

JEWISH **EDUCATIONAL** LEADERSHIP

The Role of Parents in Education | Volume 19:1 | Fall 2020



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Perspective

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with a High
School Teacher

JEWISH EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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Letter from the Editor



The Talmud describes the extraordinary innovation of R. Yehoshua ben Gamla, who began teaching fatherless children or those whose fathers were unable to teach them. We would have thought that he would receive accolades from all sides, yet the Talmud's response is, "however, we still recognize the good that he did." This backhanded compliment suggests that starting the first yeshiva to teach children was a cause for concern, and perhaps that concern was that the parents were being replaced as the primary educators for their children.

R. Yehoshua ben Gamla's innovation, which may have saved countless Jewish children from ignorance, has been the flashpoint for many minor internal conflicts. What do we do when the formal Jewish learning undermines long-standing family traditions? How do those with formal Jewish authority react when the families and the community seek to undermine that authority? The questions are not limited to religion, they extend to almost every aspect of life. Are schools to function as societal thought-leaders and change agents or is their mandate to maintain the norms and standards of its constituents and the community it serves?

When we "zoom" in from the macro-questions to how it plays out on an individual level, the parents stand front and center. What is/could/should be the role that they play in their children's education? What does a productive or healthy relationship between the parent and school or parent and teacher look like, and how can that be nurtured? And how is COVID creating chaos and opportunity particularly in this area – with students attending classes remotely and parents being thrust into roles they largely sub-contracted to others long ago?

To explore the role of parents we sought to include a diverse range of perspectives. They include day schools, supplementary schools, and stand-alone programs; school leaders, teachers, parents, guidance counselors, and even home-schoolers; early childhood, elementary school, and high school. One set of articles consists of abridged and edited transcripts of interviews we conducted, and we include a roundtable discussion of our own staff at The Lookstein Center.

We'd love for you to share your thoughts, comments, experiences, and insights as well. It is through sharing that we all learn. Join the discussion.

Bivrakha,
Rabbi Zvi Grumet, Ed.D.



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Bar-Ilan University's International School and the Department of Hebrew and Semitic Languages are launching "Hebrew Ulpan Online", a Hebrew language course via Zoom, starting in November 2020.

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* *Ulpan* is a Hebrew word meaning "studio" or "instruction".

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A Seat at The Lookstein Center's Conference Table

Parent Involvement

For as long as we can remember, parent involvement in schools was usually limited to volunteerism for a variety of school functions, often related to non-educational areas such as recruitment, fundraising, gifts for teachers, and chaperoning trips. A few select parents served advisory roles on a school's educational committee and others on the school's board of directors, but parents were largely kept out of roles involving education. That was comfortable for the vast majority of parents and the overwhelming majority of the educational staff. Schools were silos protected from meddling, and the classrooms were silos within those silos.

COVID-19 forced changes for many, as the homes became the locus of education. Teachers got new insights into students' homes, and parents got to see and hear a lot of what was happening in the children's virtual classrooms. The forced changes present an opportunity to rethink norms that likely evolved by default rather than by design. What kind of involvement do parents want to have? What could be the benefits and the downsides of that? What kind of involvement do the professionals believe could be productive and healthy?

While sitting around our own virtual conference table brainstorming the questions that would make up the Call for Papers for this issue, we (Chana German, Zvi Grumet, Dee Mack, and Naomi Schrager) shared our own ideas with one another and now we'd like to share them with you, our readers, as well. Pull up a chair.

Involvement

I think about this question both on a macro scale and on a micro scale. On the macro scale, the last century has ushered in an era of professionalism in all fields - from banking to law to medicine, and even in education. That professionalization has been accompanied by specialization, even hyper-specialization. In medicine we are hard-pressed to find a general practitioner, but it would not take long to find an expert on thyroid functioning or separating twins in utero. This professionalism and specialization, along with other societal changes, has often meant families with two working parents spending many hours out of the house, the result being that schools have had to take on many parenting roles from after-school care to counseling and a range of other support services which might have earlier been taken on by involved parents. COVID-19 has shifted the working world, so that parents are home more and taking on more active roles in their children's lives, resetting the balance between home and school. This is to be welcomed, but poses a challenge to the educators who are much more professional than they were just a generation ago and who take greater ownership over their own work. This need not set up a conflict, and can be a boon for the teachers who can now count on the parents for more but who must also yield some of their control in the process.

On the micro scale, I think about individual teachers in their classes. With a highly professionalized parent body with a range of knowledge and skills, and who now may be working more flexible hours from home, they

can play an amazing role in their children's education in school, and not just as home-based support staff. Parents who are doctors or scientists can give guest classes in science classes, lawyers and social workers can offer insights in social studies or government, and so on. I'm not talking about "show and tell," but about real parent integration on a regular basis. The parents and the schools can become real partners in education and the parents can become fully integrated. Aside from the obvious benefits, it would allow the parents to see their children in a different light and make the school functioning more transparent to the parents, which builds trust and confidence and offers opportunities for even greater professionalism in the school which embraces, rather than fears, parental involvement.

On the school-wide level, I have long been uncomfortable with situations in which the educational staff at the school live in different worlds than their students. This happens much more frequently in larger cities, where teachers need not live in the same communities as their students (and often cannot afford to), but can happen in smaller communities as well. It generates disconnect between the teachers and the families and possibly even mistrust. Greater interaction between parents and teachers where both are more exposed can potentially create greater transparency and a stronger confluence of messages the student receives in and out of home. And that would be good news indeed.

Zvi Grumet

Cooperation

In thinking about the parent-school relationship, my initial reaction is as a parent experiencing COVID-19 distance learning. Much of this experience has been clouded by a sense of controlled chaos, but despite the chaos, the educational professional in me couldn't help but see the amazing opportunity that had been presented to our children: the chance to become independent learners; the safe space in which to practice real life skills with the help of teachers and parents cheering them on. A small voice in the back of my head was even excited about this crazy, uncharted experience where my children would become master online learners by taking charge of their own time management, using effective online communication skills, and of course troubleshooting their own technology hiccups!

While this excitement might have been just a little bit exaggerated, seven months later I still believe that parents and teachers do have an amazing opportunity to work together to help our children develop their online learning skills. This shouldn't take the form

of parents spending hours on homework with their children each night, or serving as on-site tech support, but rather that teachers and parents form a united front in encouraging and reinforcing specific, age appropriate, transferable skills.

This type of 'asynchronous' partnership could serve as a model even when schools return to a brick and mortar setting. Focusing on skill development rather than content completion creates a common language and a framework through which parents and teachers can together encourage their students to face obstacles, and use their own resources to overcome those obstacles, be it academic or otherwise. Imagine the impact on our students if the same critical thinking, learning, communication, collaboration, and other skills were reinforced in both school and the home! By focusing on specific skills, parents and teachers could see each other as partners in their students' development, and complement each other's efforts for our students' benefit.

Dee Mack

Communication

Parents are the experts when it comes to their children - they see them in so many different contexts and know their kids "from the inside out." But that doesn't make them experts as educators; that's what the teachers and school personnel are for. Teachers often make the mistake of thinking that school is the sole place where learning happens. Of

course, school is where students expand their knowledge and are exposed to new ideas. In the best circumstances, school is where students feel safe enough to consider new ideas and how they might apply to their lives. But home is where a lot of the learning happens and is probably the most significant factor in determining a student's outcome.

Parents and teachers are two halves of an educational puzzle. Engaging parents in a meaningful way in the education of their children shouldn't be simply a check box on a checklist of best practices; without the involvement of parents the puzzle is incomplete. Parent partnership should be part of a school's mission. What would this look like practically? Give teachers the space and time to explore how that partnership will look in their classrooms. This will take a serious mind shift and won't be easy for teachers. The school will need to help them work this through, both individually and as a group, so

that they don't feel that the parents are being "thrust upon them" and so that they can figure out how to make the parents their partners. This takes us way beyond back-to-school nights, report cards, and the uncomfortable calls home when there's a problem.

Communication should be two-way, frequent, timely, and open. Both teachers and parents need to learn to listen to each other, and not just to talk at each other. Just imagine the impact on students when they sense that their parents and teachers function as a team.

Naomi Schrager

Impact

Parents are often very involved in the first half of first grade, listening to their children read, helping them with early math, signing off on worksheets to demonstrate to teachers that they are aware of progress. After school, for a few minutes every day, parents are coaches, gently correcting their children when they make an error, encouraging them not to give up, and cheering them on when they grasp a new idea or master a new skill. In these few months, children make great strides, and it is no coincidence that those strides are made when teachers and parents are working in tandem on common goals. Then, when the children have reached these goals, parents step back and give teachers space.

What if Jewish schools enlisted their long-term help in achieving well-articulated,

specific goals? What if the daily investment of ten minutes extended through the first three or four years of school? What if it lasted longer? Research demonstrates that children can duplicate the achievements of those first few months of first grade if parents continue to act as coaches throughout their elementary school years.

Imagine the impact on Hebrew fluency if reading was conducted every evening for several years. Imagine the impact if the Parasha was reviewed throughout the week, again for several years? Not only would skill-building and knowledge-acquisition increase exponentially, but parents and children would have ongoing, shared Jewish learning experiences.

Chana German

The Parent-Day School Partnership: A Critical Imperative in the Shadow of a Pandemic

Chaim Y. Botwinick

As we know, parental involvement, engagement, collaboration, and support have and will continue to occupy an essential aspect of the Jewish Day school education landscape. The evolving impact of parent involvement and engagement on their children's learning experiences has shown to strongly influence student achievement, engagement, and motivation. Moreover, parental involvement in education is widely understood as a key component to educational success. To be sure, the best predictor of student success is the extent to which families encourage learning at home and involve themselves in their children's education.

In addition to hands-on involvement in their children's formal cognitive development in school, over the past many decades, parents have assumed an impressive array of volunteer opportunities in order to enhance

the impact and effectiveness of day schooling on students, the school, and the community at large.

The wide array of parent involvement opportunities in the Jewish day school community is impressive to say the least. It represents a growing number of parents who are motivated to assume these meaningful volunteer leadership roles in our schools. It is also the result of a remarkable level of volunteer commitment, driven by an unswerving passion on the part of parents to support Jewish day school education in a very meaningful fashion.

Today, many of our Jewish day schools have been truly blessed with a cadre of parents who continuously and successfully assume a variety of voluntary leadership roles; yet other schools continue to aspire to reach these levels of parental engagement with varying

degrees of success. The one common denominator is that they are all inspired by a select group of dedicated parents and/or day school professional leaders who inspire, motivate, and create these meaningful collaborative relationships and partnerships. To this end, it is important to note that these relationships do not happen in a vacuum; but rather through a carefully designed and deliberate planning process which endeavors to engage and empower parents by enabling them to become involved in school-related programs and activities on an ongoing basis.

