

The RAVSAK Journal



The Jewish Community Day School Network  
רשת בתי ספר קהילתיים

# הידועות

HaYidion

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# Parents

## HaYidion: The RAVSAK Journal

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# From the Editor

■ by **BARBARA DAVIS**

**T**HE headline in the *Forward* reads: “The Jewish Mother Revisited: Goodbye, Mrs. Portnoy, Hello, Bad Mommy.” A forthcoming book is entitled *Hell is Other Parents and Other Tales of Maternal Combustion*. An article in the *New Jersey Jewish Standard* promotes “Helping Kids Thrive With the Coach Approach to Parenting.” On the parenting shelf of the public library sits *Straight Talk About Your Child’s Mental Health: What to Do When Something Seems Wrong*. Parenting in the Age of Anxiety is extremely stressful.

And dealing with parents as a school leader is also stressful. Their issues become your issues. When a friend of mine became a pediatrician years ago, I remarked, “You have to like kids a lot to become a pediatrician.” “No,” he replied, “you have to like mothers.” The same holds true for school leaders. While it may seem that our clients are our students, the reality is that dealing with parental matters probably consumes a great deal more of our time and energy.

But the partnership between schools and parents is what makes education work, and the more educated and enlightened school leaders are about the home side of the

home/school equation, the stronger the partnership is. The current issue of *HaYidion* tackles the theme of parents head on. The articles are hard-hitting



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and packed with practical advice and recommendations in a wide range of arenas.

As we all begin the new school year as well as the year 5770, we believe that you will find this issue to be yet another that will be well-thumbed, referred to and recommended. Its theme is topical and vital, for as it says in Proverbs, “Children’s children are the crown of their elders, and the glory of children is their parents.” ■



## Day School Networks Join Forces to Conserve Resources and Strengthen Klal Yisrael

Professional and lay leaders from Jewish day schools from across the spectrum of practice will come together in a first ever unified educational conference this coming January 2010 in the Metropolitan New York area. Jointly planned by RAVSAK: The Jewish Community Day School Network, the Institute for University-School Partnership at Yeshiva University, the Solomon Schechter Day School Association, and PARDeS: The Progressive Association of Reform Day Schools, the shared conference represents groundbreaking work in cost-effectiveness and community building among Reform, Conservative, Community and Orthodox day schools.

Historically, each day school network has hosted its own annual professional development conference. Elements of duplication of service were seen as secondary to the need for each organization to serve

their constituent schools. The rapid change in the economy, which has shaken the day school world to its core, inspired the heads of the various networks to collaborate in new ways, resulting in a conference model which capitalizes on knowledge-sharing and meta-issues in leadership while making possible new alliances among the schools. Conference programming will include keynote sessions by leading-edge thinkers, case studies, intensive workshops, peer-to-peer learning and network-specific meetings.

The theme of this year’s conference, **Thriving in a New Reality – Klal Yisrael, Community, School and Home**, will focus professional and lay participants on critical issues facing Jewish day schools due to rapid changes in the economy, society, and the Jewish community.

According to Susan Weintrob, president

of the RAVSAK Executive Committee, “Everything about this conference is right minded, from the timely theme to our inviting the other school networks to join us as planning partners.” Robin Feldman, Director of Member Services and conference planning director, concurs. “Bringing day schools of all stripes together this year makes sense. We will build community, share ideas, learn from one another, and save money. It is very exciting.”

In keeping with RAVSAK protocol, the joint conference will be held from Sunday, January 17 through Tuesday, January 19, 2010 (Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Weekend). Conference program details are available on the RAVSAK website and registration is now open. Significant subsidies are anticipated. Please watch your e-mail for more information. We look forward to seeing you in January! ■



# From the Desk of Susan Weintrob, RAVSAK President

**T**HREE wonderful weeks in Israel this summer reinforced why I love being in Jewish education. Walking the streets of Jerusalem, Haifa or Tel Aviv, sitting in cafes or hiking in the Golan bind us to our history and culture. Our school's very special partnership with the Reali School in Haifa puts faces on the Israelis for all of us at Wornick; working with their teachers and administrators makes us realize how we share so many similar concerns. We also share a priority for what RAVSAK has long spoken of—*amiyut*: peoplehood.

Connections are an important part of our school lives, whether to Israel and the Jewish people, our students or our parents, crucial partners in creating an educational environment. As we begin our school year, we build our school communities—welcoming returning families and opening the door for our new families. This past year has been a challenging one for so many of us: lower enrollments, higher requests for financial aid and tighter budgets. Our communities are more important than ever.

Over the last few years, we at RAVSAK have strengthened other important connections at teacher workshops and seminars, at major and successful administrative professional development programs, such as Project SuLaM and at our annual RAVSAK conference. I look forward to seeing you at our conference in New York this January, together with our friends and colleagues from Solomon Schechter, PARDeS, and Yeshiva University.

Working together helps us all in this financial downturn and gives us the confidence to strengthen our schools from within and build the capacity of our communities with the vision of our leadership. We are extraordinarily pleased that RAVSAK's vision will continued to be enriched through the leadership of our newly formed

Board of Directors, under the stewardship of Arnee Winshall, our new Chair. We welcome Arnee and thank her for her faith and confidence in the future of RAVSAK and Jewish community day school education.



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In *The Gift of Asher Lev*, Chaim Potok wrote: "When the soul of a man is in its darkest night, he must strive constantly for new light. When one thinks there is only an end, that is when one must struggle for the new beginning...I wish your journey will be to a light not only for yourself but for all of us."

On behalf of the RAVSAK Executive Committee and RAVSAK staff, I wish you a wonderful opening of school this fall. May the New Year and fall chaggim take us on a journey to light for us and our families, and for our larger family: the Jewish people in Israel and around the world. ■



שנה טובה

*We at RAVSAK wish you and your loved ones a Happy New Year!*

# Arnee Winshall Named First Board Chair of RAVSAK

**A**RNEE Winshall, the founding chair of JCDS, Boston's Jewish Community Day School, and a nationally recognized leader in Jewish education, will assume the role of chair of the first RAVSAK Board of Directors at the upcoming annual meeting in January. Working with Executive Director Marc Kramer, Arnee will guide the transition from the original grassroots, Executive Committee structure made up solely of day school professionals to an international governing board of extraordinary lay and professional leadership committed to ensuring the future of RAVSAK.

Arnee R. Winshall has volunteered for the Jewish community in a wide variety of capacities. In her home state of Massachusetts, she is the Founding Chair of JCDS, Boston's Jewish Community Day School, and sits on the Board of Overseers of Hebrew College. As a past member of the boards of The Harold Grinspoon Foundation and the JCCs of Greater Boston, she helped spearhead the launch of PJ Library in Boston. She was also a founding member of DAF, the Greater Boston day school advocacy forum initiative and Boston's representative to the Continental Council for Jewish Day School Education. Nationally, Arnee currently serves on the Executive Committee of JESNA, as the lay chair of the Lippman Kanfer Institute, and on the board of the Foundation for Jewish Camp. In addition, she is the Founding Chair of Hebrew at the Center dedicated to advancing Hebrew teaching and learning.

Professionally, as a Peace Corps volunteer in Thailand, Arnee taught English as a second language to all ages and supervised a pilot K-2 English immersion project in six lab schools. Subsequently, she pursued studies in developmental psycholinguistics at the University of Chicago. In addition, she has worked in wholesale and retail sales, tradeshow information tools, owned and operated a residential real estate company and as Interim Head of JCDS, in Boston.

Arnee is married to Walter Winshall and is the proud mother of Sarah and Aaron, who have both benefited from day school educations and Jewish camping. She is a passionate advocate for consistent excellence in Jewish education, investing in the development of educational leadership, fostering lifelong teaching and learning and enabling each person to reach his or her potential. ■



“The AVI CHAI Foundation is inspired by the work RAVSAK does to nourish the Jewish soul of community day schools. We are delighted by the growth of RAVSAK over the past decade, and by the leadership of Dr. Marc Kramer and the Executive Committee that has worked closely with him. We are also pleased that RAVSAK is taking the next big step to build a national board of lay leaders to expand on its success to date. We applaud the chair-designate, Arnee Winshall, whose work in the Jewish community is a model for us all.”

—Yossi Prager, Executive Director,  
AVI CHAI North America

# Parents as Partners

■ by **PATRICK F. BASSETT**

**ONE** goal of all great schools is to establish a good working partnership with parents. Parents are not stockholders with voice and vote on administrative decisions, but they are “stakeholders.” Their large “stake” in the school is that it operates effectively so that their investment with their children and their tuition dollars is rewarded. In this sense, they are also customers or clients, as opposed to “friends” or “family members,” who on occasion expect accommodations from us that are not in either party’s best interest. The satisfaction of customers or clients is important for an operation to prosper.

Forming partnerships with parents takes consistent effort from the school. Here are ten tips schools should follow to nurture positive relationships with parents.

**Establish strong communication networks with parents from the beginning.** This will help validate their decision to enroll in the school and ease anxieties that inevitably attach to such a major decision. Create a parent ambassadors program, where each current parent ambassador is the contact for five new parents in the same class, meeting at least once in the spring and once in the summer prior to the new school year. Add new parents to the mailing list for all publications and the invitation lists for all events, beginning in the spring. While not soliciting donations, send new parents the annual report in the summer indicating the strength and importance of annual giving by parents. Create a special event for new parents at the school in late spring. Information-giving and partnership-building are the themes, with brief remarks by head, board chair, parent association president, and division heads outlining the roles and goals of each segment of the organization.

**Develop a “parent contract” that outlines behavior expectations.** This document can highlight mutual expectations, helping parents feel empowered about their role in the lives of their children and the school. On the website of the National Association of Independent Schools, [www.nais.org](http://www.nais.org), samples of such contracts are available to member schools.

**Encourage the faculty to see the parent, and not just the student, as a customer.** In “the good old days,” meeting the needs of one’s primary customer (the student) meant that one met the needs of one’s secondary customer (the parent). Now, parent relationships require nurturing too. Patience, skill in problem-solving at the most direct level, powers of observation, and the abil-

ity to defuse anger and anxiety are all part of the professional repertoire now required and valued in skilled teachers. These skills and exigencies require the distance of a professional (as opposed to a personal) relationship with parents.

**Write to the parent body regularly.** You can address the issues of the moment and share the larger agenda of the board and school with the parent body. A monthly or quarterly head’s letter allows the

school to reinforce the value it’s adding to students’ lives and highlight the school’s accomplishments. It also adds a personal link so that families feel more connected to the school. Particularly in these trying economic times, transparent communication is key to satisfaction and support. See a blog on the topic of



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“Communicating in Stressful Times” at [www.nais.org/go/bassettblog](http://www.nais.org/go/bassettblog).

**Develop a Parent Association mechanism so that parental input can be shared.** The association or committee can host occasional “town





meetings” with parents, head, and board representatives.

**Host small group meetings to solicit feedback.** Involve a cross-section of new parents and returning parents in small breakfasts with the school head. The head can ask the group questions such as “Why did you choose the school?” “What are we doing well?” “Where do we need to improve?” The “testimonials” will build loyalty and enthusiasm among the newest members of the family. Some schools regularly survey their whole parent body to ask specific questions about satisfaction and expectations. Services such as the Independent School Survey Builder allow you to do this easily. See [www.nais.org/go/surveybuilder](http://www.nais.org/go/surveybuilder).

**Educate parents to deal with dissatisfaction directly.** The first avenue of recourse should always be the person with

whom they disagree (parent to teacher or coach). If the conflict cannot be resolved, it is then appropriate to move up the ladder as necessary. The final court of appeal is the head (and NOT the board).

**Appoint “opinion leaders” to board committees.** This helps get wider input on key issues, spread empowerment, and facilitate communications. Opinion leaders can be from the faculty, parent body, and larger community. Committees, of course, do the research and legwork on school business, reporting to the board, which makes any final decisions and policies.

**Conduct a friend-raising/fund-raising campaign strategically timed to maximize participation.** For instance, schedule meetings of the Parent Association at “command performance” times such as grade conference or student recitals.

**Attend to the needs of parents whose children are graduating from the school.** Produce letter or a brochure that outlines the predictable anxieties both parents and children will feel as they move from one comfortable setting (your school) to another (often initially more forbidding setting by virtue of newness). Host a meeting or event for these families (parents and students) describing how to manage the transition. Have recent graduates who survived the transition speak at these events. You will be able to highlight the areas where your school excels and gather information about areas that could be improved.

In short, developing a partnership with parents involves a multi-faceted approach, but continual nourishment of relationships with parents will reap great rewards. ■

# When Two Worlds Meet:

## Parent Reactions to What Children Bring Home From School

■ by **ALEX POMSON**

**T**HE interactions between parents and schools occur in two locations: at school itself, where parents come into direct contact with school life, and at home, where children literally and figuratively transport school back to their families in their knapsacks. In the Spring 2008 *HaYidion*, I argued that day schools have in recent times taken on the roles traditionally played by synagogues in the lives of North American Jewish adults as Beit Knesset, Beit Midrash and Beit Tefillah; they have become places of meeting, study and spiritual inspiration, for adults.

At present, I want to explore what happens when children bring school home; and in particular what happens when the Jewish culture of school and home are not fully aligned. A four-year study a colleague and I conducted of families at seven denominationally diverse Jewish elementary schools reveals that this cultural encounter plays out in idiosyncratic ways, and can constitute a challenge to the conventional assumptions of day school educators. What occurs in the home, I suggest, calls for a sophisticated response at school.

### How School Enters People's Homes

Young children bring school into their homes almost every day. The nine-year old students we interviewed found it easy to provide examples of how they taught their parents things which, they say, their moms and dads had either forgotten or had never known. It is difficult to know how much of what children “teach” their parents is unsolicited and how much has been genuinely unknown or forgotten, but our conversations with parents reveal that when they did not experience an intensive Jewish education of their own, they do find themselves learning about Jewish holidays, practices and concepts from their children. Certainly, they pick up a great deal of Hebrew; it is the aspect of children’s education which, because of the many hours devoted to it in day schools, differs most from parents’ own childhood experience of Jewish schooling.

