demarcation between their responsibilities as board members and as parents, the board worked to clarify its own role. Tammy Dollin’s initial presentation to the board, which took a hard look at the financial situation of the school, concluded with a clear and strong message: the fiduciary side of the school is **our** problem as a board. The board then delegated specific tasks to its members, and developed a fair and transparent system to address tuition and contract questions. Tammy Dollin and her board showed community supporters and parents that transparency and consistency of operation (that is, procedures fair and open to all) were needed for growth and sustainability — *heimishness* alone was insufficient if the school was to be viable.

After systematizing its own operations and focusing its activities to the proper domain of board leadership, the board

¹ Daniel Pekarsky, “Vision and Education,” *Judaism & Education: Essays in Honor of Walter I. Ackerman*, ed. Haim Marantz (Beersheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 1998).

turned to another weakness in the school: the lack of clarity about divisions of labor between the board and the educational leadership. The board set about clarifying those lines of decision-making by adopting a set of Board Standards.

Currently, a clear formulation of leadership is published on the website:

The Board of Trustees is responsible for ensuring that the mission of the school is fulfilled through the hiring of and partnership with the Head of School. The Board sets long term strategic planning for capital and financial needs. Annual budgets, fundraising programs, tuition assistance policies, and governance issues are under the oversight of the Board with the partnership of school professionals.

It then moved on to the next step: professionalizing the school's educational leadership. While DAT was in a transitional moment between school heads, the board elevated a classroom teacher, Dr. Peggy Kasloff, to be a lead teacher and to oversee general studies. Her task was to bring order out of the somewhat muddled curriculum and to rebuild the academic excellence of DAT's general studies offerings.

As capable and respected as Kasloff was and still is, the board remained intent on honoring its founding charter, which limited the position of Head of School to an ordained Modern Orthodox rabbi. Finding that kind of rabbi to lead DAT had been a challenge. Denver, after all, was a bit off-the-beaten-track for Orthodox rabbis; DAT had struggled to recruit the right teaching personnel. And the challenges were only magnified when searching for a school head. From the beginning, the lay leadership had a sense that, given changing patterns within the local Jewish community, a new school head would have to commit fully to the school's vision and thereby uphold its co-educational orientation and commitment to Zionism,

two contentious issues within the world of Orthodox Judaism. In addition, board members believed the school head must also be prepared to send his own school-aged children to DAT. In a good many other Modern Orthodox schools, the rabbinic leaders tend to favor Haredi schools for their own children, a practice that sends an unhealthy message to their students. Believing it now knew how to govern, the board resolved to end the headship "revolving door" — a commitment harder to achieve in practice than in theory.

The current incumbent, Rabbi Daniel Alter, who was hired in 2006, was not recruited through a typical search process for a school head. The brief story of how he came to Denver and to the DAT headship illuminates the school's subsequent patterns of growth, professionalization, mission focus, and alignment of stakeholders. As a young rabbinic couple (armed with Yeshiva University degrees), Daniel and Rivka Alter came to Denver because they perceived opportunities for Modern Orthodox outreach in a rapidly growing Jewish community. The Alters were recruited in 2000 to EDOS — East Denver Orthodox Synagogue (founded in 1962) — Daniel, age 26 at the time, became the congregation's first rabbi and Rivka began teaching at DAT. Daniel came to realize that DAT's location in a neighborhood with tremendous growth potential would be a prime location for a satellite *minyan* of EDOS, located one mile away from the school building and a series of new residential neighborhoods. His intuition proved correct: Modern Orthodox families gravitated to the neighborhood where DAT was located, in part due to the availability of different types and costs of housing in the area. Once the satellite *minyan* took off, a symbiotic relationship developed between the school and *shul*. Both shared a commitment to outreach and growth. During this time, Rabbi Alter also became the school's *posek*, decisor on religious policy. In 2006, by mutual agreement with EDOS, the satellite became an independent entity, known as the DAT Minyan, and Alter amicably left EDOS to become the spiritual leader of what once had been a satellite *minyan*.