As a Jewish day school principal, communal leader, and day school consultant, I have witnessed a wide variety of outstanding parent engagement initiatives – whether they be school-wide or classroom-based programs relating to the celebration of holidays, participation in hesed projects, science and math fairs, art contests, or the distribution of special teacher appreciation gifts to teachers (to name a few) – they are all anchored in a serious, conscious planful effort. They require time, energy, thoughtful planning, and a willingness to devote an inordinate amount of focus on detail and measurable outcomes.



Dr. Chaim Y. Botwinick is Principal of the Hebrew Academy Community School, Margate, FL., organizational consultant, and executive coach. He served in a variety of senior leadership positions on the local and national levels and is the Co-Founder of LEV Consulting Associates, specializing in strategic planning and organizational development. He is the author of *Think Excellence: Harnessing Your Power to Succeed Beyond Greatness* (Brown Books, 2001).

Parental engagement, collaboration, involvement, and empowerment are activities which are challenging to plan and implement during “normal” times, and all the more so, during today’s COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, many of my principal colleagues are bemoaning the fact that they are now experiencing tremendous difficulty trying to engage parents in school-wide activities. This is over and above the monitoring and reinforcement of what their children are now learning remotely or in-person under very different, and at times difficult and challenging, circumstances.

In light of this health crisis, our Jewish day schools are now faced with a variety of operational, structural, curricular, and fiscal exigencies which to quote one principal, “makes parental engagement and involvement a true luxury.” I have witnessed this frustration in many schools. But I have also seen a variety of schools which continue to promote, support, embrace, and even celebrate parental engagement.

As our Jewish day schools face this unprecedented challenge, it is essential that we continue to ensure parental engagement, involvement, and collaboration. As day school leaders, we must be nimble and resilient, and we must create the right conditions for our parents which are sensitive to “new normal” realities. This includes the creation of a school environment and culture which motivates, inspires, and supports parental engagement and collaboration.

The Epstein Framework

One of the most effective and meaningful parent engagement models is embedded in a framework developed by Joyce Epstein of Johns Hopkins University, which assists educators in developing school-

family partnerships which are meaningful and sustainable, and which can overcome the stresses and strains of today's unprecedented conditions. The "Epstein Framework" for parent engagement is divided into six (6) discrete yet interrelated domains: parenting; communicating; volunteering; learning at home (connecting to homework); decision-making (policy); and collaborating with community. By dividing parental engagement into these six domains, Jewish Day Schools are able to compartmentalize the ways in which they can engage and involve parents.

To see an application of Epstein's framework to day schools looking to involve parents with vision, purpose, and structure, see Practical Ideas for Parent-School Relationships on the following page. By compartmentalizing these activities, school leaders will be able to engage parents and present options for their involvement which respond to their interests, areas of expertise, skill-sets, and availability.

The Jewish day school needs to create a warm, respectful, and welcoming environment for parents. Schools must create an inviting culture for parents in an area which respects social distancing, offer a forum for PTA/PTO meetings for parents to voice their concerns to the school, ensure that the school responds effectively to phone calls and emails within a reasonable amount of time, remain calm and positive, and support parent involvement in policy decision-making such as dress codes, grading, and homework requirements. Especially through the course of the pandemic, the school must also reimagine creative and meaningful ways to engage parents and families. Health and safety protocols minimize the number of touch-points and interaction between parents and between parents and the school. This

new reality will therefore change the nature and scope of parent engagement. The school can help to alleviate some of the distancing generated by the need for social distancing, including the following:

- The use of social media platforms to engage parents as well as Zoom technology for parent education
- Parent volunteer teaching and teacher substitutes, especially from retired educators
- Parent tutors who can help the school in its remediation efforts
- Assisting in the distribution of breakfast and lunch programs
- The creation of "homework centers" staffed by parents
- Parent workshops on how to support student learning in specific subject areas
- Parents with expertise in media and advertising to help promote the school
- Assist the school in its "welcome wagon" for new parents and families
- Help coordinate fundraising events and opportunities
- Serve as a liaison to foundations and governmental funding agencies in order to help leverage desperately needed financial resources
- Assist in school functions
- Assist the school in its efforts to recruit new families

These are just a few of the ways in which schools can engage parents in activities which are vital to the future success of the school.

Conclusion

Parental engagement and involvement in the current pandemic environment is a challenge unsurpassed in history. What was once viewed as a relatively natural and straight-forward opportunity for parent partnership and collaboration is now as a daunting challenge with significant barriers and limitations. Social distancing requirements, and health concerns have significantly changed the parent-partnership landscape. Parents are hesitant to spend extra time on school projects outside the home and schools are hesitant to ask parents to commit more time to the school. This unfortunate reality has greatly curtailed the quality and quantity of parent involvement and engagement in the school. Nevertheless, as schools begin to acclimate to the new realities of the pandemic and as schools get accustomed to mitigating unknown health concerns, more and more parents and schools will return to pre-COVID opportunities.

Schools can begin now to plant the seeds for future effective parent-partnerships. It will take a level of optimism and resilience in addition to a positive disposition. The crisis challenges us to be creative and generate new opportunities, as we reimagine how parents can once again help transform our schools into strong, vibrant and viable institutions.

Practical Ideas for Parent-School Relationships

The domains below describe a framework for parent engagement and represent a context for ongoing engagement, participation, and collaboration. It contextualizes the variety of potential applications and opportunities for parent-school partnerships, and creates a series of challenges and opportunities which deepen engagement, involvement, and collaboration.

Parenting:

The school can assist families with parenting skills, family support, understanding and appreciating child development, and creating home conditions which are conducive to supporting age-appropriate learning. In addition, parents can help schools understand family backgrounds, cultural nuance, and specific cognitive goals for children. They may include:

- The provision of home study opportunities based on Jewish texts relating to effective parenting, social/emotional concerns, and child development.
- Family support programs in order to assist parents with health, nutrition, and other essential needs.
- The provision of school and/or community workshops, seminars, and conferences (in person and on-line) relating to topics such as shalom bayit, child rearing, conflict resolution, and complex family structures.



Communicating:

It is essential that the school communicate with parents about school programs, projects, and the academic progress of students. In addition, the school must create clear and concise two-way communication opportunities between parents and the school to create a symbiotic relationship between school and home. A more informed parent creates a better understanding about the school as well as parental expectations and opportunities.

Several opportunities may include: conferences with every parent at least once a year; a phone tree or instant messaging app to ensure the rapid dissemination of timely information; an updated parent portal on the school's website; and a parent e-newsletter with important school related information.

Volunteering:

One of the most important aspects of parental involvement is the fact that it is based totally on volunteerism. As such, parents have traditionally volunteered to assist schools to recruit new students and families, assist teachers as class parents and as parent liaisons, participate as class- trip chaperones, and fundraise.

In addition, the creation of "Family Centers" for volunteer work, meetings, and resources for families can provide the school with an invaluable resource for students, faculty, and administration

Learning at Home:

Parents and families can play a central role in supporting academic learning at home, supporting homework requirements, helping with extra academic curricular activities, creating and supporting project based learning, and the identification of academic skills which students are expected to master and social behaviors commensurate with the schools standards. This is of particular importance in the areas of character development and middot for students.

Decision Making:

Parents are often called upon to serve on committees, workgroups, and governance entities which focus upon policy-setting and policy implementation. Parents bring a variety of knowledge and expertise to the table which help inform policy and advocacy.

Collaborating with Communities:

Parent groups can help coordinate resources and services for families, students, and the school. This is especially evident when the school is called upon to assist in a variety of tzedaka and hesed projects, advocacy programs, community programming and outreach, as well as other community-based initiatives which impact the school and its local as well as global community.

Effective Partnership in Support of the Whole Child

Esther S. M. Cohen



Each morning during school term, parents wave goodbye to their children with the confidence that they will be cared for while being stimulated by quality lessons and activities, delivered by competent and caring staff. With the freed hours in the day, they can get on with life's responsibilities and become the professional, the volunteer, the keep-fit, and the leisurely adult that is their chosen routine. When schools went on lockdown, suddenly the scaffolding that kept life ticking collapsed. Without warning or choice, parents were gifted (or lumbered) with taking primary responsibility for their children's education. What lessons have we learnt from the last few months about how schools can facilitate the role parents play in their children's education? How can these lessons be incorporated in a post-pandemic school culture to foster a better working relationship with primary carers, offering better mutual support?

Historically, education was a responsibility of parents and families until the Industrial Revolution and the move from village communities to big cities, when children's education was progressively left to schools. The traditional model is expressed in the Jewish command to teach one's children - veshinantam levanecha. Some argue that communities have allowed educational expectations to rest too heavily on the shoulders of teachers and schools, allowing parents to point a blaming finger when things go wrong, without acknowledging their share of the responsibility. It is clear from the Torah that there is much to be gained by maintaining parents involved in their children's education.

As an educator and therapist who previously taught my children at home due to lack of suitable schooling, I can say that teaching one's own children can be a delight and a nightmare, it just depends on the day. There were days where I felt on top of the world. The children learned well,

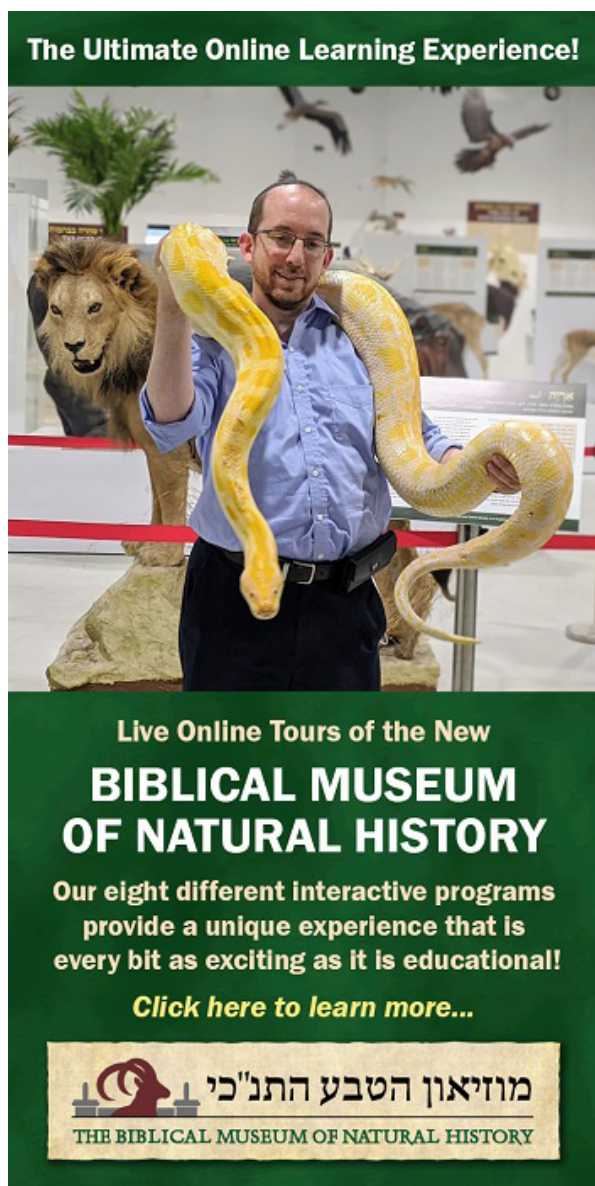
Esther Cohen is a teacher, educator, therapist and Chabad Shlucha living in the UK. With over 35 years' educational experience, she is Head of Religious Education at a Jewish Primary school with a multifaith intake, fostering personal development and wellbeing through Jewish Education. Esther is also a Pikuach (Jewish Education) inspector and a therapist working with university students.

my planned activities worked, they listened, there was no squabbling between them, and I felt like a good mother and educator rather than the referee of a poorly orchestrated rugby match. There were days when even my coffee needed a coffee to keep me going, and I had to remind myself to breathe and keep calm. Looking back at that time, I realize how precious an opportunity and gift it was to be a partner in my children's

education. Had support opportunities in the form of consultation with teachers and other mothers existed then, it would have enabled me to learn better educational and behaviour management skills from others in order to be more effective.