The most vivid and perhaps the most authentic instances of children bringing school into their homes occur as a result of unexpected and unsolicited outbursts of song, conversation and inquiry with which children interrupt the regular life of the family. These outbursts occur frequently and take various forms. Children launch in to

blessings, contemporary Hebrew songs, or traditional festival melodies—in the car to and from school, at home when family are visiting, in the supermarket with parents, or on the street and at the beach.



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### How Parents React

Not surprisingly, given the diversity of families whose children attend day schools today, parents react to these interruptions in diverse ways. In broad terms, these reactions can be viewed along a continuum from resistance and rejection, on the one hand, to adoption and adaptation, on the other. The first set of responses expresses an inclination to keep things the way they are and not to make changes in the family’s Jewish life; the second set suggests a readiness to make changes as a result of what children bring home from school. While one might have thought that the second set of reactions would be less challenging for schools, it turns out that when families adopt or adapt the Judaism that children bring home, they rarely follow a normative cultural script. In turn, when children transport back to school the diverse and idiosyncratic expressions of Judaism



created out of this encounter, they can challenge school culture.

## Rejection

The most extreme strategy available for rejecting what children bring home is to withdraw them from the school altogether. If parents feel so uncomfortable with the Jewish concepts and ideas their children meet at school, they can transfer their children to other schools where they don't have to meet these problematic ideas and practices.

Our research shows that withdrawals of this sort almost never happen. This is probably because even if parents may not select a day school specifically for its Jewish education, they recognize that Jewish schools do have a mission to impart Jewish culture and ideas. (If parents had insurmountable problems with the school's Jewishness they likely wouldn't have chosen it in the first place.) Additionally, most parents seem to feel an obligation to knit school and home closely together; having purposefully selected the school for their children, they feel an obligation to reinforce and encourage what their children learn.

I have found only two factors that cause parents to head for the exits for "religious reasons": first, when it seems that Jewish education is being provided at the expense of general educational quality, and, second, when parents feel that policies or persons in the school actively challenge the religious/Jewish life they choose to lead at home. In these circumstances, schools would be well advised to address such perceptions since they may indicate problems either in what schools promise parents or in how well they can satisfy such promises.

## Resistance

A marginally more frequent reaction among those uncomfortable with the Jewish education their children receive at school is to resist it, either by complaining about it at school or by compartmentalizing it at home. The first possibility, more familiar because it is more visible, can challenge school leadership, but, more

productively, can be viewed as an opportunity to engage parents about the school's purposes and practices.

The second possibility also represents an opportunity for schools because it is so unstable. Compartmentalization occurs when parents attempt to maintain the equilibrium of Jewish life in the family by framing what children learn about Judaism as not being immediately relevant but as something children should know so that when they're older they can make an informed choice about the kind of Jewish life they lead. This reaction is difficult to sustain, first because children are reluctant to wait until adulthood to build their own sukkah or observe Friday night, for example, and second because it clashes with the tenor of much that day schools communicate about Judaism as something to be experienced and not just academically investigated. The question for schools is whether they are interested in helping families navigate these shifting responses. Many educators may find such interest invasive of family privacy.

## Neither Rejection or Resistance, nor Adoption or Adaptation

One kind of parent reaction often observed in Orthodox schools but rarely in community day schools is essentially a lack of reaction, that is, an absence of change in the family. This happens because children bring home from school what they, the parents, would otherwise have given them or because the school so much complements the way parents already lead their lives. This is often the *sine qua non* of Orthodox schools that are located at the heart of a well-defined community. It is an uncommon reaction in community day schools because, as emerging parent survey data confirm, a high proportion of community day school parents had not originally expected to enroll their child in a Jewish day school. Given that parents' Jewish lives did not predict enrollment, it is not surprising that once a child does enroll, parents either resist what children bring home or their lives start to change.

## Adoption

Inferred in the above is the fact that the Jewish lives of a great majority of parents do significantly change once their child enrolls at a day school. This is evidenced in the many instances where parents told us about how "there would be no Jewishness in our lives if our child wasn't at the school." A small number of interviewees described precisely how this happens and what it means. It turns out that it means a couple of things.

A first possibility is that parents take on practices that their families had occasionally observed and now perform them more consistently as they become part of a routine organized around the rhythm of the school (and Jewish) calendar. A flavor of what is involved is provided by a father with some supplementary school Jewish education married to a woman who converted to Judaism at the time of their marriage. He explains:

I wouldn't normally have Shabbat every Friday if Natalie was going to public school, and it's not that we wouldn't know how or we couldn't; it just probably would be easy enough to say, not this Friday! But she has it in school, she brings the challah home. How dare we not! Not out of fear, how dare we not, but of course...

As this father indicates, the driver of change is not any special religious search, it is rather the desire to knit school and home together; this is certainly not some *baal teshuva* quest for the school to provide the family with an authoritative religious script (something that almost never happens). Parents react in this way because they feel a kind of obligation to ensure that what their children learn at school does not fall on infertile ground. As a byproduct, it results in changes in their own lives, as families reproduce more or less faithfully the practices their children learned in school. For educators, this may be the most unproblematic resolution of any gap between the Jewish cultures of school and home.

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 45]

# What Parents Should Hear From Day School Leaders

■ by **JILL KESSLER**

**B** EING a teacher or administrator in a Jewish Day school at a time when Blackberries, Facebook, and Twitter prevail is not easy. It probably wasn't easy before parents had a myriad of ways to find us, but we live in an age of instant gratification. In other words, parents want to be responded to immediately and we feel in the hot seat to do so.

Unfortunately, hasty responses are often what get teachers and administrators into trouble. Over the years, I have come to conclude that school leadership must lay the groundwork for positive parent relationships and state some hard truths at the beginning of each school year. We need to tell parents not only what we will do for them but what they must do for us. Being proactive, confronting difficult topics head on, setting clear expectations for open communication, and adhering to the guidelines that we set, will ultimately save time and, more importantly, lead to better relationships with families in our schools.

So, why is it that in many schools we are not telling parents what they need to hear? Is it possible to set appropriate boundaries while showing we truly care about the children we teach? Can we model respectful communication so parents, in turn, will speak to us in an acceptable manner? And finally, can we build trusting relationships with families that will lead to mutual respect?

E-mail, wonderful as it may be, can be a dangerous tool in which to communicate anything other than easy factual information such as the girl's soccer schedule and the time of the boy's basketball tryouts. When you e-mail about a child's social or academic difficulties, the e-mail is subject to the parent's interpretation. Parents can't hear compassion in your voice or see sympathetic facial expression. They read into the e-mail what they want which can lead to all sorts of trouble—not to mention, a continuous stream of back and forth communication stemming from the original e-mail. This can cause undue stress to faculty and administration.

E-mail can be downloaded and used as documentation in lawsuits against the school. Every employee needs to be reminded of this so nothing of great importance is put in an e-mail. This too, however, runs both ways. I tell faculty to print inappropriate e-mails from parents, and file them in their locked cabinets.

How do we avoid the endless stream of back and forth e-mails and the stress that comes with the constant demand for a quick and immediate response? First, if the response to the e-mail is anything other than factual, it is best to be proactive and call the parent. Initially, faculty may complain because it's less easy and takes longer to reach someone if they aren't home, but they come to see that more often than not, the situation can be resolved with a phone call or meeting and be put to rest. Because the stage was set with the initial phone call, follow up can often be done via

e-mail. This is because both parent and teacher understand the action plan for the student subsequent to the discussion. In addition, I tell faculty to check their e-mail before they leave for the day. They are not obligated to answer school e-mail in the evening. This is one way of setting a boundary for parents. They come to learn, or we tell them, that e-mails are answered during the work day and not



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in the evenings. Hard-working faculty and administration need to spend quality time with their families.

It is human nature that we want to avoid conflict, and calling our most challenging parents can be scary and hard. I learned a wonderful statement from a coach that frames difficult conversations. It is simply: "We share the same goals that your child be successful, academically, socially, and emotionally." It is easy to say because we genuinely feel this way. I want every student in my school to be successful and so do my faculty and leadership. You too, I'm sure, want your students to succeed. We would not devote the endless hours to our craft if not for this simple fact. We want the children we pour our hearts and souls into to thrive! And what Jewish parent doesn't want the same? This is our common goal and we must take the time to remind parents we are in this together.

This powerful statement aligns parents and teachers as well as parents and administration, and weakens the defensiveness of parents. The real issue to be dis-

cussed can then be addressed. This is where coaching teachers on the importance of how information is conveyed is critical. If teachers and administrators convey their caring and concern without giving parents potential solutions to the problems, parents leave frustrated and unhappy. They feel dumped upon. In truth, they are correct. The problem has been dumped into their lap and they often don't have the intellectual resources (not that they aren't smart, they aren't educators) to come up with a solution. This is why it is so important that every teacher or administrator has a game plan before going into a meeting. Parents are paying for private Jewish day school and expect that we will help them resolve issues in a mentsch-like way.

**“We want the children we pour our hearts and souls into to thrive! And what Jewish parent doesn't want the same? We must take the time to remind parents we are in this together.”**

Building trust is essential for maintaining positive relationships with parents. One of my first grade teachers sums up what so many teachers think when she says, “I am in a career of nurturing young children to be competent thinkers who listen, who can think analytically and creatively, solve problems, and make decisions, shaping children to be inquirers who negotiate, inventors who collaborate and can work successfully with diverse individuals and groups; and yet we still have parents who question educator's techniques, challenge our decisions and oppose our very quest to strengthen and enrich their child's educational journey. I wish more parents could trust in the educators that surround their child and believe we also have their child's best interest at heart.”

Some parents believe they too can teach since they have been through school. It takes patience and understanding in dealing with parents who want to tell you how to do your job. We have to try and remember that it is often emotional baggage from their own school days which they unknowingly bring to us. Fear of failure drives their concerns.

On the other hand, trust needs to be earned. We have to give parents clear expectations, explanations, and an understanding of the theory or philosophy behind what we do. This can be done in newsletters, teacher letters, electronic publications, in back-to-school nights and teacher conferences. For some, it will be done one-on-one in a meeting with teacher, parent, and administrator.

We need to tell parents that we want their trust. We need to tell parents that respectful communication is mutual. We need to tell parents that appropriate boundaries must be adhered to for the well being of the faculty and administration. Burnt out, stressed out teachers/administrators are not good role models for their children. Our policies and communication both orally, and in writing, must let parents know this is what we need from them in order for us to be most successful with their children. We have an obligation to speak the truth with kindness and concern, clarity and strength. ■



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# What Do Day School Parents Really Think? School Leaders Get Their Own Report Cards

■ by **BONNIE HAUSMAN** and **SUZANNE KLING**

**W**e know what our parents think...they have no problem picking up the phone and letting me know just what's on their mind."

"We've surveyed parents before and got about 30-40% to reply."

Sound familiar? Not to the 38 schools that participated in PEJE's Jewish Day School Parent Survey this past spring. The survey, conducted in partnership with Measuring Success, LLC (developers of the Day School Peer Yardstick® Suite of Tools), enabled more than 7000 parents to share their opinions anonymously on a wide range of topics. These schools now have treasure troves of rich data to help them understand parent perceptions. More importantly, through this Survey and the accompanying consultation, school leaders are learning how to interpret and use the data to strengthen their schools. The "report card" they've received is a tool to measure progress in key areas as well as to foster more disciplined and sophisticated decision-making.

## Background/Methodology

After a pilot program in 2008 with a design team representing eight schools, the Survey was launched last fall using a web-based instrument. School leaders used templates and creative strategies to attain an incredible average response rate of 77%, with one school managing to get 97% of its parents to participate. In a sign of how donors value school use of data, Community Day School in Pittsburgh even acquired a \$10,000 gift for surpassing their target response rate. One explanation for the high response rate is the simple desire parents have to share their opinions confidentially. "Parents really got into it," said one head of school.

As the megabytes of data flowed in, the team from Measuring Success began their analysis by identifying "the ultimate question," the concept coined by Fred Reichheld that describes the gold standard of customer satisfaction research: which customers agree to "strongly recommend to a friend" the product or service. Every day school admission professional knows that the biggest influence on parents' decision to select a school for their child is word of mouth. The Survey accordingly saw likelihood to recommend as the best proxy for measuring overall satisfaction.

Overall, 53% of parents "strongly agreed" with the statement, "If asked, I would

recommend School X to other Jewish families I know." An additional 35% "agreed" with the statement, indicating a promising 89% satisfaction rate among current parents in the Survey. The underlying objective of the analysis is to stimulate school leaders to move more families into the "strongly agree" category. As Sacha Litman of Measuring Success explains it:



**Bonnie Hausman, PhD**, is Senior Program Officer, Research and Evaluation at PEJE with responsibility for the design and management of the Day School Parent Survey. She can be reached at [bonnie@peje.org](mailto:bonnie@peje.org).



**Suzanne Kling** is PEJE's Communications Officer. She can be reached at [Suzanne@peje.org](mailto:Suzanne@peje.org).

The net promoter methodology is designed to convert the "pareve" supporters of your school into passionate promoters, the influencers who will sustain the day school enterprise. They are the ones who will rave about your school and persuade other parents to enroll their children.

The customized Survey Report that each school received identifies a wide variety of factors associated with the "likelihood to strongly recommend" and compares each school with its self-designated peer group, chosen according to factors such as size, denomination, and division.

School leaders are then able to focus on areas of educational programming and practice that are most likely to yield growth. This approach represents a fundamental departure from most school surveys. Rabbi Seth Linfield, Head of School at Lehrman Community Day School in Miami Beach, describes his school's Survey experience:

The really meaningful concept is that of parents' strongly recommending. This may well be a more fruitful investment than trying to turn around the few parents who feel strongly the other way—just move the neutrals to a higher level [of satisfaction]. This is a paradigm shift from the way we had been looking at things.

Rather than focusing on the “squeaky wheels,” those parents whom day school leaders hear from most often, the Survey provided all parents with a constructive outlet for their feedback and shines a spotlight on those areas that matter most. Leaders can then make decisions that improve performance and/or perception.

## Surprises

Knowing that the quantity of information could be overwhelming to even data-savvy school leaders, Measuring Success conducted six-hour in-person consultations with leadership teams at each participating school. Training school leaders to use the data through experiential learning that will extend beyond the consultation was a critical success factor in this project. We are thrilled that a number of schools have contracted with Measuring Success for additional consultation time.

