

Some Dissonance on the Day School Bandwagon

BY STEVEN M. BROWN

The current love affair with day schools was unimaginable even twenty years ago.¹ Elementary day schools of all denominations and community orientations have convinced parents that a rich bicultural, bilingual, independent school education is a real option for Jews of all movements. The success of these schools in the eighties and nineties has led to a startling increase in the number of new day high schools sprouting up all over the continent.² Jewish public policy makers and shakers, particularly those in the federation ranks, have seized on the day school phenomenon as “the answer” to Jewish continuity issues.³ And while day schools are proclaimed as the best educational investment we can make, synagogue school education has continued to recede as a viable alternative in the minds of many policy makers.⁴

As a professional who has labored diligently in the vineyards of both synagogue and day school education, I find the present mentality troubling.

At the very time when informed students of American Jewish communal life urge the creation of many gateways into Judaism, one institutional format is elbowing all the others out of the way.⁵ But everything we know today about learning, individual needs, and multiple intelligences screams that the era of “one-size-school-fits-everyone” is gone. My purpose here is to discuss the serious pitfalls inherent in allegiance to the emerging policy of exclusive support for day schools, and to caution against neglect of other forms of gateways into Judaism. The explosive growth of day schools, and the ensuing enthusiastic support of Federations and family foundations may be blinding policy makers to some troubling facts that could bring the whole enterprise to collapse. Here, then, are some dissonant vibrations about the day school bandwagon.

Growing teacher shortages

If the *raison d'être* of the Jewish day

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school is to provide a serious, in-depth exposure to Jewish texts, practice, faith development and integrated learning, then the success of these schools will be largely dependent on a corps of qualified, committed Jewish role models (of every denomination, depending on the individual school's mission). These people simply don't exist. Ask day school heads, and you'll find they are all desperate for qualified Judaic studies teachers.⁶ Strong anecdotal evidence suggests that nationally, only 150 teachers a year are being produced on the MA level by all the Jewish teacher training institutions in North America. Currently, there are approximately 500 vacancies for teachers in day schools. No one is seriously engaged in developing sophisticated, funded programs to recruit candidates to a profession in great need of fiscal enhancement.⁷

Moreover, many day schools have enjoyed the luxury of employing general studies teachers who enjoy working at lower pay in a school atmosphere that offers them more control of curriculum, personal safety and a feeling of accomplishment than might be available in public settings. These legions of general studies teachers could be earning twice as much in public schools. That situation is about to change drastically. Over the next decade the American public school system will need approximately 2,000,000 new teachers to replace retirees and those leaving the profession for more lucrative and personally satisfying jobs.⁸ Any no-

tion of supply and demand economics will force a dramatic increase in what public schools will need and be willing to pay to attract new, younger teachers to their staffs.

At the same time, many of the general studies teachers who have helped make our day school systems so successful are also approaching retirement. Think about the teachers in your own child's day school. How many are young, in mid-career, or getting ready to retire? Thus, when graduates of teacher training colleges look for jobs in the coming years, they simply will not be able to afford to work for independent day schools. This is not only a problem for Jewish schools, but for independent schools in general. No major funding of any sort is being targeted at this emerging crisis.

One final policy issue affecting teacher recruitment and retention needs to be considered by the organized Jewish community. At the very least, establishment of a health and welfare safety net for Jewish teachers and professionals ought to be as central to the national debate as day school scholarship funding. Every Jewish teacher, principal or communal worker should be guaranteed adequate health care coverage, a pension plan proportionate to their work in Jewish education and tuition discounts for their children. Jewish educators aren't doing their work to get rich, but knowing that their families are protected, or that their own children can attend a Jewish day school or summer camp would be a power-

ful incentive to recruiting and keeping people in the field.⁹

Shortage of Qualified School Leaders

Not a week goes by — not one — without my office getting a call or an e-mail from the head of a search committee desperate to hire a head of school for a new day school or to replace one who has left an existing school. Having done it for 16 years, I'm convinced there is no harder job in public Jewish life than being head of a Jewish day school. The range of agendas, demands and constituency needs, and the complexity of modern families require enormous professional, interpersonal, business, educational leadership and visionary skills. Not many people are trained to handle these burdens.¹⁰ Of late some exciting new programs are emerging to fast track leadership, such as the one created at the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education with the help of a major grant from The Avi Chai Foundation. A second cohort of 15 talented people began a two year period of training this summer as day school leaders. But the demand far exceeds our current capacity to recruit and train school leaders.

All the research of which I am aware points to the importance of the school head in effective schools. The head must set the vision and tone. Even in a consultative, Reconstructionist model of process, the head's vision, organizational talents and professional skills are crucial for de-

veloping school culture and climate. Where will the newly created day schools springing up all over the country find these leaders?

