

Marcia R. Jacobs, Ph.D.
6111 Peachtree Dunwoody Road, N.E.
Suite F-103
Atlanta, Georgia 30328

(770) 395-0059

**The Jewish Academy of Metropolitan Detroit:
The Experience of the Pioneering Graduating Class
July 2003**

Marcia R. Jacobs, Ph.D.

This study was initiated by PEJE, under the guidance of Dr. Bonnie Hausman, Program Officer, with the goal of capturing the experience of the first graduating class at a newly established Jewish high school. As a collaborative initiative of philanthropic partners committed to strengthening Jewish day school education in North America, PEJE has supported the start-up of many new Jewish day schools. It now seems important to gather information about these schools from the point-of-view of one (or more) significant group(s) of participants—in the case of this study, the students and a few of their parents—so as to begin to develop a deeper and more complete understanding of these early years in a new school’s development. It is anticipated that this in-depth look at the experience of these pioneering students will be helpful to the planners and administrators of other new schools and also to those families who are considering whether to enroll their children in the first class at a new school. It should be noted, however, that since only one school was studied here, the results may not be valid for other schools in other cities.

The Jewish Academy of Metropolitan Detroit (JAMD) was selected by Dr. Hausman as the site for this study because it has been very successful in its first three years in a variety of ways, including its recruitment of students, the high acceptance rates at desirable colleges for the students in its first graduating class, its strong support of Israel and of local community service, the positive reputation it has established within the community in such a short time, and its strong and very competent administration. JAMD, often referred to as “the Academy” in this report, states, as part of its mission statement, that it is “an independent, coeducational, Jewish day high school offering a rigorous college preparatory curriculum integrated with an intensive Jewish Studies program.” Rabbi Lee Buckman is the head of school and has been since the school’s inception. The school opened in September 2000 with 53 freshmen and sophomores. In its second year, its enrollment climbed to about 90, and it had 112 students for the 2002-2003 school year, with 21 seniors in the first graduating class. The students in this pioneering class came from a variety of backgrounds: 11 came from Hillel, the Solomon Schechter school in Detroit; five came from Orthodox day schools; and five attended public or private secular schools. The 11 students from Hillel all spent at least one year in a secular public or private school as well, since they entered the Academy as sophomores.

Study Methodology

The data sources, data collection and analysis, and the approach to maintaining confidentiality are discussed in this section.

Data sources. The 21 graduating seniors (nine males and 12 females) in this class were interviewed in five focus groups; the groups were constituted so as to be relatively balanced in terms of the number of male and female students in each group and also in terms of what type of school the student attended before coming to the Academy (i.e., Hillel, the Solomon Schechter School; a public or a secular private school; or an Orthodox day school). In addition, a focus group made up of three parents was arranged by Rabbi Buckman; one parent had a child who had attended an Orthodox day school in Detroit, one had a child who had attended Hillel, and one had a child who had previously been in public school.

I developed the interview protocol incorporating suggestions by Rabbi Buckman and Dr. Hausman. I also used a report written by Dr. Hausman, "Emerging Non-Orthodox Jewish Day High Schools: A Progress Report for Major Donors, September 2000", to generate ideas for questions; the report included some of the results of a 1999 study in which the first graduating class of the New Jewish High School of Greater Boston had been interviewed. Questions were written to cover the following areas: The expectations and concerns as the students considered attending the Academy; the academic program; the social environment, including opportunities for leadership and access to extra-curricular activities; religious identity development and issues regarding religious practice at the school; the mission of the school as they experienced it; their predictions and hopes for the school as it grows over the next five to ten years; the legacy they would like to leave to the Academy, as individuals and/or as a class; and ways for them to stay connected to the school and to each other over the next few years. (A copy of the protocol is in the Appendix to this report.)

Data collection and analysis methods. The focus group interviews were part of a senior retreat held at a local hotel which involved a variety of activities, including planning the class's graduation ceremony. Five of the six focus group interviews took place on May 20 and 21 in a conference room of the hotel; the sixth focus group was interviewed on May 21 in a conference room at the University of Michigan Hillel house, where the class was planning to have lunch and a closing program. Each interview took approximately 90 minutes; I made an audiotape of each interview and also took written notes during the interviews. Given time constraints, most, but not all, questions were asked of all groups.