During the on-site consultation, leaders were asked to articulate hypotheses related to their scores. According to Measuring Success, about 80% of the hypotheses were based on beliefs that were contradicted by the data. For example, one school team was dismayed by a lower than expected score on the statement “I feel part of a social community

of parents at our school,” one of the factors correlated with likelihood to recommend the school. After developing a hypothesis to explain the score, they delved into the data segmented by demographic group, and discovered that one denominational segment of their parent body was actually not satisfied in that area, bringing down the school's total score in comparison to their peer group. By using their Survey Report's appendix, they were able to identify this segment, and plan strategies to address this weakness. Another school was shocked to discover the range of parent incomes and realized they had been setting their fundraising goals too low. According to one school leader, “The people who were at the consultation were surprised at how their preconceptions were not necessarily correct, and it will definitely influence our plans and focus us.”

When school leaders encountered data they found surprising, such as a relatively low score on the factor related to smooth transitions between school divisions, there was a tendency to rationalize the data. “Well, that was the year when the fifth grade teacher left mid-year,” for example. As one school leader put it: “In the end it doesn't really matter if it's perception or reality; the perception will become reality if you don't do anything about it.” The concept of transparency in communication has received much attention in this year of economic upheaval, and it applies beyond the financial realm. Schools expressed a hesitancy to share data, even when it might reveal strong achievement, such as standardized test scores. This “culture of fear” that came across in some consultations is not helping schools increase the number of parent advocates. Each consultation concluded with school leaders articulating an action plan and a communications plan.

## Overall Findings

The schools participating in the Parent Survey this past year represent denominational and geographic diversity. Demographic information about par-

ents shows a range of incomes and affiliations. Keeping in mind that the richest analysis is available at the individual school level (these reports are proprietary to each school and confidential), we are able to draw some general insights about day school parents, with corresponding questions and possible implications for schools and the day school field.

- Slightly more than half (51%) of current parents were actively considering, or had recently considered, educational options other than their current day school. The breakdown of other options under consideration (“the most appealing alternative to our school”) might be surprising:

Public school	33%
Other Jewish day school	33%
Non-Jewish private school	25%
Charter/magnet school	9%

Is competition with public school less intense than commonly assumed? If administrators instituted more regular check-in communication with families during the year, would the additional attention reduce student attrition<sup>1</sup>?

- Family affiliation was significantly linked with a parent's likelihood to strongly recommend a school. Recalling the average “strongly recommend” rate was 53%, consider the following breakdown:

Reform	62%
Conservative	55%
Modern/Centrist Orthodox	49%

Why might Reform families currently in day school be so much

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 48]

<sup>1</sup> In response to the critical question about recommending the school to other Jewish families, 12% of parents answered one of the following: “neither agree nor disagree,” “disagree,” or “strongly disagree.” The Day School Peer Yardstick Benchmark Report identified 12% to be the average rate of student attrition, suggesting an interesting consistency across data indicators.

# The PTO: Forging Connections at School

■ by **ZVI SCHOENBURG**

At the last RAVSAK conference, Dr. Alex Pomson shared with us research findings on the motivations of parents who enroll their children in our Jewish community day schools. Large numbers come in search of community. Above all else, they wish to be involved in their children's schooling for both their children's learning and growth and their own learning and growth.

An effective PTO (Parent Teachers Organization) captures these motivations. It offers school parents a wide range of opportunities for connecting both on behalf of their children and on behalf of themselves. There are at least four significant areas in which a PTO connects parents at school:

## Connecting school parents to the school culture and its mission

There is no better way for a parent to get acculturated to a school than to be in school while school is in session, doing something useful. It is a win-win. For example, volunteering for a Jewish holiday program through the PTO, or planning the same, is a perfect vehicle for new and veteran parents alike to both help out and to experience that Jewish event along with their children.

The same holds true with celebrations, performances, and/or presentations from the General Studies side of the ledger. The extent to which a PTO gets the parents involved creates the parents' buy-in to what the school is about. If part of the school mission is a commitment to practice justice, kindness and respect, as it is at our school, the PTO can advance that commitment by turning an early dismissal day into a family service day. If a PTO channels parents' desires to promote healthier food choices and fitness, it can create the programming and disseminate the information to go along with it, to further those aims so that they permeate and characterize the school culture. If a day school is all about learning, a PTO can offer school parents informal lessons in any of a number of areas, Jewish or general, a structured adult education program, or a parent-child beit midrash.

## Connecting school parents family to family

We talk a lot about community in our community day schools. The PTO is central in creating the links that allow families to get to know one another. This is what the Back to School Ice Cream Social and the End of the Year Picnic are all about. The PTO convenes the parents in the school, whether for coffees, lectures, salons, etc.—to some regard the topic is secondary. At our school, the PTO organizes a parent

walk every Monday morning right after drop off, through the ball field to that popular coffee purveyor you may have in your vicinity as well.



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The PTO can provide families with ways to share Jewish experiences, connecting families to families and to the school mission and culture as well. For example, the PTO can match school families for Shabbat dinners or for Pesach sedarim. And every PTO should act as a vaad chesed in the school, a committee that mobilizes to provide support for families in difficult situations due to illness or loss.

## Connecting parents to faculty, administration, staff

The PTO creates a crucial link between parents and teachers. The PTO is the best vehicle to organize room parents in a school and orient the room parents to the responsibilities that they assume in taking on that role. Our PTO has put together a room parents handbook and holds a late August training session. Teacher appreciation, the back to school breakfast, coffee in the teachers' workroom, etc., all are ways to build connections. The PTO can create settings for teachers and school principals, department heads, and heads of school to meet, talk, and exchange ideas.

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**April 2010**

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# What to Expect When It's All Unexpected: Parenting a Middle Schooler

■ by **JEFFREY KOBRIN**

**I**t is trite but nonetheless true that middle school is all about transitions. Students begin these years as children and end them as young adults. The overt chemical and physical changes that their bodies undergo during these years are complemented by (mostly) unseen mental and psychological development that brings them academically from rote memorizers to abstract thinkers and from children on playdates to teenagers on, well, dates. Indeed, one wag once commented to an audience of public school parents that “middle schoolers come to us as babies—and leave us able to have babies.” While this may scare some of us (or make us glad our children are educated somewhat more insularly), the summary is apt.

Parents of middle schoolers, especially those whose oldest child is just beginning the fifth or sixth grade, are best equipped for these challenging years by knowing what to expect from school and from their children—and how their own partnership with the school can best be established. The transitions of middle school are not only experienced by the students. Parents go through their own metamorphosis as well by the time their children move on to high school.

What then ought parents to expect? On the academic level, as subjects begin to departmentalize, students in a middle school will likely now encounter more teachers each day than they did in the lower years, each with their own particular demands and systems of organization. Children will likely have more homework, or at least more disparate tasks to perform, as their teachers each ask for follow-up at home. Students will likely be asked to work on a larger number of group projects than in the past, as teachers integrate teaching joint responsibility with their subject matter. By seventh and eighth grades, students will be expected to move beyond mere rote learning and to begin to demonstrate higher level and more abstract thinking.

Emotional and social development takes place concurrently with academic and intellectual growth. As academic achievement becomes more important, friendships change. As members of the opposite sex become interesting and puzzling in heretofore unknown ways, further erosion of set social circles occurs. Parents ought not to be surprised or dismayed if their children speak of completely different friends in October than they mention in May. Not all middle schoolers go through these

changes of interest and intellect at similar rates or at parallel times, so the speed at which these issues arrive at home will vary from family to family.

Parents can prepare for (or attest to, de-



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pending on where they are in this stage of parental life) periods of slammed doors, stony silence, sudden weeping or manic excitement. The period of pre-adolescence is certainly never dull. “Seventh graders,” one educator once remarked, “are a breed apart in that no one seems to want them—or really knows how to cope with them.” Middle school parents look to their children’s educators for insight, and the teachers, evaluating the zany behavior of their students, may in weaker moments wonder what messages the students receive at home. For parents, the hardest part is often the contrast between their memory of the adorable kindergartener and the confused (and confusing) pre-adolescent who now sits before them. For example, children who were excitedly verbal about every detail of their school and extracurricular lives as preschoolers will somehow morph into monosyllabic respondents to the most heartfelt of queries.

Middle school parents must emulate the experience of their children as those children transition from the nurturing environment of elementary school to the freedom and self-monitoring necessary for

secondary school. They simply need to let go in ways that allow the children to make their own mistakes. For a parent, this can often be nerve-wracking, to say the least; but to be what the press sardonically terms a “helicopter parent” ultimately does a disservice to one’s child, who needs to learn to cope with the academic and social challenges of life on his or her own. Parents who are used to spending time accompanying their children to the classroom door—and lingering there—may feel excluded by a middle school (or a middle schooler) who wants them to depart at the front door of the school building, or even at the front door at home. Even those children who are nervous to say goodbye to mom or dad should be encouraged to do so. Fostering such independence is a large part of what the middle school experience is all about.

Another important area in which independence should be helped along for middle schoolers is that of time and schoolwork management. Many schools provide new students with some form of daily planner,

which obviated the spiral homework pad many of their parents used. Students are expected to write down their short- and long-term assignments both to remind themselves and keep parents aware of upcoming deadlines. Many teachers at the start of middle school will happily provide parents with a schedule of home assignments. Parents can be sorely tempted to help their children budget and prioritize their independent work time—and, at the start, the children will need such help. With a larger number of teachers and a myriad demands, they may not automatically know what amounts of time to commit to each task and how to prioritize completing them. After several months, however, students should be expected to be able to do so independently. Parents can help their children focus, but children may need to learn through what can be painful experience that spending too long on one project leaves them little time for another.

The bad news is that parents may need to keep silent and watch their child misman-

age his or her time at the outset. The good news is that middle school grades are relatively meaningless outside of the school in which they are earned. Therefore, a less than stellar grade earned while a student learns far more important lessons of executive functioning is an insignificant sacrifice. If a child still seems overwhelmed by such issues after spending a year or so in a middle school setting, parents may wish to consider determining if some type of learning or attentional issue is at play. The school psychologist or learning specialist can be an invaluable resource in such cases. Parents must try not to create more tension in helping a child learn organization by pressuring the child or making him or her feel that they are being judged by their family.

Take heart: there are not merely “don’ts” for parents of middle schoolers. It is imperative to ask your child many, many questions each day: how their day went, what homework they have, with whom they sat at lunch, etc. As the child progresses through

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 45]

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# Building the Buzz: Parents as Ambassadors for Jewish Day School

■ by **REBECCA EGOLF**

**H**AVE you kvelled over your children lately and felt a sense of pride at giving them a wonderful Jewish day school experience? Are their teachers filling their heads with more Hebrew and Judaic knowledge than you have, even though they are only in the first grade? Have you shared this with anyone else—grandparents, a neighbor, a colleague, or a friend?

If so, congratulations! You are already an ambassador for your Jewish day school! There is no form of marketing, public relations, advertising, or promotion, nothing that can be said or written that will have as much impact on Jewish day school recruitment as personal stories told by current day school parents to prospective day school parents.

Why is this so? The best person to promote any product, whether a restaurant, brand of car, vacation destination, or school, is a happy customer who is so proud of their purchase that they feel compelled to tell others about it. Research overwhelmingly shows that people seek advice, trust information, and make purchasing decisions for all kinds of products and services based largely on personal referrals and recommendations. We swap stories about products and services we like or dislike. We rate what we're reading on Amazon, read restaurant reviews and recommendations, complain about disappointing customer service we've received, and share what we know about a myriad of subjects with those we know well and those with whom we are barely connected through our social networks.

When it comes to choosing a Jewish day school, no other source is more effective than word of mouth at increasing interest and encouraging prospective families to apply for admission. How effective is word of mouth? The Solomon Schechter Day School of Greater Boston reports that as many as 80% of their inquiring families cite a personal referral as the way they heard about the school.

While marketing and sales used to be all about convincing or persuading a customer to buy something, today it is more about identifying or recognizing someone's needs and offering something that we believe will fill that need. Back when current day school parents were considering educational options for their children, they considered all of the various factors they wanted in a school, and chose a Jewish day school education. Now, months or years later, they have seen the incredible impact Jewish day school has on their children and family and are enthusiastic and passionate about their school. Without spouting facts or statistics or quoting the

school's mission statement, any parent can pass on their enthusiasm to others simply by telling them about it—in their own words.



*Rebecca Egolf is a PEJE Coach and the facilitator of the PEJE Admission Community of Practice, supporting Jewish day schools with expertise in admission, recruitment and marketing. She can be reached at [rebecca@peje.org](mailto:rebecca@peje.org).*

When a parent tells a personal story, their emotions get involved. They tell it from the heart, honest, genuine and unscripted. Marketing expert Andy Goodman, in his book *Storytelling as Best Practice*, reports that “while we will always need hard facts to make our cases, we often fail to realize that the battle for hearts and minds starts with the hearts. The audience you seek will only give its attention to things it cares about, so it’s incumbent upon us to make an emotional connection before we start feeding them facts. Stories are the most effective communication tool at our disposal.”

“I often ask myself how I became a parent ambassador,” says Rachel Wachs, who co-chairs the parent ambassador program at Perelman Jewish Day School in Wynnwood, Pennsylvania. “In many ways it is one of the easiest jobs for me to do. I became so passionate about day school education that I just started talking to anyone who would listen. And when I would hear parents say they were looking at other schools, I would simply say, ‘Here’s why you need to look at my school.’”

Judy Schaffert, a board member and parent of a graduate of Jess Schwartz College Prep in Scottsdale, Arizona, agrees. She seeks to connect to people who might be open to the idea of Jewish day school. “While attending a back-to-school night a few years ago, my husband commented that in his entire education he had had about five teachers who were wonderful and made a difference in his life. But our child, who attended Jewish day school, had seven teachers every day who fit that description! That’s the kind of story that you tell people that makes them think, ‘I’ve got to check out this school!’”

There are many different ambassador roles a parent can take, both formal and informal. Every parent can speak about their positive personal experiences with a school. Informal conversations about school choice and other parenting concerns often take place over a cup of coffee at the Shabbat oneg, at the neighborhood playground, or in the checkout line at the supermarket. Board members have an additional responsibility, as supporting and promoting the school is part of their responsibility as a trustee.