Funding Issues

Not only are low salaries a barrier to attracting quality, stable staffs, but escalating tuition costs are squeezing out the middle class parent, creating schools for the privileged few who can afford it, or the very needy who can qualify for tuition aid. Schick points out that "day school families are significantly larger than non-day school families. This is true of non-Orthodox—and certainly of Orthodox—day school families."¹¹

My bleakest moments as a day school head came in tearful conferences with parents who had to pull their children from the school because the financial burden was simply overwhelming. Though national efforts are being made to ameliorate the tuition aid issue, the amount of dollars necessary to support school operations and physical plant needs of a growing day school movement committed to excellence are far beyond even the marvelous fund raising capacities of our major Jewish philanthropies.¹² Indeed, families who can afford a quality education will buy it elsewhere if they do not perceive the Jewish day school as a place of distinction. Less affluent families don't want a bargain basement education for their children in order to lower school costs, and will remove their children, sending them

back to the local public school if they do not perceive the school as high caliber.¹³

The understandable desire to concentrate on day school fund raising will of necessity drain available resources from other important Jewish educational and social welfare enterprises like synagogue schools, summer camps, serious adult education, family education and informal youth group needs, and care for the elderly and impoverished.¹⁴ The time has come, therefore, for a serious re-engagement with the school voucher issue, a zero-based review if you will, of Jewish public policy turned into *halakha mi-sinai*. Because I do believe that day schools are an important option for our families, and because the Jewish community alone cannot provide the kind of funding it will take to maintain schools of excellence open to the widest range of Jewish children, I support publicly funded vouchers of significant buying power. Here's why.

Vouchers

Day school proliferation is clearly a result of a growing post-modern perception by Americans that the industrial model of public schooling is no longer the only option for those who would live a fully integrated ethnocentric, American life. America's post-industrial needs are very different from those addressed by a public school system established at the turn of the nineteenth century as the chief vehicle for homogenizing the immi-

grant population — Americanizing it to insure a work force for industrial America. Current attitudes towards multiculturalism, ethnic pride, and the need for diverse groups to maintain their own uniqueness in the salad bowl of American life, have made it difficult, if not nearly impossible, for the public school system to be all things to all people. You can sit next to a black, Hispanic, Catholic, or Asian child for twelve years in a public school and still turn out to be a bigot if no one deals overtly, systematically and volitionally with a values tradition that teaches you what your obligations are to others on a day to day basis. If Jewish day schools are successful, then they should be measured by their ability to promulgate and instill in everyday behavioral terms the idea that all people are God's creation, created in the divine image. It is our deepest Jewish obligation to care for and support all people. Our curricula need to teach appreciation, even reverence, for other people's cultures and traditions, allowing for interaction and multicultural learning opportunities with children in different schools and social settings.

It is not un-American or disloyal to democracy to advocate that schools be effective. Fairness is not treating everyone the same, it's giving everyone what he or she needs. Mindless devotion to a nineteenth century industrial model of factory schooling for all is not in the best interest of a post-modern economy and emerging culture. One size

school does not fit all. Thus, giving parents a real choice in the kind of school a child attends is a much better fit with contemporary American democracy.

Moreover, the Jewish community that so virulently condemns vouchers is at best inconsistent, at worst downright hypocritical. Jews have made their choice —by moving to the suburbs or electing to send their children to an enormous range of non-Jewish independent schools. When committed to public schools, Jews can choose to live in urban neighborhoods which often have strong coalitions of neighbors who make the local elementary school a unique and different setting when compared to other schools in the district. Why shouldn't less fortunate families have the same choice? The billions upon billions of dollars poured into school reform in this country have not worked. It's *arousgewaffene gelt* (throwing away good money)!¹⁵

Is aversion to vouchers valid on principle or is it really our "making a fence around the law" lest other barriers between church and state come tumbling down? I am reminded of the words of William Doll, Jr., who wrote:

We face the twenty-first century, the third millennium, gripped by strong elements of doubt and fear. If we have a faith, and I hope we do, it is a faith based on doubt, not on certainty. What we do — and we must do

— we do with the realization that it may be wrong; no longer do we have the feeling of certainty and rightness in the universal and metaphysical sense the modernists posited. Such an absolute right (or truth) does not exist. Instead we make particular decisions which we hope will be right for now, for a local time and place.¹⁶

Is current Jewish public policy still right for this time and place?

Effective Schools

There is increasing research on what makes for good schools that support learning for understanding. We know that human beings learn best in cooperative groups, when they are actively engaged in learning and able to make personal meaning. Schools that don't focus on these central notions will not be effective in the long run. Day schools are not necessarily any better at doing these things than a fine synagogue school. Though day schools have made enormous strides in broadening the envelope of accommodations for learning differences, a bilingual, highly academic, dual track, integrated general and Jewish studies curriculum is not for every child or family. Presently only 30% of Jewish children in the liberal American Jewish movements attending some form of Jewish schooling attend day schools. The Jewish community cannot — must not — neglect the needs and aspira-

tions of 70% of our younger constituents.

