

## **Early Childhood Director Survey on Day School and Continuing Jewish Education** September 2008

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N=102

This survey was distributed to early childhood directors at the CAJE conference in August 2008, as well as via a Zoomerang online survey sent to USCJ, URJ and JCCA early childhood directors (the request and link were sent out on each listserv)

### **Results**

#### **1. Do parents ask?**

70% of respondents reported that at least some parents of students seek information from the early childhood director about their choice of a kindergarten/elementary school for their child.

30% reported that hardly any or no parents of students seek information from the early childhood director about their choice of a kindergarten/elementary school for their child.

#### **2. Do EC Directors initiate?**

77% of responding EC directors initiate a discussion with parents of 3 and/or 4 year olds about their child's continuing Jewish education. (33% do so with parents of 3's and 4's, 44% do so only with parents of 4's.)

13% of EC directors do not initiate the discussion at all.

10% gave other answers, such as occasionally, only when asked, it depends, the religious school director contacts the 4's, I discuss it on their tour of the Nursery school, send a letter, the day school and our school contacts the families, with our kindergarten, and I am planning a forum with 3 area day schls in Nov.

#### **3. In the know?**

85% of responding EC directors claim to have enough information needed about the Jewish day school(s) in their community and, if they are housed in a synagogue, about the synagogue's religious school, in order to be able to speak with parents about their choice of a kindergarten/ elementary school for their child.

15% do not have enough information, and would benefit from more.

#### **4. Information, please!**

When asked "what would be the most effective way for you to learn more about Jewish day school options in your community in order to acquire more information so that you

can advise or guide your ECE parents toward an appropriate choice of a kindergarten/ elementary school for their child? (indicate all that apply),” EC directors responded:

- A personal visit to the school (56%)
- The school’s admission packet (50%)
- Conversations with former ECE parents whose children attend a Jewish day school (45%)
- An in-person meeting with the Head of School or Principal (42%)

They also suggested:

- Having the heads of these schools visit our program
- former parents to speak w/ current parents
- An open house with religious school director

**5. Are you a supporter?**

65% of responding EC Directors consider themselves to be a supporter of Jewish day school education.

24% are not supporters, or are uncertain.

“Other” answers included in general yes, but costs are prohibitive, it depends on the quality of the day school, yes but not Chabad, yes if it’s a good fit for the family/child, and it’s an option along with the public schools – I’m not a “rah-rah” supporter.

(see chart below for the correlation between school affiliation and day school supporter status)

	Total*	Conservative synagogue	Reform synagogue	Reconstructionist synagogue	JCC	Other, please specify
	102	50	27	1	20	4
Yes	66 64.7%	34 68.0%	16 59.3%	1 100.0%	14 70.0%	1 25.0%
No	6 5.9%	2 4.0%	3 11.1%	0 0.0%	1 5.0%	0 0.0%
Uncertain	18 17.6%	11 22.0%	4 14.8%	0 0.0%	3 15.0%	0 0.0%
Other, please explain	12 11.8%	3 6.0%	4 14.8%	0 0.0%	2 10.0%	3 75.0%

**6. What’s in the neighborhood?**

89% of respondents live in areas where there are day schools they know of.

51% have a Community Day School near-by

47% have a Solomon Schechter school near-by

47% have a Modern Orthodox day school near-by

28% have a Chabad day school near-by

### **7. Impressions of local day schools**

When asked to “Please give your impressions of the Jewish day school(s) in your community as a learning environment for young children,” the majority reported that most of schools in their area offered excellent education.

Some concerns and other comments included:

- Distance
- Cost
- Public schools were the preferred choice
- Don’t serve children with special needs
- Non-Reform day schools are not attractive to Reform families

A few respondents reported that the schools in their area were dysfunctional or had negative environments.