Dan Levine, Director of Marketing and Recruitment for the Solomon Schechter Day School of Greater Boston, takes an additional step in helping parents and board members learn to be ambassadors. “We provide annual training sessions for board members and parents on how to be good advocates for the school. The emphasis is on being positive and talking authentically and passionately about the school. That’s usually effective in at least convincing someone to come and take a look at the school, and our admission staff takes over from there. It doesn’t matter what our advocates are talking about—we don’t tell them what to say—the goal is just to get people out there having conversations and talking positively about the school.”

Many schools also have formal ambassador programs, in which the admission director selects and trains a group of parents to support recruitment initia-

tives. The process of selecting specific parents to serve on this team involves strategizing about what demographics and characteristics will be most beneficial in reaching the school’s target audiences. Among the typical tasks for these ambassadors are participating in a variety of events for prospec-

**“While marketing and sales used to be all about convincing or persuading a customer to buy something, today it is more about identifying or recognizing someone’s needs and offering something that we believe will fill that need.”**

tive families, serving as tour guides, and making phone calls and sending e-mails to prospective parents to answer their questions and make them feel welcome. Ambassadors are great at making connections between the day school and other organizations, like their synagogues and the preschools their children attended, and helping identify new families to whom the school can reach out. Ambassadors also provide invaluable input and feedback to the admission director as events are planned and new strategies are tested. Each task and activity strengthens the positive connections between the volunteer, the school and the families of prospective students.

In trying to increase the enrollment of The Epstein School in Atlanta, Georgia, Director of Admission Susan Berk knew that the most effective way to identify and reach more prospective families was by increasing the number of people involved in helping promote the school. Several years ago, she created a formal parent ambassador program at the school, carefully selecting a small cadre of parents and training them to support her in recruitment initiatives. “My initial efforts in working with the parents were not completely effective,” Susan reported. “It’s all about getting the right people on the team. It was important that our ambassadors be selected, rather than asking for volunteers. We wanted parents to consider it an honor that they were

asked to serve their school in this way.”

Over time, Berk saw the fruits of her labor, increasing interest in the school and ultimately reaching the school’s enrollment goals. “What was interesting was that inquiries didn’t really increase, but application numbers and enrolling students did,”

Berk noted. “This is because we had been casting our net too wide, trying to reach a broader audience that wasn’t interested in day school. Our parent ambassadors were able to use their social networks to accurately identify those families that were better fits for our school, proving that more isn’t always better. Connecting to the right audience is what is important.”

Promoting the school as an ambassador has a number of positive benefits, both for the school and for the parents that do it. Schools should focus their attention on creating customer enthusiasm rather than pushing marketing messages, because the happier parents are, the more they talk. Over time, this leads to building “buzz” in the community, which both brings in new families and reinforces for current families that they made a wise decision in choosing the school. Schools with organized word of mouth initiatives report a marked decrease in attrition, since why would anyone want to leave a school that everyone is talking about? At The Epstein School, while ambassadors were helping increase the number of new incoming students, they also helped cut attrition in half over a two year period. Being an ambassador provides a great deal of personal satisfaction as well. “I am proud of my efforts in opening other parents’ eyes to the nurturing, excellent, diverse education offered at our school,” says Rachel Wachs of Perelman Jewish Day School. “Being a parent ambassador is simply being me.” ■

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## RAVSAK Welcomes Rachel O. Alexander, Director of Institutional Advancement

It is with great joy that we welcome Rachel O. Alexander to the RAVSAK staff as the new Director of Institutional Advancement. Rachel comes to RAVSAK with nearly 15 years of development and Jewish nonprofit leadership experience and brings vision, fine-tuned skills, and passion for day school in her fundraising toolkit.

Prior to coming to RAVSAK, Rachel worked for the Jewish Women's Archive, Combined Jewish Philanthropies, UJA Federation of Northern New Jersey, and most recently, for the

Solomon Schechter Day School and High School of Long Island. A graduate of Solomon Schechter Day School, now Jewish Community Day School, of Rhode Island, Rachel earned a BA in Judaic Studies and Psychology from Brown University and an MPA in Nonprofit Management from Columbia University. She has studied at the Conservative Yeshiva of Jerusalem and has been a Wexner Graduate Fellow and a Bronfman Fellow. Rachel is the founding director of Project Geshet, the recipient of the Brody Award for the New Jersey Association

of Jewish Communal Service, and a participant in the current cohort of DSLTI.

"Rachel brings a powerful combination of skills, experiences and *menshlichkeit* to RAVSAK," says Executive Director Dr. Marc N. Kramer. "She is a wonderful new colleague and a great asset to the organization. I have no doubt that she will help RAVSAK live deeply in its mission."

We welcome Rachel and wish her great success at RAVSAK. ■

## The PTO: Forging Connections at School

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 14]

### Connecting parents to the unfunded needs of students

A PTO can make things happen for students in a school that otherwise would go unfunded or unfulfilled. These are the extras that go bravely beyond the reach of the school's budget. Special performances can be booked, field trips arranged, musical instruments purchased, a laptop cart outfitted, latkes distributed. In the true spirit of Hillel's dictum, "If I am not for myself, who will be?" an effective PTO can act on behalf of a school's parents, take measure of a gap in what the school

can otherwise do, and judiciously make a connection for the benefit of the students.

An on-the-ball PTO will take even its most mundane functions and use them to create the kinds of con-

nections discussed above. Fundraising, for example, may be a means to pursue these ends, but still more can be achieved when the means also achieve the ends. Better to raise money with a book sale (which promotes reading) or a mishloach manot project (which builds connections from family to family while fulfilling a holiday mitzvah), than with, say, selling gift wrap or a coupon booklet. The more



**There is no better way for a parent to get acculturated to a school than to be in school while school is in session, doing something useful. It is a win-win.**

explicitly purposeful the functioning of the PTO in connecting parents at school, the more effectively the PTO serves and the more is accomplished for all. ■

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# Wearing Two Hats I: Parents as Board Members

■ by **AUDREY GOLDFARB**

**S**HOULD parents be board members? Pros: Since parents along with their children are the major consumers of Jewish Day schools, it is vital to the school to listen to their voices. Aside from fulfilling their role as parents, they possess many talents, interests and skills that are valuable assets and can be utilized by the board to fulfill its vision and strategic plan. Building a board is more than simply filling slots. It is about being strategic in the way a board looks at its composition and its operations. A board, under the guidance of its committee of trustees, should continually profile and evaluate its membership. Utilizing this information the board can identify, cultivate, and recruit new members who are well suited to assist the board in meeting its action plan needs. If potential new members are also parents, there could be an additional benefit. Parents have chosen the school as the best place to educate their children. Current parents who are pleased with the school approach their board responsibilities with a unique passion.

Cons: Parent trustees' role is a tough one, often fraught with competing personal relationships and potential conflicts of interest. As parents the trustees might be inwardly focused on their children's particular needs, their family's particular needs or the particular needs of their family friends. As trustees they need to be able to "stand on the balcony" and look at the school as a whole. They need to be ever vigilant to assure that their decisions are focused on the welfare of the school as a whole, not on the welfare of their own children.

## How many parents should be on the board?

The National Association of Independent Schools suggests that the ideal board size is 15-21: small enough to act decisively as a team, but large enough to cover the strategic needs of the school. It further suggests that current parents should represent no more than 60 percent of board membership. It is important to balance current parents with non-parents to ensure objectivity and the long view. Alumni, past parents, grandparents, and community opinion leaders should be considered as non-parent

board members. It is also recommended that the parent association liaison be selected by the board, not elected by the parent body to ensure that the liaison meet the same criteria for board selection as any other board member.

## Can current parents be effective board members?

Some of the most capable and effective Jewish day school board leaders



*Currently a Coach-Mentor for PEJE, Audrey Goldfarb has been a classroom teacher, a special education teacher and administrator in both public and private education over the past 35 years. She can be reached at [goldfoo3@umn.edu](mailto:goldfoo3@umn.edu).*

with whom I have had the privilege to work were and are current parents in their schools. Their role as a parent is not the sole reason for board nomination. In addition to being parents, their names are placed under consideration for board membership because they are recognized as possessing skills and talents that are viewed as "useful" and needed for the current board vision and action plan. Their names are suggested because they are known and well respected by the school and within the wider community. They are considered in the hopes that they will be valuable additions to the current board.

NAIS's popular Trustee Handbook notes that "it is not easy to diversify a board, but the effort to do so will pay great dividends in providing a multiple of perspectives, and lead to more effective decisions in the long run."

## How can we orient, support and evaluate parents who are “wearing two hats” to understand and fulfill their dual roles?

All new board members should participate in an orientation that clearly articulates the school’s mission and vision and facilitates an understanding of the trustee’s role and responsibilities. An orientation enhances the effectiveness of any board trustee. The responsibilities listed below are especially important to address with parents:

- Board members are responsible for looking at the needs of the school as a whole.
- Board members take on the obligation of confidentiality. They will have access to information that is not open to the general community.
- Board members will be asked to take on responsibilities that will facilitate the board’s annual plan.
- Board members need to partner with the head of school.
- Whatever disagreements may occur behind closed doors, board members must demonstrate unity to all outside and within the school.

Pairing a new board member with an experienced board member as a mentor can be a mutually supportive process. The mentor makes him/herself available to welcome the new board member, attend meetings together, answer questions, and discuss issues. If the new board member is a parent it may be wise to assign an experienced board member who is also a parent.

Each new board member should be invited to become an active member on a committee that fulfills her interests and would benefit from her skills and talents. Involving and empowering new members in an area of need and interest is an important tool to build effective board members.

Establishing a process of on-going reflection and evaluation regarding realization of annual goals as well as personal accomplishments facilitates healthy communication and support, and can be powerful in shaping an effective board leader. The committee of trustees, executive committee, and board chair should facilitate this process throughout the year.

In summary, I believe that parents should be considered as potential board members. It is important to nominate parents who have talents and skills that will be assets to the board’s work. It is also vital that all board members, including parents, receive orientation and ongoing support and engage in frequent reflection and evaluation. Throughout the day school world many parents have worn “two hats” and have been successfully providing effective day school board leadership. ■



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# Engaging Parents for a Successful Parents Fund

■ by **Ryan Carmichael**

**I** THINK that all of us who work with parents know that since parents are getting more and more used to being approached about fundraising and are more and more involved in their child's college experience, there is great potential to engage them as donors.

At the same time, they have increasing expectations to be approached and engaged in meaningful ways, not just asked for money. Parents want to feel like insiders, they want to feel connected, and they want to feel like partners.

Before I dive into this topic, let me tell you about my experience in the field. I served as Director of Parent Giving and Programs at Colby College for the past three years (a mature, well-established parents program bringing in approximately \$1 million annually) and recently began a new job with Columbia University's School of Engineering and Applied Science (a brand new program).



*The following was a presentation given by Ryan Carmichael, Director of the Parents Fund at the Columbia University Fu Foundation School of Engineering and Applied Science, to the 2008 Annual Conference of the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education (CASE). Though presented to college development officers, many of the techniques apply to primary and secondary private schools as well. Ryan can be reached at [rc2533@columbia.edu](mailto:rc2533@columbia.edu).*

Even in these two very different settings, the approach to parents is largely the same. There are five essential elements for success: identification of top prospects; early involvement; administrative support; focus on fundraising; and remaining involved as a go-to person (concierge).

## Identifying and Cultivating Prospects

Start the process early—as soon as students have accepted. Summer is key research time. Utilize the main sources of information:

- Information from admissions
- Matriculation/Information forms
- Self-identifying parents
- Recommendations from current parent volunteers or alumni volunteers

The single most important tool for engaging parents and building your Parents Fund is a strong Parents Committee (PC). The PC is the main parent volunteer body which focuses on fundraising and on serving as liaisons between the school and the parent body.

This is the most ideal way to get parents engaged and give them ownership in the success of the school. Once onboard as volunteers, it is much easier to have a conversation about their giving and to push them to maximize their philanthropy. They feel like insiders and know the vision of the school better. Also, people often make their giving priorities based on where they're involved as a volunteer. The Parents Committee is great in two ways: it strengthens bonds with top parents and also uses those parents to

bring in *more* parents and money.

Get them involved early (summer before first year). Their meetings should be part business but mostly a chance to engage with the leadership of the school so that they feel like insiders and can build confidence in the vision of the school. They may only be just getting to know your school, but their first engagement is as an insider and from the very beginning, they're hear-

ing the right messages from senior administrators and taking ownership. This access, and the knowledge that comes with this access, keeps them connected to their children and to the future of the school. Remember: the main "perk" of volunteering is that they get early and direct attention from the president/dean/provost.

You can use your leadership positions (chairs, class co-chairs) as a further tool to cultivate and recognize the highest prospects, and they'll have higher giving expectations. Obviously, the PC becomes the top of your giving pyramid. At Colby, they donated over half the total PF each year. This is the pool you will focus on for leadership/principal gifts.

## Establishing an Effective Parents Committee

Here are some helpful guidelines for setting up a PC that will serve as a success fundraising vehicle for your school:

- The invitation should come from the top, with follow-up from development professionals and chairs
- Set reasonable expectations for calling—six to ten families, tops
- Provide a job description
- Establish clear giving expectations
- Keep the focus on fundraising, not other subcommittees; there is always a danger in drift

In order for them to learn more about the school and to begin to feel more connected, weekends on campus are important. Typically, the first meeting is during Parents Weekend in the fall. This provides an opportunity for you and administrative staff to meet and get to know your volunteers. You should hold an Officers Meeting, where you can cultivate your co-chairs and have them buy into the PC's goals and plan.

The highlight of the weekend consists of a New Member Training. Start by conducting a special briefing with the president and/or dean. Have them share their vision for the school and answers questions. This requires a commitment of time on the president's part, but results in big payoffs by creating allies and partners in success. Then highlight top faculty and energize volunteers through exposure to the intellectual vitality of the school. Include a social element with their student—i.e., a reception with the president/dean, a special lunch or picnic. Most importantly, make them feel like insiders and valued.