When my children later joined a school, I wanted to carry on supporting their learning but communication with the school was scarce. Information was too general and parent-teacher meetings too infrequent to be of purpose. I wanted to understand my children's needs as perceived by their teachers so that I could be supportive of them, to guide them each in their own way, but was frustrated by the sparse communication. Just as children learn best when they are happy and feel cherished, appreciated, and understood, parents need to feel happy, cherished, appreciated, and understood to educate or support their children's learning. Schools can help a parent feel a partner in their child's education by cherishing their contributions and understanding their challenges.

The need for communication goes both ways. Children often behave differently at home and at school. Parents are often surprised to hear that their child acts in a different manner in a large group context, and with teachers and friends. There are great benefits to enabling parents and teachers to acquire a better understanding of the whole child. It can help teachers and parents promote integration of different ways of being, building confidence, self-esteem, and a growth mindset. It can also help pick up any mental health turbulences at an earlier stage. By mental health turbulence I mean identifying low self-esteem, poor body image, lack of confidence, social awkwardness, and obsessive tendencies, as well as more serious




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conditions such as childhood depression, eating disorders, and addictive behavior.

As life has become more complex and schools more aware of the role they can play, parents consciously or unconsciously leave schools to discipline and instill good moral and social values in their children. Some parents are hesitant to enforce boundaries, leaving teaching staff to be the 'bad parent' who disciplines, while they remain the 'good parent' who is forever giving, thus avoiding feelings of inadequacy or guilt. In cases where there is a complex family situation, financial difficulties, or illness, some might want to compensate for challenges by loosening boundaries. At other times, parents might be driven by subconscious messages, trying hard to be the parent they wish they had had or the parent who their child wants.

As such, teachers are increasingly functioning as therapists, mediators, and social workers. Most progressive educational institutions look to educate the whole child, imparting knowledge and skills as well as preparing them to be positive contributors to society, educating them on how to lead healthy and balanced physical, emotional, and spiritual lives. Thus, especially in an age where schools are bearing a greater portion of the overall education of children, the need for communication between the parents and the school is vital. Open dialogue with school staff can offer support and reassurance would help give parents direction and a range of techniques on behavior management. Schools might also facilitate parent groups where they can share ideas, experiences, and strengths and support one another.

Cohesion between messages children receive from teachers and parents is essential for holistic education. When parents

and teachers conflict, a child struggles to conciliate the opinions of both sides, often causing him or her to lose respect for either teacher, parent, or both. A good working alliance between these two key role models enables the child to perceive congruence in the learning and life messages shared. This does not mean that parents and teachers need to always agree, have the same life-code or religious outlook, but it does mean that dialogue and agreement must take place for the child to receive a unified message. One time, a liberal parent told me that she was concerned about the learning messages her daughter would receive from me, a Chabad, haredi teacher. "There is much in our outlook that differs from yours", she stated. I explained that there is much in our shared outlook that is the same, and that was what I was going to teach her daughter. We build a healthy open dialogue that prevented problems which lasted throughout the happy years her daughter attended my school. Clarifying how and what was going to be taught cemented this working relationship.

A positive working alliance can help parents understand the methodology and skills employed by the school for teaching different subjects so that they can support their child's learning in the way it has been taught. I remember being shocked when I began teaching in England and found that long division is done differently than the way it had been taught to me as a child! I needed to learn the school's methodology in order to teach accordingly. Whether it is learning to read, algebra, approaches to Jewish law, or any other subject, it is important that parents are offered an opportunity to understand the philosophy and approaches to teaching used by the school their child attends. Having

Professional Development Schedule

NOVEMBER 2020 - JANUARY 2021

Best Practices in Online Education

- Taking Care of Yourself: Managing Time, Tasks, and Expectations
- Mastering Classroom Management Online
- Teaching in Two Places at Once: Concurrent/Hybrid/Flex/HyFlex Teaching

Student-Centered Series

- Making Jewish Learning Meaningful in the Online Environment
- Personalizing Instruction and Assessment

Expanding Your Toolbox

- How to Use *Creating Memory: An Arts-Based Initiative in Holocaust Education*
- Digital Tools For Bloom's Taxonomy
- Tools for Teaching and Celebrating Chanukah 2020

workshops that enable parents to learn how certain subjects are taught, can help them support their children at home. At our school, we run year-long group workshops on different subjects which take place during the school day. Parents attend a presentation on how the school teaches the topic, and how the children can be best assisted to make progress. Pupils then join the workshop allowing parents to trial out how to help and further their child's learning. The class teacher is present to clarify doubts, help with techniques, and clear misconceptions. Feedback from staff and parents have indicated the success of these workshops in fostering communication.

When a school community grows to develop the warmth and loving care of a family, all parties benefit. A school community that is based on mutual respect and adherence to a shared vision and mission develop a sense of togetherness. This is a process that can only come about through building connections, engagement in the process, and approachability from all parties. Good communication is time-consuming, so it is fundamental that pressure on staff workload is taken into consideration. In an era where communication is easily accessible via WhatsApp groups, Zoom meetings, blogs, and many other platforms, information and support can be effectively set up to promote healthy and ongoing dialogue between all stakeholders in an education organization. This enables schools and parents to reach their ultimate goal: a holistic and meaningful education for all children, that fosters the acquisition of knowledge, wellbeing, as well as personal and spiritual development.

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System Solvers

Shmuel Feld

The rapid shifts in society brought on by the coronavirus pandemic open up an opportunity to understand the challenges children face in school at the system level. Parents tend to address their child's issues "in the moment," at a specific (and perhaps, granular) level. This makes sense: parents understand their children's experiences in school via a limited set of data from a limited number of informants. The COVID crisis brought school into the home, and as such, gave parents a new view into their child's school experience, a chance for parents to pause, step back, and partner with the school to explore challenges from a systems level. In order to do this, parents need to understand not only how schools work, but how the systems of schools work. A child in one system context looks different than the same child in another system.

About a year ago, I set out to expand my own thinking about schools. I had been on the dance floor of school as a teacher and administrator, and later, on the safer balcony as a foundation professional. As I amassed knowledge of many different schools, patterns emerged. These patterns helped me think of a larger ecosystem in which each school exists, which in turn led to bigger questions about what we know about systems as a whole and how that knowledge applies to Jewish day schools. After I spent some time learning about systems, two ideas became apparent. First, a system describes a set of interactions among entities that form a unified whole. As such, school culture forms a system. Second, in order to change school culture to solve problems one has to alter systems. This means that unchanged systems maintain existing problems.

In Jewish day schools, systems play a crucial role in creating culture. The system creates flows of information, power, and energy that make schools function, and at the same time, can cripple themselves in junctions of negligent design or benign neglect. When this occurs, it affixes the problems in place. Often, the people involved in the malfunction do not understand how or where the breakdown takes place. For example, a school may hold a belief that the teaching of Judaic studies should create ethical people. To structure and support the act of "teaching," the school mandates teachers to teach specific content and assess the material based on tests, quizzes, or projects. These graded assessments chart student progress in relation to the others in the class. The student gets ranked by a competitive grading mechanism which gives out a few top grades and many lower grades. Students then might feel compelled to cheat on tests, experience envy of their peers, or develop a distaste for



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Torah learning, leading to the very opposite outcome of the foundational belief. The system undermines itself. The cover story of Judaic studies taught to teach ethics does not unfold through the strategies deployed to teach it. By contrast, if a school wanted to teach ethics, it could deploy a system in which students gain sacred content, practice inculcating into themselves ethical decision making, and teachers guide the process individually without a comparative feedback device. In the first example, the system holds in place the problem of expecting students to develop Jewish ethics from a system which only exposes children to the content of ethics, the skill of text decoding, and rewards demonstrating mastering these in competition with their peers. In the second example, the systems align with the beliefs and desired outcomes are achieved.

This year, parents across the country and, indeed, around the world, bore witness to a rapid, forced change in educational culture in the dynamic shift from in-person to online learning as a mainstream practice. The particular advantages and disadvantages of teaching online were, in most cases, not reflective of a systems approach, but were instead glimpses into the idiosyncratic reality of how individual educators adapted to a very different way of being. Some teachers thrived, tapping into technology strategies and other pedagogies that accelerated learning, and some teachers were fundamentally hamstrung by the distance of distance learning (and most teachers were somewhere in the middle). True, too, for students, who for a wide variety of reasons—some internal to the child and some more directly informed by their environment—thrived, muddled through, or failed. Nonetheless, the unfolding of

school at home gave parents a new, up-close-and-personal perspective on their child's experience. Parents could see the interplay among the teacher, the class, the content, the learning activities, and their own child. This, in and of itself, was a look at a system. Whereas before a parent might react to a disappointing grade with the belief that their child was not working hard enough, now a parent could partner with their child, the teacher, and school to see how to address their child's learning needs in the broader context of the system. To be sure, this does not abrogate the child of his or her own responsibilities as a learner, nor does this mean that rigor is lost. The opportunity at hand is to resolve a child's dilemmas at a higher level, shifting away from the minutiae of the moment and "up" to a place that opens new pathways for success.

"The world is made of circles and we think in straight lines." Peter Senge's quote encapsulates the difference between minutiae and systems thinking. While, on an empathetic level, we as parents see a child in pain and want to remove that pain, in fact, the cause of the situation that causes the pain might be less obvious. In systems thinking, we shift from linear to circular, meaning we consider the interconnectedness of events and agents in the system. The parts of a system work together in an interrelated way to create end goals. This creates synergy, where the sum of the parts acting together eclipses the effects that the parts individually could create. When a collection of teachers focus parallel curricula with certain skill sets at one age level, they generate thinking patterns in students that could not occur if the classes were not orchestrated: individually strong and collectively stronger. Synergizing smaller systems causes emergence, the outcome of

things interacting together. So, when a student develops resilience through sustained school designed mechanisms in physical education, individual academic coaching, strong peer modeling, using the Zone of Proximal Development, and encouraging school leadership, the outcome of these collaborative pieces is the emergence of a resilient student; the school-designed systems with the goal in mind that the student develops resilience. Instead of commanding it or having lip service in a few classes, the school creates interconnected classes that act together. The effect of acting together causes the synergy that each piece could not achieve alone. This results in the emergence, the consequence of the combined actions, which in this case produces a resilient student.