Around this time, DAT once again found itself without a Head of School. The board took a chance and asked Alter to apply his communal leadership skills to the position of interim Head of School while continuing as a pulpit rabbi. What he

lacked in graduate training in education, he made up for with his zeal for community-building, knowledge of the community, and experience as a parent in the school. Community-building would become a key facet of the way DAT would achieve mission-alignment among all stakeholders, whether school families affiliated with the DAT *minyan* or not.

The board realized that if Rabbi Alter was to guide the school effectively and build a community around the school through outreach, he would need a strong pedagogic leader to serve as his partner. Dr. Kasloff, who had overseen the development of an outstanding general studies curriculum and begun to instill a culture of continuing learning among teachers, agreed to join with Rabbi Alter to form the executive educational team as school principal. There were skeptics, including outside consultants, who thought their partnership was doomed, especially if the new Head of School transferred too much educational authority to a principal. Yet the two have been very successful together in their complimentary roles, and Alter now applies the same leadership model to the educational leadership of DAT's new high school. Somewhat playfully, Alter observes: "Maybe the place works because the rabbi is not an educator and the educator is not a rabbi." This observation certainly explains why space was created to allow Kasloff to grow as school leader. As Alter's confidence as an educational leader grew, he effectively blurred his official role when needed. For example, Alter is overseeing the rewriting and mapping of the Jewish studies curriculum. Still he believes his leadership is more effective when he delegates responsibilities and everyone is clear about his or her responsibilities.

DAT's efforts to align its board in support of the school's mission, followed by its appointment of a strong administrative team to head the school, exemplify a school that has become far clearer about its mission and how its various stakeholders must work in tandem to further its aims. Alignment began on the board level and then was instituted among its educational professionals. Because the DAT board trusted Rabbi Alter's skillset and commitment to the mission, they were open to his often creative and unconventional approach to school management and programming. The next step would be a concerted effort to build a collaborative faculty culture and strengthen communication between the school and parents about student progress.

Aligning for Growth and Expansion

It is safe to say that all Jewish day schools (perhaps excluding the Haredi *yeshivah* variety) face diversity challenges of one form or another. While pluralistic or Community schools seem to be the most obvious schools working with a broad range of families, denominational schools also attract diverse family populations for a variety of reason. This certainly is the case at DAT, a school with a clear mission as a Modern Orthodox champion that nonetheless attracts students from families with a broad range of Jewish practices. Why is this the case?

- Denver attracts Jews who are willing to live outside of the large Orthodox hubs on both coasts. In fact, they may move to Denver to escape from what some regard as the somewhat narrow Jewish life in those hubs. They therefore are, by disposition or experience, receptive to a diverse school population.
- The historically relatively small size of the Jewish community limited choices and necessitated collaboration by Jews of different backgrounds.
- Orthodox *kiruv* organizations in Denver have a track record of bringing families into increasing levels of observance. A fair number of such families find their way to DAT.
- Denver has many converts and also a high proportion who were drawn to Judaism as seekers, rather than as converts for the sake of marriage to a Jew.

For these and other reasons, both the school and also the *minyan* have a pluralistic orientation, taking in families ranging from those that are fairly typical in Modern Orthodoxy to the newly Orthodox, from Haredi-leaning families to members of a local Reform temple. As a result, quite a wide spectrum is evident in the school, including so-called "black hat" families, students with at least one set of non-Jewish grandparents, parents who converted under the auspices of Conservative or Reform rabbis², and even a small minority whose families do not observe the rules of *kashrut* or keep the Sabbath. This is evident too in the DAT *minyan*, described

² If the mother is such a convert, DAT requires an Orthodox conversion for the student in order to be enrolled.

by one participant as follows: “On Shabbat morning one finds sweaters and suits, *kippot* and *streimels*, *sheitels* and no head-coverings, shoes and sandals.” Despite this, the core of the school is committed to Orthodoxy of some type, with 90% of families observing the Sabbath.