I would also advise making the PC as big as you can manage while still making it feel exclusive. At Colby, the PC has grown from 42 when I started to 100 when I left. Yes, this is more time to manage, but the payoffs are huge. You can ask them for more and assume they will give since they've signed on with a specific giving expectation.

## Parent Receptions

Aside from a vibrant PC, the next most important tool for engaging parents who aren't on the committee but who are

leadership-gift prospects would be to organize parent-specific cultivation events. These should be small receptions, hosted by PC members in their homes, providing another way to make them feel useful in non-fundraising capacity. Often, they pay, saving your budget. Invite all major donor prospects. Important: Make no direct fundraising pitches. Receptions provide a way for parents to meet each other, feel part of an important or exclusive community, meet the president in a small setting or hear faculty and feel more connected with the academics. Most importantly, they hear the messages of the campaign and begin to feel more knowledgeable.

Two other kinds of events that parents can attend/host as a way to feel closer to the school. A send-off reception of

fers a less formal, more mass-engagement activity held in the summer before school starts again. Invite all incoming students and parents and other returning students/families. The event can be hosted by a PC member or other parent prospects. Again, there is no fundraising; the event creates positive feelings and enables highly rated parents to meet important peers and alumni.

A similar kind of reception, called an admissions yield event, takes place during the weeks that people are making their decisions on where to attend. All accepted students and families should be invited. The idea is similar to send-off receptions, offering parents the opportunity of connecting and getting a glimpse of the community. Volunteer hosts and attend-

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 28]

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[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 25]

ees feel useful and get to share their good feelings about the school, taking ownership in its success.

## Other Opportunities

Let me quickly mention other avenues for engagement if you have time and resources (depending on size of your school, these may be taken care of by Student Affairs or Communications departments).

Invite parents to participate on a Welcome Committee, whose responsibilities are outreach to new parents and addressing concerns before the students arrive on campus. The number one reason people turn down a position on the PC is that they don't want to make solicitation calls. A Welcome Committee enables you to keep them connected as school volunteers, effectively serving as ambassadors

to new parents. This move yields benefits on both sides: the volunteer becomes more engaged with the school, and the new parent is welcomed into a friendly community well before receiving a fundraising pitch.

Another excellent means for inspiring parent engagement is parent-specific communications. In the age of Web 2.0 there are many vehicles you can use to maintain quality contact, including E-newsletters, parent magazines (or at least sending parents copy of alumni magazine), and a parent webpage. The more avenues you provide for parents to be informed and engaged, the more connected your parent body will feel to the school as a community.

Those are the key ways we attempt build a strong Parents Fund by engaging and cultivating parents. (Of course, major gift officer and I are also doing one-on-

one visits throughout the year for both PF gifts and capital gifts.) The implied message is for you to focus on the top of your giving pyramid. Try for participation level gifts from most, but by focusing on the few who can make a difference with the \$1K+ gifts, that will make the difference.

You'll see that some of these avenues for engagement are not directly related to the Parents Fund, but the relationships that they cultivate are important as parents feel more like partners and not just dollar signs.

And just to reiterate, the success also relies on having the president's or top administrators' buy-in and commitment to cultivating parents. They know about the priorities ahead of time and trust his/her leadership. You are also paving the way for their students to become knowledgeable, engaged and supportive alumni. ■



## Project ROPE Doubles in Size in Year Two

The second year of Project ROPE: Roots of Philanthropy Education is underway! Students in six RAVSAK schools have committed themselves to this elite program in Jewish youth philanthropy. This year's theme, chosen by the schools themselves, is Disadvantaged Youth. Students are studying an advanced curriculum of Jewish sources on tzedakah, as well as a separate package of Jewish sources related to the theme prepared specially for this year's cohort.

Throughout the year, students study social issues and discover nonprofit groups that address them in a variety of ways. They learn how nonprofits function from numerous angles, through site visits, interviews with clients and staff, and examination of organizations' annual reports and balance sheets. Students from all the schools convene through monthly phone or video conferences, sharing ideas for the program and learning about philanthropy from top professionals in the field. By the end of the program they are able to make philanthropic decisions informed by the head and the heart, guided by Jewish values and taking account of needs both in their local communities and in Israel.

Mazel tov to this year's participating schools:

- Donna Klein Jewish Academy, Boca Raton, FL
- Gray Academy of Jewish Education, Winnipeg, MB
- The Samuel Scheck Hillel Community Day School, North Miami Beach, FL
- San Diego Jewish Academy, San Diego, CA
- The Shoshana S. Cardin School, Baltimore, MD
- Tarbut V'Torah Community Day School, Irvine, CA

*If you are interested in having your school join Project ROPE next year, contact Dr. Elliott Rabin at [erabin@ravsak.org](mailto:erabin@ravsak.org).*





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# Engaging Parents in RAVSAK Schools

As the articles in this issue show, schools talk about embracing parents, but in practice they often keep them at arm's length. What are the kinds of programs that bring parents to contribute talents and energies in the most productive ways? How do schools employ parents to improve their school communities while increasing their enthusiasm for and commitment to their children's day school? We asked schools to find parents to write about these kinds of successes, and to share the effects they've had on the parent body and the school as a whole. Here are five.

## Go Far: Parents in Training for a Healthy Family

■ **MICHELLE BIGELMAN**, parent, B'nai Shalom Day School, Asheville, North Carolina

Parents are definitely an integral part of our school community. We have plenty of programming that is for our children, but also programming that involves and betters our parents, such as Go Far. Go Far focuses on healthy lifestyles for children and their families. The program targets third through fifth grade boys and girls. The children and families commit to a ten week program that meets twice weekly to train for a 5k run.

Besides building confidence, the program includes discussions about sportsmanship, perseverance, and commitment. Parents are encouraged to run one time during the week outside the program with their child, and to help continue the nutrition tips and encouragement at home. The final 5k was an amazing event. The camaraderie, pride, and parent participation made the event extra special. Robin Lindsay, a physician assis-

tant who helped start the program, said she had never seen such a supportive and committed group of parents. The hard work paid off with many parents cheering on students, providing snacks, and a pat on the back.

The parents' commitment to the program benefits the family as a whole. Our hope is that these healthy habits instilled will last a lifetime. ■





## Town Hall

■ **IRENE MAGERMAN**, alumni parent, Jess Schwartz College Prep, Phoenix, Arizona

I find it fascinating that two elderly gentlemen who participated in a significant moment in world history spoke just years apart at a small Jewish high school in Phoenix. Ben Ferencz was a chief prosecutor and Ernest Michel, a survivor of Auschwitz, was a special correspondent, both at the Nuremberg Trials.

Their appearances at Jess Schwartz College Prep were part of the school's Town Hall, a weekly 50-minute event for the student body, faculty and parents. Town Hall showcases a multitude of subjects and activities and is a forum for knowledge and experiences gained outside the

classroom. The goal of Town Hall is to build community. According to the JSCP's media director, Phil Trapani, this is achieved three ways: 1) by informing and educating, 2) by sharing in-group activities, and 3) by participating in the democratic process.

Town Hall has included subjects as varied as a state senator discussing the situation of genocide in Darfur, excerpts from the Phoenix Jewish Film Festival, cyber bullying, a Klezmer band, Israeli dancers, authors, AIPAC representatives, and outstanding artistic and musical student work.

Group activities have consisted of Sukkot building, theatrical workshops, student-made commercials for Drug Free America, the Israeli elections, a teen dating abuse presentation, and a prevention program by the residential treatment center called Beit T'Shuvah.

The democratic process incorporates student government elections. Next fall, students will be asked to determine school policies.

Whether a VIP is in town or a current event is taking place there is never a lack of topics for Town Hall. ■



## Vision Through Parent Focus Groups

■ **MICHELLE STRAVITZ** and **ANDI DORLESTER**, parents, Gesher Jewish Day School, Fairfax, Virginia

In June 2008 Gesher Jewish Day School launched a strategic planning initiative called Destination GESHER! Much of the effort involved listening to Gesher's stakeholders. These included the parent body, faculty and staff, board of directors, local preschool parents, congregational rabbis, and other members of the community. Many ideas for new initiatives were gener-

ated, but what emerged from the parent focus groups ultimately made clear the overriding vision for Gesher.

Drawing upon a visioning technique described in *Moment* magazine (May/June 2008, "The Re-Branding of Israel"), focus group facilitators asked parents to close their eyes and imagine Gesher as a house.

Each participant then spoke about what they saw happening there: the images, feelings, sights, and sounds that were invoked.

Parents spoke of a place brimming with learners of all ages gathering to pray, learn, play and solve problems. They described the smell of challah baking in the kitchen, the sound of music coming from the living room, and the sight of children laughing and playing in the yard. Some saw it as a messy place, with toys and books mixed together and available for all to share. Others felt it as a place of security, warmth, and a sense of belonging. Nearly all saw it as a magnet, drawing in people from all directions to be a part of the Gesher community.

These impressions of Gesher as a home of learning, not only for its students, but for the entire Jewish community, helped guide the strategic planning committee in developing a two-part vision for the school as both a Destination school for K-8 education excellence and a Destination home for Jewish learning and community. ■



## Building Character, the Jewish Way

■ **DEBBIE DOLINER**, parent, Hillel School of Tampa, Florida

I lead a program at the Hillel School of Tampa that is a blend of character education and self-development with a heavy mix of Jewish study. It's been our recipe for a fascinating volunteer program for parents and faculty.

We are a group of about 20 parents and faculty members who call ourselves the Guiding Jewish Values (GJV) Task Force. We meet monthly to inspire our faculty to implement character education in their classrooms. We have evolved to understand that our own characters are strengthening too, with the result that

our group has become a "think tank" of ideas for character building.

We began a decade ago with the goal to establish a Jewish values-oriented school culture. Once we realized that what we were doing was developing our own character education program, we have sought out and attended local and national character education conferences. Our character education program is driven by Jewish values and a language of Hebrew and Yiddish terms, including mitzvah, mensch, kavod and tikkun olam.

Our GJV meetings begin with a discussion of a Jewish text. From there we discuss and reflect on how that particular text morally affects what is currently happening in our classrooms or the wider world. Those of us who attend conferences bring in what is happening in the world of secular character education. Then I offer an exercise as another way to convey values, like a recent one where we used a drawing of a "my heart" with its many segments, to show what and how what is important to us guides our choices. We leave the meetings enlightened and eager to inspire children to grow their characters, sure ingredients for success. ■

# Unearthing Jewish Roots to the Land and Its Produce

■ **LISA PINKUS**, parent, King David School, Scottsdale, Arizona

How often have you heard the words “Jewish day school” and “fresh, organic produce” in the same sentence? When I was approached to chair the Community Supported Agriculture Program (CSA) at the King David School (KDS), I jumped at the chance. A CSA is a relationship between a local farmer and the community whereby members receive fresh, organic produce delivered to them on a weekly basis. Most Jewish day schools sell challah each week to enhance the Shabbat experience and raise money for the school. The CSA sells fresh, organic produce to enhance our commitment to eat healthy and raise awareness of our partnership with G-d in caring for the earth and ourselves.

The enthusiasm I initially experienced for this program may have been selfishly motivated. Eating healthier and the exceptional taste difference I had experienced before from an organic co-op were strong motivators, as well as my desire to be a farmer and the fact that this was probably as close as I’d ever get. It is often our own, personal interests and passions that lead us to bring new ideas and expressions of Jewish values to our children’s education. In a Jewish community day school, parental interpretation of a school’s mission can bring added benefits and innovative programming to a school.

I did not realize the collaborative effort between our school and a local farm would gift me with a unique opportunity of involvement at KDS. The CSA program has enhanced the community and our connections to each other; it encourages healthy eating and is tied all together with Jewish values. In the fall, we will begin a formal educational component of our CSA through Tuv HaAretz, a CSA program of Hazon, a Jewish environmental organization. King David is the first Jewish day school to participate in this program alongside synagogues and Jewish community centers, and I am eagerly waiting for this next phase of the partnership to begin! ■





# Grandparents: An Untapped Resource

■ by **GARY DREVITCH**

**L**AST year, the 235-student Hebrew Academy of Morris County (HAMC) in Randolph, New Jersey, decided to take part in the Butterfly Project, launched by the San Diego Jewish Academy with the goal of creating 1.5 million butterflies in memory of all the children who died in the Holocaust. Naomi Bacharach, director of marketing and development at the school, and other administrators did not want students to work on their art projects in a vacuum—they knew the project would have more meaning if they invited grandparents to take part as well, painting side-by-side with the children and sharing their families' histories.

"We're all about *ledor vador* and passing from one generation to the next," Bacharach said. "It's critical. We're trying to connect grandparents to our children and connect the past to the future of Klal Yisrael." The students and grandparents made more than 400 butterflies for the project, just one example of how schools today are finding success by welcoming the older generation into their classrooms. The benefits are clear for the students, for parents with overtaxed schedules, and just maybe, for development funds needing a boost in a down economy.



**Gary Drevitch** is Senior Editor of *Grandparents.com*. He can be reached at [Gary@grandparents.com](mailto:Gary@grandparents.com).

parents, but because households headed by 55- to 64-year-olds have the highest net worth of any age group's—and 55 percent of grandparents do not carry a mortgage, putting them in a relatively good position to weather the current economic downturn.

The best-educated and most-skilled grandparents in history are prepared to bring their professional experience—and their bake-sale recipes—to their grand-

children's schools. All administrators have to do is ask.

## Today's Grandparents: A New Model

The country's 70 million grandparents represent one of the largest, fastest-growing, and most powerful segments of the U.S. population. Three in ten American adults are grandparents—an all-time high. And today's grandparents are younger than ever before—the average age of first-time grandmothers in the United States is 50; for first-time grandpas, the average age is 54. Overall, 54 percent of grandparents are younger than 65. By 2015, 60 percent of grandparents will be Baby Boomers.