When interconnectedness creates synergies that lead to positive outcomes through emergence, we see a healthy system. Healthy systems have balancing feedback loops where the systems move (or get moved) to experience a positive homeostasis. For example, in a school with the stated goal of producing students with a spirit of inquiry, a healthy system would have balancing feedback loops that prioritize hiring teachers with aligned pedagogic skills that promote curiosity and autonomy over advanced subject/content knowledge. A new teacher with stronger content than pedagogy would be identified by the system as someone in need of either immersive professional development in the inquiry approach (or removal from the classroom). In this example, the minutia view problematizes the teacher, whereas the systemic view utilizes balancing feedback loops to support the teacher in accordance to the stated core educational goal.

Consider now a student who experienced

challenges in school due to social anxiety, feelings of coercion from adults and peers, and perceptions of under-performance. When school was forced online, the systems that perpetuated those experiences, like micro aggressions by other students that fly under a teacher's radar at school, changed. With all communications being monitored and lacking opportunities to create a pecking order in class, that form of bullying dissolved in the online environment. Removing that irritant contributed to the child's learning success. Without those typical school social systems in place, the student no longer obsessed about social issues around recess or lunch (which became non-issues online). With anxiety in check, creativity and risk-taking emerged, with the energy dedicated to coping with social anxiety rechanneled into a positive, healthy attitude about being "in" school. The interconnected systems worked together to have a newly resilient student emerge.

In unpacking this second example, we get another look at the values of examining student problems at the systems level. Prior to the pivot to online learning, the student knew only one reality about school: its systems were tacit accomplices to a culture of bullying. The child may have been told to ignore cruel comments, or was witness to a bully relishing in the negative attention given by a scolding teacher. The same child may have been encouraged to stay focused on her studies, and when distracted by social pressures, reprimanded for a lack of attention. The feedback loops reinforced an unhealthy system. For this child, the systems of the school normalized the child's experience. The switch to the online environment stripped away these systems and with them, the problems they held. The new system was able

to give balancing feedback loops that made the child stronger. Imagine this student now - more calm and confident - and the awareness of the parents as to the core issues undermining their child's experience in the past versus the present.

The lesson learned here deals with altering the vision of the school from a monolithic entity to a series of interconnecting systems. First, take repeated views of the systems from different angles to get a holistic view of the design. Look for the interconnectedness. Second, think about what information, authority, and transparency exist in the systems. Seek out the synergies. Consider what causes and effects happen on the surface and what might be flowing beneath the surface. Remember to look at what transpires instead of what, in theory, should transpire. Third, contemplate in what contexts the child succeeds and how various teachers seem to affect this. Contemplate what emerges from the systems working together and what kind of feedback loops exist. The fourth step constitutes the hardest step: reflect on how to partner productively with the school to examine the system so as not to hold the problem in place for your child. Done well, the pivot to online learning can lead to a new pathway for a child's success in school.



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A New Pedagogy for Parents and Children in Bar/Bat/Benai/B' Mitzvah Education

Daniel Brenner

What role should a parent play in the months of preparation that lead up to a coming of age celebration for a child?

I first started taking this question seriously after I stood on the Bimah, uttered the traditional parental blessing that freed me from “personal liability” (shepetarani mei'onsho shel zeh) for my newly dubbed “teenager” and tried my best to connect to the blessing on an emotional level. It was not easy. As much as I felt a release in that moment; the parental part of me was actually sensing a growing set of legal and moral responsibilities that I would carry for the actions of the pimpled, brace-faced teen who stood before me in his new suit and tie. I remembered my own random acts of teen recklessness and I wondered, on a karmic level, what my payback would be as a parent of a teen. So, while, yes, maybe on a spiritual plane the blessings' words were still valid, I had internally concluded that relations between parents and teens have fundamentally changed. This blessing would be better fit to be said when a child reaches the age of eighteen and takes on the legal status of adult, not at thirteen.

I had these thoughts, yet the Jewish educator in me continued to ask: Shouldn't we expect a thirteen-year-old to have a basic sense of responsibility for personal decisions and actions? And isn't that what this blessing conveys? And might this blessing be speaking to a need to re-think the parent/teen relationship between ages thirteen and eighteen?

Today's teens, the first true “digital natives,” are fascinating—on the one hand they are more worldly and wise than previous generations of teens, and yet they seem less grown up. Even before



Rabbi Daniel Brenner serves as the Chief of Education for Moving Traditions, a non-profit based in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania. In addition to developing family education models, Daniel trains Jewish educators and others who are mentoring middle and high school aged boys through Moving Traditions' Shevet groups and designs professional development experiences for summer camp and youth group professionals.

the COVID pandemic, researchers began to notice that the majority of Generation Z teens in America have close personal relationships with parents. Professor Jean Twenge, author of [iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy - and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood](#), argues that rather than seeking independence from parents, most of today's teens experience something akin to "extended childhood." Teens spend more time in conversations with parents, and in terms of Jewish teens, [2019 research](#) conducted by the Rosov Group found that 90% of Jewish teens like spending time with their family for Jewish holidays and that 61% of Jewish teens affirm, "I ask my parents questions about Jewish life."

Today's parents of benai mitzvah students are also different. Although there are parents of many different ages in this group, ranging from folks in their 30s to folks in their 70s, the bulk of parents are from Gen X, a generation noted for taking a "stealth" approach to parenting. Professor Shalini Shankar of Northwestern University has argued in her [book](#), that this "stealth" approach means that parents practice surveillance of their children at a distance and encourage their children to compete in multiple arenas so that their children will find a practical and safe path to success. These parents also attempt to move away from micro-manager approaches to parenting, seeking ways that they can encourage their pre-teens and teens to develop a sense of agency.

A Case Study in Family Education

With an understanding that there have been both seen and unseen generational shifts in

parent-teen relationships, five years ago my colleagues and I at Moving Traditions began piloting a new model of interactive family education for 6th and 7th graders in Jewish schools and synagogues that imagined the benai mitzvah as not about "becoming an adult" or "becoming a man" or "becoming a woman" but about "becoming a teen."

What does it mean to "become" a teen? In developing a curriculum for the program, we were influenced by Professor A. Rae Simpson of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology whose recent research led to her [ten tasks of adolescence](#) model, drawing attention to such things as adjusting to sexually maturing bodies and new emotions, clarifying values, and forming friendships. Instead of gaining independence from parents, in this model teens are "renegotiating" roles with parents.

The Moving Traditions program, which now contains 20 hours of curriculum that have been adapted for online use by clergy and educators, and a podcast series for parents titled "@13," is centered on the idea that as pre-teens are marking, ritually and communally, the leap from child to teen, parents are making a leap from parenting a child to parenting a teen. The topics that we chose to focus on in the curriculum all connect to social-emotional aspects of the benai mitzvah "year" that involve both parent and pre-teen. For example, the curriculum explores the pressures and expectations that come with being a host of a celebration, the different ways that people navigate being the "center of attention," a session called "looking good and feeling good" about what people choose to wear, how these choices reflect social and gender codes, and what values are conveyed through those choices. In discussing these issues, and other key

issues such as parent-teen communication and peer pressures, parents and pre-teens are guided by educators in a program where they learn how to better listen to one another and learn to empathize with peer groups and across the generational divide. These conversations all happen within a Jewish communal framework, connecting Jewish wisdom, text, and ritual to a dialogic model of family and group interaction. In a typical two-hour meeting, parents and pre-teens learn together, then they split off to spend time in parents only and pre-teens only groups, and then they have dialogue and de-briefing within the family unit of parent(s) and pre-teen(s).

Rabbis, educators, and cantors who join us for the training for this [program](#) are often struck that we not only focus time on exploring new theories about adolescence, but we reflect on senescence, the life-stage that most parents are experiencing. Parents are often newly aware of physical decline, balancing peak career phases with caregiving for others, and returning to unfulfilled dreams or joyful past-times from their own adolescence. In this program model, parents not only learn to empathize with their teens, but teens learn to see their parents in a new light – learning about their parents lives as teens and learning about how their parents approach Jewish texts, rituals, and values.

What have we learned? Last year, 843 parents responded to surveys conducted after the sessions: 88% of respondents said that the program helped them connect adolescent issues to the benai mitzvah, 89% felt that the program helped them to speak with their child in a valuable way, and 82% said that the Jewish education components of the program were relevant to their lives.

We were also fortunate to have a few

institutional partners in the day school world. To learn about the program's impact in a Jewish day school setting, I spoke with Rabbi Dr. Yechiel Hoffman, who ran the program with day school families from Temple Beth Am (Los Angeles) for three years.

Once we started to run the [Moving Traditions] program, it became clear that we could engage the parents as "learners" in a way that we never had before with middle school parents. The guided conversations were perfectly aligned with the life-stage they were in and helped them to see themselves on a journey that paralleled their child's journey.

As an educator, some of Hoffman's insights were based on using curricular material with 6th and 7th graders and then using it in the family sessions:

Many of the students need help navigating the challenge of being the center of attention that comes with benai mitzvah [celebrations] and I saw how well the curriculum's focus on introverts and extroverts worked with pre-teens. When I extended that conversation to the family-based, parent-child conversations, all of a sudden I hear a mom say, "I hate the fact that I need to get dressed up and have people look at me" and a father say, "I just want to sit back and enjoy this, not be greeting people." And it became clear that it wasn't just the pre-teens who would benefit from some values clarification and deep conversation about the social pressures of this rite-of-passage—it was everyone. And when they engaged in that conversation, they realized that the pressure to "perform" was a shared challenge, and one that they could push back on.

Family Education as a Model of Parent Education

In Alex Pomson and Randal F. Schnoor's 2018 work, [Jewish Family: Identity and Self-Formation at Home](#), they argue that:

providers of Jewish educational experiences and interventions ought to think of their work within a different paradigm, one we liken to a flipped classroom where it is understood that learning can be acquired independent of the classroom and yet where the classroom continues to play an important facilitative role.

The learning that happens outside of the classroom and outside of the student's preparation for leading tefillah, reading Torah, or giving a devar Torah is extensive. Every family considers what it means to host an event, there are decisions about what to wear and how to present oneself, and there are endless discussions about money, food, decorations, and how to celebrate. This can all serve as a "text" that educators can use to guide conversations that help parents and their children to reflect on Jewish social values and personal middot.

Back to the Blessing

The blessing, freeing a parent from personal liability of a teen, does it still make sense to say when your child is age twelve or thirteen? Honestly, I continue to have my doubts. But I am certain now that saying it helped me as a parent to let go of the childhood stage and to begin to envision a journey towards adulthood for my children. And I think that the more that Jewish educators can pay attention to both parent and pre-teen, and the relationship between them, the more we will be able to meet the emotional and spiritual needs of today's families.