The tapes were later transcribed, and the transcribed notes and the handwritten notes taken during the interviews were merged, so that there was a complete set of notes for each focus group. The data was then organized by question and theme across the groups, looking for similarities and differences in responses.

Maintaining confidentiality. All parties to the study agreed that I would be the only person to have access to the raw data, including the tapes, the written notes, and the transcripts of the tapes. They also agreed that all results in the report would be reported in the aggregate, and all quotations from students or parents in the report would not have identifying comments. The students and parents were informed of this before the focus groups began, and they were also informed that I reserved the right to communicate specific information to the Head of School if circumstances arose during the discussions which may affect either the well-being of an individual student or the future welfare of the Academy. The parents and students were also informed that Rabbi Buckman would

receive a copy of this report, and that I would share with him more detailed information about the focus group interviews, without identifying the source of any response or quotation.

Study Results

In this section, I will first share some general observations and then discuss the results of the study, organized by theme. For each theme, I will summarize the responses and include a variety of quotations from focus group participants so that their voices can be heard directly.

General observations. This was a delightful group of young women and men. They fully engaged themselves in discussing the questions. They were thoughtful and articulate, and the conversations about the issues tended to be lively, loud, and passionate. (In the middle of a rather heated discussion in one of the groups, a young woman said, “I think it is a really positive thing that we all care enough to have this kind of passionate conversation with you.”) The students appeared to relish the opportunity to share their ideas and give their feedback, and they truly seemed to enjoy the reflective work they were asked to do.

Expectations and concerns. The first question asked in the focus groups concerned the expectations and concerns that the students and their families had as they were considering whether or not to attend the Academy and be part of the pioneering class. In general, the Orthodox students and their families seemed to be more concerned about the Judaics program and, in some cases, whether attending the school would impact in a negative way on the student’s Jewish identity and practice, and less concerned about the secular academic program, assuming that it would be superior to what was available at the Orthodox high school they were attending. Most of these students, representing about 25% of the graduating class, had essentially come to the Academy as a group, since their class in the school they had been attending had dwindled to just a few students:

I was not as concerned about the academics on the secular side. The Judaics were important to us. We didn’t think the Judaics were strong enough. . .

My family was concerned that the religious level and Judaic studies would not be up to par. . . And also that the school would be a negative influence on me religiously.

Students who had attended public or other non-parochial private schools for their education were most concerned about the strength of the academic program and whether going to the Academy would have a negative impact on the college admissions process. These academic concerns were shared by some of those students who had attended Hillel, a Solomon Schechter School; in a couple of instances, families apparently were reassured about the academic issues because they were familiar with Dr. Helene Cohen, Dean of Academic Affairs, through her work at Hillel.

It was a small school, and you may not have the opportunity to have all the classes you would have in the public school.

My parents were against my coming because I'd be leaving a prestigious school. They were concerned about the effect on my college chances.

My father was concerned that being in an unaccredited school and a small school would keep me from getting into a good college, like the U. of M[ichigan].

My mother was concerned about colleges and didn't know how colleges would see the school, and since it wasn't accredited, she wondered if going to the school would hinder my getting into a good college.

Many students expressed that they or their parents felt that the social environment might be too small and not sufficiently diverse, or that they would be too sheltered from the real world:

My parents thought it was too small and not diverse enough, and I would not be able to face the real world when I got out.

I had my friends, I was a cheerleader, and there was diversity, and I thought I'd miss some of the classical high school experience.

Their only concern for me was that it was so small. It was ultimately up to me. . . They were afraid that it would not be social enough, that there would not enough people for me.

The aspects of the school that most attracted these students and their families are listed below. The first item, smaller classes and the opportunity for more individualized learning, was mentioned most often by the non-Orthodox focus group participants as the primary reason for their wanting to attend the Academy as a member of the pioneering class:

1. The smaller classes and the opportunity for more individualized learning:

[In public school], I didn't enjoy the classes, the teachers only came to do their job and when school was over, that was it; I'd come for help and they wouldn't show. I felt kind of lost in the big classes, and my friends weren't doing much work, and I'd go with them and my grades dropped. The idea of smaller classes was attractive to me and my parents. Taking a Bible class did not appeal to me. The Jewish stuff was not the main reason, even though I was interested in using my Hebrew again. The school was small, and that was appealing.

