

Investing in Jewish Day Schools: Case Statement

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A Moment of Special Opportunity

Jewish day schools constitute the most effective vehicle for maintaining Jewish life outside Israel for families that don't live in Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox) enclaves.¹ Research has shown that Jewish day schools function as incubators of volunteer and professional Jewish leadership,² anchors for stable Jewish community,³ seedbeds of Jewish continuity,⁴ and facilitators of a connection to Israel.⁵ Their graduates, whatever their family backgrounds, display high levels of commitment to raising their own children as Jews.⁶ No other educational intervention promises such wide-reaching positive outcomes for children, families, and communities.

Over the last 50 years, a very high proportion of children raised in Orthodox Jewish homes (including both Ultra-Orthodox and Modern Orthodox) has attended Jewish day school (94% of 18–29-year-old respondents in the most recent Pew survey of Jewish Americans). Only a minority of children raised in non-Orthodox Jewish families have done so (25% of those in the Pew sample).⁷

The upsurge in antisemitic and anti-Israel expressions in public spaces across North America since October 7, 2023, has created the possibility that these historic patterns will change. This is a moment of rare opportunity for Jewish communities. If day schools and their supporters take decisive steps, they may be able to substantially increase the proportion of children and families from non-Orthodox Jewish homes exposed to these powerful Jewish educational experiences. This would have profound implications for the vitality of Jewish life in North America and for the relationship of the world's largest diaspora community to Israel.

Day School Enrollment Pre–October 2023

Enrollment Trends until 2020

The most recent national census of Jewish day schools in the United States, conducted in 2018, established that about 292,000 young Jews attended Jewish schools—17.5% of the relevant school-age population. Of these students, about 80,000 attended non-Haredi schools.⁸

¹ Jewish day schools refers to all-day schools that provide both Jewish and general education.

² Research Success Technologies (2021). *The Jewish education of today's Jewish leadership: Day schools, overnight camps, & other education experiences among lay and professional Jewish communal leaders*. Keren Keshet.

³ Pomson, A. & Wertheimer, J (2022). *Inside Jewish day schools: Leadership, learning and Community*. Brandeis University Press.

⁴ Cohen, S. (2008). The differential impact of Jewish education on adult Jewish identity. In J. Wertheimer (ed.) *Family matters: Jewish education in an age of choice*. Brandeis University Press.

⁵ Pomson, A., Wertheimer, J., & Hacohen Wolf, H. (2014). *Hearts and minds: Israel in North American Jewish day schools*. AVI CHAI Foundation.

⁶ Miller, H. & Pomson, A. (2024). *Jewish lives and Jewish education in the UK: School, family and society*. Springer.

⁷ Pew Research Center (2021). *Jewish Americans in 2020*.

⁸ Non-Haredi includes Chabad, Community, Immigrant/Outreach, Modern Orthodox, Reform, Schechter, and Special Education (AVI CHAI 2020).





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The number of non-Haredi students enrolled at that time was somewhat lower than it had been 20 years earlier, in 1998, when the first national census of day schools was conducted. In 1998, almost 95,000 children up to and including the age of 18 were enrolled in non-Haredi schools. While the numbers of students in Modern Orthodox schools increased by 9.2% over this 20-year period, those in non-Orthodox schools (including Community, Schechter/Conservative, and Reform) decreased by 16.6%. Today, fewer than 10% of school-age children from non-Orthodox homes attend Jewish day school.