Educating All of Our Children: Community Support for Homeschooling in the Jewish Community

Suri Kinzbrunner

Last year at this time, I was a preschool director, busy running teacher in-service trainings, helping set up classrooms, and finalizing class lists. This year, I am likewise preparing for a new school year with one big difference: instead of running a preschool, I will be home educating, or “homeschooling,” my 7 children.

Especially in light of COVID-19, many parents are turning to home education as the best option for their children, and the Jewish community is no exception. According to a [survey](#) conducted by Prizmah: Center for Jewish Day Schools (August 2020), 42% of participating schools project a decrease in enrollment for the 2020-2021 school year. Several families I have spoken to cite financial, educational, and health related concerns as reasons they are choosing to home educate for this school year. Others have always wanted to try homeschooling and see this year as a good time to explore the option.



Suri Kinzbrunner was most recently the Director of Young Israel Shomrai Emunah Preschool in Silver Spring, MD. She is currently homeschooling her 7 children. Suri studied cognitive neuroscience at the George Washington University in Washington D.C. and worked as a research assistant but was later drawn into the education field upon becoming a parent. She is passionate about all Jewish children having access to quality Jewish education.

Home education is not a new phenomenon in the Jewish community. According to Yehudis Eagle, mother of 11 who has been home educating her children for the past 29 years, the 1990s saw a huge rise of people coming to home education worldwide. This trend started to trickle into Jewish communities. “Hinukh is our responsibility”, says Eagle. “You can delegate that responsibility to teachers and schools, or you can do it yourself.” Eagle home educates her children in Baltimore, Maryland, where there is a relatively large number of homeschooling families. “There were more than thirty families home educating here since we moved here twenty-three years ago. I can’t even count how many there are now!” Another parent shared with me that homeschooling in the Jewish community “could be a great option. There is no morning rush, kids are more well rested. There are parents who work full-time just to pay tuition who might choose to homeschool instead if they had more community support.” A different parent shared with me that her son required medication for ADHD when he was in school. She was able to successfully wean him off of his medication since bringing him home and enjoys being able to cater the learning to suit her child’s temperament. One other homeschooling mother, who was home educated herself, says that she “comes from the perspective that homeschooling is the default and the norm, and the best educational option if parents can do it!”

While Eagle and others came to home education for ideological reasons, there are many other reasons why families in the Jewish community turn to homeschooling. In fact, Eagle says it is rare to see families in the Orthodox Jewish community choosing

to home educate from a “grassroots” perspective. According to Stephanie Frumkin, an educational consultant and founder of Exceptional Educational Solutions, “families may choose to homeschool because their child is either not accepted to or ‘counseled out’ of Jewish day schools.” She adds that a child may not thrive academically or socially in a school environment. Finally, the financial burden of day school tuition, especially for multiple children, also brings some families to home education. “There should be more programming for students outside of the Jewish school system”, says Frumkin. “It is a whole community issue that we need to work together to solve.”

Home education families in the Orthodox Jewish world are a minority according to Yael Aldrich, who has been home educating her four children for the past thirteen years. Aldrich recently ran a virtual Torah Home Education Conference which had over 137 tickets sold and still more people requesting access to the recorded sessions. She noticed an influx of Jewish parents exploring homeschooling for this school year and felt this was a “very valid reason to do a conference now.” Aldrich also runs a Google group, “Jewish Orthodox and Homeschooling,” with more than one hundred subscribers. Aldrich is a big supporter of Jewish day schools, as they are “the best option for a lot of kids.” She does believe that it would be a positive development “if schools could be more open minded to families who can’t be in that environment. We want every child to be educated Jewishly.”

While it will never be the majority, home education in the Orthodox Jewish community is here to stay and is only growing.

Unfortunately, the majority of home education families I have spoken to have experienced feelings of isolation and even rejection from the mainstream Orthodox Jewish community. Outside of the day school system, parents are essentially on their own when it comes to their child's Jewish education, and socialization with their day-schooled peers is difficult. The disruption to the system that COVID-19 has caused can be used as an opportunity to create more community support for Jewish education for children outside of the Jewish day school system. Two institutions that are central to Jewish life that can provide this support are local Jewish day schools and shuls.

Jewish Day Schools

Jewish day schools are the primary way in which many children in a Jewish community receive their education and socialization. As discussed above, for a variety of reasons, not all children are able to attend Jewish day school. There are ways, however, for our schools to support home educated students, and it is important to do so. Cyrel Brudny, principal of Yeshiva Shaarei Tzion Girls School agrees, stating that, "We are part of the community. It is impossible to invest in one without investing in the other." Brudny works hard to include all children, believing in the importance of cultivating the community piece of school. However, she continues to offer her time and support to families whose children are not successful in the school environment. One parent shared with me that Brudny even offered to learn with her daughter on Shabbat. Some other ways in which Jewish day schools can support and include home educated children include curriculum support, a la carte learning opportunities, and/ or allow

participation in extracurricular activities.

Curriculum support

Curriculum support is the simplest way that Jewish day schools can help home education families. This is especially the case regarding families who are temporarily homeschooling. The school can share ideas and resources with families, such as recommended texts, benchmarks by grade level, or they can even have a designated learning specialist available to answer questions or provide guidance. Many home education parents report receiving this form of support from their local day schools when they reach out and ask for it. One parent shared that the administrator at her local school is a former homeschooling parent and had been very helpful to her.

A la carte classes

Another way that Jewish day schools can support Jewish homeschoolers is to offer a la carte enrollment options. With this option, learners can enroll in individual classes of interest without being full-time students. This option can be of benefit not only to the home educated student but to the class as a whole, as the presence of learners who are intrinsically motivated and driven can help set the tone for the entire class. Jewish day schools serve as true community institutions in this way as well, by providing education options for learners who thrive outside of full-time enrollment. Several homeschool parents shared with me that their local day school allows for part time enrollment in Judaics classes, which is a great option for some families.

Inclusion in extracurricular activities

One common sentiment among home education families is the difficulty their children experience in forming friendships with their local day school peers. Not fitting in socially can end up, very sadly, pushing homeschooled children out of the Jewish community. Opening up and facilitating participation in afterschool and social activities such as sports, clubs, and Shabbatons to home educated children is a great way for schools to promote inclusion, especially in the case of communities where the majority of afterschool and social options for Jewish children are school-based.

Shul Support

The above-mentioned ideas all involve local Jewish day schools. This makes sense because it is where many Jewish children already receive their education and all the resources are already in place. However, another institution that can offer valuable support to Jewish home education families is the local shul. Chana Billet, who is a homeschooling mother in addition to rebbetzin of Anshei Chesed Congregation in Boynton Beach, FL, says that for her family, “Shul is the core of our life. Anything a shul can do to make children feel included is important.” Before COVID-19, Billet’s children participated in minyan, attended lectures and classes, and were involved in daily operations of their shul. Other ways that shuls can support homeschool families can be in the form of community classes as well as other learning or volunteer opportunities.

Community classes

Depending on the community, on a given weekday there are multiple classes and shiurim offered, all geared toward adults.

The addition of one or two classes for children would be a welcome option for home education families, and if the classes occur after school hours, they could be open to all students. This is another way of enhancing inclusion among all children in the community and supporting Jewish education for all community children. Of course, shuls can also welcome home educated students to attend existing classes that are already offered. “Kids who are interested learners can attend any shiur,” says Eagle from experience.

Other learning or volunteer opportunities

Other learning opportunities can include tutoring or a havruta matching program. Willing adults can offer their time to learn individually with community children and adolescents on a regular basis. This can be coordinated through the shul’s youth director or parent volunteer as a point of contact. Volunteer opportunities can include many shul functions that require daytime assistance. As Eagle shared, “It is common for a homeschooling family to get a call to help. Their kids are available at times when others aren’t.” Some examples can include preparing or setting up for events, assisting at a local food pantry, or helping with childcare needs.

The above ideas are certainly not all-encompassing and may or may not be feasible in every community. I hope, though, that they can serve as a springboard for discussion about how our institutions can support the Jewish education and integration of all community children. The disruption caused by COVID-19 can be used as an opportunity to rethink and reimagine the possibilities of making Jewish education accessible to all the children in our community through our

mainstream institutions. Perhaps, in our gradual return to normalcy, some of these ideas can be implemented. Until then, families interested in homeschooling can of course continue to find valuable support from other homeschooling families. As Rena Baron of Baltimore, Maryland advises, “One of the first steps is to talk to someone who homeschools. Don’t make a decision that you can’t do it without talking to someone first.” I know that this form of support has been and will continue to be invaluable for me in my own homeschool journey.



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Parents are our Partners: Important Lessons from the Pandemic for Jewish Educators

Cherie Koller-Fox

Supplemental Jewish educators quickly pivoted to online instruction once the pandemic broke. Teachers “zoomed” into the homes of our students and thus into a direct partnership with their parents. This was a dramatic shift from before the crisis when there was often a dichotomy between home and school—school being where “Jewish” happened.

Some Jewish educators believed that the school-home dichotomy was ideal, that Jewish education should be delivered by “those who know” rather than the parents. Ironically, when it comes to Jewish education, the parent was always a partner and likely a more important partner than the teacher realized. Lived Judaism is centered in the home where parents and extended family have the most important influence on the Jewish identity of their children. Certainly, teachers can inspire children to want to learn more and they can become role models for them, but the values of their parents are most compelling.

The last quarter of the twentieth century saw a rise in family education. Instructional time and money were invested in the premise that Jewish educators could create a scaffold of education and experiences for families, so that parents who were less educated could be helped to teach their own children about Judaism. This created the potential for a partnership between school and home and the opportunity to deepen a family’s Jewish experience



Rabbi Cherie Koller-Fox is the President of NewCAJE, a pluralistic organization that empowers Jewish educators and multi-medium artists to be excellent Jewish educators through advocacy and professional development. An early pioneer in family education, she also advocates for Biblical text study in supplementary schools.

in a positive way.

Ultimately, family education failed in many communities where it was not structured around whole family experiences and where it did not have a carefully thought-out curricular structure. Many schools used a classroom-based model where, for example, parents were invited to come to a classroom with one of their children for an activity or learning session. If they had more than one child, they likely attended this same program multiple times. It was usually geared to the child's level and neither inspired the parents nor motivated them to bring what they had learned into their homes. Judaism is centered in the home and the memories of Jewish practices surrounded by loving parents and grandparents is what has led to Jewish continuity from generation to generation throughout our history.


In the age of Coronavirus, as we provide instruction directly into the home, it is impossible to ignore the role of the parents. Suddenly teachers and school directors understand that without the cooperation of the parents, they are not likely to be successful teaching online. This is an important, critical insight and was actually always the case. Children are not likely to be successful in a face-to-face classroom either, without the encouragement, support, and participation of their family.

