

JEWISH DAY SCHOOL NEW PARENT STUDY 2021

BACKGROUND

After two decades of slow erosion in the numbers of students enrolled in non-Orthodox Jewish day schools in North America, the 18 months since the onset of COVID-19 have seen an unanticipated change.¹ Many schools have reported a spate of inquiries and enrollments among children transferring from public schools, sometimes in the middle of the year. It seems that families noticed how well day schools were responding to the challenge of offering a solid and stable education during the pandemic. They preferred what they saw to what their children were experiencing in their previous schools.

Plenty of anecdotal information attests to what has prompted such choices. Until now there have been no systematic data gathered and analyzed about this phenomenon. Little is known about what previously led these families **not** to enroll in a Jewish day school. The extent to which they intend to stay whenever the pandemic is over is also unclear. This information will be valuable not only in helping schools retain as many as possible of these families but also in what it might reveal about how to woo other mission-appropriate families who have not yet opted for day school.

Prizmah: Center for Jewish Day Schools recruited the team at Rosov Consulting to explore these issues, focused on the non-Orthodox day school sectors where this phenomenon has been most dramatic. Animated by its mission to strengthen the North American day school field, Prizmah seeks to make a contribution to the field by gaining a better understanding of what had previously kept families away, what drew them now, and what might keep them inside the day school system in the years ahead. In this way, the study would enhance the longer-term potential of schools to recruit and retain families.

METHODOLOGY

Research Questions

To better understand what has taken place over the last 18 months, the study was constructed around the following research questions:

CHOOSING AN ALTERNATIVE TO DAY SCHOOL

1. Why did people whose children have now transferred to Jewish day school previously send their children to a non-Jewish school, and what kept them there? What, by comparison, did parents previously think of Jewish day school that they didn't enroll their children?

¹ In November 2020, Prizmah reported a 4.3% increase in enrollment at non-Orthodox schools from 2019–2020 to 2020–2021.

APPROACHING DAY SCHOOL

2. Why and in what ways did Jewish day school become an option for these families? In what ways did families become aware of this option? What were parents looking for in their child's school when they switched, besides that the school was open?

EMBRACING DAY SCHOOL

3. What have parents liked most about the schools they have joined, and what have they missed compared to the schools their children previously attended? How likely are these transfer families to keep their children in Jewish day schools, and what would it take to keep them there?

An interview protocol was developed with input from the Prizmah leadership team and a couple of current Heads of School designed to address these questions and provide additional nuance through further probing of these central questions.

Research Sample

Prizmah and Rosov Consulting worked together to recruit families from 24 schools all of which are constituted as Community, Conservative, or Reform day schools. Out of this sample, 22 of the schools are elementary schools, one is a K-12 school, and one is a high school. The schools are dispersed across North America. Thanks to a partnership with the Jim Joseph Foundation and UJA Federation of Greater Toronto, the sample included a concentration of five schools in the Bay Area and five in the Greater Toronto Area. These partnerships enabled the exploration of community-level factors in both of these cases as a supplement to the continental-wide study, a dimension we return to at the end of the report.

Participating schools provided the research team with a list of transfer families who agreed to be interviewed as part of the study. A parent from each of these families was invited to participate in an interview. If this person did not respond, then a second parent was contacted, where possible. If neither parent responded, one further invitation was sent to both parents. Overall, 59% of invitees participated in a 30-minute interview, making for 114 interviews in total. Interviews were conducted between April and June 2021, with one parent from each family unit participating.

Data Analysis

The data for this study were gathered by means of semi-structured interviews. The interviewers followed a consistent script of questions but gave interviewees a chance to describe their perceptions and experiences in their own words. If needed, the interviewer probed the meaning of what they said beyond what was in the interview script. Because more than 100 interviews were conducted, we were able to identify recurring patterns in what people said; we did not just document the distinctive and often personal ways in which they spoke. Coding and quantifying qualitative data in this way yields valuable insights into general trends, on the one hand, while preserving idiosyncratic or personal exceptions, on the other. Typically, in what follows, we identify a phenomenon as noteworthy if it was evident or referenced by at least a quarter of the sample (28 out of 114 interviewees). We assume that if this number of interviewees made mention of an issue, it probably occurs at other schools beyond those in our sample. In addition, we reference exceptions associated with smaller numbers of interviewees if those exceptions indicate the existence of a phenomenon that is neither widely known nor well understood. Finally, we also paid attention to what interviewees did not say, especially if related to phenomena widely assumed to exist. In what follows, we note when this was the case.

FINDINGS

I. Choosing an Alternative to Day School

One of the special opportunities afforded by this study is in having been able to speak with tens of families that had previously chosen *not* to enroll their child at a Jewish day school but that then, due to an unexpected change in circumstances (the outbreak of a pandemic), opted to do so. These families are especially interesting because their subsequent choices indicate that they were neither completely disinterested in what day schools offer nor were they dogmatically opposed to the concept of day school education. In a sense, we might conceive of them as having been “near misses.” We have a chance to learn why this adjacent population found a non-Jewish school more appealing in normal times, and we can infer what, if anything, at that time could have tipped their choices in favor of day school. In these respects, three broad reasons loom large.