COVID-19: A First Turning Point

Complete national data do not exist for the period since 2018; however, Prizmah: Center for Jewish Day Schools has conducted opt-in surveys of the more than 300 schools it serves (all of which are non-Haredi schools) at least once a year since then. In December 2022, it reported that of 135 schools that participated in its surveys, 54% experienced an increase in enrollment during the two years since 2020, 11% saw stable enrollment, and 34% saw a decline. From these data, it was deduced that participating schools saw a 2% increase over the school year 2019/20–2020/21 and a further increase of 3% over 2020/21–2021/22.⁹

These data are consistent with widespread reports from Jewish day schools across North America. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, Jewish day schools demonstrated a nimbleness and proficiency in their transition to online and blended learning—and then in their quick return to in-person learning. They excelled in their ability to meet the social and emotional needs of students and in providing warm community for both parents and children at such an unsettling time. As a result, they attracted hundreds of transfers from public schools. As far as can be established, enrollment in these schools since that time has been generally stable. This suggests that once families enroll in day schools, the prejudices that kept them away from these schools in the first place have been overturned.¹⁰

Post-October 2023: Indicators of an Emerging Change

Various studies of American Jews over the last nine months, including teens, young adults, and older adults, attest to a heightened sense of personal insecurity and a newfound hunger for Jewish connection and belonging since October 7.¹¹ Based on a poll of Americans conducted in the first quarter of 2024, JFNA has identified “a surge”—a phenomenon in which 40% of Jews who were “only somewhat,” “not very,” or “not at all engaged” prior to October 7 are now showing up in larger numbers in Jewish life. These people, JFNA reports, crave “substantive

⁹ Prizmah (2022). *Enrollment Pulse Survey Report: Jewish Day School and Yeshiva Enrollment Trends (December 2022)*.

¹⁰ Prizmah (2023). *A Year in Review: Data and Reflections on Jewish Day Schools and Yeshivas: 2023–2023 (September 2023)*.

¹¹ BBYO (2024). *Antisemitism Survey: Executive Summary, February 2024*; Hersh, E. (2024). *U.S. college students and the war in Israel: Jewish engagement and social tensions on campus*. Jim Joseph Foundation.





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engagement, such as discussions about antisemitism and more education about Israel, they crave community even more during this moment.”¹²

The JFNA study revealed high levels of concern among parents for the safety of their children and about the messages their children are hearing about Israel at school. It was reported that “39% of Jewish parents indicate they will reevaluate or reconsider school enrollment or summer programs for their children.” The study’s authors conclude that this sentiment is due to parents’ concerns about antisemitism.¹³

These findings are consistent with those reported by Prizmah based on a survey of 103 schools (34% of the Prizmah catchment) conducted in the second quarter of 2024. Sixty percent (60%) of participating schools reported “they had new students enrolled or projected to enroll for the 2024–25 school year as a result of the change in climate post October 7th.”¹⁴ The most common reasons parents provided for why they are now enrolling are antisemitism in public and/or independent schools; increased Jewish community for their children; concerns about safety in their child’s current schools; (for Israelis in North America) the war in Israel; and other reasons including Jewish identity, Jewish environment, and Jewish education.

These data points may foreshadow a profound shift in the behaviors of American Jews driven by a decline in confidence in both public and secular private schools, on the one hand, and a search for Jewish community, on the other.

Widening the Lens: Reasons to Expect a Profound Shift

Why Jewish Parents Did Not Enroll in Jewish School Until Now

In studies that transcend regions and national contexts, researchers have consistently found that when parents choose a school for their children, they typically weigh four primary factors: (1) schools’ academic reputation and curriculum; (2) the religion and values that schools promote; (3) discipline and safety at school; and (4) convenience and cost.¹⁵ This four-factor calculus helps explain why over the last 50 years most North American Jews chose to enroll their children in public schools, and why this may now change.

¹² Kravetz, M., Eisenman, S., & Manchester, D. (2024). “‘The Surge,’ ‘The Core’ and more: What you need to know about the explosion of interest in Jewish life.” *eJewish Philanthropy*, May 9, 2024.

¹³ Jewish Federations of North America (2024). Israel - Hamas War Sentiment Survey.

¹⁴ Epstein, O., Rivkind, B., & Adler, A. (2024). *Enrollment Trend Report: Families Turn to Jewish Day School Post 10/7*. Prizmah: Center for Jewish Day Schools.