There are so many practical examples of this notion. For example: if you teach a child a Passover song that can be sung at their Seders, it is not likely they will sing it unless the parents know the song as well and have the words and perhaps the music at hand. If you teach a child to bake a challah in school, it is less likely they will do it at home unless a parent has also been taught how and inspired to do so. If you want a child to practice their

Hebrew reading at home, it is much more likely to happen if the parent can read Hebrew than if they cannot help their child.

This awareness is true for long-term goals also. If you want children to celebrate Sukkot at home as adults, it is more likely to happen if they grow up with a sukkah built by their parents. It is unlikely that a Synagogue sukkah will lead to that outcome. If Bible study is to become a lifelong habit, it is critical that


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children see their parents engage in Torah study. The pattern is clear: it is the values, Jewish practices, and traditions of their parents and grandparents that children carry with them into adulthood. That is why it is so critical that schools engage families, deepen their knowledge and repertoire of Jewish practice, and encourage them to incorporate these things into their homes.

Judaism contains many practices and teachings that make life richer and that offer wisdom and comfort to those who engage with it. These are important aspects of life that many people are seeking. Our job as Jewish educators is to open doors to people and let them explore Judaism for themselves. It is never too late to discover more about your own history and heritage.

Feeling connected to Jewish and family history is compelling. Experiencing warm family celebrations in the home builds a foundation for a Jewish future. What happens in the home matters and therefore, if we, in schools and synagogues, are working to transmit Jewish culture and education to a new generation of Jews, we must work together with the family to succeed. If the adults are interested in learning more, than part of our job is certainly to teach them.

Parents today who enroll their children in supplementary and day schools do so because they want them to have a Jewish education. Too many Jewish children today do not get a Jewish education at all. Even when parents are reacting to pressure from grandparents to enroll their kids or because they want them to become a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, Jewish education and Jewish continuity have a place in their lives, and they are willing to invest their time and money to make that happen. That may not be as deep a commitment as if

they recognized that being Jewish requires a certain degree of literacy and knowledge, but it is a start.

Some parents may not have the skills to feel comfortable “doing Jewish” in their homes. Why institute a Shabbat dinner if it were not a tradition in their homes of origin, or if they are not familiar with the blessings, or do not have a sense of why Shabbat is meaningful to them? Now that Jewish education is coming directly into the home, this has created a real opportunity for us to bring not only Hebrew school but adult education and family education into the home as well.

Parents are under a lot of pressure now, especially if they are juggling work and child care. Jewish educators must respond to the stressors facing both parents and children. Judaism has a lot to offer in this pandemic environment, and when it’s over, children and their parents should feel that their Jewish community was one of the places they went to for support during troubled times, and not a place that added to their stress. The whole Jewish community, not only the school, should support families. Teachers, because they regularly engage with the families, know what support the family needs and can convey that to community and clergy.

Social-emotional learning is key. Curriculum is not the only priority. We are coming into the homes of children and engaging families also. How are they doing? What do they need? How can the community be helpful? Shouldn’t we be asking the question: “what would ease the stress for parents”? How often should the teacher add to the burden of harried parents by requiring a project that demands parental guidance or by giving homework that requires a parent’s supervision?

This does not imply that the content of

a Jewish education is unimportant. On the contrary, Jewish wisdom, celebrations, and spiritual practices can inform and support a family in difficult of times. Making those connections for the family should be the goal of Jewish education now. Educators should be asking what about Judaism could help the family feel more connected? What teachings could bring them comfort?

Here are some examples.

A family values social justice project—what could educators organize that would give parents the opportunity to teach their children something that resonates with them within a Jewish ethical framework? Parents value this kind of experience for their children.

A family prepares meals and treats for holidays—what recipes could educators share with parents that would have roles for children in the preparation? How about teaching the blessings and rituals to the whole family so that parents can comfortably lead them.

Bedtime can also be stressful for parents. Providing parents with Jewish stories to read to their children and teaching about the practice of a bedtime Shema might give them a routine that adds a simple spirituality and calm to bedtime.

The teacher can provide families with holiday props that will enrich their home celebrations or can provide materials and instructions for a family who wants to make them. Such home-made crafts can become family traditions over time.

Life cycle celebrations also provide opportunity for family engagement. Coming into the home via Zoom, a teacher can know that a new baby is coming or that there has been a death in the family. The community could respond with information, support, and even education about Jewish practices

around life cycle events. The teacher can communicate with the director and/or the rabbis to alert them to life cycle events in a family.

Some parents might be interested in adult education for themselves that they can access online. Bible study can be effective in helping people to weather difficult times if the learners are encouraged to read the text and then relate what it is saying to what is going on in their own lives. One way to get parents interested in Bible study is to begin to teach text to their children. Children of all ages can hear Bible stories, and by the age of nine can begin to study the text themselves. Bringing children and their parents together around text study is an important way to connect them all to Jewish learning as something relevant to their lives.

In fact, there are many Jewish topics that are relevant to parents today. They might be interested in studying Jewish history to better understand the upsurge in anti-Semitism. The pandemic might raise theological concerns they want to explore. If what you are teaching is something that speaks to them and is helpful to them, they might well find the bandwidth to participate.

Parents also welcome a few moments to themselves while you entertain the children with things that do not require them to be present. On the other hand, there are times they might also want to participate with their children such as a family Shabbat experience.

The key here is to develop a relationship with the parents and learn what they need. Teachers should be trained to gather that information as part of their responsibilities. They can make online appointments with parents to discuss how the school and community can be helpful. The parents

should feel that they are cared for and part of a community that wants to support them and is willing to be there for them when help is needed. The children should know that their teacher cares about them and is willing to answer any question that may arise. The time that the parents and the child spend on their Jewish education must feel important and helpful to them and not just another thing they have to do.

If one thing has become crystal clear in this “new normal” it is that it is neither possible nor desirable to recreate the in-person classroom in the online environment. We should not

even try. In fact, we should see this as an opportunity—as a door that has been opened between the home and the school. How can we best take advantage of this renewed ideal of partnership and bring this important insight back with us when we return to the classroom?

Everything has not changed because of the pandemic; only, the role that parents play has become easier to see and appreciate. The lessons we learn through this experience should become an integral part of Jewish education and community life going forward.

A Parent's Perspective

Nicky Newfield

The following appeared initially as a Facebook post. It has been lightly edited and is republished with permission.

Online schooling is bringing out many emotions in so many people. It is placing students at the center of their own learning experience. Some schools are doing amazingly well and others less so. Some parents love the journey with their kids, others are finding it overwhelming and stressful. Either way - parents have been forced into positions we never chose. We have all become full time educators and for the first time we are seeing all the positive qualities of our children while experiencing first-hand the learning challenges our children deal with. We now know what they need to work on. It is not simple for anyone. The governments, schools, parents, and children are all trying to survive. Some are trying to thrive and adapt. The education system we know is not perfect - and it will be interesting to see what education will look like post COVID-19.

These are the 5 attributes I feel my children are developing in this unique moment in time:

Adaptability: All kids have had to deal with a new reality. Resilience is a muscle and it is being tested now. It's a good life lesson.

Responsibility: Kids have to navigate their own learning agenda. Spoon feeding is impossible in this moment. Kids have had to step up, get organized. Slightly older kids are able to make a physical learning space for themselves, check their timetable, enter Zoom, find their assignments. Parents are pulled from all directions if we have more than one child. And often I feel like an octopus juggling multiple Zooms etc... And so, each kid has had to take responsibility.

Accountability: This is a big one. In adult life we are accountable for our actions. When an adult does not deliver the work as a certain standard and quality, they get fired or lose



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money or prospective clients. In a homeschooling environment, there needs to be accountability. It is difficult for educators to enforce real consequences to distant learners. Kids have had to show up and be accountable for completing their projects and tasks. They have had to learn respect. It's a process I can see my children learning - a slow process. It's a very useful tool in life to have a sense of accountability and to stop making excuses for our behavior. And in this environment - there are so many possible (and likely valid) excuses... it's up to each learner to have accountability and stop using excuses as to why they could not complete their tasks. When something is too difficult, they need to work out a way to get the help they need to complete the task - google the info, ask a friend or adult, break up the task into smaller and more manageable parts. As parents and educators our job is to help our children navigate this process, yet let the kids take ownership of the consequences of their actions. I would love it if my 11-year-old could say at the end of this, "I am proud of the work I did" or "it was my fault that I never completed my math homework" and perhaps "could you please help me find ways to complete my project and do it myself?"

Curiosity: As adults, we generally set our own trajectory in life... choose our jobs and careers and put ourselves where we want to be (or feel is best for ourselves and our families). Kids have less choice. Parents put their children in a certain schooling system and the system directs the kids learning path. The system is relatively rigid and has the same set of learning goals for all children, even though each child has their own learning style. Online learning has the

potential for children to travel to wherever their own curiosity lies. I think our role as head educators of our homes is to spark our children's curiosity. What is interesting to them? What motivates them? What drives them? What learning is fun for them? What would happen if children could choose where their learning journey took them? What if we allowed them to follow their own curiosity? My 14-year-old has a new found hobby. She is exercising every day. She is curious about the science of exercise and nutrition - she researched and found a Coursera course and we are studying it together. She is still doing what her school asks her to - but I am so proud that she is following what she is curious to learn about.

Raising the bar: I often wonder if we expect too little or too much from our kids. Each kid is different. Each child has a different style of learning. Some are auditory learners, some are visual. Some are stronger readers and some are brilliant at math. Adults also have different strengths and weaknesses. What happens when we discover what style of learning works best for our kids...and then we raise the bar and challenge them to do things that may be slightly challenging for them? I have been so impressed by my children. I raised the bar of what I thought they could do (understanding each kids' capacity). I gave them learning goals beyond what they were expected to do at school - and they have thrived. What would happen if our system scrapped the useless information that kids are expected to learn and instead sent our kids on a journey to explore skills and tools necessary in today's real-life world? What if we as parents raise the bar for our kids?

At the start of COVID-19 homeschooling, I quickly realized that homeschooling kids in Hebrew was not viable for our family. We live in Israel and my Hebrew is not sufficient to help kids in 4th, 6th, and 8th grade. So, a friend and I developed our own home curriculum and learning journey. We chose our own topic and carefully constructed a learning journey we felt we could navigate our families through. We focused on an Impact Journey to highlight to our children what impact they could make in the world and give them skills to do it. We constructed a curriculum based on the 17 sustainable learning goals that the UN set out to achieve by 2030. We have all been on a journey exploring how to prevent poverty, hunger, prevent diseases. They have learnt financial literacy and digital literacy skills. They have become makers, doers, explorers. They learnt entrepreneurship and we have invited guest speakers, professors, CEOs, startups, and professionals to speak to our kids on each topic we explore. They have had business coaching sessions on presentation skills and collaboration and the art of failure. The Kids Impact Forum that we have created for our kids has given them a sense of accountability, responsibility, adaptability, and curiosity and raised the bar to what we think they can achieve. And we have been privileged to learn along with them.