*Grandparents.com* recently commissioned Peter Francese, founder of *American Demographics*, to create The Grandparent Economy, a wide-reaching study that sheds new light on the economic clout of the country's grandparents—and their commitment to their grandchildren. Here's what he discovered:

- Grandparents control more than half the financial assets in the United States, and despite the recession, they haven't stopped spending on their grandkids. Francese estimates that grandparents will spend \$52 billion on their grandkids this year, \$32 billion of it on school tuition and related education costs.
- Grandparents lead 37 percent of the country's households, about 44 million in all, and trends show that number rising in the years ahead. Fortunately, they're well-prepared for the responsibilities, not only because they're experienced

## Boomers Making an Impact

The baby-boom generation has never been one to sit back passively. When they get involved, they dive in with all of their considerable passion and energy. As grandparents, they're not content to ask kids, "What are you doing in school?" during rote weekly phone calls. They want to see for themselves and they want to improve their grandchildren's experiences, at day schools and elsewhere.

As a young mother, Mary Bourgeois of Metairie, Louisiana, spent countless hours volunteering at her children's grade school. She was a "Room Mom" who baked, helped out in the classroom, and organized holiday celebrations. Today, the 62-year-old grandmother of five is president of the 172-member Grandparents Club at St. Philip Neri School in



Metairie, where her 6-year-old grandson is in kindergarten. “I pour a lot of work into this,” Bourgeois says, “because I’m very passionate” about promoting grandparent involvement in schools.

St. Philip Neri principal Carol Stack deploys her school’s Grandparents Club on campus in a range of roles, from reading and science volunteers to lunch and recess monitors. “They can fill in and provide role models and examples,” Stack says.

At HAMC, Bacharach says, several grandparents volunteer in the school library; some also chair special committees of the parents association. “That’s a great way to bring in other grandparents,” she says, because it shows them that grandparents can take on substantial responsibilities in the school community.

## How to Get Grandparents Involved

In every area of need for your school, there’s probably a grandparent in the community who can contribute and

make a difference. The key is getting to know them, inviting them in, giving them real tasks, and making them feel appreciated. Here are a few suggestions to get you started:

- Reach out. HAMC reaches out to local and long-distance grandparents in a variety of ways. When the school sends e-mails to families promoting upcoming events or sharing classroom news, it includes grandparents whenever possible. Additionally, each week Bacharach sends about a dozen families personal e-mails with photos of their children. Parents always tell her how much grandparents appreciate seeing the pictures. “It really keeps them in the loop of what kids are doing,” Bacharach says, and that gets them thinking about how they can get involved.
- Let them know what you need. Some grandparents are great musicians; others are expert storytellers. Let your families know what your needs are and they just may tell you there’s a grandparent ready to step

in. Reginald Rose, 68, a grandfather of 10 in Tupelo, Mississippi, brought his expertise as a master gardener into his grandchildren’s elementary school when he began volunteering six years ago. Now he teaches regular science-enrichment activities at two Tupelo schools. At a time when schools may face budget cuts, volunteer grandparents who can provide quality classroom and after-school enrichment activities may be especially welcome. Encourage grandparents who say they want to help out to make an appointment to discuss how their skills might best be put to use.

- Don’t inadvertently cause family stress. One never knows a family’s internal dynamic. When a grandparent comes to you ready to volunteer, double-check that they’ve already cleared it with the parents—and the children. For a grandparent, “If you’re going into your grandchild’s school, certainly you should talk with the parent first,” suggests Illinois state PTA president and grand-

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 49]

# Wearing Two Hats II: Parents as School Employees

■ by **NEHEMIA ICHILOV**

**E**ARLY in my career I heard a story of a head of school who sent his children to a different school in town so that the challenges of working as a professional and being a parent would never have to become an issue. In my case it was for precisely the opposite reason that I decided to enter the field of Jewish education... I wanted specifically to be the head of school for my own children's Jewish community day school experience!

In our own small school, I and two fellow administrators have children in five of our school's nine classes spanning grades K-8, and a similar situation can be found in many other day schools. The dual roles of parent and administrator can be difficult to manage, and wearing two hats has its daily challenges; but being a parent employee has tremendous advantages, including the rewards of being "present" in one's own child's education. Having the opportunity to develop personal relationships with a child's teachers, knowing what it is that s/he will be studying and the environment s/he will be studying it in—these offer a bounty beyond remuneration.

Problems arise, however, even for employee parents with the best intentions. Many fail during moments of conflicting interests; others are challenged professionally knowing "too much for their own good," and being "too involved" to be objective about their own children. Still others fail to keep confidential information from friends and family because of social demands and peer pressures.

Yet the majority of employee-parents behave with impressive sensitivity in their dual roles. The parents who struggle often think that they know better or more than their colleagues, in whom they lack faith.

**“The key to successful staff-parents is to be proactive. The time committed upfront will provide the school with opportunities to avoid the pitfalls of dual role professionals.”**

The key to successful staff-parents is to be proactive. Whether it is the creation of a clearly written document that is committed to by the supervisor and employee, or less formal face-to-face conversation clarifying expectations and procedures, the time committed upfront will provide the school with the best possible opportunities to avoid the pitfalls of dual role professionals.

It is also critical to differentiate between the act of voicing a concern and the method a professional takes to voice it. Here are a number of steps schools can take to clarify the expectations of staff members who are also school parents:

**Employee-parent contract.** A simple addendum to any existing contract can be cre-

ated to clearly delineate a professional's responsibilities as they relate to his or her dual role. This addendum should be given the same legal status as the formal contract itself, allowing for both the insti-



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tution as well as the parent-staff person to go back to it should the time ever arise.

**Preemptive conversation.** This is probably the most common method employed to address this situation. The advantage is that it allows for an informal opportunity to discuss the benefits and challenges of the dual role. The most significant negative is that it leaves much room for misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and significant "grey area" should any challenges arise. As good practice, it is rec-

ommended that there be a brief written summary of the meeting, with the staff person provided a copy and the original placed in the professional's personnel file.

**HR manual description.** This method is the least confrontational way of dealing with a staff member's dual role. A paragraph articulating the policies and procedures for a dual role professional in

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# Some Varieties of Problem Parents

■ by **PAUL SHAVIV**

**T**HERE is something to be said for the old adage that “there are no problem students, only problem parents.”

Many parents struggling with financial, medical, marital, emotional and legal problems do their best to protect their children from the “fallout.” Most of the time, unfortunately, children cannot remain immune to family stress. Whatever the underlying causes, some common effects are seen very directly in problematic parent-child relationships.

They may include—but are not limited to—the following:

## Parents Who Cannot Say “No”

By the time the issue reaches the school, the student has become used to totally permissive and indulgent parents. S/he will make demands just to check whether the parents are still ready to fulfill every wish. It will be very difficult to institute change. The school may have a basic discussion with the parents about their responsibilities, and suggest some further reading or some outside professional help.

In some cases, the root problem is straightforward: the parents feel that they are obligated to give their children “everything that the other children have.” The parents should be firmly told the facts of life—that not all the other families are rich; that while some students may seem to have a great deal, many live more modest lives, and that not “every” child has the latest or most fashionable clothing or possessions. A full and frank discussion with the student by a sympathetic adult may help the student understand that they, too, have responsibilities to understand their family’s financial circumstances.

## Parents Who Cannot Say “Yes”

The principal must be very straightforward with these parents and suggest to them that they are making their own situation worse. Outside counseling may be necessary. They must learn to trust their child, allow them to grow up, and give them freedom, responsibility—and the chance to learn from their mistakes. To continually deny appropriate and responsible freedom is as irresponsible as giving a child complete freedom.

## Parents Who Wish to Realize Their Ambitions Through Their Children

The parent is trying to insist that the student take courses (or music lessons, or sports training) which the student either doesn’t want to take, or with which the child simply cannot cope.

Investigation elicits the information that the parent themselves “wanted to do medi-

cine, and it’s always been my dream that my child will be a doctor” (or the appropriate equivalent). A variant on this is the parent who wishes to send an unwilling child to yeshivah or seminary “because I never had the chance to go.” The parents have to understand that their chil-



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dren, too, have a right to be happy and to make their own choices. The parents’ pride and fulfillment has to be in raising happy children who are themselves fulfilled. Forcing a child into an unwanted choice will result in bitterness and resentment that will reverberate in the family for decades. Forcing a child to go to yeshivah or seminary will, of course, have exactly the opposite effect of that desired.

## Parents Who “Baby” Their Children

Currently termed “helicopter parents” because they hover over their children the whole time, these are the parents who come with their high-school children to arrange their lockers, want to sit in with them in the school opening orientation, and cover their textbooks for them. Generally they (i.e., the parents) grow out of it—usually the first time the student goes on a school trip and “forgets” to call home. Gentle reassurance is required: “Mrs. A, your daughter will be just fine. All the students manage. So will Jennifer. Arranging her own timetable change is part of becoming a high school student.” In many cases, such parents

will be arguing and fretting over issues that their children do not think are at all important.

## Parents With Blameless Children

Nothing is ever the child's fault. The teachers, the school, "the wrong friends" are all to blame for the student's problems. The parents never figure on the list. "The school must put things right." Plain talking is needed, to the student as much as to the parents. A

**The parents' pride and fulfillment has to be in raising happy children who are themselves fulfilled. Forcing a child into an unwanted choice will result in bitterness and resentment.**

productive tactic is dealing with the student without the parents being present, and effectively excluding the parents from discussion of the problem. If this fails, the parents may "threaten" to withdraw the child from the school. Let them.

## Parents Who Dislike or Disapprove of Their Children

A step on the path to rejection, and therefore both serious and tragic. The consequences of parental disapproval or dislike are devastating for the child. Parental love for a child must be unconditional. If the child does not feel that whatever the circumstances, a sympathetic welcome awaits them as they turn the key in the front door, they have no incentive to return home, and, in fact, every incentive to stay out and stay away. If they cannot find approval and love from their parents, they will seek it elsewhere, often from individuals or groups who will offer acceptance and "support"—but in return for something else. Events may enter a self-fulfilling, tragic spiral. Serious professional counseling is needed.

## Parents Who Reject Their Children

Very occasionally, parents simply reject their own children. Your sympathy must be with the children. Immediate expert advice is necessary.

## Parents Who Are Victims of Their Children

While it often seems that children are victims of their parents, occasionally the reverse is true. Parents may be totally dominated by their children, and, in rare cases, victimized by them. This may be because the child has sociopathic or psychopathic tendencies. There may be other reasons. The child may sense a vulnerability in the parents which, consciously or unconsciously, they exploit—for example, a sense of guilt over some undisclosed or hidden component of family or personal his-

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# Pebbles in our Sandals: Difficult Parents in the Jewish Day School Setting

■ by **DAVID A. PORTNOY**

**L**ISTEN into any teachers' lounge conversation or administrative meeting, and it is only a matter of time before the talk veers towards an issue that is on the minds—and the nerves—of virtually every professional working in our schools today: the aggressive and disrespectful behavior of too many ... parents. Whether referred to as aggressive, entitled, difficult, adversarial, helicoptering, hovering or high maintenance, such parents have shaken the traditional, deferential relationship between family and school unlike any school-related phenomenon we have seen in recent decades. As noted psychologist and independent school consultant Michael Thompson has stated, "Every teacher [and administrator] has been scarred by at least one threatening out-of-control parent."

The amount of time teachers and administrators now spend responding to parents is greater than ever before, and the heavy stress school professionals are experiencing has made this issue one that is front and center for nearly all professionals working in schools. In short, teachers and administrators are beleaguered by, and deeply concerned about, the distraction from the most important aspects of their work (instructional leadership, curriculum, staff development, student service) that responding to parent-initiated communications has become.

Teachers and administrators report that the most intractable problems they have encountered in recent years involve dealing with aggressive and difficult parents. Few, if any, teachers or administrators went into K-12 education to deal primarily with other adults. And yet, if you were to ask most principals and other school leaders about their greatest administrative challenges, there is little doubt that difficult parents would be near, if not at, the top of the list.

Have parent-school relations reached an all-time low? Are mounting parental pressures on schools deterring qualified people from entering the profession, or driving good people out? How is parent behavior affecting administrative time constraints, decision-making, and job satisfaction? In general, what effects are such overparenting behavior having on school professionals' time, job satisfaction, and stress? And, most important, what is in the best interests of our schools, and of our children?

Most research to date on the interrelationship between parenting and schools has

focused on issues of underparenting, i.e., the deleterious effects of non- or under-engaged parents on student achievement, attendance, and behavior. This existing research has, as its goal, the identifica-



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tion of initiatives and programs designed to increase parental involvement in their children's schooling, and on resultant improvements to school communities, and to student achievement and behavior. Overparenting, on the other hand, is a relatively new term that describes the behavior of mothers and fathers who are too involved in their children's lives—in terms of raising resilient, self-sufficient children—to interact positively with social institutions such as health care providers, organized youth activities, and schools.

In a school setting, these are the parents who micro-manage their children's schedules, class placements, extra-curricular activities, and social relations. These are the parents who challenge the Little League coaches and umpires; rail against the injustices of the college admissions process; and challenge both teachers' and principals' decisions about anything they feel does not meet each and every need of their children, and, perhaps more accurately, themselves. These are the parents who view themselves essentially as customers (as in, "The customer is always right") in an educational system

that only reluctantly adapts to business models. They consider schools as organizations that exist simply to satisfy their perceived individual needs, rather than as learning and living communities designed to educate, nurture, and respect each and every member of that community—students, parents, teachers, and administrators alike.

This is the leadership challenge that a growing number of teachers, coaches, counselors, and administrators are encountering, on a more frequent basis today than ever before. Its effects on teacher and administrator job satisfaction, and on professional stress, call into question the all-important issues of teacher and administrator recruitment and retention. According to management expert Mi-

“Overparenting is a relatively new term that describes the behavior of mothers and fathers who are too involved in their children’s lives—in terms of raising resilient, self-sufficient children—to interact positively with social institutions such as health care providers, organized youth activities, and schools.

chael Fullan, “If leadership does not become more attractive, doable, and exciting, public and private institutions will deteriorate.”

Why are school parents acting this way? Likely sources of parental behavior include generalized anxiety and fear about their children’s safety and their futures; about the global economy; and about their child’s fitness for admissions to a highly selective college or university. Indeed, a new genre of literature, dubbed Admissions Lit, has been described as books and articles “about the great rat race of getting your children into the right schools.” According to the *New York Times* Education Life Supplement, “Parents behaving badly is the real subject of admissions lit ... predatory parents who treat the education of their offspring as a sort of social blood sport and will do anything—lie, cheat, grovel, sue—to get an advantage.” Almost daily, we are barraged with outrageous stories of the college admissions system and the anxieties that accompany an experience that was, in the memory of some, a reasonably straightforward process that did not require a shelf of self-help books and a pricey private consultant. College admissions is but one of the issues plaguing overparents, their offspring, and the many institutions with which they come into contact, most dramatically the schools which their children attend.

