

Responding to “Opting Out of Private Schools”

Joint Conference Call: PEJE Lay Leadership and Admission Communities of Practice

Tuesday, September 19, 2006

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Resources:

“Opting Out of Private School,” by Nancy Keates. Wall Street Journal, September 15, 2006. Distributed on both COP listservs, available on WSJ website to subscribers only.

“Talking Points: Opting Out of Private School,” National Association of Independent Schools, September 15, 2006. <http://www.nais.org/about/article.cfm?ItemNumber=148814>

Introduction:

The purpose of our call is to strategize about how we can improve our advocacy efforts for Jewish day school education, and how we can reach out to members of our communities to help them understand that a Jewish day school education is a means to providing an enriched Jewish life for their children, for their families, and for their communities. Given the attention created by articles such as “Opting Out of Private Schools” in the September 15 Wall Street Journal (which certainly wasn’t the first article we’ve ever seen about this) it becomes important for all of us, whether we are board members, staff, or donors to a Jewish day school to have some talking points in hand to address issues that come up when addressing prospective or current families or donors.

We spend a good deal of time in our schools speaking about maintaining a competitive edge with public and private schools through excellence in our secular programming. Articles such as that in the WSJ give us a unique opportunity and an important opening to discuss our exclusive value, that is, the ability to instill in our children a love of Judaism and Jewish life. This is something neither public schools, whether charter or traditional, or other types of independent private schools can offer.

Discussion:

To begin our discussion, please share some of your current experiences in enrollment. What are prospective families telling you about why they are or are not enrolling? Let’s all agree from the outset that economics are a factor, but the cost of attending a day school is only a part of the equation. As stated in the article, private school parents (who are used to paying the costs of education) are not worried about the money they are spending. They are wondering about the “value” being received from enrolling their children in the school ...not the money. They question whether that value is different or significant enough from the public school to warrant their children attending a private school? It’s not only a money issue.

So, again, aside from the economics, what are you learning from your families?

- Parents are saying they want their children in an environment that stresses Jewish values, which makes Jewish day schools unique from other private schools.
- (High school) Parents want to see their kids continuing with their Jewish education.
- Our city has a strong tradition of families sending their kids to private schools, which helps us. Public schools aren’t known to be very good. (This was a description of several cities, including Dallas and Washington DC.)
- We have some families that have switched to our day school from public schools, even high quality public schools.
- Biggest reason to explain school’s growth is that current parents are such excellent ambassadors, who encourage their friends to consider day school as opposed to public school.
- Families value sense of community, feeling of belonging which Jewish schools offer.
- Quality of secular curriculum as important as Jewish content.

- Having an amazing new campus certainly helps!
- Several schools indicate that their competition is primarily other independent schools, not public schools.
- (Pittsburgh) Our competition is now a public school that is coming on very strong that has a Jewish principal who is well known in the community. The principal is now on the board of the local BJE as well. The Jewish day school and the BJE have a good relationship, located in same building. The Head of School has met with the public school principal to begin to establish a relationship. It was noted that there is a big difference between being a school with a population of Jewish students and being a Jewish school. One provides Jewish friendships, perhaps, but the other provides education on Jewish values, history, tradition, etc.
- A Modern Orthodox school notes that it is having trouble tapping into the Conservative, Reform, or unaffiliated populations in a smaller community where there are not as many possible prospective families. With 40% of their instructional time devoted to Jewish studies, they are not perceived as an appealing product to the mainstream community (seen as too Jewish).
 - Another Modern Orthodox elementary school responded to this situation. They pride themselves on being non-judgmental and welcoming people from all walks of Jewish life. They just had a Reform day school in their community close its doors and they reached out to those families to welcome them into their Modern Orthodox school community. They got 50% of those families to enroll and they are happy in the school. A lot of the too-Jewish/not-Jewish-enough perspective can be changed by how you describe and market yourself and how you make people feel.