COST

The most common reason for not enrolling in a day school, mentioned by three-quarters of the interviewees, was financial. To be clear, however, few members of the sample indicated that they could not afford the tuition; their subsequent enrollment in day school makes clear that cost was not an insurmountable barrier. Day school tuition was an obstacle as part of a broader set of personally weighed financial calculations.

Sunk Cost Fallacy: Economists characterize the sunk cost fallacy as “our tendency to follow through on an endeavor if we have already invested time, effort or money into it, whether or not the current costs outweigh the benefits.”² In this instance, interviewees explained that they were already paying high taxes associated with where they lived, which they saw as fees-in-kind for public schools; some even chose to pay over the odds for a house proximate to good public schools. They weren’t then prepared to pay for a private school, Jewish or otherwise, no matter how good, on top of the investment they were already making. This is a strong expression of the sunk cost fallacy: continuing with an investment even if it would be rational to give it up.

Opportunity Cost: Day school is, as many interviewees conveyed, a “serious financial commitment.” Families reflected on how while they are somehow meeting the tuition challenge today, they previously doubted their ability to do so. They had not been willing to endure the strain this commitment placed on the rest of their household finances especially when they wouldn’t qualify for financial support from the school. It wasn’t just a question of the level of the tuition they’d have to bear, but what they’d need to forgo in order to pay tuition. In economic terms, opportunity cost is “the loss of potential gain from other alternatives when one alternative is chosen.” Paying for day school tuition meant sacrificing other investments of value.

² “The Sunk Cost Fallacy,” The Decision Lab, accessed August 11, 2021, <https://thedecisionlab.com/biases/the-sunk-cost-fallacy/>.

Perceived Value: Finally, expressing a related set of ideas were parents who were able to pay the fees but hadn't thought it worth doing so when there were equally good, if not better, public schools a few blocks away available for free. In this sense, what day school offered wasn't worth the expense. By the same token, other parents, and some of these parents too, were interested in their child receiving a sound Jewish education or making friends with other Jewish children but were convinced that there were other good-enough, more cost-effective ways of doing so. On both accounts, day school did not have enough perceived value to justify the outlay.

Taken together, these perspectives indicate that the price of day school education was not in and of itself what kept these parents away before the pandemic; the issue was how parents related to these costs in psychological terms. In practice, this distinction is important, since it implies that lowering fees would have limited impact on parental choices unless associated with other steps to address the psychological drivers of those choices.

LOGISTICS

A less commonly mentioned challenge, but still raised by a third of the sample, were the logistics associated with a school's location. Interviewees explained that the distance of school from their home was a serious consideration in their previous choices and then when they made a change. Interviewees asserted that if day school was further from their home, they would not have been able to send their children there now either. As one interviewee expressed it: "Proximity was important—we both work and couldn't drive children to and from school every day." The pandemic changed this equation. With many parents now working at home, they had greater flexibility to participate in carpools and the like. Their capacity to get their children to school changed unexpectedly.

This phenomenon creates some uncertainty about whether these particular families will keep their children in schools once/if they return to their previous workplaces. But, as with the tuition challenge, there is a strong sense that while logistics can be objectively challenging, the scale of the challenge posed by those logistics depends on the individual's readiness to find a solution—their perceived value of the effort involved in getting their children to school. As will be seen below, after a year or more in this setting, when parents have gained a personal appreciation for what day school offers, their previous calculus of choices can and does shift. They are more willing to tackle the logistics involved.

VALUES

Diversity

A third of the sample indicated that they had originally been drawn to public school, rather than day school, by the prospect of their child being educated in what they called a “diverse environment.” Rightly or wrongly, they perceived day schools to lack diversity, and they actively sought a place that would not shelter their child from a “real world experience.” For some, this was an inevitable consequence of the differences between public schools and private schools: if parents are expected to pay tuition, they assumed one wouldn’t find the same degree of socioeconomic diversity. For others, the problem ran deeper. The very fact that day schools accept only or primarily Jewish-identified students feeds—they argued—an insular, exclusivist, and monochrome culture. One interviewee explained how these circumstances create an “insular, small, privileged, white, all-Jewish environment; not reflective of the world.” Others employed a variety of similar adjectives: “homogeneous,” “cliquish,” “insular,” “sheltered,” “not the real world” and “closed and claustrophobic.” We’ll see shortly how some parents revised these assessments once their children actually attended a day school, finding unexpected socioeconomic, denominational, and occasionally racial diversity; while others still felt that even while day schools were more diverse than they had imagined, as a family they were compromising on important values when not enrolling in public school.

It’s worth noting that, when reflecting on why they had perceived day schools to lack diversity, relatively few interviewees (a little over 10%) associated this quality with wealth, privilege, or pretentiousness. Such perceptions did exist, even among those who eventually transferred—as one interview put it, “I was concerned that the families would be really entitled and have different values”—but these sentiments reflect a view held by very few people. When interviewees say they are looking for more diversity, they primarily mean racial diversity.

