

OUTSTANDING RELIGIOUS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Small School, Making Great Strides

Students as life-long researchers who also have a sense of menschlikeit

While school hunting for her oldest daughter, Robin Shinder left no stone unturned. Like the army of Manhattan parents on that very same quest each year, she toured, she interviewed, she pored over a 500 plus-page encyclopedia of New York City private schools.

Each campus, it seemed, was more gorgeous than the next, each mission statement more empowering. But it was in the modest yet “disproportionately fun” classrooms of the Solomon Schechter School of Manhattan that she and her family felt most at home.

The Solomon Schechter Day School

quality, a focus on Israeli and Hebrew culture—had been clear from the beginning, but it was not until Dr. Steven Lorch arrived that the Manhattan school’s true character emerged.

Lorch’s resume of Jewish education is indeed one to be reckoned with. The Manhattan native has earned multiple advanced degrees in education, was ordained as an orthodox rabbi, and has been the head of day schools in Philadelphia, Melbourne and Jerusalem. He proudly refers to Schechter Manhattan as his life’s work.

“He was the first head of school,” says Shinder of Lorch, “that could articulate such a clear vision. That really resonated with us.”

When Shinder enrolled her daughter, Eliane, in Schechter’s kindergarten, friends told her she was crazy. They haven’t even graduated one class yet, they told her. You don’t know where the students go on to high school—to college!

This past May, Solomon Schechter sent its first 11 eighth graders on to high school, their personal successes bearing testament to the achievements of the fledgling school. Students went on to Stuyvesant, Heschel High School and the Metropolitan Schechter Academy in Teaneck, N.J. Cindy Dolgin, director of admissions, calls these the pioneer families.

For Lorch, Schechter Manhattan provided a clean slate on which he could apply the lessons of his own career. In the English-dominant schools, he had witnessed both a curricular and a cultural separation brought about by the traditional division of the school day into religious studies and secular studies.

“The two schools [in Philadelphia and Melbourne] were highly regarded for the quality of their Jewish programs,” he said. “Then I saw the Israeli school’s Jewish studies and the quality there. Thinking back, the contrast was stark and painful.”

Solomon Schechter Manhattan’s rejection of this dominant paradigm has led to its creation of a



Students pair off in class.

twofold mission: to create life-long researchers but also to instill in students a sense of menschlikeit, the Yiddish word roughly meaning moral sensibility. This latter belief extends into the school’s administration, which has established a commitment to need-blind admissions.

From kindergarten on, children make decisions that affect their learning through the school’s specially orchestrated thematic curriculum. Every student researches a subject and presents it to the class, which then votes on one subject to become the focal point of all areas of study for six weeks.

Nicole Levy, a kindergarten teacher at Schechter since 2000, asserts that this integrated curriculum teaches skills, not only facts. Last year, her class’s unit on the Dead Sea spanned the entire range of disciplines: in science the students ran experiments with salt and water; in math they weighed sand; in Jewish studies they learned the story of Sodom and Gomorrah.

In the Dead Sea unit’s culminating project—a book with a captioned illustration by each child—one student wrote: “There is a lot and lot and lot of salt in the Dead Sea.”

“Research skills get embedded in whatever the subject matter may be,” says Shira Jacobson, who has formerly taught third and fifth grade at the school and currently serves as programming director.

In third grade, students enter the Upper Elementary Division, where the thematic studies become more guided: third graders study community; fourth graders, habitat. The curriculum, however, continues to change and evolve with each new class. The fifth grade unit on “New Beginnings” originated as a study of Colonial America, but recent projects have explored New York City tenements and the emigration of Syrian

Jewry. At Schechter Manhattan, textbooks are frowned upon.

“You won’t see a teacher stand in front of a class and say, ‘Please open the book to page 55 and we’ll start with question three,’” says Gary Pretsfelder, head of the Upper Elementary Division. “The teachers continuously build the curriculum and make it live.”

The Jewish studies curriculum follows a



Dr. Steven Lorch, head of school.

similar model wherein students are urged from day one by the school’s exclusively bilingual teachers to achieve fluency in Hebrew, practicing through the day and across disciplines. Dolgin explains that students and teachers address the difficult questions, the “why” questions, in English.

“Students are not arm-twisted to do this,” says Elisheva Urbas, school president and mother of three students, regarding the prayer and Jewish studies components. “They do it because they can say, ‘Somebody made this cool for me.’”

—Lee Norsworthy

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Dr. Steven Lorch, head of school

Association was a product of the burgeoning movement of Conservative Judaism in the 1950s and has grown to encompass 75 schools throughout the United States and Canada. Just over one decade ago, the New York United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, with a handful of the city’s rabbis and congregants, set out to found a Solomon Schechter school in New York City, where there had previously been none. In 1996, the school opened its doors to a kindergarten class of 14.

This original committee’s guiding principles—strong Jewish content, high academic



Fifth graders volunteer with Dorot, a senior program.