¹⁵ See an influential statement of this theory in Goldring, E & Shapira R. (1993). Choice, empowerment and involvement: what satisfies parents? *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 15(4): 396–409; and in Bell, C. (2009). Geography in parental choice. *American Journal of Education*, 115(4): 493–521. The findings have been replicated in Australia, Canada, France, and Israel. For an application of this framework to a Jewish school context, see: Miller, H., Pomson, A., & Hacoheh Wolf, H. (2016). Secondary school choice as a window on Jewish faith schools in contemporary British society. *Journal of School Choice*, 10(4), 537–559.





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Academic reputation. Over the last 50 years, Jewish families have been able to afford to purchase homes in neighborhoods with access to public schools with relatively strong academic reputations.¹⁶

Values. Jewish parents have been strongly attracted to the diversity that public schools promise. Jewish parents have not wanted to “ghettoize” their children by sending them to schools where everyone is Jewish.¹⁷

Safety. Historically, public schools have been safe places for children, even if in some regions of the United States gun violence has been a concern.

Cost. Public schools have been, by definition, highly affordable and most are located quite close to where families live.

When non-Orthodox Jewish families *have* chosen to enroll their children in Jewish schools, it has been because they assigned higher importance to one factor in particular: religion and values. The families that enrolled in Jewish schools have been more highly committed to providing their children with an intensive Jewish education and to socializing their children alongside families who share the same Jewish values. They have been willing to make this choice when the general education schools offer has also been of a high-enough quality.¹⁸

Most Modern Orthodox families have been motivated by the same calculus: providing their children with a solid Jewish education within the context of an observant Jewish school community has been more important than exposing them to social diversity in public schools. Because the Jewish dimensions of what Jewish schools offer have been so important to these Modern Orthodox families, many have even been prepared to make do with a general education that has sometimes been of a mediocre quality.¹⁹

Why Jewish Families Are Now Considering Jewish Day Schools

Since 2020, the balance of this four-factor calculus has been increasingly unsettled. Since October 7, 2023, it has been profoundly disturbed. These are the phenomena associated with the emergent reassessment of public education.

¹⁶ Where this has not been the case, for example in St. Louis and Nashville, once bussing was introduced, Jewish families have gained entree to high quality private schools instead. Pomson, A. (2008). Schools for parents: What parents want and what they get from their children’s Jewish day school. In J. Wertheimer (ed.) *Family matters: Jewish education in an age of choice*. Brandeis University Press.

¹⁷ Cohen, S. & Kelner, S. (2008). Why Jewish parents send their children to Jewish day schools. In J. Wertheimer (ed.) *Family matters: Jewish education in an age of choice*. Brandeis University Press.

¹⁸ Rosov Consulting (2023). *Choosing early, staying close: Exploring schools choice in the Greater Boston Area*. Combined Jewish Philanthropies.

¹⁹ Pomson, A. (2022). What makes a day school great. *Sapir* (Summer 2022).





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Diminished academic reputation. The poor performance of public schools during the COVID-19 pandemic contradicted their claim to deliver educational quality, and, as seen above, this resulted in a small but meaningful transfer to day school.²⁰

Problematic values. A growing movement in public schools to teach critical race theory alongside ethnic studies programs that critique Israel as a “settler colonialist state” and Jews as bearers of white privilege have triggered a growing critique in Jewish circles of the values that public schools prioritize.²¹

Lack of safety. Now, burgeoning evidence of anti-Israel and antisemitic expressions in public schools since October 7 has raised questions both about the safety and prevailing values of schools.²²

Public schools still have a price advantage, for sure. If Jewish day schools can avoid pricing themselves out of parents’ reach, they can become an attractive proposition based on other factors. The pendulum in terms of safety and values appears to be swinging in favor of Jewish schools. The task now is to capitalize on this opportunity.