In my public school, I was more and more frustrated; there were 2000 kids in the school. There was no way to be an individual and distinguish myself; I was lost in the crowd. My classes all had 30+ people . . .

We wanted her to be known as a person and not as a number. She wanted the small classes.

2. The opportunity to be pioneers:

We are a family that supports pioneering, risk-taking behaviors; we think those are positive behaviors . . . We wanted to support this pioneering spirit if at all possible.

My parents were concerned that I would be too sheltered. They were swayed by the opportunity to create our own school.

3. The Jewish environment and curriculum:

[When I got older and became involved in youth groups, I realized that] it wasn't Judaism I didn't like, it was the way it was being taught that wasn't appealing to me. The Academy really looked interesting from that aspect . . .

I wanted the religious aspect but I wanted to make sure the academics were good enough.

In their stories of how they came to the decision to attend the Academy, a majority of the students said that it was their choice to do so, and that in some cases, they needed to convince their parents that the decision was a wise one.

Academics. In general, those students who came to the Academy from Orthodox day schools found the secular academic curriculum to be strong and challenging; it definitely was “a step up” from what they were used to at their previous school. They really needed to work hard and develop good study habits:

I was not used to studying so much. I thought the school was too hard for me. I learned that I did need to study.

There was a range of opinions concerning the secular academic curriculum from the other students. As one might expect, students varied in their evaluations of which classes were particularly strong and which they felt could be improved. They appreciated that there was a wide array of academic options, including Advanced Placement and honors classes, especially for such a small school, and they found the administration to be very accommodating about offering a class, such a psychology or statistics, even if just a few students wanted such a class:

Whatever you wanted, they gave it to you. They were very nice to us. For four people, they hired a new teacher to teach AP government.

Scheduling was a problem at times:

Because the school is so small, you can't always get into your schedule the classes you should be taking.

Most students believed that being at the Academy had improved their chances at being accepted at a good college, especially an in-state school:

It helped people to get into schools. 14 of 17 got into U. of M[ichigan]. That is an incredible percentage. I don't know how it will work in the future. For our grade, it didn't hurt, it helped.

Some students wondered whether the fact that a number of students applied to Ivy League schools, and a couple were wait-listed but none were accepted, had something to do with going to a new school:

A lot of colleges would not have looked at us if we weren't in this school. But none of us got into Ivy League schools this year. I am not saying we would have had we gone elsewhere. But a lot of us applied, and none of us got in.

Many stressed the individual attention from the school counselors and the efforts the school counselors made to establish relationships with a number of colleges and universities.

In general, the Judaics curriculum was experienced as challenging by those students who entered the Academy from public or private school and had little or no day school background:

I had to work harder in the Judaics. One problem is that they did away with levels in Bible and Rabbinics after the first year of the school.

I really love my Bible class but I don't belong there—it is too advanced. I have been thrown into too advanced classes.

Those students from the Orthodox day school were concerned that the Rabbinics curriculum was not advanced enough for them, and they also believed that Bible and Rabbinics should be taught in levels:

In Rabbinics. . . they took the middle ground and hurt the top and bottom levels. After the first year, they abolished the levels. . . It may be hard for us going to Israel to study, since others will have had much more Rabbinics than we have had.

At least one person in each focus group mentioned a specific Bible teacher who was identified as an exceptional teacher, regardless of the Judaics background of the student:

He is a wonderful teacher, and it has been an amazing year for me in his class. He brings respect and love to the subject matter. He makes other people love it.

The relationships with teachers were acknowledged in each group as vital to the students' school experience. Students and their parents felt that the teachers knew them as individuals, were interested in their lives outside of school, and went the extra mile to help them succeed:

The teachers really care about what is happening in your outside life. They will talk to you about decisions you have to make, give you advice. They actually know what you do outside of school; that's really important. They are not just here to teach you; they also are here to be your friend.

Lots of kids are close to the teachers. They really are our best friends. The teachers are dedicated to know us and to help us with issues and personal problems. They know us so well.

A significant number of the teachers have been outstanding and have influenced my life in positive important ways.

He [my son] would say, we are going to Caribou to study; the teacher is going to meet us there. Or we are going to the library, and the science teacher will be there to help us. That's very different than the teachers at his other school. The teachers at the Academy are really dedicated to the kids and want them to succeed.