Too Religious

Far more widespread was an assumption that day schools were particularly religious environments, a view expressed by just under half of the sample. Some stated this as fact—something they had assumed about day schools before enrolling their children in one themselves—while for others this “fact” had been a strong reason to stay away. Among those who were actively put off because of this perception, there were two distinct concerns. First, that a particular religious ideology would be forced on their child, that their child would be “brainwashed,” and that religion “would be forced down their throats.” (“We thought the religious aspect would be more overt than it seems to be, in a more uncomfortable way; like intrusive.”) Second, they worried that as a Reform/interfaith/not particularly observant/not very connected family, they simply would not fit in. They’d be different from everyone else. (“We thought it was too religious for our family. When we started looking, we felt that the people there must be very observant—and we weren’t sure if we’d fit in.”) One way or another, even when they conveyed seriousness about their child gaining a Jewish education, they had thought that there was a more balanced way of doing so through “school, temple, and family [without] Jewish insularity.”

The Bottom Line: Who We Are

Concerns such as these focus on specific dimensions of day school education and what made it less desirable than the alternatives. For about a quarter of our sample, there was an even bigger issue informing their choice. For these parents, it was less about their perception or misperception of who went to day schools and what happened there, it was more a question of how they thought of themselves. They were deeply committed to public education and what it represents: “we’re public-school proponents,” as one interviewee put it. And as another explained, “We’re generally supporters of public schooling. It took extraordinary circumstances to make us pull her out.” The stories these families tell of their transition to day school are echoed in research about other parents who also never imagined enrolling their children in day school. When people have a reason for checking out their local day school and are called to suppress their assumptions about what it means to be a day school family, they can end up being surprised by how much at home they feel. Until they try it out, they don’t see themselves as the kinds of people who would enroll their children in a private, Jewish school.

ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS

Three further points deserve mentioning in relation to parents’ perceptions of day schools and their previous decision to opt for a different form of schooling for their children, usually public school.

First, while parents evidently had strong reasons for not choosing day school, they were not oblivious to what day schools offered. Interviewees share that they previously knew day schools to be supportive and to include “strong communities.” They had been aware of them as “nurturing environments,” “caring,” “warm,” “having a strong emphasis on community,” “welcoming,” “loving,” and “friendly.” It seems that when, for one reason or another, they decided to explore transferring to a day school, these qualities (many of which constitute the flip side of the exclusiveness and homogeneity that kept others away) were front of mind.

More striking still—even if an argument from silence—just a handful of interviewees reported that they had previously assumed that day schools were weaker academically than the alternatives and had therefore stayed away. In fact, interviewees more often reported that they previously assumed day schools were academically stronger or at least as strong as the alternatives, in part because of their smaller class sizes and in part because of their academic culture. Families had chosen the alternatives not because day schools were inferior on these counts, but—as we have seen—for other financial, logistical, or ideological reasons.

Finally, what seems to have kept many families out of day schools before the pandemic once they had chosen a school for their child, and despite (some) awareness of what day school offered, was inertia. As long as their children were generally satisfied in school, most felt no need to change no matter how appealing the alternatives. The path of least resistance was to continue to send their children to the same schools until something disruptive (primarily COVID, though for some, other issues arose as well) caused them to make the shift. As one interviewee put it, “It was always in the back of our heads, but our children were doing well in public [school].”

Conclusion: Reviewing the accounts of these parents whose children are now enrolled in day school, it is evident that some had previously been “near misses;” enrolling their children in day school has been a plausible option for them. Overall, most report being able to afford day school tuition but having not been willing to undertake the expense or the financial hardships involved; similarly, they hadn’t been inclined to tackle the logistics of getting their children to school when those were challenging. Some were and still are compelled by values associated with public education, especially values of diversity and inclusion; but as their subsequent choices show, these values are not dogmas which allow no room for compromise. All told, one is left wondering what it would have taken to recruit these families even without a pandemic, and how many such families there are across the continent.

II. Approaching Day School

Whatever they previously thought of day school, all the families we interviewed nevertheless transferred their children into the Jewish school system. They all reached the same decision. Why they did so differed markedly. Their choices were shaped, on the one hand, by what prompted them to leave their previous schools (push factors) and, on the other hand, by what prompted them to join their current school (pull factors). In this section we explore this mix of factors.

PUSH FACTORS

Thrown Over a Precipice

A sizable proportion of the sample—close to half of the interviewees—insisted that if it hadn't been for the COVID-19 pandemic, they would neither have left their previous school nor have chosen day school. "We were looking for commitment to in-person education and that was the only reason to switch." And from another parent: "The main thing was the COVID response of the public school—it was not open for in-person. We wanted five days a week, in person, full curriculum." Some of these families were what we previously called "near misses," but once they had made a choice, there hadn't been sufficiently compelling reasons to reassess that choice—until the pandemic, that is. These families made clear that their values and priorities hadn't changed and that day school hadn't suddenly become much more appealing. The only reason they changed was because the day school was open and was offering in-person education. One interviewee put it bluntly: "100% COVID. We would not have considered private school without COVID." We might say that the pandemic threw their lives over an unforeseen precipice and their local day school offered a parachute which allowed them some kind of soft landing.