It's not only up to our school staff members to address prospective families' questions about our schools. Board members are also important advocates for the school and should be publicizing the importance and value of the school's offerings on every occasion possible. Jewish day schools **are** different from private schools.

Do board members feel prepared to answer questions about the school? Do board members have a list of FAQs? Do admission directors routinely prepare FAQs for board members? How do you work together to make sure everyone is informed?

- (The Lerner School, NC) The Admission Director and Board Recruitment Chair worked together to prepare a training for board members on how to be good ambassadors. They created wallet-sized information cards with all the most important info that they could carry around with them. At the training they role-played different ways you can approach people to have a conversation about the school, like at synagogue functions, lunch, in public, etc. It made the board feel much more comfortable in this role.
- PEJE's recent Admission, Recruitment and Attrition Prevention seminar, led by Rheua Stakely, recommended the use of current parents, students, and alumni as ambassadors. PEJE does not recommend using board members as tour guides, though other "ambassador" roles are appropriate for board members.
- Board members and parents at SSDS of Greater Boston complete a one-hour training on being an advocate for the school. The emphasis is on being positive and talking authentically about the school, which is usually effective in at least convincing someone to come and take a look at the school. It doesn't really matter what they are talking about (school doesn't tell them what to say) but the goal is just to get people out there talking positively about the school.
- On the high school level, students are found to be the best ambassadors.

Question: In some cities, other independent schools are significantly more expensive than Jewish day schools, even as much as twice the cost. Is this standard in other cities, and does it help Jewish day schools by presenting a lower-cost private school option?

- School prices vary widely across the country, and this call isn't the time to address that topic in depth. Sometimes when a school costs less the public perceives the value as

less, kind of a reverse effect. Think of cars – you want the most expensive car you can afford, not the cheapest.

- What are trends in tuition prices for independent schools? Is there a breaking point? Even when the cost of the Jewish day school is less than that of competitor private schools, it is still a sizable expense. The PEJE Peer Yardstick collects data about this, as does NAIS. There is so much regional variation in cost, as it really depends on what the market can bear in your city.
- Most secular independent schools offer much less financial assistance than Jewish day schools, as it is not in their mission to serve all students in their target community but rather to be exclusive and selective. Jewish schools are going to make more aid available to families whether their cost is higher or lower than private schools in the area.

Question: How can an article like this one in the Wall Street Journal be used to our advantage for some good publicity about Jewish day schools?

- That's the reason for this call! Have talking points, and know what to say to respond to questions and concerns from prospective families and donors.

For board members, have you visited your own school while it is in session, not just for evening meetings? This enables board members to talk about what they have seen themselves, not just what they have been told.

- At many schools, a large percentage of the board members are also parents of students, so they have personal experiences to draw on.
- One school provides vignettes/stories to their board members of things that have happened in the school, student experiences, etc. so that they have more authentic examples to use when talking about the school.
- One board member described what she calls the "Anne Frank" factor. You can talk about the Holocaust all you want and it won't sink in, but when you talk about one person's experience, like Anne Frank, suddenly it becomes clear. Board members need to be able to tell stories about the effect the school has on specific students, whether their own kids, or friend's children, or stories they are provided during training that they can utilize.
- One board member reports a story: While attending a back to school night, her husband said that in his entire education he had had five teachers who were wonderful and made a difference in his life, and his child, attending this Jewish day school, has seven teachers every day who fit this description! That's the kind of story that you tell people that makes them think "I've got to check out this school!"

Question: One school in California is having trouble with developing feeder school relationships. They have their own preschool to draw from, but that isn't enough to fill the school. They need to find more sources of students to recruit. They are a small school, not flashy, with proximity to a major metropolitan area.