### **8. Positive experiences with a local day school as an EC director.**

75 people (74% of respondents) answered the question “Please describe a positive experience you’ve had with a local day school as an EC director. (please write a sentence or two)”

Many people mentioned:

- Tours, meetings and luncheons
  - Toured the day school
  - Open house at the day school for EC directors (It's an opportunity for the local directors to get familiar with the school, but it also provides a day of learning and networking for us.)
  - Lunch at the day school for EC directors (one respondent mentioned this lunch is an annual affair, which she attends every other year because every year is too much)
  - Meetings with the Head of school, lower school head, and other administrators.
  - Head of school visits EC center
  - EC dir invited to spend time in the K class at the day schools
  - invited to attend a Shabbat involving the kindergarten children
- Keeping in contact
  - Head of school or other day school administrator brings materials to the EC Director.
  - Day school contacts EC dir every year to share information about how children from the EC program are doing in the day school.
- The day school and the EC families
  - Day school sends flyers/invites EC families to participate
  - Day school has an open house designed specifically for our parents

- The Day School invites the 4 year old students and their parents to several joint events during the school year. They plan it and provide transportation for us.
- Family Education programs brought to our school, speakers from the school visited committee meetings
- The head of school comes to do a workshop for preschool parents every year, on choosing a kindergarten for their child.
- The day school and EC children
  - We have a wonderful program where the day school kindergarten teachers come to our school and spend part of a morning teaching our 3 year olds. Our 4 year olds go to the day school as a field trip and spend a morning with the kindergarten teachers. It is a great exchange program.
  - Receiving invitations for our children to visit rehearsals for a play
  - they brought their choir to sing at family Shabbat
  - The creation of a "Reading Buddies" program where Third graders came to read stories to our pre-K class. And where our children were invited to Jewish holiday festivals organized by the day school
  - For the last two years we have shared a purim experience that was so much fun.
  - Our local Solomon Schechter visited our school with their 4th grade class, who presented an Israeli Dance exhibit to our students.
  - I work very closely with the Director of Admissions on planning fun programs for the school to offer to the preschool community on Sukkot.
  - I was just contacted by one of the 4th grade Judaic teachers to plan a buddy program with our pre-k to read together one on one monthly
  - We share the building and do some joint holiday celebrations
  - I have been involved in partnerships where they visit our school for one holiday and we go to them for another.
- Experiences for teachers
  - Solomon Schechter School has had a day where Ec teachers are invited to an informational forum with Kindergarten teachers followed by a social lunch
  - The admissions director has reached out to us and allowed us to use their computer lab to train our teachers to use digital photos and the internet.
  - Day School sends a couple of their staff to our program to see what we do in our school then they spend a bit of time with the staff (as available) to ask and answer questions.
  - they sponsored a Day of Learning for my staff.
- On children with special needs
  - They have met the needs of special needs children who need a smaller, more personal program
  - The directors have invited me to visit their campuses and learn more about their programs. When children with learning challenges have been interested in the community day school, we have been able to have frank and open discussions with the staff about what was best for the child.

Nine people responded that they have had no positive experiences, including comments such as

- The only experience I have had is requests from their admissions people to hold an information session at our school.
- a bit of difficulty because there is competition for four year old programs
- None. They disregard our program - have called it "insignificant."

Two final comments which highlight the bottom line goal of the relationship between the day school and the early childhood program:

- I feel like the Day School values my opinion.
- The director and staff have visited us and invited us to visit them. The goal is a partnership of sorts that will help us advise our parents based on our own positive experience with the school

### **9. Negative experiences**

61 people responded to the question, "Please describe a negative experience you've had with a local day school as an EC director. (please write a sentence or two)."

Of those, 41% said they hadn't had any negative experiences.

Some of the negative experiences included:

- Competition between the EC program and the day school for 4 year olds or kindergarteners (several responses)
  - Since they created a K program (and had originally said they would not) we have found the recruiter has called families to register there instead of at our temple.
  - they threatened us when we opened our Kindergarten program.
- The day schools seem to be mainly interested in getting our enrollment list to enroll our children in their programs and having the younger sibling attend there and not at our school. This makes us not want to recommend them when it comes time to attend elementary school.
  - The Solomon Schechter can be very forceful about making sure we promote their programs and that teachers attend their K information sessions year after year.
  - The day school mostly pumps us for lists, or for info about prospective families, but never shows interest in our school that is not connected to registration.
  - The day school gets our student directory through the Federation and markets our 4 yr olds to their pre-K
- The admissions person shared an answer to a question she asked me concerning a child that was applying to her school and then shared my confidential comment with the parent.
- School issued invitations they didn't follow through on
  - An admissions director not following through and giving us information to give to our parents.
  - They dropped us from their reading buddies program without telling us.