DAT’s pedagogic approach enables the school to appeal to a broad swath of Jews without dictating to families how they must live their Jewish lives outside of school. While upholding a Modern Orthodox lifestyle as normative for its community, the school distinguishes between what takes place within its own walls and the separate “Jewish journeys” of its families. Educationally this means that DAT’s curriculum is built to develop the skills (including thinking skills) needed for access to knowledge, personal decision-making, and agency in the world. Even in a middle school class about *halakhah*, the *yeshivah*-trained rabbi with degrees in education emphasizes that no judgments are being made about individual or family practice; rather, tradition is viewed as “a touchstone to consider as families and students make their own decisions.” This resonates equally with parents who are not observant and who love the school for being “a real learning environment” and with more traditionally Orthodox parents who value the school for letting traditional sources speak for themselves.

One of Rabbi Alter’s mantras is that “mastery breeds enjoyment.” Especially in Judaic studies, teachers are not recruited for their charisma, which Rabbi Alter thinks is overrated in other day schools, but for their capacity to think innovatively and effectively with regard to teaching textual skills and content to a diverse population. Modern Orthodoxy for Alter means that “it is positive to engage with the world.” Skills-building in general studies likewise aligns with his vision. Thus, the school’s commitment to excellence in secular studies is not just about preparing students to get a good job, it is part and parcel of Alter’s religious philosophy. DAT it is about cultivating a type of human being who can engage with the world, steeped in Jewish **and** secular traditions.

DAT pedagogic philosophy can be enacted because the school has built a strong alignment between the administration and teaching staff. Because of the school’s commitment to the Colorado State Standards, Kasloff combined the general and

Judaic studies teachers into Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), to collaborate on planning standards-based lessons and assessments. For the Judaic studies staff, there is the additional challenge of having to create DAT’s own standards. This year, DAT is introducing a standards-based report card in the lower school in consonance with the philosophy that “learning at DAT [is] customized to suit the needs of all of our students, while still maintaining academic standards of education.” The new assessments are intended to avoid the finality of a grade, and instead to evaluate progress toward the mastery of skills. PLCs advance educational change in a highly collaborative fashion; alignment is developed organically between faculty and administration. When hiring new faculty, the principals look for individuals who can buy into the school’s educational philosophy and collaborative professional environment.

Parental buy-in and commitment to the mission is largely accomplished through the school’s pledge to paying close attention to each individual student. DAT has also adopted a standards-based reporting in grades K–8 to insure a systematic teacher-parent partnership that gives parents more and transparent information about their children’s progress. DAT is also using 21st social media so that parents can easily access information about the rationale and implementation of its shift from letter grades to ongoing progress reports. Parents are able to gain access to the school’s website where they can watch an animated video about standards-based reporting prepared by Dr. Kasloff and Rabbi Reiffman, a leading Jewish studies teacher. DAT’s communication with the parent body thereby has been upgraded for use by for the YouTube generation.

When it opened a new high school three years ago,³ DAT was confronted by new challenges to its relationship with its stakeholders. One such test arose in the biology class: Should the school teach evolution? And if so, how? Rabbi Alter treated the question as an opportunity to open a conversation about what DAT’s pedagogic vision is all about: “We take both science and Torah seriously and have humility regarding our understanding of both,” he has stated. It is important to Alter that students come to understand the essential questions religion and science ask in common, and also when

³ An earlier attempt to open a high school proved unsuccessful.

they seem at odds. Rabbi Alter assumes that open-minded conversations help foster Jewish commitments in parents and students. And by modeling a non-defensive openness, the school is teaching its students how to live as Jews in the world and how to create community.

