

Developing Our Jewish Youth For The Global Environment

"We must act as if our institutions are ours to create, our learning is ours to define, our leadership we seek is ours to become."
Peter Block, philosopher

Introduction

During my tenure at Prozdor, I have encountered over three thousand students. It has become quite obvious to me that a successful Jewish school that meets the needs of a diverse student body (including learning needs, religious background, and interests) requires strong leadership. As director of the high school at Prozdor, I have embraced the philosophy stated above by creating an environment that fosters *Kehilla* (community), *Masoret* (tradition) and *Ahavat Yisrael* (love for Israel). This work has required the collaboration of the administration, faculty, local synagogues, families, and most importantly students.

By creating a school environment which is founded on *Kehilla*, *Masoret*, and *Ahavat Yisrael*, the Jewish day school student will be able to draw upon the support and spiritual system of the Jewish people, and in turn, the student will appreciate a lifetime of responsibility and privilege as an active member of the Jewish community. This requires the graduate to have a strong sense of who she is as a Jew and as an individual member of both the Jewish and global communities around her. My vision is to create powerful community moments fostered through the school. Students will hold these cherished memories near to their hearts and use these memories to sustain them and bring comfort, joy and inspiration to others as they travel through the continuum of life as part of a *kehilla*.

I firmly believe in the concept of teamwork. A school must be run by capable and hard working individuals that want to work as a team to create an environment of educational excellence. My job as the leader is to manage the team, maintain a level of collegiality among faculty and staff, and build a community of students and parents that respects each other both educationally and socially. An educational community that works together to cherish, support, and promote education can have a profound and enduring effect on all students, including a five-year old navigating their first reading of words, an eighth grader vying for a position on student council, a senior in high school looking towards future opportunities to continue their learning, and for the graduate, seeking leadership opportunities in the Jewish community. A leader ensures that a diverse set of educational tools are available in an environment that lends itself to learning, reaching appropriate benchmarks and succeeding in every day common moments.

The Educational Framework

The day school environment must be a place that is on the cutting edge educationally, with a reputation for outstanding academics, a commitment to Jewish teachings, and is responsive to the needs of diverse learners. First and foremost, a day school student must have access to the best quality and most innovative secular education. Throughout the curriculum Judaic studies and general studies will be seamlessly fused in a symbiotic and natural way. For example, students studying a unit on stars would combine obvious lessons in astronomy and math with a more esoteric lesson in *Tanach* about God's blessing to Abraham for making his descendants as numerous as the stars. As a leader, it is my responsibility to find, train and support teachers who can grapple with these ideas and the learning environment with the singular goal of creating "Aha!" moments in which positive experiences and learning are internalized.

A holistic approach which incorporates the affective and cognitive will prepare students to be Jewish members of a global society. This will be accomplished through attention to diverse learning styles, utilization of cutting-edge classroom technologies, and incorporating athletics and the arts throughout. A vested interest in community, tradition, and a love for Israel grown through a nurturing and academically rigorous environment will prepare our youth to become responsible citizens in a global environment.

Experiential education will be a cornerstone of the school. Taking the students out of the classroom and out of the school into the world creates a lens of life for our students. More than just field trips, this form of experiential learning will give students the opportunity to learn in a creative and innovative approach while reflecting upon their own contributions to their community and world. Creating teachable moments in a variety of ways reinforces lessons learned through text and in the classroom. Social Action, (*Gemilut Chasidim*) is an ideal way to practice Jewish values while learning about secular, real-world, real-time issues.

Supporting the Faculty

Innovative teachers and teaching is the cornerstone of any great school. Faculty will lead students through a process of developing a love of life-long learning. Students will work with secular studies teachers whose passion is to teach and whose commitment to student success is the singularly most important reason they are in the classroom. Learners will be given opportunities to find their passion and to build upon it in an environment that fosters free thinking and allows each student to flourish. The ideal teacher is one that can connect with each student at an individual level and promote intellectual, social, and emotional development while protecting the thirst for learning. Ideal teaching involves the transmission of passion and knowledge from one person to another- be it teacher to student or teacher to peers.

The role of the school is to support these teachers both financially and spiritually. We must foster deep and committed relationships with our teachers so that they feel secure in their teaching and develop a sense of place at the school. This is done through continual professional development. Providing structured opportunities to reflect on individual practice, receiving support and supervision from more experienced teachers and the principal, and participating in workshops to support learning are important tools for growth. Equally important is the informal climate of the school. It is important to have a culture in which teachers feel comfortable seeking advice from others, sharing best practices, and taking risks. As a leader, I consider it my responsibility to know each teacher on an individual level, so that I may be able to capitalize on their strengths while minimizing their weaknesses.

The student body

When a student walks through the doors of a school for which I am responsible they are given the chance to use their unique abilities in a variety of modalities. Whether it is organizing a class-wide social action project, working one-on-one in a talented and gifted program, being challenged in a Learning Center, or driving a run in during the big baseball game, students share a common thread in our school: a passion for learning. All students have it, but some might not know they own it yet. Through individualized attention, each student that I work and learn with knows that I care deeply about their well-being, not only as a student but as a person. Learners come in all varieties and I believe that every student has been given the ability to learn and contribute to the community in some form. As an educator, an administrator and a leader, students are at the center of my educational vision. They are my *raison d'etre*. It is my responsibility to get to know the unique

attributes and intricacies of each of my students. By greeting each student personally in the morning, asking a student how she is doing in a particular subject, the student knows I am there to help them succeed.

The day school graduate

A day school graduate will understand that they are a link in a long chain and an integral part of the Jewish tradition, or *Masoret*. Our tradition commands that we constantly educate ourselves about our storied history and beliefs. Graduates need to be well versed in Bible, Talmud, Rabbinics, and Hebrew language. The graduate will be prepared to inquisitively debate with her teachers, peers and the outside world with integrity, conviction, respect, and thoughtfulness. A Jewish day school graduate may leave with more questions than when she arrived, but will also have the passion to pursue answers, the knowledge of where to look for those answers, and the confidence to internalize beliefs.

Through this supportive education that embraces tradition and community, each day school graduate will come to love the State of Israel, *Ahavat Yisrael*, in its simplest form - the homeland of the Jewish people. Spiraling throughout the school, from the youngest to the oldest, students will be taught about Israel and why generations of Jews have come to love it, as well as the sources of historical and present day conflict that shape our/the world.

Sustaining the school

A Jewish day school must be able to have an effect on more than the constituents it currently serves. The school must seek full financial support from the Jewish community both locally and nationally. A strong school leader must be ready to market and promote the school both locally and nationally by advertising the success and fundamental importance of a Jewish day school education. A network of community lay leaders, educators and policy makers must be invested in working in conjunction with leadership of the school to continue to see it thrive.

We must be ready to reach out and engage a new population of Jewish families that would have never considered a Jewish day school education before. Jewish families in large numbers are choosing a private school education for their children but all too frequently they are choosing a secular private school over the Jewish day school. My vision is of the day school that rivals and surpasses that of any secular private school in the educational, extracurricular, and spiritual experiences it offers. As the school grows, students are afforded opportunities that students in larger public schools also have. A greater social network and an enrichment program with multiple choices for students are just some of the benefits of a larger school that I hope to transfer into the day school environment. Coupled with the added benefit of a Jewish education that values *Kehilla*, *Masoret*, and *Ahavat Yisrael*, students will be prepared to be active citizens in the Jewish community and the wider global environment.