Reaching a Tipping Point

Another group of parents—slightly fewer than half—also explained that if it hadn't been for COVID they too would probably not have switched, but that they had nevertheless been quite interested in day school previously. In effect, the COVID-19 pandemic constituted a tipping point. For some, it brought to the foreground concerns they already had about the school in which they were enrolled: "[Our children are] not very social and the previous school is a huge school so [they] got lost there. But it's a good school, there's just no community there. The reason we transferred was related to COVID. [The Jewish day school] was doing a much better job with in-person teaching and keeping kids connected to the school." For others, COVID prompted a reassessment of the financial or logistical challenges involved in enrolling in day school: "We wanted our child to be in the classroom. We had thought before [she] would be a better fit at [the Jewish day school] but we didn't want to because of tuition. ... We made the move because of the uncertainty of this year." And for another family: "COVID was the biggest driver. We're just kind of lucky we were already interested, ideologically. It didn't seem feasible before—too far from our house. It helped that when COVID hit, we knew we were interested in another option."

These families epitomize the “near misses” we previously identified. These parents had a preexisting interest in day school but hadn’t previously felt the need to switch. Tuition, distance, and other factors had kept them away from Jewish school, while different factors, such as social challenges and the learning quality of their prior school, may have been pushing them toward Jewish day school. With the advent of COVID, their issues with their previous schools were magnified, and/or the factors that previously kept them away from Jewish day school seemed less important in the face of the pandemic. They reached a tipping point.

Already On Their Way

A small group of interviewees revealed that they would have switched to day school at some point regardless of the pandemic, in effect signaling that they had already been on their way before this past year. While there may be an element of confirmation bias in these responses, with people choosing to highlight the inevitability of their current choices, the narratives associated with this perspective are compelling. First, there are those who explain that their gameplan had always been to transfer their children once they reached certain grades (most commonly, first grade or middle school), and COVID just sped up the process: “We always knew we wanted him at day school. We figured we would switch for first grade. The pandemic accelerated that.” Others employ the image that “the writing was on the wall;” for various reasons, it was inevitable that they would have switched. “Our child was one of the only Jewish students in the school, they never really fit in. We had friends who were already enrolled, and we were hearing how well they were doing, the sense of community, opportunities the school had. We applied not knowing anything, praying for financial assistance. We just felt it would be better, from everything we heard. It would be a better environment for them.” We cannot know for sure whether these families would really have made a change, but surely COVID provided a stimulus even if it did not really figure in their explanations.

Within the Day School's Orbit

One of the most intriguing findings to surface in our probing of why and how families made a change was that almost all of the interviewees had some kind of prior connection with the day school. They were not learning about the school for the first time during this period. Some had even previously attended, worked at, or sent their children to these schools or to camps and preschools on these sites. This finding reinforces the sense that these families were already proximate to the day school universe. They had not been the targets of a recruitment campaign at this time, as they might have been when their children were in preschool. They simply knew how to find their way in by tapping a word-of-mouth network of friends, family, colleagues, and other community members. Near misses or not, it seems that a substantial population exists alongside and relatively close to those already enrolled in schools.

Pull Factors

When parents talk about what drew them to the school to which they transferred, it is significant that three-quarters of the sample made clear that their concerns were not simply limited to the question of whether or not the school would be open for in-person classes. In other words, although these may be unusual times, the factors informing whether parents enrolled their children were ultimately consistent with those that concern parents in normal times. Their considerations went beyond whether their child would have access to a robust educational experience despite the pandemic.

Quality of the Education

Slightly fewer than half of these families made clear that they would not have switched if they couldn't be sure the school would offer a good enough, even high-quality, education. Without the tools to fully assess these matters, they referred to features of the environment that would indicate such things: smaller classrooms; a more individualized approach to their child's learning and wellbeing; special support from a teacher, tutor, or specialist; and a whole-child approach to learning. In short, parents wanted to be sure that the school would be able to meet their child's unique needs. As one interviewee explained: "We wanted to be sure our child is cared for as an individual, not just a number. That there would be people looking out for them and their needs ... enhancing education. Not the lowest common denominator."

Jewish Culture

Given that they previously had not chosen to enroll in a Jewish school, it might be unexpected that about a quarter of the sample indicated that Jewish education or culture was an important contributor to their decision to transfer. One family shed light on this phenomenon: "We were very concerned about Jewish education prior to the pandemic, but the pandemic pushed us over the edge." It had previously been a latent concern but not sufficiently important. Others clarified further that Jewish education had not previously been of special importance to them but that was because they hadn't realized what it could be until they started day school. As one interviewee expressed it: "Our lack of experience with [Jewish education] before kept us away from knowing it's a value." And another: "It wasn't a factor in the first place. We knew it's a good school. But now we've transformed ourselves around it. Now we think it is important." One might say that when it comes to Jewish education many families really don't get it until they get it.