While openness to new ideas and innovation is the hallmark of curricular decision-making in the school, communal norms remain essential to culture building. This requires careful attention in a school with a diverse family population that is led by a Modern Orthodox rabbi. Rabbi Alter freely concedes that some issues are too controversial or not important enough to warrant a major confrontation. He tables some issues in order to preserve the unity of the school community as a central value. Sometimes, though, the tough questions cannot be avoided, especially when they threaten to bring to the fore tensions between the school's Orthodox worldview and the spirit of open-minded inquiry it wishes to foster. It takes a lot of careful listening combined with sound decision-making to maintain the balance. Since the majority of the school's parent body is affiliated with the DAT *minyan*, Alter has a natural setting for ongoing conversation with the bulk of families. To provide all families with the same open channels of communication, Alter has initiated parlor meetings in other neighborhoods, and he maintains an active blog.

The DAT High School: New Challenges

DAT's decision to open a secondary school has raised a series of new challenges. Rabbi Alter identified a local educator, Dr. Juli Kramer, to serve as the principal. As she puts it, her role is to serve as the "keeper of the mission." A Denver native with a liberal Jewish background, Dr. Kramer has informal Jewish education leadership experience and a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction; she accepted the challenge to create an innovative program that could further actualize the high school's educational vision and religious philosophy — even if the latter is not exactly her own. Together with her assistant principal, Naomi Lev (who has a background in Jewish studies and is a doctoral student), Kramer brings cutting edge educational methods into the high school, an innovative approach greatly valued by the parent body of the high school.

"Many individuals, including some of our parents, tend to see this diversity as a challenge and a problem. While diversity does create challenges, I do think that when celebrated and managed appropriately, diversity is a positive attribute for a school such as ours. School should be a place where our students learn how to succeed in life."

Rabbi Daniel Alter,
Introduction to Philosophy of Diversity

Even among its local public and private competitors, the DAT High School is recognized as cutting-edge. By design, the high school is no mere continuation of the K–8 program. DAT students moving from 8th to 9th grade want and need something different. Initially located in a large house a few blocks from the main DAT campus, the high school currently enrolls 28 students (grades 9–12) and now rents space from a nearby Reform synagogue; students are exposed to a rigorous education (with ample AP opportunities) combined with a most elaborate program for Problem Based Learning, which includes *Extended Classroom Experiences (ECE's)*, and experiential education, known as *Immersion*s — aligned with, and not in addition to, the curriculum. Like in the lower and middle schools, teachers and administrators become aligned by engaging in the ongoing work of program and curriculum development in the collaborative PLCs.

On the high school level, DAT wants students to see themselves as contributing stakeholders. Through the ECE's and Immersion, students practice how to apply what they learn to their individual lives, school culture, and society. High school learning at DAT is not theoretical, nor is it only about decision-making for adulthood. Although the current facilities of the high school impose some constraints, DAT has not permitted these limitations to impede the convening of community discussions whenever either students or faculty members perceive there is a need for a communal forum. Because they know their views are valued, students come to appreciate that they are stakeholders in DAT and the larger society they inhabit.

We believe in learning beyond walls. Rooted in our commitment to experiential education, ECE's occur on a weekly basis. They relate either to ongoing research, community building, or social action.

(From the High School's web page)

DAT's Expansive Commitments

As DAT proceeds into its third decade, its leadership continues to define, refine, and align what the school is all about. To a great extent, it's about articulating unstated philosophies in order to achieve clarity, greater levels of “buy-in,” and guideposts for dealing with future decision-making. Last year, a committee led by Rabbi Alter produced a **Philosophy of Diversity**. Although perhaps prompted by policy considerations of a religious nature for the new high school, the resulting document is an eloquent re-statement of DAT's essential educational commitments: The school strives to provide a transformative experience for students (and their families) consistent with Orthodox religious values, even as it honors the diversity of families that it seeks to attract and integrate into its school community. The following excerpt from the Diversity Statement captures that bold vision:

