



## Resurgent Day-School Movement Disperses Host of Misconceptions

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Jewish day schools have come of age in North America, and you may be surprised by who's attending these schools.

Jewish day-school enrollment in the United States has tripled over the course of the last 30 years, from about 70,000 to 200,000 students. Today, about 40 percent of all students who are receiving a Jewish education do so in day schools. These are no longer just the children of the most-observant families, but children from all movements -- Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative and Orthodox -- whose parents want to provide their children with a stellar, values-based education.

As children from more varied backgrounds join the ranks of day-school students, one of the primary concerns voiced by parents is alleviated -- the need for diversity. At my own school, the Jack M. Barrack Hebrew Academy, and at pluralistic Jewish day schools across the country, students engage in daily discourse about politics, Israel and life choices in a respectful manner. In fact, this type of dialogue, which prepares students to succeed in our multicultural country and the world at large, is part of the curriculum.

Consider the words of day-school graduate Alison Klayman, whose path since graduating from Brown University in 2006 has included road-tripping to Tibet, working on a Jackie Chan movie, producing radio pieces for NPR, and working as a sports editor/ writer for the official Olympic Games Web site.

"It may seem strange that I attribute this confidence and thrill-seeking spirit to my attending a small, private, Jewish day school in the Philadelphia area. Yet, my Jewish day-school education made me secure in knowing where I come from. Instead of becoming parochially minded, I emerged to embrace a great spectrum of beliefs and attitudes. This is because I saw how differences are manifested even in a 'homogenous' group like a Jewish community, but, also, because I felt comfortable enough with my understanding of my own cultural background to enter the world and engage with other peoples and places without losing my own heritage."

Today's Jewish day schools bear only a glancing resemblance to the yeshivas of the past. While they retain the goal of graduating *menschen*, competition from secular independent schools has ensured that modern day schools offer students state-of-the-art technology and a winning athletics program. But, is the lure of academic rigor (inherently, a Jewish value), coupled with competitive facilities, the reason for the resurgence of day schools?

A 2007 study by the Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education suggests several reasons so many Jewish parents are willing to revisit their notions of day school. In comparing college students who graduated from public, secular-private and Jewish day schools, PEJE found that day-school graduates were the most positive about the level of intellectual challenge and encouragement fostered by their secondary-school teachers.

They rated their preparedness in history, writing and study skills as equal to alumni from the top preparatory schools and significantly higher than their public-school peers. They participate in all aspects of undergraduate life, are well-represented in the ranks of student leaders, and are more likely to demonstrate a strong sense of responsibility for the larger society, helping those in need through volunteerism and pursuing helping careers.

Perhaps most important to many parents, day-school alumni were found to be more resistant than their public-school peers to social pressures for the types of heavy drinking that leads to other risky behaviors.

Many parents voice concern that the dual Hebrew/English curriculum of a day school undermines academic rigor. What they misunderstand is that, rather than detracting from the educational program, the Hebrew curriculum provides added value. It stimulates and refines cognitive and creative skills, critical thinking, and nimbleness in judgment, creativity, imagination and problem-solving.

Jewish day-school graduates go on to Ivy League schools at a rate higher than public-school students or their peers at secular-private schools. They succeed in college ... and in life.

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