Aligned Values

We saw earlier that a range of values-informed considerations shaped parents' previous choice of school. It's not surprising then that this continued to be the case when making a change, with about a quarter of the sample saying that this was an important consideration. School choice is one of the most powerful expressions of parents' shared or negotiated identities. In most cases, it's of great importance to parents that their child's school is consistent with how they think of themselves, even when their exploration of a new school is strongly prompted by pragmatic considerations. Elaborating on why they transferred to a particular school, one interviewee offered a detailed enumeration of what mattered: "[The school] has values that align with us. [They] care about creating a wholesome person. Not just high achieving. Focus on community service, socially aware, giving back." And another: "[The school demonstrates strong values: Helping those in need, donations for underserved. They don't just focus on Jewish community but community at large." Transferring from a public setting, one can understand why these particular values so were important.

Conclusion: Looking at the push and pull factors that contribute to changing schools alongside one another helps clarify how while the act of transferring from one school to another was unexpected for most families and somewhat made under duress, for others ultimately it was not such a radical step. About half of the sample had already been contemplating making such a move or had reached a tipping point. When they made the move, their assessment of which school to join involved weighing a set of considerations that exercise most parents during normal times. The influx of families into day schools during the pandemic may have been unusual, but it conformed to the "laws of physics" of school choice.

III. Embracing Day School

With their children having spent between six months and a year in Jewish day school by the time we spoke with them, our interviewees had enough time to develop a well-informed opinion of their family's experience. Asked about their impressions of the schools to which they had transferred, their responses are especially interesting because they are colored by comparison to their previous schools, a comparison many explicitly made. Each of the schools that participated in this study will receive an anonymized summary of these assessments; here we highlight the most common themes across the sample, opening a window on the strengths and weaknesses of the contemporary day school experience in the face of rare societal challenges.

Overall, the families have been very pleased with the experience, and, as will be seen in the next section, about three-quarters expect that it will be very likely that their children will stay at the school to which they transferred. Whatever their previous reservations, they have embraced day school.

NAVIGATING THE PANDEMIC

It was the pandemic that prompted almost all of the sample to transfer schools, and to a very high degree parents have been thrilled with how schools have responded to the challenges posed by this situation. More than 85% of respondents hailed the schools for their nimbleness, their trustworthiness, and the sense of safety they cultivated in the face of an acutely challenging situation. Some interviewees were disappointed that aspects of their child's and their own experience were constrained by health regulations, but they all praised the schools for making every effort to maintain as full an educational experience as possible while keeping their children safe.



The school has strict COVID protocols—we feel totally safe there. They're very nimble and transitioned well to the COVID environment. It may be different, but we still feel involved—not missing out on anything.



School leadership is outstanding, doing an outstanding job at giving kids some sense of normalcy, keeping the learning going, the fun going. Very impressed with the leadership.



Excellent job with COVID: constant communication, protocols. That's a good part of it being a small community—they're able to work it out. Because everyone wants to be at school and involved, as parents and as a community, everyone is working together and following protocols, not being risky, to keep everyone safe.

As can be seen, parents attribute the schools' effectiveness in responding to the pandemic to structural and cultural features of the schools—such as their intimacy and sense of community—features which they appreciate in their own right, and which are also special assets at this time.

RELATIONSHIPS

The most cited of these features, again referenced by more than 85% of the sample, has been the strength, frequency, and variety of positive relationships at the school: among the students, among families, and between teachers and families. One can understand why, for new arrivals, the warmth and intensity of these relationships would be especially welcome, when they might have feared it being hard to break into a close-knit community or that they might be stigmatized for not having embraced this community in normal times.

These positive relationships have taken various forms.

AMONG STUDENTS

We did not hear any interviewee complain that their child had found it hard to make friends. On the contrary, about a third of the families noted how readily their children formed close and positive relationships with their peers despite joining already formed social groups. In doing so, parents highlighted two points: first their relief given how much time their children previously spent stuck at home, and second the extent to which there was a perceived Jewish dimension to the quickness with which their children formed these relationships, as demonstrated by the following interviewees:



Our kids feel very welcomed. They've integrated very well, made friends. They like being with other kids. Because they were home last spring, they're very aware of the alternative to the current situation. They've really made friends.



[Our child] made friends so quickly. [She's] connected more quickly with kids here than from public school the year before. The Jewish connection makes it a lot easier.

AMONG FAMILIES

It's not just the children who feel welcomed. The parents do, too. About a third of the interviewees explicitly celebrated what they call a sense of community at the schools and a sense of feeling welcomed and included. It was this aspect of being at day school that interviewees most frequently contrasted with what they experienced at their children's previous schools. Interviewees make clear that this has been such a welcome part of the experience in their new schools because of being so unexpected, first because it so much contrasted with what they encountered at other schools and second because they hadn't imagined it would be possible given COVID restrictions and the limits on conventional social gatherings at school. In this respect, day schools really do seem to have exceeded all expectations.



There's a very close-knit community and a lot of trust; families take care of one another. We didn't see that in other schools.



I felt really welcomed really quickly, and a part of the fabric of what's going on. Huge sense of community and belonging that I have never felt before.



I wasn't expecting to feel so connected to the community given that COVID prevented us from seeing one another in person—the sense of connection between parents. We talk online, they've reached out to us and made us feel welcomed, like part of the class. Didn't expect to get to know anyone without in person school functions. It's been a happy surprise.



I love the community. It has been really helpful for us. We really feel part of the community. We weren't aware of that dimension before; a pleasant surprise.