Social environment. All participants in the focus groups agreed that the Academy afforded significant opportunities to develop self-confidence and leadership skills:

This school completely helped shape a lot of us into leaders. We are given the chance to speak up on issues; we talk with our teachers, with authority figures, more. . . There are more classroom discussions; with the smaller classes, you get a chance to speak up more.

I think this school does wonders for your leadership and confidence. Because there is so much opportunity to be the first one to do something, it really builds confidence. Before I came to this school, I never would have dreamed of going out for a play or doing student government. . . It just does wonders for your confidence.

She blossomed as a person, she became more assertive. . . She felt that the people were behind her, the teachers, Rabbi Buckman, the other students.

He can talk with someone in the administration if he has concerns. He feels that he can, and that he has, made a difference in the school.

In all focus groups, it was emphasized that as members of this pioneering class, they believed they had benefited in a myriad of ways from being in a close-knit, warm, supportive school environment for their high school years. The environment of the school fostered significant personal growth in both academic and non-academic areas. These students did not seem to feel limited by the small size of the school; in part, this was because they maintained friendships with peers outside school, through participation in Jewish youth groups and other extracurricular activities that were not based at school and by keeping in contact with friends they had made at public school. The small size of the school seemed to be one of its most positive aspects; it facilitated the close-knit nature of this class, so that it was almost like a family. No one was excluded, and cliques, while they existed, were kept to a minimum:

I don't know of one student who is not liked. When they get together, there is a genuine love between them--that's the best way I can say it.

There are lots of chances to bond with the people here. But many still have friends outside the school. . . So, you enlarge your group by getting to be friends with the friends of your school friends.

We are bonded. . . We are all friends. . . Even the people who aren't your good friends, you end up friends with them; it's like in a family, like a brother you don't like very much, but he is still part of the family.

Here, I talk to people I would never have talked to in public school; we became very close. It opened me up a lot . . . Our grade was very lucky. We could have hated each other, but we clicked and all get along. We formed the school together, and we have become one family.

I've known these people for three years and I feel like I've known them for 18 years; I know them in and out.

The people who come here, their values, they are the kind of people I want to be friends with. They are people I want to stay close to, keep in touch with.

In addition, the students did not need to compete to be able to participate in a wide array of other experiences, including sports teams, student government, theatre productions, and a student newspaper:

You talk to the dean of academics and suggest a class or an activity, and most of the time, you can start that class or activity. You can do everything you want to at this school. You don't have to choose just one thing, you don't have to choose between teams and a musical. They encourage you to do things, to try new things.

You can get involved in anything here; in public school, sports teams, being in the play, all that would be very competitive.

There are lots of extracurricular activities, especially for a school this size. . . If you have an idea, they will support you. We have a newspaper now, and we have all the sports but football.

For some students, there was a trade-off in the area of extracurricular activities: Those who excelled in a sport, for example, may not have been able to continue to grow and improve as they might have in a more competitive environment:

I became the coach [by starting a new sports team] but I didn't grow, I didn't get to improve. But, they look up to me; I got to be a leader.

For the most part, the students did not feel that they were sheltered or lacked diversity in the school environment. They stressed that they did community service and were involved in the community, both the larger Jewish community (locally and in terms of support for Israel) and the general local community. They valued the religious diversity at the school and felt that they benefited from getting to know well Jews with different beliefs and practices:

She got to know kids she wouldn't have known otherwise; the school is diverse in terms of religious background.

We do lots of things within the community. . . One teacher in particular stresses that Jews don't have the only point of view. You are around Jews all the time, but you do learn the positions of other points of view.

The diversity we have, being a non-denominational school, is very good. There is the opportunity to interact on a daily basis with people from across the Jewish spectrum.

We went to Israel this year when lots of groups weren't going. And we sent a lot of people to that rally in Washington, D.C. in support of Israel.

Jewish identity and religious practice at school. In terms of Jewish identity, most believed that they had not changed in their religious practice, but that they had more understanding of and knowledge about Judaism than they had before:

The school presents all sides of the situation, and people get to make their own decisions. You get to make an educated decision as to how to live your life. I don't know if I have become any more religious. But I have become more knowledgeable.