We believe that empowering our students to be open minded, empathetic, and understanding of other viewpoints and belief systems is a Torah value as well as a core competency in today's global world. Fear of the other's opinions tends to stem from a lack of self confidence in one's own belief system. As such, we recognize the importance of first imparting a strong sense of Torah values, identity, self-knowledge and confidence in our students. With these tools, our students will possess a self confidence that allows them to learn from others when appropriate, and share their own viewpoints in a respectful fashion with those that hold different perspectives. They will feel comfortable venturing into unfamiliar intellectual territory so that they can act as opinion shapers in the Jewish community and wider society. With these tools, our students will be able to approach others' perspectives from a secure vantage point. This will allow them to both learn from others as well as to share their own

viewpoints in a respectful fashion. In a world that continues to become more polarized, we consider the clustering of like-minded thinkers into virtual ghettos to be a negative phenomenon that leads to “group think,” intolerance, and lack of respect for others.

According to reports from parents and educators, graduates of DAT already carry that sense of confidence into the world. Those who continue their education at Yeshiva University and Stern College are reputed to be among the most secure in their own skins and strongly committed to the ideals of Modern Orthodoxy. As to the parent body: It is striking how many parents from a range of backgrounds commend the school for its openness and receptivity to diverse family backgrounds. They feel it is right for their own families and the correct approach for the relatively small Modern Orthodox community of Denver.

Symptomatic of DAT's forward-looking orientation is the school's decision to create a partnership with Ekar Farms and Community Gardens to develop the underutilized acreages adjacent to the school. Ekar Farm and Community Gardens is a communal urban farm, inspired by Jewish values. The bulk of produce grown at Ekar is donated to the Jewish Family Service's Weinberg Food pantry. DAT students have the unique opportunity to use the farm as a learning tool for many areas of Jewish law and put Jewish values into practice through ongoing experiential education. Collaboration with this urban farming community effort literally and figuratively further grounds DAT's essential vision of outreach and community-building.

This initiative speaks volumes for the willingness of DAT to experiment with new forms and work with populations and institutions that go far beyond its Modern Orthodox base. What grounds the school as it continually strives to innovate is its leadership's commitment to transparency and its Modern Orthodox ideology. DAT's leaders are candid about the challenges they face in the coming years: managing the growth of the high school population; addressing space limitations in the lower school; keeping up with sound financial management, planning, and development; and balancing the school's innovative educational thinking with DAT's Modern Orthodox outlook and its diverse stakeholders. As they face those challenges, the school's leadership benefits from the efforts invested by those at the top — on the board level and the educational leadership level — to align all those who participate in the DAT community in the furtherance of a clear and transparent Jewish mission.

Questions for Further Consideration:

1. Looking at your school's Jewish mission and vision, are there aspects or strategic issues that warrant a re-examination?
2. How sure are you that all stakeholders are aligned with the existing vision in ways that allow your school to move forward cohesively?
3. To what extent is the founding narrative of your school still significant? Does this narrative propel or hinder future growth?
4. Does your school face boundary-stretching challenges, unresolved curricular decisions, or unaddressed questions pertaining to communal norms? Have you been able to create a culture that allows for these issues to be discussed openly and productively among stakeholders?
5. In its short history, DAT learned a lot about leadership for sustainability. What lessons did it need to learn about the proper role of lay leadership? How did it go about learning and applying those lessons? What's on, or should be on, the agenda for your school when it looks at leadership development for the board?
6. When DAT reconsidered its founding vision, it chose not to revisit its vision for what it needed in a Head of School. For the DAT community, a personal commitment to Modern Orthodox day school education is a *sine qua non* of top school leadership as evidenced by certain litmus tests. Has your school had occasion to engage in discussion about the relationship between the personal and professional of school professional leadership? Have leadership questions been framed in terms of what is needed to achieve the vision under present circumstances and into the future?
7. Rabbi Alter admits that he'd rather duck some issues if they are likely to cause distraction. How does an effective leader know when to do this? When does avoidance preserve community as a value and when does it damage it?
8. How has your school approached the challenges of diversity? How do those challenges compare to those of DAT? DAT felt that it was essentially articulating an unwritten philosophy. Are there unwritten philosophies in your school that would benefit from formal articulation for the reasons stated in this case study?