BETWEEN TEACHERS AND THE FAMILIES

An additional ingredient in the families' connection to the schools has been the relationship between students, parents, and teachers. First, interviewees articulated a sense that their children's teachers really care about their children and give them whatever attention they need. They convey how this feels authentic and not reactive. And, again, they especially celebrate this phenomenon because of the degree to which it has happened despite the challenges created by COVID regulations.



Teachers care if they complete work. They want them to share about their lives, have the opportunity to talk about what they care about, think about. They matter.



Both secular and Hebrew teachers are very responsive to me. They take it one step further, they proactively send me messages, especially in beginning before I even asked them to update me on his status and needs, they're specific in what he's achieved. I know what's going on with him. His successes are their successes. They treat him like one of their family. Not just once but several times, they've shared with me about his successes, anecdotes, etc.

Second, the parents express particular gratitude for the extent to which teachers communicate with them, a feature they're inclined to contrast with their experience in public school. These interactions are not, in their eyes, a technical matter. They both tap into and feed the sense of having joined a community where people look out for one another. This was an experience noted by more than three-quarters of the sample.



Communicated extremely well, very clear that they truly on a personal level care about every child and want to succeed educationally and emotionally. Been very responsive to our needs—new situation, did it last minute, and they've been great at helping us integrate into the school community. When we have an issue we know we can reach out.



Teacher calls and texts me all the time, lots of communication. In public school, the teachers were not personable, formal ways of contact. It's the opposite here, to the point where I can talk to [their] teacher about other things. Open door. Different degree of availability.



We feel very engaged, communication is good, lots of activities, Zoom meetings. More like a real community on top of just a school. It feels better in that sense.

ACADEMIC PROGRAM

We imagine that parents would have been disappointed if schools had excelled at cultivating relationships and a sense of community but had not met their academic expectations. The interviewees make clear that this was not the case. About a third of the parents specially noted their satisfaction with the quality of the educational experience at the school, some underlining how much this surpassed their expectations coming in, with the school matching or exceeding their public-school experience. We'll see below that a minority of interviewees expressed disappointed at the day school curriculum's lack of breadth due to what they see as time-pressure created by the Jewish curriculum. At the same time, a much larger proportion underlined their satisfaction with both the curriculum's breadth and depth. This inconsistency suggests that when it comes to this matter, it is not possible to generalize about the day school sector as a whole or even across the study sample.



There's more attention and smaller class sizes. They're doing what they can to help kids like school. They do a good job as far as taking them outside, learning by doing, with hands on work. ... One thing I like about [the school] is that they integrate lessons, integrate a concept through multiple classes—get little minds to see the big picture, in different lights and different subjects.



Academically, it has been an improvement: more rigorous, more challenging, more individualized attention. In public school, we felt we had to supplement the academic stuff as well. We can now focus on fun stuff outside of school, knowing we can trust the school to educate the kids.



We didn't expect social-emotional learning; it's not there in public or the typical curriculum component, but it really helps our child. The facilities are wonderful—computers, STEM room. All the add-ons. I wasn't expecting all of that.



The way he's learning math, English, language arts is very impressive. The social studies unit was my big concern; would he learn same values as public school? Those experiences have blown me away. He's really internalized these lessons (he asked me 'why would someone shoot MLK!?!') and been really affected by it.

JEWISH DIMENSIONS OF THE EXPERIENCE

Interestingly, given the range of prior expectations about the Jewish dimensions of day schools and the variety of schools participating in the study, there was much greater uniformity in parents' assessment of the Jewish education their children experienced. We saw previously how some interviewees admitted that until their children started school they hadn't really known what would be involved. After more than half a year, just under half of the interviewees now expressed delight with what their children were experiencing, many acknowledging how it had confounded their expectations. They noted the greater intensity compared to what their children had previously experienced, the holistic integration of Jewish themes and content across the curriculum and into their children's daily lives, and their children's experience of being surrounded by other Jewish people. These dimensions were all embraced as positives even if not the primary aspect of the experience that parents celebrated about having changed.



I like how deeply my son has connected to Judaism—that's magnificent and beautiful. I didn't know that it could be like this—it brings tears to my eyes. It's such a beautiful thing to see. It's spread through our whole family.



With all the Jewish study courses, I was expecting her to be more resistant, to think it's boring, but they've really engaged her, and she really enjoys it. They're doing something to make it sink in with her, not to be boring. At Hebrew school, she was bored and didn't like it, but here she's accepts and enjoys.



I like that they're getting Jewish education. Surrounded by others similar to them when they wouldn't otherwise get that. It was hard being the only Jewish family before. Here, everything they do at the school celebrates our values and traditions.

Unexpectedly, given that almost universally their children were entering the schools with less experience of Jewish education, fewer than 10% of the interviewees complained that their children were finding it hard to catch up or were simply finding Hebrew or Jewish studies to be especially difficult. As one interviewee explained: "Hebrew is the hardest part—they have to catch up—on virtual school, it's been difficult." In fact, there were a handful of parents who even complained that they had expected more rigorous Jewish or Hebrew education and hadn't found it. Clearly, matching expectations with reality is an imperfect science.