I hope everyone survives the homeschooling stage and that we all just get through each day!! But what if we can manage to guide our kids to a much deeper and richer learning space than they were in before?

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Who is Talmud

Conversation with a High School Teacher Olivia Friedman

Olivia Friedman is an innovative educational thinker who teaches at Ida Crown Jewish Academy (Skokie) and is a member of the Advisory Board of Jewish Educational Leadership. In this conversation she shares her thoughts about relationships with and engaging parents who have high school age children.



JEL: We are interested in hearing your thoughts about the role of parents in their children's education. There are those educators who see parents as full partners and there are others who whisper that they would love to run a school for orphans, with no parents to bother them.

OF: The first piece of this has to do with the age of the child, because I think that the type of relationship will differ if you have a child who's in kindergarten or preschool as opposed to a child who's in high school. I think that the word that we're looking for when it comes to parents and teachers is partnership. And while there are times when a parent is not getting along with the teacher, that should never be the starting point – the starting point should be good and robust communication from the school and from the teacher, because the greatest problems occur when there is a mismatch between the expectations

of the parents and the expectations of the teacher. I once experienced this when I began teaching in a new school. In the school that I was coming from the expectation was that I would be teaching a rigorous and challenging Judaics class, like an AP course, and I brought those expectations to my honors class. The parents, however, expected that the goal of the class was to inspire their children and have them walk out feeling proud and excited to be Jews. I had a lot of trouble with that class.

I realized that back-to-school night was a great opportunity to clarify expectations; that was where I could help loop them into what their kids will be experiencing, why I was doing it that way, prepare the parents for what was coming, and give them my contact information to let them know that I was available for follow-up. On the high school level this became really important so that there are no surprises about the kind or the amount of work being assigned or why it is being assigned at all. Instead of

parents calling to complain to defend their children, I try to recruit them to be allies in the educational process, especially when I explain my style of teaching, why I do it that way, and acknowledge how it may be different from what the parents grew up with. For example, in my Navi class, many parents were accustomed to content-knowledge based questions such as who-said-to-whom and traditional fact-spit-back tests, whereas my approach was more literary, exploring characters, and with project-based assessments. Explaining what I am doing and why I am doing it helps everyone to adjust.

JEL: The model you are sharing here is one in which the teacher is the professional running the show, and you are trying to bring the parent on board, which you do through communication. So that even if the parents are not active partners, they'll understand what is going on and become supportive.

OF: Yes, that's the beginning, but there are ways to make it much more robust than that. There are schools that have embraced the project-based learning model. In project-based learning there's something called authentic learning and creating an authentic exhibition of learning. The idea behind that is that when students create something, they create for real people; they don't just create it to show to the teacher, but to share it with their fellow students, their parents, or even in the community. It could involve some kind of partnership where older students teach younger ones. These authentic exhibitions of learning may have students working on a project for a while, perhaps even a semester, after which the parents and community are invited to come view the work. It's not quite

like a traditional science fair or Torah fair where everyone in sixth grade does this thing every year and you have a bunch of projects that are all the same. It's more personalized; the idea behind the authentic learning and the project-based learning practice is that in real life people are going to have to create proposals or put together projects that they would submit to real people. If we're trying to show students that these things are important, the greater extent to which we can make that happen the better. For example, I had students create Sefaria source sheets because I wanted them to have that skill – how to research, how to find everything, and how to put it all together. I then sent out the links to the source sheets, not just to the students, but to all their parents, and I recommended to the parents that they consider actually using their child's source sheet for their Shavuot learning. Several parents did and afterwards emailed me about how exciting or how cool it was that they were actually able to use their children's work in a real and meaningful way.

Another example is the "Names, Not Numbers" Holocaust film program in which students have to interview Holocaust survivors. They learn how to conduct an interview, they research their specific survivor and the situations under which that survivor lived, and then they actually conduct and record the interviews – after which the interviews are compiled into a movie which is shown to the entire community. That's another model of what parental engagement could look like especially with middle school and high school age children.

JEL: Many of the things you describe fit a model that many people are familiar with, in which the school does something and keeps

the parents in the loop. Can you envision parents who would be interested in playing a more active role in the actual educational process with their own children or impacting on the school in a way which would be healthy for the parent, the student, and the school?

OF: Yes, but it could get complicated. I'll be candid. Many people still hold the canard that, "Those who can, do, and those who can't, teach." They don't see teaching as a profession of choice, and don't recognize that teachers have professional training and degrees or have done research in education. When parents have that kind of attitude, they think that they know how a certain subject should be taught and that they certainly know better than the teacher. Many want to re-create their own experience of when they were their child's age, regardless of whether it was a good experience or not – they think that that's the way it needs to be taught. In those situations, parental involvement could become quite negative. If, however, there is a mutual respect, where the parents actually do recognize the teachers as professionals with both content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge, then there is potential for fantastic partnerships. Parents could share their expertise, either through the teacher or directly to the class, in areas that are relevant. Parents could be involved in "town hall" discussions in school, again, especially with middle and high school students.

It's interesting, when younger kids go to school, parents often get to fill out cards in which they share their hopes and dreams for their children. What if there were an open discussion on the high school level about what parents want out of a Jewish education, why are they prepared to invest so much to send

their kids to Jewish schools. This is not like a survey, but a real discussion. I wonder what kind of impact it would have if they had those conversations with the teachers, or with their own children. For some, they just want their kid in a Jewish community; for others, they really want their kids to master Jewish texts; for others, they want their kids to be inspired and committed Jews. I think it would be really powerful for parents to actually sit down and talk to their kids about that, and for teachers to hear about that too. That way they could put the student into a meaningful context. I once put together a little booklet of responses to the question of why students learn Torah – first I asked the students to record their own responses and then I had them speak to adults about the same question. It was really interesting, and what a great opportunity to include the parents in a meaningful and transparent discussion with their kids. If we do this properly, it will result in authentic parent involvement in the kid's education.

JEL: Could you talk about how you think COVID is affecting or will affect parent involvement?

OF: When it comes to the younger grades, the teacher now has a window into the home. In the worst-case scenario parents are feeling very overwhelmed, like they've become the teacher in lieu of the teacher and it has led them to feel frustrated. In the best-case scenario, the schools and the teachers were very responsive to how parents felt, made fixes to try to make things better, and researched best practices. For example, I was very appreciative that my daughter had some Zoom sessions that were short, which made sense because she was five years old. She would have a small group session where

she and two other kids plus the teacher would review math, English, or something which was manageable because you didn't have that 15 to 20 kids on Zoom all trying to mute and unmute at the same time. The rest of the learning was done asynchronously – for example, they would have everything linked in one Google doc, and each day would start with the calendar date and underneath the date it would have a recorded video lesson and corresponding worksheet. The beautiful thing about this was that I was teaching high school on Zoom for multiple hours in the morning, but when I finished at let's say 1:00 PM, I could sit down with my daughter and we could watch the video that is there forever because it was an asynchronous video, print out the worksheet, and help her if she needed help. That worked a lot better than if I had to actually get her on Zoom at the same time that I was supposed to be working and teaching myself.

I like the idea of a WhatsApp class group that includes the teachers, if teachers are willing... The school also surveyed the parents and made adjustments for this year as we're in person with masks – I think that that's really cool when you see that a school is seeking feedback, listening, and making changes. I think that that gives credibility to a school and to a school-parent relationship. It could be very beneficial for schools and teachers to be transparent about what they tried and didn't work and what they're trying instead. Parents know that the schools are in an unprecedented situation and so they have some compassion and understanding; and the schools knew that the parents were in a strange situation under lockdown trying to work from home and work with kids and so there was that reciprocity of compassion and understanding. Looking

ahead, imagine what it could look like if we could harness that reciprocity going forward. It's really easy to feel frustrated when the kids didn't do their homework, and you sent an e-mail home and there's no response. Sometimes it's warranted to just give the kid an "F" on the assignment, but maybe it would be better to have a phone conversation which would start with compassion and reciprocity.

JEL: If you, as a high school teacher, could dream, what would be the kind of relationship you would want to have with a parent?

OF: I don't like the idea of education being outsourced to schools, which is the way I think it is viewed by many parents: "The schools provide a service to teach kids about Judaism and inspire them; the parents work to pay for those services." I believe that parents are the kids' primary teachers; they are the key role models for their kids. What the kids see at home is far more impactful and profound than what they learn in school. I've seen teachers try to build on this – inviting the parents to a minyan with their kids, or doing a Shabbat together with the parents. Rabbi Fliegelman does that at Ida Crown with the freshman. The kids with their parents get to experience things together; he tries to create a partnership with the families. It sends a message to the parents that we want everyone on board and working together. This can get complicated because it means possibly challenging parents' assumptions of what the role of a Jewish day school is and because not all parents are at the same levels of observance or adhere to the same standards that the school might be expecting.

You asked me to dream. My ideal would be that we all agree that Jewish education and

Jewish identity are very important and we're all partners in figuring out the best way to inspire kids and to help them be excited about their Jewish identity, in addition to having the skills of Jewish living and a desire to include them in their practice. Ideally we could all be candid, meaning it would be great if the school could lay out their expectations and the parents could say well this is where I think that I could partner and be on board and here's where I'm not going to be able to help – but let's be honest about it. That would be my ideal because if kids saw that excitement and that joy and that passion for Judaism being lived at home and being reinforced by what they learn in school, or vice versa, that would be perfect.



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Conversation with a Kindergarten Teacher

Elisa Marcus

Elisa Marcus teaches Kindergarten at the Solomon Schechter of Manhattan. In this conversation with Jewish Educational Leadership she describes the culture in her school and articulates a vision of parent involvement in education alongside the relationship between parent and school/teacher.



JEL: While planning this journal issue, we thought it would be very important to hear from teachers. How do they see the parent role in their children's education?

EM: I was “raised” as a teacher in an environment that strongly focused on parent partnership from the very beginning. The school has a culture of parent partnership that parents understand very quickly when they become part of the school, certainly when they start in kindergarten and which they continue to feel as their kids get older. It manifests in language that we use when we're talking with parents, when we make it explicit that we're partners with them. For example, on curriculum night, we always end by saying that: “You know your child best at home while we know your child best at school – we have to be partners to help your child grow. We need you and you need us.” We have mandatory check-in phone calls four times a year. This is not to report on something specific that

happened on that day, but a general check-in. Here's what your child is doing very well, here is something amazing she did, here are some challenges we're working on... On a structural level, between the parents' association and the administration and the teachers, relationships are all based on the value of *menchlichkeit*; our founding Head of School, Steve Lorch, made that a priority. So, I think that parents feel that they are partners in their children's education. It's a cultural thing, and you need to build a culture in which parents feel part of the team, so that what happens in the classroom is part of regular communication.

JEL: That sounds extraordinary. What happened when COVID hit?