While day school education can be powerful, transformative and helpful in creating literate Jews with a mastery of Jewish content, skills, life styles and culture, our public policy must support alternative models that can be effective and life giving.¹⁷ I am a product of a fine (for its day) synagogue school, Camp Ramah, and I guess some genetic encoding that has predisposed me to a religious life style. We need to reinvent the synagogue school, not ignore it.¹⁸ The Melton Research Center is deeply involved in developing some new approaches to formal Jewish learning based on the latest research in cognitive theory and learner-centered education. Ultimately, no one strategy can solve all the problems of allowing gateway entrants to reconstruct their Judaism, but a certain core of Jewish literacy that can be made personally meaningful by the learner is imperative.

Approaches to reinventing the nature of learning and instruction in the synagogue school become more urgent as we watch a powerful new trend emerging in American schooling: year round schools. In the coming years more and more school districts will move to a six-weeks-on-two-weeks-off, year-round model of schooling. It has many benefits: better use of facilities and staff, greater consistency of learning, avoidance of long down-time where learning is forgotten, and provision of year-round day care. For synagogue

schools, this may mean an unprecedented opportunity to offer two week intensive Judaica immersion programs that can be transformative and life enhancing for our students and families.

Enhanced utilization of our growing and universal pre-school populations for intensive family education and Hebrew language immersion can also be a realistic way of transforming Jewish learning without incurring the fiscal burdens of day school education. Currently we are doing serious research and piloting of Hebrew language immersion in preschool children ages three to five. Much research has shown that the best time to teach a second language is when children are very young and their brain stores the new language near the native language. Early second language acquisition also enhances general academic and intellectual prowess.¹⁹ Imagine what synagogue schools could do, or what day schools could build upon, if by five years old our children were fairly fluent in modern Hebrew! This is now doable. Jewish public policy needs to look carefully at early childhood Hebrew immersion programs for raising the level and quality of synagogue school education.

Make no mistake about my position. Day schools are extraordinarily powerful institutions, but we dare not put all our eggs into one basket, nor forget the pluralistic nature of American Jewish life. Jewish public policy needs to make choices, but it must not sacrifice all the alternative

gateways on the sacred altar of only one.

1. See M. Schick, *A Census of Jewish Day Schools* (New York: The Avi Chai Foundation, 2000). According to this study there were 185,000 students enrolled in Jewish Day Schools in the United States in 1998-99. Eighty percent of students are enrolled in Orthodox schools, but enrollment in Solomon Schechter (Conservative), Reform, and transdenominational Community schools has risen about 20% since 1992-93.

2. The newest day high school, the Jewish Academy of Metropolitan Detroit, had hoped to open in the Fall 2000 semester with fifteen students. It will open with over fifty!

3. The formation of the Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education (PEJE) by Michael Steinhardt from New York in 1997 is a powerful example of how a partnership of individual and foundation philanthropists is pursuing the day school agenda with meaningful funding. Twelve partners have each contributed \$1,500,000, creating a pool of funds used to provide challenge seed grants of up to \$300,000 for new schools. High standards of excellence are used to guide schools in formation and as a condition of acceptance to the project. Funding at least equal to this start up money will be essential to recruiting, training, and retaining qualified staff if these new schools are to succeed in the long run. Jack Wertheimer notes "that by the late 1990s, over 180,000 children attended day schools, compared to 260,000 enrolled in supplementary schools. In absolute terms, this means that the day-school population has tripled over the past 35 years; and the day schools' share of all Jewish enrollments has grown from under 10 percent in 1962 to nearly 40 percent." Jack Wertheimer, "Jewish Education in the United States," *American Jewish Year Book* (1999): 52.

4. For a succinct description of a remarkable "resurgence of serious interest in reviving and even recreating supplemen-

tary education," see Wertheimer, 61-68. 5. Jonathan Woocher suggests that "the more we can construct pathways of Jewish educational experiences that are characterized by extensivity, intensivity, and high quality, and the more Jews we can induce to enter and travel along those pathways, the better off we will be . . . We need to think less in terms of 'programs' at all, and more in terms of 'pathways.' Attending to the connections between and among various programs and settings to create smooth handoffs and synergies that are so often lacking today is the next frontier for Jewish education." Jonathan Woocher, "A Jewish Education Strategy for the 21st Century" (Unpublished), 12-13.