DISAPPOINTMENTS

While, as can be seen, the general tenor of parents' assessment of their children's experiences at their schools was overwhelmingly positive, the transition did nevertheless bring some disappointments. The most frequent of these relate to a sense of missing out on facets of the school experience such as extracurricular and community-building programs due to COVID. These reactions are not so important as criticisms of schools (the interviewees themselves recognize they reflect the constraints of the current moment), but they do helpfully indicate what parents hunger for once schools fully reopen. A couple of examples bring these sentiments to life:



This year for us—hard to put this on the school as they had no choice—community aspect of interacting with other parents couldn't happen this year—pods. Son's friends/our parent friends' kids in the same grade don't even see one another. We're missing that extra community piece that in other years is probably pretty vibrant.



Can't attend amazing in-person events and activities that I've heard parents go for so many things. Watching your children and getting to meet people. Haven't really been able to tour.

While these kinds of sentiments were widely shared, there were a couple of other issues that parents expressed as disappointments, in each case a view shared by about 10% of the sample.

DIVERSITY

We saw earlier that about a third of interviewees had indicated that they had not previously enrolled in day school because they were concerned that it would not provide their child with the kind of exposure to diversity they could get in public school. We noted, too, how some of these families subsequently expressed surprise to find more diversity in day schools than they had expected. Nevertheless, a small proportion of interviewees did continue to note that this was a feature of their child's experience that they felt was lacking even while they recognized the challenges in fully addressing this issue.



There's a piece that will always be hard for a Jewish day school that charges tuition; they're homogeneous, no diversity whatsoever; wealthy, white Jewish kids from same part of town. While we're also in that category theoretically. One thing I liked about public school was our son having friends who didn't grow up in household like ours, different races. I think he's missing out on that now.



Really the racial diversity. There is diversity within the LGBTQ community at the school, but not racially. Even lessons are not as diverse (i.e., around Black History).

NARROW ACADEMIC PROGRAM

Finally, as previously mentioned, while the majority of interviewees expressed real satisfaction and even surprise at the quality of the educational program, a minority—again about 10% of the sample—complained about the lack of breadth to the curriculum. This was something they were inclined to attribute to time pressure created by the Jewish curriculum.



No music, no drama, no dance—not exposed to more arts, like they would in public school. Maybe just don't have time in the day, but it's a bit of a miss. Should have arts.



Academically, we've noticed that because so much time is dedicated to Jewish studies—there is a focus on literacy, reading, writing, math as core parts of the day, but art, music, social studies, science, substantially less than old school because of addition of Judaica.

Conclusion: Having taken what was unquestionably an unusual step when they switched schools in the midst of a pandemic, parents have not been disappointed. Now that they've had a chance to taste the day school experience, they have generally been thrilled; not just with the way the schools responded to the pandemic but with educational and social dimensions of the experience—the core dimensions of day school education. It's not surprising that we could not find any interviewees in our sample who felt they had made a wrong decision when switching in.

The Ten-Thousand-Dollar Question: How likely are these people to stay?

In a different, less-comprehensive study of how day schools were responding to COVID, a head of school, discussing the influx of new families to his school, characterized them as “ours to lose.”³ From his perspective, these families constituted a special opportunity it would be irresponsible to waste. What can we say now after gathering data from many more schools and after talking to parents themselves about these very matters?

The picture is exceptionally clear: as previously noted, overall, three-quarters of the interviewees plan for their children to stay at their new school, just 15% expect to leave. The remaining handful are undecided. Two-thirds of those who had no intention at all of leaving their previous school indicate that they would definitely stay.

Almost all of those who plan to leave attribute their intentions to the financial costs involved. Staying in the school would require a change in their families’ lifestyle to a degree they are not able or willing to bear. Some of these families also mentioned social factors and the claustrophobic sense created by the small class sizes; “the larger the grade level, the better for socialization,” one of them explained. The fact that tuition levels was almost never cited as the only reason for leaving further reinforces our earlier argument that tuition is almost always an issue of perceived value rather than strictly one of cost.

It is evident that for many of those who plan to stay, tuition levels are also a challenge; but now, for a variety of reasons, they’re willing to wrestle with that challenge. For a small proportion of interviewees—about 15% of them—this is primarily a case of wanting to minimize further disruption for their children; one might call this the least positive reason for staying. As one interviewee expressed it: “Because of the emotionally unstable past year and a half we want everything to be as stable as possible.” For most, the calculus is much more positive: they really appreciate the quality of the education and the supportive environment. They see how happy their children are. “[Our children] love what they’re learning, they love the friends they’ve made, the teachers, subjects they’re learning, languages.” These families—at least two-thirds of our interviewees—have been won over. For them, there is no going back, and there is no reason to do so. They have become day school COVID-converts.

³ Jack Wertheimer and Alex Pomson, “Jewish Education and the Pandemic,” Commentary, January 2021, <https://www.commentary.org/articles/jack-wertheimer/jewish-education-pandemic/>.