- Day school does not provide services to special needs children
  - Sliding the requirements and allowing children who are really not ready for kindergarten to enroll, then finding out that the child needs an additional year of kindergarten. It's difficult when the budget overrules what's best for the child.
- Not enough feedback from school.
- The Day School Director treated our children (from the Reform preschool) as if they were not up to their level in knowing Hebrew, prayers, info etc.
  - A parent was told that their child would be unprepared for K because Reform Jews didn't know how to daven.
- tend to sell their program based on what an individual family is looking for compared to knowing who they are not accepting that they aren't for everybody.
- unresponsive to EC parent's concerns
- Expensive - a big increase in the percentage

The bottom line of what EC directors want day schools to recognize:  
Promoting in early childhood the importance of foundation education and getting past the "it's just preschool" mentality.

#### **10. Who were the respondents?**

49% Conservative synagogue is the host institution

26 % Reform synagogue is the host institution

21% JCC is the host institution

3% are independent schools

1% Reconstructionist synagogue is the host institution

## **Reflections**

The relationship between early childhood directors and the directors of schools of higher Jewish education (day schools and religious schools) is critical if families are to stay on the path of Jewish education. While no analysis of statistical significance, this survey does demonstrate that while in many locations this relationship is strong, there is still much room for improvement. Close to 70% of both Conservative and JCC EC directors consider themselves supporters of day school education, but only close to 60% of Reform EC directors are day school supporters. Ideally, these numbers for all EC directors should be closer to 100%. While day school education is not the best choice for every family, every EC director should be able to proudly stand up and declare her support for day school education in general. Especially since, as this survey shows, parents do look to the EC director for guidance as to their child's continuing Jewish education.

Thankfully, most respondents had many more positive things to say about their interactions and knowledge of local day schools, but the negative comments are important to pay attention to. Early childhood programs are not simply feeders for day school and religious schools. Essential education happens in the early years, critical connections are made, and strong foundations are built. The more this is recognized by day school and religious school leaders, the better we will all be able to serve families and keep children and parents on the path of Jewish education.

## **Recommendations**

### **For early childhood directors:**

1. Initiate the conversation with parents about their child's continuing Jewish education. The EC director should bring up the subject of continuing Jewish education with parents of 3's and 4 year olds, if not with parents of younger children as well.
2. Not only directors, but also teachers should broach the subject with parents. This means that both the EC director and the teachers (at least the teachers of 4 year olds, and ideally all the teachers) should be personally familiar with all the continuing Jewish education options in the area. For educators at JCCs, this means being familiar with the religious schools at all the local synagogues, in addition to the day schools.
3. Demand personal attention from day schools and religious schools. Insist that you and your staff get tours and meetings with the heads of school before you consider turning over one class list. Then go on the tours and take the meetings. Ask a lot of questions.
4. Look for opportunities of partnership – for parents, children and teachers.
5. Be in communication about the “sharing” of four year olds. In communities where the day school has a 4 year old program, or the early childhood program hosts a kindergarten as well, have frank conversations with all the players about how the community can insure that families get the Jewish education they need, and each school gets its fair share of the market. Remember that Jewish life is the ultimate goal.

**For day school heads of school and religious school directors:**

1. Provide personal attention to local early childhood programs. Visit early childhood programs and meet with EC directors. Ask questions; seek to understand just what they do, and how. Do not ask for a class list from a school you have not personally visited. Provide information about your school for EC directors to pass on to their parents. In addition to the admissions packet, help to set up conversations with former ECE parents whose children attend your school.
2. Seek multiple venues to provide information about your school to the local early childhood directors. While the great majority of EC directors responded that they have the information they need about their local day schools, there was still a great response to ways they would choose to get more information. (see questions 3 and 4)
3. Look for opportunities of partnership – for parents, children and teachers. In addition to tours and meetings, see the list above in answer to question 8 for ideas.
4. Provide early childhood programs with updates on the progress of their “graduates” who are in your school.
5. Be in communication about the “sharing” of four year olds. In communities where the day school has a 4 year old program, or the early childhood program hosts a kindergarten as well, have frank conversations with all the players about how the community can insure that families get the Jewish education they need, and each school gets its fair share of the market. Remember that Jewish life is the ultimate goal.
6. Seek to establish quality programs and support for children with special needs.
7. Remember these two comments, of relationships that were working:
  - a. I feel like the Day School values my opinion.
  - b. The director and staff have visited us and invited us to visit them. The goal is a partnership of sorts that will help us advise our parents based on our own positive experience with the school