Michael Thompson, who estimates that only about 5% of our parent populations are truly difficult, has suggested that a mutual fear between parents and teachers is responsible for much of the anxiety on the part of both parents and schools. Writing within the context of independent schools, he notes:

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# Between the Match and the Fuse: Mussar Advice for Day School Parents

■ by **ALAN MORINIS**

**P**ARENTS of day school children are, as a rule, idealistic. That idealism shows up in the expectations parents have for their children's school, which they want to be of the highest quality in both Jewish and general studies. And their idealism underlies their expectations that their own children will not only succeed but excel. And therein lies the root of many problems parents encounter both with the school and their own children.

When school or student meet or exceed expectations, there is no problem, only delight. But in this real world of ours, the ideal is seldom to be found. It is much more likely that parents will experience disappointment because neither school nor child matches up to their ideal expectations. What then?

I approach this question with a perspective derived from Mussar—a little known but wise Jewish tradition that is enjoying a revival today. Mussar provides wise perspectives on life, the goals we ought to set for living, the path to reach those goals, and the pitfalls we are likely to encounter along the way. As a student and practitioner of Mussar myself, one of the things I have found most valuable is its practical tools and methods to bring about personal change. The Torah tells us that holiness is the highest aim of a human life, and Mussar steps in on the ground to guide the arrogant person in ways to become more humble, showing the tight-fisted what will unclench the hand to be generous, giving practices that will settle the impatient one, and so on, all in service of the journey toward holiness.

Mussar's insights and lessons are as applicable to the issues we face in our lives today as many preceding generations found it to be. Though much has changed over the centuries, one thing that has remained constant is human nature. We are fortunate to have a Jewish tradition that has as its purpose to guide us on the pathways of human nature, for the sake of our own lives and for the benefit of the community.

When the school, or a teacher, or your child fulfills your expectations, there is no problem. But when someone delivers a disappointment, then you face a challenge. The Mussar teachers call those sorts of challenges *nisyonot*, Hebrew for "tests." Calling these situations tests lets us in on an important perspective that might not immediately be apparent to you. When someone delivers a disappointing result to you, it is you who are being tested. The situation is difficult, and the test lies in how you respond.

How do you respond to disappointment? Most of us very quickly and easily find our way to the territory of blame. The school didn't do its job. The teacher was unquali-

fied. The child didn't work hard enough. Someone has to be held to account. Indeed, any of those things may well be true but the Mussar teachers tell us that we will do ourselves, the school and our



*Alan Morinis holds a PhD from Oxford University and is the author of two books on Mussar: *Climbing Jacob's Ladder* and *Everyday Holiness*. He is also the founder and guide of The Mussar Institute ([www.mussarinstitute.org](http://www.mussarinstitute.org)). He can be reached at [alan@mussarinstitute.org](mailto:alan@mussarinstitute.org).*

children a major service by inserting a small but crucial process between our disappointment and our response. That process is what will help us pass the test that has come our way.

Some background is necessary before explaining the technique I just alluded to. The teachers of the Mussar tradition encourage us to see our lives as journeys through time in the direction of wholeness (*shlemut*). The goal of life is to become as whole as one can be, and lest you think that seems like a narcissistic aim, Mussar does not hold out any hope that a person can become whole without skillful engagement with others and the community. Among the many traits of a "whole" person (*adam ha-shalem*) we find compassion, patience, generosity, gratitude and many other characteristics that require interaction with other people and the community.

At any given instant, none of us is truly whole, but every moment does hold out the possibility of moving yourself closer to the wholeness that is your ultimate potential. Every decision or choice you make, every reaction or response, will

either propel you in the direction of becoming more whole, or leave you right where you are, or set you back to some extent.

Everyone is graced with some inner traits that are really quite strong and balanced right now. You may know yourself to be patient or generous or trusting, for example. And yet everyone has certain traits in which there is potential to grow. The patient person may also be stingy. The generous person may have a tendency to worry.

What makes a life situation into a test is being brought face to face with one of your traits that is not fully realized at this time. For a patient person, a long line at the bank is no test at all, but for an impatient person, even a short line can be a test. Someone endowed with generosity can easily handle multiple demands, while a miserly person finds every imagined request to be a difficult issue. The list of traits found in all people is very long; inevitably, we are weak in some of them, and we confront challenges to one or more of those weak traits.

Why do we call these difficult experiences “tests”? Because every experience that tries you is offering you something to learn and a way to grow that is particularly relevant to you and your inner make-up. Put another person in exactly the same situation and your difficult test will be no issue for them at all. If you get the lesson and take a positive step in your own growth, you pass the test, while the opposite is also possible. The test is not so much of you as a person as it is of your ability to stretch a particular trait in the direction of wholeness.

With that Mussar perspective explained, we can now return to the question of how to deal with disappointment when the school, teacher or student fails to meet your expectations. You surely have to respond to the situation, but what response is the best one for this circumstance? Based on the explanation above, before responding, consider this: This trying situation has come to teach you

something, and even more than that, it presents you with an opportunity to grow as a person and a soul.

Instinctively, you may want to blame or even lash out, but it is unlikely that the situation has come to teach you how to be angry and defensive. More likely, embedded in the situation there is a challenge to you to exercise a trait like patience, generosity, gratitude, discernment or wisdom. By giving yourself an opportunity to identify where you could stretch yourself toward wholeness in this situation—a process my Mussar teacher calls “opening a space between the match and the fuse”—you are almost certain to come upon a way to respond that is likely to be more effective than blame, anger,

etc., in terms of pursuing the very ideals that have been disappointed. At the same time, you will be growing as a person and a soul, coming closer to the wholeness that is your potential and your purpose.

A parent who can respond to a trying situation in this way will find a much more effective intervention to deal with the trying situation. At the same time, he or she will benefit spiritually by fostering personal inner growth. Perhaps most important of all, however, a parent who models for their child how to consider and respond to a difficult situation in a way that fosters the positive in themselves and others will not only have passed their test, they will have given a great gift of modeling to their child. ■



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## RAVSAK Pioneers Israel Education

RAVSAK, in collaboration with the iCenter, the Israel Education Resource Center, organized a Training Institute in Israel and Zionism Education that took place on May 5th-6th. Thirty-eight middle-school educators from community day schools throughout the US and Canada came together for an opportunity to reflect upon Israel education in their schools and enrich it. Participants all received cutting-edge software for Israel education designed by Israel Interactive, and several sessions of the Institute were dedicated to training for this highly rewarding educational tool.

The educators networked by sharing their schools' successes and asking each other for ideas in areas that need development. Participants quickly warmed up to each other, enabling candid conversation about the challenges that schools confront to take place in an environment of trust and confidentiality. They worked on crafting mission statements for their schools' Israel education, enumerating the tools and dispositions they want students to take away. They were asked to dream about what Israel education might look like in a couple of years, and were given time to create a blueprint in order to turn their dreams into reality.

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ways. One program focuses on places in Israel where pivotal events in Israeli and Jewish history took place; another program features contemporary Israelis, many of whom are not particularly well known, who embody an

important and fascinating aspect of Israeli society and culture. Participants expressed unbridled enthusiasm for the software and immediately described ways they would use it in their classrooms. They received other valuable materials as well during the



**The Institute was a wonderful opportunity to look at our current curriculum for Israel education and improve it. We can't wait to use the Israel Interactive program in our study of Israel. I am so appreciative of the opportunity to have been chosen to participate and of the quality and professionalism of the planners and other participants."**

—Sharon Paz, King David School, Scottsdale, Arizona



Institute. At a session devoted to the use of texts in Israel education, RAVSAK presented them with a 60-page sourcebook on Israel & Zionism. They also were given sheets that juxtaposed sources from rabbinic tradition with ones from Zionist thinkers, modeling the kinds of discussions that are possible when Judaics and Israel studies are put into conversation.

RAVSAK is grateful for the support of the iCenter on this important project, and looks forward to future collaborations enabling schools to strengthen their Israel and Zionism education. ■

# When Two Worlds Meet: Parent Reactions to What Children Bring Home From School

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9]

## Adaptation

More challenging is what we observed taking place in the many (perhaps most) homes where the encounter between school and home results not in the faithful reproduction of some normative script but rather the creation of a syncretized, home-made Jewish culture. Numerous families told us, for example, how their children inspired them to celebrate the festival of Sukkot, and of how they built a sukkah “even it was three months late” or “not exactly the way you’re supposed to,” or how their family decided to mark the festival by going camping. Others talk about creating new family rituals, such as making a blessing every time they hear an ambulance, or saying Shabbat prayers in the car when they’re out on a weekend trip.

None of these parents passively follow the cultural scripts that their children bring into the home. Instead of reproducing traditions, they create them anew, improvising and innovating, drawing on their own diverse cultural assets as well as on those their

children have introduced into the family.

The challenge for educators is that the Jewish culture created at home does not stay there; it comes back to school, where children enthusiastically share it with their teachers. At times, children might report that their parents weren’t interested in what they brought home or that they were too busy to hear a new Jewish song. On occasion, they might even report that their parents were upset that they wanted to make a blessing before eating a snack, as they had learned to do at school.

These less than enthusiastic responses might be disappointing to educators, but, I suggest, they are not especially problematic. Educators working in liberal day schools are neither expected to be judgmental nor to proselytize. Such rejection is always an unspoken possibility for all educators engaged in the counter-cultural work of Jewish education.

What teachers might find more provocative is when students hold up as models of Jewish practice unconventional or id-

iosyncratic adaptations that they practice at home. Are educators expected to be unfailingly enthusiastic in these circumstances? How would most teachers react when they learn from students that their parents weave decidedly non-Jewish ideas and practices with the Jewish practices children learned at school, for example, mixing Buddhism and Judaism, celebrating Christmas and Chanukah at the same time, or on Friday night, as one parent reported, “[doing all] the Shabbat stuff” their children learned and then asking their non-Jewish family members to say a Christian prayer. Is the fact that there is some Jewish content on these occasions better than that there is none at all, whatever else it may be syncretized with?

Ironically, the greatest challenge for schools may come not from those parents who resist or vocally reject what children bring home but from those who adapt it so much that when it returns to schools it is almost unrecognizable as conventionally Jewish. This is one of those instances where school-people should be careful what they wish for. ■

## What to Expect When It’s All Unexpected: Parenting a Middle Schooler

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 17]

the middle years, the answers to these questions may become shorter and less informative by the day. Parents should expect, or demand, information from the school regarding both academics and extracurricular programming. Such information ought to come not only in advance (in the form of permission slips, information about upcoming tests, etc.), but also after the fact. Schools need to understand that they cannot rely on their blossoming adolescents as conduits of information and hence should be welcoming of parental concern and even input.

Another vital part of their children’s lives

that parents of middle schoolers can help provide is making sure that their children have a safe and reliable adult confidante other than themselves. This person may be a family friend, relative, teacher, or even the school psychologist. Children need to have an adult to turn to when they feel for whatever reason that they cannot speak to mom or dad about a particular issue. Many parents feel that such a person is unnecessary because of the strength of their own relationship with their children, which may well be true for much of the time. But for those instances when children do not feel they can confide in a parent, they will need to have another trustworthy and responsible mentor.

Middle school parents go through a parallel transition to that of their children. As their children vacillate between feeling (and behaving) like “little kids” and young adults, parents can be hard pressed to know how to react supportively. Such constant fluctuation is perfectly normal, however trying it may be. As parents strive to give their children the roots that they need to feel confident as they find independence, as well as the wings they need to attempt to confront the world on their own, parents have the right to feel that they can rely on their child’s school to partner with them in this most scary, yet most rewarding, of ventures. ■



# Pebbles in our Sandals: Difficult Parents in the Jewish Day School Setting

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 41]

Fear infects the relationship between independent school teachers and independent school parents—a fear that is often denied and only painfully approached. I see evidence of this fear throughout the independent school world, no matter how much a particular school may say it is a “community,” or “like family.” Parent-teacher relationships, even when good, are less than they could be because of the latent fear between the parties.

Heads of school often feel caught between the two, criticized by teachers for favoring parents, criticized by parents for being insufficiently responsive, or too protective of mediocre faculty. Parents often feel subtly—or not too subtly—excluded from schools.

Thompson analyzes the sources of parent fear, including these insights: “Your child-rearing mistakes are on display through your child’s behavior”; “Every parent is trapped by hope, love—and anxieties”; “Parents are so vulnerable with respect to their children”; and “Teachers have immense power over children’s lives.” He then zeroes in on the stressful reactions of teachers and administrators:

Many independent school teachers have to sit across from parents who make two times, or four times, or fifty times more money per year than they do. It makes them doubt themselves and their value. A school head made the observation that much of the con-

flict between parents and teachers is class warfare. One of the things that teachers say to me to explain their fear of parents or their fear of lack of administrative support is, “The customer is always right.” Many independent school parents, whatever their income, are high-status in a variety of ways that can be intimidating to teachers.

As if the class-status differential were not enough, Thompson goes on to describe the ways in which independent school parents tend to interact with teachers and administrators. Noting that so many independent school parents are high-powered professionals and business people, he hits the nail squarely on the head, and in characteristically understated language: “Parents bring their professional skills to bear on their relationships with teachers even though they may not be helpful in a school situation.” He explains:

If parents can sometimes come to their child’s school feeling amateurish, anxious, ignorant, and trapped, they are naturally going to reach for the set of skills that make them successful in the “outside” world. Independent school parents usually have such skills in abundance, and they are often not helpful in a school context. I have seen attorney parents treat their upper school directors as if they were opposing counsel; mental health professionals analyze the motives of a teacher, child, school head, and every other child in the class. Recently, I had an entrepreneurial parent who

had come to me for help make a business presentation of his child that took up the entire hour we had together. It was an articulate, polished, forceful sales presentation; however, it did not help the situation, because I was not “buying” his son, I was trying to help a child who was already in the school and already annoying many teachers there. Even when parents know they are intimidating teachers, they cannot stop exercising their strongest muscles, the ones that make them powerful in their own professional lives.