REGIONAL SIMILARITIES AND VARIATIONS

As mentioned earlier, thanks to a partnership with the Jim Joseph Foundation and UJA Federation of Greater Toronto, the sample of 24 schools that participated in the study included a concentration of five schools in the Bay Area and five in the Greater Toronto Area. The same patterns described above regarding what kept parents away and what drew them to day school were as readily observable in these communities as in the sample as a whole despite their great sociological and demographic differences. This is no small matter. It suggests that the phenomena we have deconstructed play out nationally and probably occur at schools not included in the sample no matter where they are located.

At the same time, we did find important local distinctions in these communities: nuances that evidently impact demand for day school education in these two different regions. We imagine that in every community similar nuances are at play.

The Bay Area

1. The Bay Area's complicated geography and high cost of living are significant factors in deciding where to send children to school. Many parents remained in their previous schools due to forces of inertia created by these conditions. A significant change of circumstance was required (i.e., a pandemic) for them to wrestle with the challenges of school tuition and distance and join a Jewish day school, even if they had been interested previously.
2. Whether in respect to what parents were hesitant about, what they were looking for, or what they like now, the Jewish educational dimension of their new school was less prominent in parents' considerations than for other parents in the sample. While parents were drawn to Jewish day schools *as* Jewish schools, it was less because of the Jewish education their children would receive and more because of the educational quality and communal connection to which this aspect of the schools contribute.

Toronto

Toronto parents differed from the general sample in other ways.

1. More so than other families in the general sample, Toronto parents were all previously in the orbit of Jewish day schools and even strongly considered them before. This might be because day schools have been such a prominent part of the Jewish communal landscape for so long and loom large in people's consciousness, or because a larger proportion of Jewish families send their children to Jewish schools than is typically found in the US. Most Jewish parents likely know someone personally whose child attends day school. They are not strangers to these institutions.
2. The Jewish aspect of Jewish day school was particularly central for Toronto parents, both as a draw and a challenge. These families talked more often about the importance of their children receiving a quality Jewish education and their expectation that local day schools could meet that challenge. At the same time, and this is probably the flip side of the same coin, Toronto parents more frequently reported that their children found the high standards in Jewish studies, and especially in Hebrew, to be a challenge when coming late into the system.

REFLECTIONS: DERIVING LONG-TERM IMPLICATIONS FROM A SPECIAL MOMENT

The existence of so many COVID-converts is a phenomenon to celebrate. Day schools have not only met the needs of already enrolled families during this challenging time, they have done so to a degree that won over families who previously had good reasons to stay away. The day school community should take great satisfaction from this accomplishment.

But this study has been about more than enabling schools to feel good about what they've accomplished. It has been an opportunity to explore what clues this phenomenon offers for day school recruitment and provision in the long term.

In the Day School's Orbit: Perhaps the most unexpected finding of the study was that all these transfer families had previous contact with their new day school. To put it simplistically, when the pandemic hit, the parents did not have to do a Google search to find their local day school. This finding suggests that Jewish day schools are addressing a wider audience than they might assume. Indeed, this prompts a question about how actively schools should attempt to engage members of this audience by, for example, offering afterschool programming to a broader public or, more modestly, by renting out space to community organizations. Some members of the audience they reach could yet become day school converts.

Getting It: The recruitment challenge in non-Orthodox schools is often assumed to come down to an issue of making schools financially more accessible—developing ways of keeping tuition low especially for those who are enrolling for the first time. While this is not an insignificant matter, the data from this study concerning why people previously chose not to enroll and why they now plan to stay make clear that a larger part of the challenge is convincing people that it's *worth* paying tuition, enhancing, that is, the perceived value of day school education in their eyes. Clearly, there is nothing quite like experiencing a school for oneself when it comes to grasping its value; as we noted, you don't really get it until you get it. That might sound like an insurmountable challenge, but perhaps there are ways through open houses, shadowing experiences, and parent get-togethers that will give prospective parents even the briefest tastes of what's offered. The key is to help parents experience what's being offered from the inside.

Challenging Preconceptions: In related fashion, and a more conventional form of "making the case," there are evidently certain misconceptions that even those who are proximate to day schools—and that, we assume, those less proximate to them—hold about these institutions. Parents are not fully aware of the educational sophistication of what schools offer, the deep sense of community that parents and children experience, and the range and inclusiveness of the Jewish learning they offer. Again, people might not properly grasp these things until their children attend school every day, but with more explicit messaging that directly addresses these issues they would get a better sense.

Getting Serious about Diversity: Day schools will never match the demographic diversity of public schools, no matter how hard they try to depict the makeup of their communities in the most progressive terms. That's an inevitable consequence of being private, parochial institutions. But schools can develop programming and curriculum that gives students a chance to wrestle with issues of equity, access, and inclusion in American society. Schools can open their windows on to these issues even while they're limited in those to whom they can open their doors. This is something that liberal parents are eagerly looking for in their children's school. Day schools might even be able to bring a unique voice to these issues with a Jewish accent.

The ways in which day schools have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic have been exceptional. They withstood the stress test set by this moment, doing better than many thought possible. If they can now derive insights from this situation that extend beyond the present moment and apply the knowledge gained at this time, they can truly turn a time of great challenge into one of great opportunity.