I felt that Hillel tried to force an identity on you. When it is forced and you don't want it, you will rebel and not accept it. We get opportunities here, the opportunity to find your own identity, and it is not forced on you.

It strengthened her passion for community and for Israel, and it was great for her to meet other kids who are passionate and more observant [than she is], even though it didn't change her level of observance.

Now, you have a better understanding--the school helps—but you grow up and realize you have to choose how you want to live. It's what you've grown up with your entire life. So, it would have happened anyway, maybe, but it has been important to be at this school.

The school is very much against intermarriage. We can bring our friends to dances, but they have to be Jewish. They give us lots of statistics about intermarriage. This is the one place where they "preach", and I agree with that. This is the Jewish Academy. You can be Jewish however you want to be, but be Jewish.

I learned more about each different section of Judaism, and now I understand more and I feel a connection to them. . . Now I have respect for them [other denominations]; I have a different attitude. I have matured in that way a lot. I don't feel as uncomfortable meeting Conservative or Reform Jews as I did.

A few of the Orthodox students saw things a bit differently:

You want to fit in and be like these kids; it took me a while to get back to what I really wanted to do. I was less religious for a while, and now I am actually more religious than when I came.

In most focus groups, there was heated discussion about certain policies and practices at the Academy. A number of students expressed opposition to the school policy of compulsory attendance at minyan every morning, although they acknowledged that the school tried to accommodate different approaches to prayer with a variety of minyanim. A number of Orthodox students and a few others were adamant that daily prayer was essential to the practice of Judaism. In most groups, students raised the issue that the school follows "halachic authority" in its religious practices and policies, and some saw this as being "unfriendly" to Reform Jews:

A lot of my friends and me, we do not want to pray. They make us pray. . . That is a huge turnoff for some kids in terms of recruitment. Some people are not drawn to the school by the religious aspect like praying. But I like learning Jewish subjects and Hebrew.

In a Jewish school, there needs to be Jewish prayer; an important part of being Jewish is davening.

We say that we are a non-denominational school but we follow halacha. The problem with that, you are claiming to be both sides, and that is not ok; you have people like them who are more religious and then you have kids whose parents are making them go, and they are not interested in keeping kosher.

Mission of the school. The focus group participants were asked to talk about the mission (or the purpose or essence) of the school as they had experienced it. They expressed the mission of the school in a variety of ways, including the following:

The goal is to make you a good person, a good Jew who is proud of being a Jew.

The goal is to prepare them to be the Jewish leaders of tomorrow, and I think they've done a pretty good job.

The real mission is they don't want us to think of the world in terms of Conservative, Orthodox, and Reform. They want us to be Jewish, and however you practice is how you practice. . .

The school's goal is to offer college preparatory, or the best education they can, in both secular and religious studies, within a Jewish environment.

The goal is to bring together Jews from different backgrounds and unite them as one, while helping them, helping us teenagers, to strengthen our Jewish identities to eventually face the real world.

An important lesson was learned by this group of pioneering students:

We learned not to be afraid to speak up, and that you can go out into the world, do something, and make a difference; I think they really accomplished that here.

Future of the school and the legacy they want to leave. The focus group participants were asked what they wanted to see preserved at the Academy as the school continues. While acknowledging that the school needed to grow to survive and to be able to afford its own building, the students and their parents were clear that they did not want the school to lose the strong sense of community among the students and the close, supportive relationships students had with the teachers and administrators. They were concerned that as it grew, the Academy would become like any other prep school and lose the personal touch and the opportunities for intense student participation in many aspects of school life and development.

I'd like to see academics grow and improve, but the closeness among the students, I'd like to see that stay.

[I'm concerned that, as the school gets bigger,] Rabbi Buckman will see a kid and won't know his name. But I don't think he'll let that happen.

We operate like a family. . . We give each other what the other person needs, whatever it is, money, or food, or a drink, whatever. We hope that they will be able to say the same thing in 10 years. . .

[I am concerned that] this will be a big, factory school where kids come in, go through the motions, and then leave after four years. It's going to get bigger and bigger and the kids will get lost. It won't be personal any more.

I'm afraid that it won't feel like a community, like a family any more. You'll need a hall pass to go into the hall.

I'd like a thousand kids to be able to come here, since it is such a great school, but if it got that big, what would be the point?