- The PEJE Peer Yardstick shows us a profile of schools that are in healthy enrollment situations. These schools have 2-3 major feeders and 7-10 minor feeders. In some small communities, there may not be that many early childhood programs, but if there are programs in churches where there are Jewish children enrolled, then you might get 1 student or sometimes zero in a year, but at least you can develop the relationship and make the effort. Evidence shows that people pick early childhood programs for quality and proximity, not usually for religious affiliation, since they think that can come when their child is a bit older. People who are in those settings may be "flying under the radar screen" and not know that you exist. If you can reach out to them and build a relationship it is worth it.
- The Lerner School in NC has similar situation – small community, not many feeders. They started a successful program this year to help with this. They started a Jewish story time series offered in local bookstores on Sundays, open to the public. The first one, about Rosh Hashanah, was well attended and attracted many families that the admission director had never seen before. They targeted 4-7 year olds. They are doing this at several bookstores in different neighborhoods. The bookstore includes the event in their

newsletters, event calendars, on website and the school provides some of their faculty to read the stories and lead the activities. This is a very non-threatening way to be introduced to the school as a possibility for a child. It helps identify the nebulous part of the community that aren't in the Jewish preschools. Many Jewish kids attend a wide variety of preschools located in churches and the day school doesn't know about them, so events in the community are a good way to find these families.

The question of "value received" as noted in the WSJ article is an issue larger than just what goes on in our individual schools. It is an issue of advocacy for Jewish life. We are pleased to have Rabbi Josh Elkin, Executive Director of PEJE, joining us on this call to speak about advocacy and the larger community role in which all of us involved in Jewish day school education should be participating.

Josh: I want to try to broaden the vision of being community institutions and give two specific examples that are very promising. The two programs I want to focus on are a new program that one of the PEJE partners, Harold Grinspoon, has recently launched. It is called the PJ Library – the Pajama Library. The program is about to go national and each of you can bring it to your communities. The second program is the idea of adult learning for the parents of the very young.

The PJ Library (www.hqf.org) came from an idea of Dolly Parton, who has a program that delivers a book each month to the home of an underprivileged child, aged 0-5. Harold Grinspoon thought that there are Jewish children who are getting very little Jewish Information in their home from the time that they were born. What if we could get a book of Jewish content into that home, every month for several years? All told, from 0 to age 5, it would be 50-60 different titles, some for the child and some for the parents. And it is only going to cost \$85.00 per child per year.

The neat thing about this program is that to do it well requires that every single Jewish institution in your community get together to collaborate and identify where to find the families with children in this age cohort. Day schools must be working together with Federations, synagogues, preschools, JCCs, OB-GYNs, realtors, baby equipment stores, and with all the people who interface with the families in the community. Once the lists are generated, these groups have to work together to decide, "What do we want to say to these families?" When the books come, a letter is included – what should it say? How is the Jewish community going to present itself to these families? This program presents tremendous opportunity for collaboration – and not only for your day school to generate leads on prospective students, but for synagogues and JCCs to grow their membership as well. It's a win-win for everyone. It uncovers people who are unlikely to be on anyone's radar until the child is 3. They might even stay off radar forever and never be identified to affiliate with some part of the Jewish community. Maybe they'll just show up in 3rd or 4th grade and enroll in religious school so that they can have a Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony. If someone had identified them earlier, that family's Jewish journey might have been changed.

Here's another example that is probably more intensive, won't hit as many people, but is being successfully done in a number of communities across the country. This has to do with serious adult Jewish learning for parents of the very young. These programs are usually weekly; instead

maybe twice a month for a year, 15-20 sessions total. It's not about religious practice; it's not about trying to bang people over the head about how important Judaism should be to them, but rather it is an opportunity for people to come together with very good teachers to connect with Jewish texts on issues that are of paramount concern to them: business ethics, the future of the world, parenting issues, human relations.

One example of this kind of opportunity is the Melton program that is now in 70 cities across the country. It currently appeals mostly to people who are much older, but it is finally being adapted for younger people as well. There is now a program in 8 or 10 locations in Boston (Ikkarim, described on the website www.cjp.org) enrolling 250 parents of early childhood students for a one-year program. The program is structured to allow these parents of the very young to learn to value what Judaism has to offer – to be exposed, to have questions raised that make them feel a strong connection and makes them want to expose their own children to Jewish values and culture even earlier. Maybe they'll want to affiliate with a synagogue, look at day schools, etc.

