

Why Consider a Jewish Day School?

The education of children is the most important responsibility of parents. Today's parents face multiple challenges in this regard. Thoughtful parents demand for their children an education which aims at professional success, ensures mastery of the core curriculum of human culture, promotes the process of life-long inquiry and study, develops values, and provides cultural and religious instruction, all in an environment which is physically and emotionally safe.

With the decline in public schools over the past three decades, that system has become even less capable of meeting these educational goals. Public school facilities are generally aging and crowded beyond their design capacities. Ineffective teachers have proven difficult to replace, while the most inspired teachers often leave to find positions in private schools where students are more motivated, salaries are higher, and where class size is smaller. Colleges and universities are reporting that an increasing number of applying students are poorly prepared for serious college work.

Jewish day schools offer a challenging dual or integrated curriculum and generally have small class size, allowing for individual attention from creative, knowledgeable teachers. **Most graduates of Jewish day schools find that their rigorous curriculum provides them with an excellent preparation for college and advanced study, and college acceptances from Jewish day school graduates are most impressive.**

Public and secular independent schools focus on a core curriculum and on academic preparation for college, but not on values, leadership, compassion, and identity. **The elementary and secondary school years are an important formative time for students, and the integrated study of values, identity, the characteristics of an admirable life, and the deep familiarity with our people's history is transformative.** Public and secular independent schools are incapable of meeting this need.

Jewish day schools present an attractive alternative for those families who increasingly view public schools as less than ideal environments for educating their children. Over the past few decades, the proportion of Jewish children enrolled

in public schools has declined from over 90% to only 65%. **Both secular independent school and Jewish day school enrollments have risen, but enrollment at Jewish day schools has risen dramatically.**

Within the last 30 years, day school enrollment has burgeoned throughout the United States. The number of children attending supplementary Jewish schools (after school and weekend) has fallen from about 550,000 to 270,000, while the number enrolled in full-time Jewish day schools has tripled, from about 70,000 to 200,000.

There are now 700 Jewish day schools (full-day schools that combine secular and Jewish studies) in the United States. Among those children receiving some Jewish education, fully 37% of them are doing so in the context of a Jewish day school. The National Jewish Population Survey (2000) reported that 23% of people aged 18-34 attended a day school, and that 29% of those aged 6-17 are enrolled or were enrolled full time in day school. These percentages are two to three times higher than in older age groups.

Jewish day schools appeal to many Jewish families who have become disillusioned with after-school supplementary Hebrew and religious education. This is so because the supplementary schools are perceived by many to have failed in their task of producing graduates who are even minimally knowledgeable as Jews. In part, this is due to ever-decreasing numbers of hours of study required by supplementary schools: the average 12 hours required in the early part of the 20th century generally has been reduced to 4-6 hours weekly, especially as other extracurricular activities compete for children's time. Also, very qualified teachers willing to work for such limited hours are hard to find. Hence, **parents who might have elected to send their children to secular public or independent schools with after-school supplementary education in Judaism are now opting in increasing numbers to send their children to all-day Jewish schools.**

What might have been a barrier to the growth of Jewish day schools is the traditional unwillingness on the part of American Jews to show "national disloyalty" by removing themselves from the public schools. In fact, this attitude appears largely to have disappeared in light



of modern generations' security regarding their integration into American civic life. Melting Pot is a dated ideal; it has given way to the ideal of diversity and mutual respect. **For at least 30 years, American Jewish scholars have successfully documented that children who graduate from Jewish day schools enter mainstream American universities, graduate schools, careers, and culture with great ease and success.**

Jewish day schools seem to be proving their effectiveness not only in graduating students well able to compete for limited positions at colleges, universities, and yeshivot, but also in graduating students who emerge with a significant body of Jewish literacy. This strong foundation of competency in Jewish text, history, and philosophy translates into preservation of Jewish identity and commitment.

In light of the more concentrated Judaic curriculum offered by day schools, it is not the least bit surprising that **study after study has concluded that graduates of full-time day schools are more than twice**

as likely as graduates of supplementary schools to marry Jewish partners, to join synagogues, to observe Jewish rituals, Shabbat, and holidays, and to become involved members of the Jewish community upon reaching adulthood (1990 National Jewish Population Survey, Avi Chai Foundation Report, 1993; Federation CJA, 1989, to name but two). These statistics in turn serve to encourage parents fearful of their children's assimilation, intermarriage, and abandonment of Jewish tradition to consider the day school alternative.

For the first time in our long history, we are all Jews by choice. And education is a necessary precondition to choice.

We as Jews have an opportunity to give our children familiarity with our cultural treasures, at that important time in a child's development when identity is formed. Our children will find context and meaning that will provide lifetime guidance and inspiration.

*Excerpted from the Partnership
for Excellence in Jewish Education.*