So, what, after all, is a school leader to do? We can begin by recognizing the changes in our institutions and the stakeholders that comprise them. As parent-school relations evolve, it can also be helpful to develop strategies, both organizationally and interpersonally, to deal with the most difficult parents in our communities, either by assigning certain school professionals to them, or by figuring out ways to communicate with such families so they do not sap all our time and energies.

To end on a hopeful note, we can all consider such school-parent interactions as professional development opportunities for ourselves, as we learn to navigate the more difficult among them. As a mentor of mine used to say, “Every member of our community—student, teacher, parent and administrator—is doing the very best he or she can on any given day.” May we have the strength to believe it, and to act accordingly, in the best interests of all the children we serve. ■

## School Employees as Parents

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 36]

the school avoids the need for the administration to address this situation personally with each employee-parent.

**Employee-parent ombudsman.** Schools may consider assigning an administrator, a supervisor, or a qualified lay person to serve

as an objective ombudsman, to mediate and advise the staff-parent and the administrator through any difficult and challenging issues in this area.

Parenting as a professional in a school requires a high level of commitment to setting boundaries between these dual roles.

Success is in the invested time up front, and most definitely not on the hopes and prayers that a staff person will do the “right thing” if the situation ever arises. By clarifying expectations and separating the hats of employee parents, schools can assure that the relationships are positive and beneficial to all parties. ■

# Some Varieties of Problem Parents

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 39]

tory.<sup>1</sup> These are circumstances way beyond the capacity of the school to deal with. The school can only insist that the student obey the rules of the school and advise the parents that they must seek qualified, professional advice to deal with their family dynamics. The school cannot “tell” the child how to behave at home. Nor can it deal with the surprisingly far-reaching influence of secrets in families.

## Parents in Conflict

Before parental conflict has reached the point of separation or divorce, it may surface in the principal’s office. The school’s concern (and the parents’ concern) can only be the welfare of the student. If the parents are in disagreement (“She should go on the trip” / “No way is she going on that trip—she’s been on holiday twice already this year”) then at a certain point the principal should simply invite the parents to settle their disagreement outside the school, and let the principal know the decision. If the logistics, the finances or the issue(s) are complex, the school may require a note signed by both parents, to avoid later arguments. Parental conflict is very often a background to students “acting out” in school.

The conflict may be religious. One parent is at a different religious “place” than the other, and is trying to impose (or remove) religious practices and standards on the child. Common sense, a relatively rare commodity in many such situations,

1. I once dealt with a student whose parents seemed to allow him total freedom, and who could not deny him anything—involving expenditure, financial and emotional, way beyond the family’s means. The son exploited this shamelessly. The father seemed unable to resist any request of the son’s. After months of meetings, the father disclosed that he had been married previously, and the student had a half-sibling of whose existence the student was totally unaware. I advised the father (and his wife) to take urgent family therapy, and to take the therapist’s advice on whether, when, and how to disclose the secret that had made them prisoners. I do not know what happened.

is needed. What does the child want? Is the action proposed by either parent going to achieve positive results for the child—or is it going to either increase the child’s resentment or the child’s confusion? Can the child “navigate” between the parents? Again, the school can only determine what happens in school. A skilled guidance counselor or teacher may be able to help the child. A sympathetic and reasonable community rabbi may be able to help the parents, and help the school ensure the comfort of the child. Occasionally, without regard to the educational interests of the child, community rabbis will be strongly partisan where religious observance is an issue. That is never helpful.

It may be that sociological changes in the parent-school relationship are bringing the problem parent into the school more than previously. Increased expectations of service (linked to rising tuition), the increasing centrality of schools in the Jewish life of families (often replacing the local synagogue), parental abdication of values and emotional education in favor of the school, and, not least, the increasing varied matrix of the Jewish family—all in-

crease the complexity and the difficulty of the school’s task.

From a school management point of view, that poses major problems. Are schools able, qualified or budgeted to deal with this encroachment of the private, family domain into the school professional structure? The problem may be particularly acute in our private Jewish schools, where every additional task translates into tuition fees. Are these expenditures that just have to be absorbed, or should the schools seek new partnerships with, for example, family service agencies? Should schools charge for some of these non-academic counseling services (“Mrs X: Just to advise you that your upcoming appointment with the School Rabbi / Principal / Guidance Counselor will cost you \$75 for the first half-hour”)? Provocative, outrageous, perhaps—but remember, you read it here first!

But as a more serious afterthought, it can be a constant source of astonishment, occasionally bordering on inspiration and sobering appreciation, to see how teenagers, too, may be shouldering huge responsibilities within their families. ■

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# What Do Day School Parents Really Think? School Leaders Get Their Own Report Cards

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13]

more likely to strongly recommend their school than those of other denominations? How can schools with sizable Reform populations engage these advocates to draw more Reform families to day school education?

- Parents care that a school “instills moral values.” Of the various factors correlating with “strongly recommend the school,” this measure had the highest percentage of parents who “strongly agreed” (51%), with an additional 38% of parents agreeing.

Parents are already pleased with the way schools are shaping their children’s moral development. How

can a school leverage its role even more and push for an even greater “strongly agree” percentage? Do parents have the opportunity to witness and celebrate this school function?

- Other research (Alex Pomson) has confirmed that day schools have a powerful impact on the lives of parents as well as children, and the Parent Survey confirms this correlation with parent satisfaction. Yet only twenty-nine per cent of parents reported that they “feel part of the social community of parents.”

Can school leaders learn more from parents about their expectations of building networks and

friendships within the day school community?

The Jewish Day School Parent Survey is the most extensive survey of day school parents ever conducted. As day schools continue to mine their Survey Reports to inform decision-making, they are active participants in improving their school in the ways that matter most. Making data-based decisions rather than relying on anecdotes and hypotheses is a critical leadership skill, and the Parent Survey makes that process accessible even to leaders without backgrounds in quantitative analysis. Parents know how important report cards are for measuring their children’s progress—now school leaders have their own tool to evaluate achievement. ■



## Welcoming *HaYidion*’s New Editorial Board

RAVSAK welcomes the members of a new, expanded Editorial Board for *HaYidion* (see Contents page for the list of participants). Editorial Board members consist of school heads and Judaic directors from the full panoply of RAVSAK schools, including small and big schools, primary schools and high schools, the US and Canada. School leaders from other day school networks, as well, make complete our Editorial Board. The composition and functioning of the Editorial Board sends a powerful message that RAVSAK’s constituents are the ones who set the agenda for *HaYidion*, determining the themes and issues that are important to the day school movement throughout North America.

This year’s Editorial Board is 50% larger than last year’s, thus enriching the journal with a wider range of voices, perspectives, talents and insights. The

Editorial Board has already started its work by establishing the lineup of topics for this year’s four issues, starting with the current issue on Parents. They bring vast experience in day school leadership

*HaYidion* is a touchstone for the creative energy and critical thinking of the extended community of Jewish educators. Quite simply, it is a privilege to serve on the editorial board and experience the remarkable range and depth of thought of our community as we confront common issues.”

—Patricia Schwartz, Head of School, Akiva School, Nashville, Tennessee

that enables them to identify the salient challenges confronting the field and the resources available to meet them. We have no doubt that the journal will grow as a source of guidance and inspiration under their capable direction.

suggestions to a full-fledged international Editorial Board, representing a broad range of schools and interests, thus assuring that the journal will continue to play a meaningful and influential role in the Jewish community day school world.” ■

# Grandparents: An Untapped Resource

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 35]

mother of four Jean Razunas, 58. "I would even communicate with the child and see what his or her opinions are." Many, if not most, kids are excited to see their grandparents at school, but if a child is self-conscious about it for whatever reason, it's better to find out before someone starts volunteering.

- Start a grandparent club. Launching a grandparent club is a great way to get grandparents involved and to assess what they can contribute, if you're ready to commit the time to finding roles for the group. Jan Harp Domene, 57, the president of the national PTA and a grandmother of five in Anaheim, California, says, "I call the grandparents our legacy leaders. They've been down this road" and already know what parents associations can accomplish given the necessary support. Her organization is stepping up efforts to recruit grandparents nationwide this year.

## A Payoff in and out of the Classroom

"Over the past few years, we've gone from mostly one-parent-working households to more two-parents-working households," Bacharach says. In practical terms, this shift has meant more grandparents doing drop-off and pick-up at the school and coming to special events in lieu of parents. "But you know what? I think it's great. They don't know what a service they're doing for the children. There's such a special bond that forms when grandparents are in the day-to-day lives of their grandkids."

That bond is part of the "chain of love," says *Grandparents.com* contributing editor Dr. Georgia Witkin, a psychologist specializing in family relationships and stress management—and a grandmother of three. It's important, she says, for children to learn that more than one adult can care for them, and to understand, even subconsciously, that if anything should happen to their parents, their grandparents will be there for them. Seeing grandparents waiting to take

them home from school, making them dinner when working couples can't get home from work on time, or just giving them the undivided attention that bubbles and zaydes are famous for—it all helps to boost their feelings of security and self-confidence. A recent large-scale survey of adolescents between 11 and 16 found a strong connection between involved grandparents and teen well-being. In fact, adolescents who had daily contact with at least one grandparent were less likely to use recreational drugs.

And, of course, schools can hope that grandparents who spend time in their classrooms, and who become connected to the spirit and promise of their student bodies, will become donors as well. "For day schools, grandparents are an untapped resource both in terms of gift-giving and volunteerism," Bacharach says. Several grandparents participate in her annual campaign and contribute to restricted funds, "and we have some grandparents who pay tuition for their grandchildren—that's definitely a growing group. But," she adds, "there could always be more." ■

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# Bookcase

THIS column features books, articles, and websites, recommended by our authors and people from the RAVSAK network, pertaining to the theme of the current issue of *HaYidion* for readers who want to investigate the topic in greater depth.

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## Online Resources

PEJE's Admissions Community of Practice page, including case studies and discussions on many issues: [http://peje.org/networking/communities\\_of\\_practice/admission.php](http://peje.org/networking/communities_of_practice/admission.php)

Free Range Thinking, Andy Goodman's monthly newsletter of communications best practices and resources for public interest groups, foundations, and progressive nonprofits and businesses that want to reach more people more effectively: <http://www.agoodmanonline.com/newsletter/index.html>

Beth's Blog: How Nonprofits Can Use Social Media, by Beth Kanter: [http://beth.typepad.com/beths\\_blog/](http://beth.typepad.com/beths_blog/)

Getting Attention: Helping Non-Profits Succeed Through Effective Marketing, the blog of Nancy Schwartz: <http://www.gettingattention.org/>



# Cohort 3 of Project SuLaM Takes Wing

For twelve days in June and July, while many of their peers had escaped for summer vacation, fifteen dedicated day school leaders met in New York City to embark upon the intense professional and personal journey that is Project SuLaM. Fifteen seasoned educators came from schools throughout North America, representing, for the first time in the program, PARDeS and Schechter members along with RAVSAK schools. The courageous participants came devoted to achieving the aims of the program: to obtain the Jewish Studies background they always wished they had; to learn about the meaning of tefillah and experience a traditional, spirited Shabbat; to gain comfort in leading HaMotzi and Birkat HaMazon; to become intimately familiar with the TaNaKH and acquire tools to be able to study it in greater depth; to gain the skills for delivering divrei Torah; and simultaneously, to gain the confidence necessary to take ownership of the Jewish vision of their schools and all of the Jewish curricula and programming.

Participants achieved all this and more while thriving in a supportive and convivial cohort of peers. Mazel tov to the people selected for this elite program:

**Lilach Bluevise**, Solomon Schechter Day School of Essex & Union, West Orange, NJ  
**Anthea Canes**, Abraham Joshua Heschel Day School, Northridge, CA  
**Todd Clauer**, Hyman Brand Hebrew Academy, Overland Park, KS  
**Peter Cline**, Rockwern Academy, Cincinnati, OH  
**Dr. Jeffrey Davis**, San Diego Jewish Academy, San Diego, CA  
**Natalie Friedman**, Donna Klein Jewish Academy, Boca Raton, FL  
**Jill Grunewald**, Solomon Schechter Day School of Greater Monmouth County, Marlboro, NJ  
**Nan Jarashow**, Aleph Bet Jewish Day School, Annapolis, MD  
**Jill Kessler**, Pardes Jewish Day School, Phoenix, AZ  
**Allison Oakes**, Eleanor Kolitz Academy, San Antonio, TX  
**Dr. David Portnoy**, The Emery/Wiener School, Houston, TX  
**Leslie Pugach**, Jack M. Barrack Hebrew Academy, Philadelphia, PA  
**Michael Tanenbaum**, Portland Jewish Academy, Portland, OR  
**B. Anat Valdman**, Reuben Gittelman Hebrew Day School, New City, NY  
**Nina Wand**, Beth Tfiloh Dahan Community School, Baltimore, MD

Todah rabbah to the mentors and teachers for their outstanding engagement with their brilliant and inquiring colleagues:

**Rabbi Tzvi Berkson**, Donna Klein Jewish Academy, Boca Raton, FL  
**Rabbi Michael Druin**, The Samuel Scheck Hillel Community Day School, North Miami Beach, FL  
**Tzivvia Garfinkel**, Bernard Zell Anshe Emet Day School, Chicago, IL  
**Mariashi Groner**, Charlotte Jewish Day School, Charlotte, NC  
**Jerry Isaak-Shapiro**, The Agnon School, Beachwood, OH  
**Dr. Laurence Kutler**, David Posnack Hebrew Day School, Plantation, FL



Project SuLaM was conceived with the understanding that it would have a significant impact on principals and heads of schools who carry out much of the day to day work of Jewish education. The program has enjoyed great success, as mentors and mentees get together in mutual adult Jewish learning. The impact of the program, the quality of its participants and idea behind it exceed the initial expectations of its founders. Today, we rejoice in the fact that we are changing the very core of how day to day Jewish education is carried out. The bar is raised, and the future is engaged.”

—Larry Kutler, Head of School,  
David Posnack Hebrew Day School, Plantation, Florida

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