The common denominator of these two programs is that they get to people who are not the normal low-hanging fruit whom we already know about. It forces the day school to be a community player, to express a vision that your school is organic to the community. It's not a loss if someone decides not to attend your school. It is a loss if a family that is raising Jewish children, or could be raising Jewish children, doesn't even know that you exist. That's a real loss. The way to do this is to put yourself out there in community programs, to think about a program like the PJ Library, find a donor who will contribute the \$85 per year per child so that participation is free to the families. Work together collaboratively to build relationships when the kids are 0-3, and create a destination learning environment that is exciting and interesting. Offer child care during adult programs, have nice refreshments, etc.

Ask parents of the very young: "Are you searching for meaning? Want to know what life is all about? Asking those big questions? We've got some answers for you, and they come out of Jewish tradition. There's no requirement for observance, you don't have to join anything – there's no gimmick here. But we've got a 3000 year old tradition that has a lot of wisdom, and we want more people to take advantage of it."

The last idea I want to talk about is trying to get people into our schools to visit, to check us out, and maybe to enroll. It's not just about selling our schools as Jewish educational institutions, selling quality secular curriculum, selling quality teachers and facilities – it is about selling Judaism. It's about selling the opportunity to put a child into this environment. These programs I have mentioned give you more time to make the case about why day school is value-added.

This isn't about public or private schools. This is about quality of life. We have a tradition that provides wisdom, answers, joy, experiences, and involvement that just isn't easily accessed elsewhere. It is very unique, and the opportunity to check it out, whether in a local bookstore, or through a PJ Library mailing, or an adult learning experience for parents is worthwhile. You can all think of more examples of how to do this. It

means having a big vision and thinking outside the box and collaborating within your community beyond your own school's immediate agenda.

Comments responding to Josh's remarks:

- Question: Can we have a copy of Josh's remarks? Here's the transcript –but make it your own, put your own words into it and shape it to the realities of your community. It will work as long as you adapt it, since you know the angles and entry points that will work for your community.
- Question: In a community like Boston where there are so many Jewish day schools, how do we get them all working together on this? We have to agree that we can't continue to go at it separately to try and recruit the same population of families into our schools. If we can do it together we have a much better chance of success.
 - Response from Ilene Sussman, Boston's Jewish Day School Advocacy Forum: Having Josh say this helps us get going. The area admission directors are gathering next week and need to start talking about collaboration and agree to remove the tension caused by competition.

Josh continues:

The newest issue of "Views from Josh Elkin" is devoted to this topic. It is being sent out between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. It includes an example of a Haredi rabbi who is the head of an Orthodox school who heard that his local community's Schechter school was having trouble with enrollment and fundraising. He went out and secured a \$150,000 grant for them from a foundation, and then went to a Schechter grandparent in his own school and got them to match it. He gave the Schechter school the money to fund a development position for three years. It's a great example of saying that if we're really in this together, we have to put the turf battles behind us. We know that demographically there are so many people who are not affiliating and we have to find them.

It's like conducting a police investigation – you have to go out and find them. These are missing people who don't know that they're missing! The more that day schools and synagogues and JCCs and Federations work together to go out and look for these people, the better results we'll see. It's a lot of work, but the paradigm of collaboration is much greater than the sum of its parts.

Conclusion:

What are you taking away from this call? Did some part of the discussion or a comment make a difference in the way you might be thinking about the "value" of Jewish education and the role of the Jewish day schools in the larger community as a means to transform Jewish life?

- We need to work together with the other day schools to continue to try and grow Jewish education. I also am taking away that we aren't selling Jewish day schools, we're selling Judaism.

Thanks for participating! Thanks to Josh Elkin, PEJE's Executive Director; Judy Zorfass, PEJE's Manager of Communities of Practice; Rebecca Egolf, Coordinator of the Admission Community of Practice; and Jennifer Miller, a PEJE coach and former head of school. Shanah Tovah!