EM: What I've seen with COVID is eye opening, and I also mean eye opening on the part of the parents. Parents now see first-hand and can really appreciate the hard work that teachers do. They've learned how environment affects

learning, whether they're sitting at a table in their kitchen or if they have a nice quiet spot. I think parents didn't really have a sense before COVID of how that could affect their children. I've personally felt a lot of appreciation from parents for the job that we do.

COVID also challenged us to ratchet up the communication piece. For example, usually on the first day of school there is a lot of informal schmoozing with the parents. The parents come in as the kids are playing, we schmooze a little bit, we get to know them a little. The next day we dismiss the children or go downstairs at dismissal, jot a little email home, send a picture. It has been very hard the first few days of school to do those things; there are physical limitations. The parents are lined up outside and we send the children one at a time, so there's none of that informal schmoozing. The workload is also different. This year, my co-teacher and I aren't in the same room because there's not enough space for us both. As the only teacher in the classroom, I have to deal with the students who are there, the student who is on Zoom, deal with the technology, doing observations and taking notes on students and taking photographs – it is more difficult, but it's a critical part of what we have to do because parents are feeling detached. This is especially true for the younger ones; the parents don't get to come upstairs and see what's on the bulletin boards, so we have to send that material home. Then for the distant learner we send home what we call our daily learning plan, which is basically an electronic schedule with the things that we're doing and what she needs to print and the zoom links, the synchronous material and the asynchronous material – so we're personalizing for them. After our first day we talked to the parents to

see how it was going and how it was working with their schedule at home. We've been doing this daily (first week of school) and we reevaluate and make the necessary changes. This requires a constant and very intimate communication with the parent about what is working or not working. This goes way beyond differentiation, which is for groups; this is really personalizing the learning for this one student.

JEL: It sounds like the parent is like a co-teacher...

EM: Well, she steps away and leaves the room once her daughter is in class so she's more like an assistant teacher – doing some prep work, printing things out, cutting things up, getting them ready. But I imagine she is supporting her daughter as a co-teacher in ways that we don't necessarily see.

JEL: Last year, during the first lockdown, what was different when you had all of your students on Zoom?

EM: One thing that we noticed right away was that my co-teacher and I felt like we weren't teaching; we were just delivering material. We'd have a morning meeting where we would do a greeting and share and then we'd send them off to check their DLP and see what to do asynchronously until our 10:00 o'clock meeting, which was half an hour dedicated to a different subject. Then they had asynchronous time until the end of the day at 2:45, by which time they had checked out. So, we decided to implement twice a week one-on-one time with each student and that transformed the learning. Sometimes the parents stayed to provide extra support but sometimes their

involvement impeded the child's way towards becoming more independent. I can think of one parent who was there but off-camera, and we could see the child look at the parent every time we asked a question. We had a conversation with the parent and suggested that he step away while his daughter was working.

JEL: You started by talking about the culture of the school which sees parents as partners. Could you flesh that out a little more?

EM: I can give you some examples. In the beginning of the year in particular, we try to share many positive observations. But, as soon as we see issues arise, we don't sit on them; we share. "I notice that so and so is having trouble ..." It can be something simple, like, "he is holding his pencil like this ... If you see it, you can gently ..." Sometimes parents ask if they should be correcting their child's reading, and usually we say no, just enjoy reading and have your child enjoy the experience while we will do the business of correcting and teaching at school. Sometimes parents like to be involved in projects, like this mom who loved to bake challah, so she came in and did it with us. Mostly, though, it's about being transparent, talking to the parents, listening to them, and problem solving together. When we go into a meeting with a parent about a challenge, we usually have thoughts about what might be causing the challenge and we have thoughts about how we might support that challenge, but it's not like we're telling the parents here's what we should do. We are sitting down with the parents to hear their side, understand their impressions, and then to brainstorm together so that we come up with ideas of what might work.

JEL: Earlier in your career you taught second, third, fourth, or fifth grade. Is it different with older students?

EM: As the kids get older the parents begin to get more anxious about things like standardized tests and academic stress, but the principles of the conversation are the same whether it's kindergarten or fourth grade. "Here's what we're seeing, what do you see at home? What do you think it's about? What can we try? Let's try this and touch base in another week." [The Essential Conversation](#), by Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot, was a transformative book for me; it really helped me understand that everybody – teachers, parents, etc. – brings their own baggage to schooling, and understanding that idea makes room for empathy. Dealing with parents with empathy is a hugely important piece because teaching is hard and parents are not always kind. While we should not accept abusive behavior, I think we should pause and try to understand what might be motivating challenging behavior from a parent. We had a parent who was concerned about her son's reading, in kindergarten. We kept pushing back, saying that he's really fine and if he were not then we would tell her. When she kept pushing, we expressed that it felt like she didn't really trust us, and could she try to explain what's happening. She explained that she was not sure that they would be able to afford to keep him in the school and that they might need to put him into a public school. If that was the case, they wanted him to get into a track for gifted and talented students, and she wanted to know if her son was on track for that. We had the impression that this parent was something of a "helicopter" parent who needed her son to read by kindergarten because otherwise, he would

somehow not be set up to a smooth path to an Ivy League university, but the pushing was really coming from a place of real anxiety about the child's education. The only reason my co-teacher and I were able to discover this was because we gently pushed back on her resistance. There are things that come out in those conversations that allow you to see the challenging parents as human.

JEL: It sounds like what you're describing is that the culture in your school probably comes close to what you might describe as an ideal culture of parents' involvement in their kids' education.

EM: It really works when parents get trained in the culture, especially beginning with the younger grades. If once in a while someone acts inappropriately, they will learn, especially if the teacher responds in an appropriate way, that we value the parent's opinion and experience with their child and that we're trying to understand together what the child needs.

JEL: You earlier spoke about life before COVID and life during COVID. Do you see anything changing in the parents' roles after COVID?

EM: I have an interesting perspective in that I am both a teacher and a parent. I have an insider view. I would imagine for parent who's never had the inside view that the experience with COVID could soften them to the teachers' experience. As teachers we try to empathize with parents and I would hope that COVID would open up a level of empathy with parents that maybe they weren't able to reach before they really got a glimpse of what it is that teachers do every day and that

that will stick with them even when we go back. The flipside could also be true. It's not just that parents got a glimpse into the hard work that teachers do, but the teachers got a glimpse into the hard work that parents do (even if they are parents themselves). This is particularly important for teachers who do not have children of their own. It's a window into the world of the child that can nurture empathy for parents just like the window that was opened to parents can nurture empathy for teachers. The greater opportunities to see other people's perspectives will only help to increase the empathy and build trust between parents and teachers. That's how we build real partnerships.

Many people say that at the core of teaching is relationships and I believe this to be true. We need to make sure that we apply this lens not just to relationships with students, but with their families as well. Building strong and respectful relationships helps a child learn and grow.

Conversation with a Parent Volunteer Gita Lisker

SAR Academy in Riverdale, NY was the first Jewish day school in North America to shut down because of COVID-19. Almost immediately, a parent group partnered with the school to help coordinate what the distance learning would look like, and parents were heavily involved in planning the reopening of the school, with all the contingency plans, in Fall 2020. The parent group included a number of medical professionals, including **Dr. Gita Lisker**. Jewish Educational Leadership spoke with Dr. Lisker just prior to the opening of the Fall 2020 semester. Below is an edited and abridged transcript of that conversation.



JEL: I understand that the plan to return back to school involved a significant amount of parent involvement. Could you describe how that came about?

GL: As you know, SAR was the first Jewish day school in the US to shut down because of COVID. That happened right before Purim. A caterer in the neighborhood volunteered to prepare Purim meals for the families of the staff, and a number of parents volunteered to pick up the meals and deliver them. While we were there we asked if there were other ways in which we could be helpful, and it turned out that lots of parents had medical questions. Remember that this was just in the beginning, when we knew much less than we do now about the virus. A few of us, including Dr. Rocker, as medical professionals, began to field questions. That quickly morphed into a hotline, also staffed by volunteers, who fielded

the calls and passed on the questions to us through a system which protected the privacy of the callers. We also conducted some town hall meeting with parents and students to help them understand what was happening and to hear their concerns.

In June, when the statistics about the spread of the virus seemed to be improving, discussions began about how to manage the return to school after the summer. The medical team was brought on for those discussions, as well as a number of other parents with various areas of expertise. There were many things to address – protocols for entering the building, masks, social distancing, the need to reconfigure classrooms and public spaces, and to rework the ventilation systems. A parent who is an architect was instrumental in reconfiguring the spaces and dealing with overall issues related to the physical plan, especially in the high school.

JEL: Was this a grass-roots parent initiative, a board initiative, or an initiative of the school's professional leadership?

GL: It was a combination of the above. We were already volunteering our medical expertise; this was the natural progression. The school's administrative leadership is extremely thoughtful about everything they do – no decision happens without a complete exploration of all the different angles. They listen carefully to the advice of experts and the concerns of the different constituents – parents, students, staff – yes, they invest heavily in caring for and listening to their staff. It all happened organically. This is a school with a tremendous amount of parent involvement and parent volunteers for many things, so it was only natural.

JEL: Now that the plan is in place, are the parents still involved? In what way?

GL: There are always issues coming up. Of course, there are the medical questions. They are not as panicked as in the first few weeks, but parents want guidance. During the summer there were lots of questions regarding camps. Then there are the policy issues which are complicated and always changing because the CDC is constantly changing their guidelines.

JEL: Do you see this as replicable in other areas of the school?

GL: I certainly think so, and it is probably happening in other areas too. I know about my involvement on the medical side in this situation, and I know that there are many others involved in other areas as well. This is

a school in which the parents see the kind of investment by the administration in the staff and the children, and that motivates parents to want to be involved and helpful in whatever ways they can.

JEL: You mentioned staff a number of times. What was their role in this process?

GL: There were definitely staff representatives who made sure that the staff was heard. Many staff members have a lot to contribute, not only for their own classrooms, but to the bigger picture. For example, science teachers contributed the understanding of aerosolization of the virus.

JEL: Your experience with what you describe as good leadership and the partnership model of the school with the parents – each contributing their own expertise, could also work for other parts of our children's education. The need for parents and schools to support each other, both in school and outside. What advice do you have for other schools or the parent groups in other schools who may be interested in learning from your experience?

GL: Schools have invested thousands of hours and perhaps hundreds of thousands of dollars planning and preparing for reopening. Of course it is important to appreciate all the efforts behind the scenes that go into the running of the schools, but all of those efforts will have been wasted efforts if we are not careful outside of the school the way we are inside. We have a shared responsibility to keep everyone safe, and that means that we need to be diligent in all the different areas of our lives to keep our students, our families,

our schools, and our communities safe.


JEL: What did you learn in the process about school leadership?

GL: Good leadership welcomes input from lots of different sources and tries to make sure that everyone knows that they are heard. That doesn't mean that everyone gets what they want, but everyone knows that they were listened to carefully and taken seriously and that their concerns are being addressed. Everything requires a team, and great school leadership knows how to motivate, assemble, and coordinate that team which includes a wide range of people.



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