Precedents in Europe

The cases of the United Kingdom and France, Europe’s two largest Jewish communities, demonstrate how Jewish school expansion occurs at times when state schools become profoundly less appealing—provided, that is, Jewish schools have the vision and capacity to admit an influx of new students, many of whom may not be mission-aligned with schools.

Today, in the UK, more than 40% of Jewish children from non-Haredi homes are enrolled in Jewish faith schools; in the 1990s, fewer than 25% were. This expansion was set in motion by the government’s closure of Grammar schools (academically selective state schools). Jewish parents concluded their children could receive at least as good a general education in Jewish schools and in a more socially appealing environment. As the academic quality of Jewish schools has increased in recent decades, so has the proportion of Jewish families enrolled.²³ Visionary leadership help convince philanthropists to invest on a large scale in the expansion of schools to meet rising demand.²⁴

²⁰ Rosov Consulting (2021). *Seizing the moment: Transferring to Jewish day school during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Prizmah: Center for Jewish Day Schools.

²¹ See *Sapir* Volume Six on Education.

²² <https://www.adl.org/antisemitism-classroom>.

²³ Staetsky, D.L. & Boyd, J. (2016). *The rise and rise of Jewish schools in the United Kingdom: Number, trends and policy issues*. Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR).

²⁴ Jakobovits, I. (1971) Forward in M. Davis. (Ed.) *Let my people know: proposals for the development of Jewish education*. Office of the Chief Rabbi. Sacks, J. (1994) *Will We Have Jewish Grandchildren*, Valentine Mitchell.





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In France today, about 40% of school-age Jews attend a Jewish day school; in 1986, just 16% did. Commentators agree that most of this change can be attributed to growing expressions of antisemitism and anti-Israelism in public schools. A recent report estimated that over the past decade, about 2,000 students a year have transferred from French public schools to Jewish day schools due to a general decline in public education and fears of violence and antisemitism.²⁵ Unlike in the UK, anecdotal reports suggest that Jewish schools in France are oversubscribed. They have lacked the vision and readiness to absorb a surge in parental demand.

The Financial Context

Average tuition for Jewish day school in the United States is roughly \$35,000 a year. Tuition is typically higher in non-Orthodox schools, in high schools, and in major urban population centers where tuition can range from \$40,000 to above \$60,000.²⁶ It is estimated that barely half of enrolled families pay full tuition; the remainder depend on some form of financial assistance.²⁷ This compares to about three-quarters of families who pay full tuition at secular private schools overall.²⁸

At Jewish day schools across North America, about 70% of schools' operating costs are covered by tuition.²⁹ The shortfall, estimated in 2014 to be \$300 million, and likely much higher today, is covered through fundraising (covering about half of the gap) and a combination of local Federation and foundation support, additional charges to parents such as "annual funds" or "building funds," income from facility rentals and other services, endowment income, tuition vouchers and tax credit initiatives in fewer than a dozen US states, and governmental grants for special education and welfare services.³⁰

Historically, philanthropic support for day schools has been a local endeavor and has resulted in an uneven landscape. Toronto leads the way having established a \$200 million community endowment to help provide tuition assistance. Chicago, Los Angeles, Montreal, and Greater MetroWest New Jersey also maintain long-running endowment initiatives. Recently, foundations such as Samis (Seattle), Crown (Chicago), and Zalik (Atlanta) have been advancing alternative tuition experiments whose impact is being studied. A continent-wide attempt to tackle this issue has never been attempted.

²⁵ Touati-Wachstock, P. 2023. נאמני תורה ועבודה. הזינוך היהודי בצרפת: בין תורה, רפובליקה ומדינת ישראל.

²⁶ In the Midwest and other non-urban centers, day school tuition ranges between \$15,000-\$30,000.

²⁷ Unpublished analysis of tuition assistance at 56 Prizmah schools by Rosov Consulting in 2023.

²⁸ Mitchell, M. (2004). *The changing face of financial aid*. National Association of Independent Schools.