6. A CIJE study reported in 1998 that "coupled with limited formal training is the finding that work conditions are not professionalized. The teaching force is largely part-time; even in day and pre-schools . . . Only 20% of teachers say their earnings from Jewish education are the main source of family income . . . Among full-time teachers in all settings, only 48% reported that they are offered health benefits, 45% have access to pensions, and 28% are offered disability coverage. Adam Gamoran, et al., *The Teachers Report: A Portrait of Teachers in Jewish Schools* (New York: Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education, 1998).

7. For a study that demonstrates the dissatisfaction of day school teachers with their salaries (even more than supplementary school teachers) see Gamoran.

8. See D. Gerald and W. Hussar, *Projections of Education Statistics to 2006* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, 1996), 96-661. Public school districts are starting to offer signing bonuses just like for baseball players! Baltimore offers \$5000 towards a house closing; Detroit \$3000 for signing, and Massachusetts offers an incentive of up to \$20,000 over four years for the top 100 candidates. Novice graduates from Jewish teacher training institutions often graduate owing as much in \$35,000 in student loans with no hope of repayment help from communities seeking

their services. (See AFT: Where We Stand October 1998. <http://www.aft.org/stand/previous/1998/1098.html>.)

9. Even where an umbrella policy for medical coverage has been instituted, such as by the Gruss Foundation in New York, cutbacks are now the rule because of skyrocketing coverage costs.

10. In a recent study conducted by the Mandel Foundation researchers found that "over half of the educational leaders in day schools are not trained in Jewish content areas. They do not hold degrees or certificates in Jewish education, Jewish studies, or related subjects. Day school educational leaders also lack formal preparation in educational administration. They fall far below expected standards for public school leaders." E. B. Goldring, A. Gamoran, B. Robinson, *The Leaders Report: A Portrait of Educational Leaders in Jewish Schools* (New York: Mandel Foundation, 1999).

11. Schick, op. cit. 13.

12. Wertheimer opines, "To put matters into some perspective, let us note that in 1994 the day-school sector alone was estimated to require a billion dollars a year—that is, just for maintenance of regular operations. Federation allocations came to an average of 12.5 percent of day school budgets, a figure that varied greatly from one community to the next" (111). A recent interview with a staffer at UJC (United Jewish Communities) headquarters revealed that total fund raising by federations in North America for 1999 amounted to \$882,000,000 (\$87,000,000 of that amount in Canada). Added to family foundation and endowment gifts approximately \$1.6 billion was the total money raised.

13. See *Report of the Task Force on Jewish Day Schools*, June 1999 (New York: United Jewish Communities & JESNA, 1999). Parent share of school budgets in Jewish day schools varies from 57% to 90% with the average tuition ranging from about \$5100 in Torah Umesorah schools to about \$6000 in Schechter schools (43). These figures are probably much higher now. According to NAIS

(National Association of Independent Schools), 17% of students at independent schools receive need-based financial assistance with an average award of \$6,540. A JESNA report suggests 33% of students in Jewish day schools receive tuition assistance. This writer's experience suggests that figure is low.

14. Wertheimer comments on allocation trends in federations: "In 1997 the largest allocations to educational programs in the big and intermediate-size communities went to day schools, while congregational schools in most cases received no funding or only a small fraction of the amounts given to day schools" (111).

15. The U.S. Department of Education reported on Friday August 11, 2000 that although half the money from federal education programs goes to the poorest schools, those schools continue to be the most lacking in qualified teachers and technological resources. While secondary schools educate a third of the poorest students in the country, they receive only 15% of \$8 billion each year in Title I funds. Moreover, while half of the instructional workers supported by these funds are only teachers aids, 41% report spending at least half their time alone with students, without a qualified teacher present. Edward Wong, "Poorest Schools Lack Teachers and Computers," *New York Times*, 13 August 2000.

16. William E. Doll, Jr., *A Post-Modern Perspective on Curriculum* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993), 60.

17. Woocher suggests "that the complex nature of post modern life requires a more open and less linear mode of thinking regarding problem solving and planning for the Jewish community." He suggests that we "embrace 'both/and' not 'either/or' answers. In a world of high variability, we generally do better hedging our bets. Two apparently contradictory courses of action (e.g., seeking to prevent intermarriage, on the one hand, and reaching out to welcome the intermarried, on the other) may both be 'right'. Many debates in Jewish policy circles (e.g., whether to invest everything we can in day schools or try to transform part-time Jewish education) reflect

a black-or-white view of the world which is simply inappropriate from the perspective of complexity theory" (11).

18. For powerful examples of reinvention and systemic change in the Reform Movement synagogue school see I. Aron, S. Lee, and S. Rossell, eds., *A Congrega-*

tion of Learners: Transforming the Synagogue Into A Learning Community (New York: UAHC Press, 1995).

19. See A. Ofek, "Learning the Hebrew Language in Early Childhood," *Melton Gleanings* (Autumn 1997): 4-7.