Some also stressed that they hoped that leadership development and community service would remain important aspects of the school:

I hope that the commitment to the community doesn't get diluted; I hope the Academy will still be preparing the students to be leaders in the community.

They hoped that the activities and “traditions” that they started will continue, and for many, that was the legacy they wanted to leave to the school:

I hope they keep the little traditions, like late sleep-in one day a week. Keep it real, keep it fun.

[I hope that] there will still be town hall meetings, where the whole school meets together or sometimes just the grade--kids can ask questions. We always celebrate everything here. I want that to stay.

I think the first graduating class really establishes the traditions and sets all the precedents.

As pioneers, they felt that they made a difference in how the school developed, and they questioned whether Academy students in the future will be allowed to participate in that way:

We want the others to have the same ability to change stuff the way we did. You still need to let people participate in change; that's a big factor in bringing people into the school. They need to be able to keep that.

We have had a lot of say in the Academy, as a new school. As it gets bigger, you lose that sense that your opinion matters about issues like the ones we have been talking about.

They see that much has changed at the Academy in the three years since it opened. It is now, as many students put it, “more like a real school,” with bells between classes and more structure and expectations. For some students, this senior year was the best year:

I would like it to be like this year[in the future]. You had the structure, and even though the classes were hard, the environment was still laid back, which was important so you wouldn't go crazy with all the work you had.

For others, nothing could compare with the first year:

The first year was the best. We were one big family. We had a big say in what went on, and we all got along so well.

Concluding Comments

As stated earlier in this report, another study, with a different format and investigator, looked at the experience of the 17 graduating seniors in the pioneering class at the New Jewish High School of Greater Boston. The results reported in the paper, “Emerging Non-Orthodox Jewish Day High Schools: A Progress Report for Major Donors, September 2000”, by Dr. Bonnie Hausman were similar to the findings of this study; in particular, it was stated there that “the intimacy of a small school afforded them [the pioneering students] unique opportunities for personal growth and for forging deeper relationships with teachers and peers.” They developed special skills by being part of the creation of their own environment. The pioneering class at the Academy expressed these same sentiments.

As a group, the graduating seniors interviewed for this study felt privileged to have been in the pioneering class at the Academy:

I think we were lucky, very fortunate to be able to have this experience.

While most of them had ideas about what could be changed or how things could be improved, almost all agreed that they had little or no regrets about having attended the Academy these last two or three years. And all agreed, in one form or another:

What we had here is hard to replace. And it will still be there, when we get back together for a reunion, no matter how much time has passed.

APPENDIX

PROTOCOL FOR JAMD PIONEERING SENIOR CLASS

1. What were some of your expectations and concerns when you and your parents were deciding whether or not to attend JAMD?
What were the issues or points that convinced your parents and you, yourselves? How and why was the decision made for you to come to JAMD?
2. Academic program, both secular and Judaic: Strengths and weaknesses
What did you gain, what did you miss; define "trade-offs":
Have there been academic trade-offs?
Compare your experiences to those of your friends in other schools
Impact on your college options?
3. Social:
What did you gain, what did you miss—What were the social "trade-offs", if any?
What sorts of opportunities, if any, have there been to develop leadership skills of critical thinking, writing, speaking?
Are you prepared for the "real world"?
Was the environment too Jewish, too isolating, too small a peer group?
What about the "fun" factor?
Extra-curricular activities?
4. Jewish identity:
Talk some about what has happened to your identity as a Jew since you have been at JAMD. Have you changed Jewishly? In what ways? Why?
How was being at JAMD influenced your Jewish life at home, if at all?
How has the issue of "pluralism" been handled at JAMD? Has this changed over the years you have been here?
5. Essence, or mission, of the school
What is this school really about?
What is its essence, its purpose, its mission?
How did you experience it?

6. What legacy would you like to leave, as individuals and as a class, to the school as its pioneering class?

What as individuals and as a group have you contributed to the life and the character of the school?

7. In what ways might you want to stay connected to the school and to one another in the coming years, especially while you are in college?

Ideas for some sort of reunion events, for some sort of communication system among the graduates?

8. Future of the school:

a. Where do you think the school will be in 5-10 years?

What will it be like in 5-10 years?

b. What do you hope it will be like? What do you hope will be different and what do you hope will be the same?