²⁹ Rosov Consulting. (2017). *Challenges and opportunities on the day school landscape*. The Jewish Federations of North America.

³⁰ Held, D. (2014). Jewish day school financial sustainability and affordability. *Greenbook* Volume 1. Jewish Funders Network.





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What Needs to Be Done

The shift proposed here will not happen suddenly; it is likely to build force over time, as growing numbers of non-Orthodox Jewish families break with longstanding norms in American Jewish life and enroll in Jewish day schools. There is much for community leaders to do to prepare for and help accelerate this shift, recognizing that the strategies for communities in the United States and Canada will differ because of the dissimilar place of day school education in each context. All the following suggestions can be implemented with appropriate investment.

Help ensure that price does not keep parents away. More than a third of non-Orthodox Jews in America live in households with family income of less than \$100,000.³¹ Even if parents would prefer to send their child to a Jewish day school, they won't if they can't afford to pay the full average annual tuition per child. It is no wonder that many of the families that transferred back out of day schools at the end of the pandemic did so because of cost. Large-scale subsidization and tuition assistance strategies are needed to ensure that schools can at least compete on price with non-Jewish independent schools. Success will only increase the philanthropic burden.

Buttress academic quality. JFNA's recent study of responses to the war in Israel shows that those most likely to switch to day schools are already enrolled in secular private schools.³² Day schools need help by means of professional development and other supports so that they can be at least as good educationally as the schools from which families transfer.

Build capacity to meet the expected wave. Day schools need help making sure that when demand builds, they have sufficient seats for those who seek them. Emerging (not yet public data) from one North American community suggest that non-Orthodox day school kindergartens are already oversubscribed for September 2024.³³ Lack of capacity, as seen above, has been the challenge in France. Funding should be made available to schools to open up new places if they demonstrate increased demand.

Expand the numbers of those who lead and teach in schools. If demand for day school education increases along the lines described here, many more high-quality teachers and heads of school will be needed. A major investment will be needed in the educator and school leader pipelines, for the purposes of recruitment, retention, and professional development.

Develop a shared system-wide brand. Today, the strongest value proposition offered by day schools is that they're safe places for parents and children, and that they also promise thick meaning-filled communities. Jewish day schools need to make this case consistently and unambiguously. Advertising educational excellence is important, but so is promising a safe

³¹ Pew Research Center (2021). *Jewish Americans in 2020*.

³² Jewish Federations of North America (2024). Israel-Hamas War Sentiment Survey.

³³ Personal communication to Rosov Consulting.





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environment for children where they'll acquire appealing values within a supportive community. A coordinated, national-scale marketing campaign to promote such a message is long overdue.

More than making a case, articulate a vision. Schools provide a means for touching the future. What they promise can be inspiring, beyond their ability to meet the needs of children at a given moment. If Jewish communities are to seize this rare moment of opportunity, both professional and volunteer day school leaders need to be mobilized around a vision for how Jewish day school can transform Jewish life in America. Day school thought leaders need opportunities to come together to craft that vision.

Conclusion

Jewish day schools deliver unmatched positive Jewish outcomes for students, maintain high academic standards, and generate a strong sense of community. Historically, most Jewish families in the US have not enrolled their children in such schools for a variety of reasons: including poor perceptions of day school education, an unwavering commitment to public education, and the high cost. The spike in antisemitic and anti-Israel attitudes and actions in America since October 7, 2023, the growing Jewish discomfort with the values now being promoted by public schools, and the general “surge” of interest in things Jewish are leading non-Orthodox Jewish parents to reconsider their school choices.

This is a moment of historic opportunity. The coming years could see a decisive turn to Jewish day schools as has happened in France and the UK over last 30 years. It is critical to ensure that interested families are not deterred by out-of-reach tuition levels (assistance for which is a massive burden for schools) and that day schools have the quality, capacity, and personnel to meet the moment.

