

**SHIBBOLEY SCHECHTER:
A GATHERING OF IDEAS
FOR LAY AND PROFESSIONAL
DAY SCHOOL LEADERS**

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**UNITED SYNAGOGUE OF CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM
SOLOMON SCHECHTER DAY SCHOOL ASSOCIATION**

Parents Working with Schools/Schools Working With Parents

Parents and schools work together to create and sustain effective partnerships. What are the respective roles and responsibilities of both partners? We begin by presenting the following principles of good practice from The National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) and include a number of responses from Schechter schools. Our schools are clearly committed to working closely with parents.

Parents Working with Schools

1. Parents recognize that effective partnerships are characterized by clearly defined responsibilities, a shared commitment to collaboration, open lines of communication, mutual respect, and a common vision of the goals to be reached.
2. In selecting an independent school, parents seek an optimal match for the needs of the student, their own expectations, and the philosophy and programs of the school.
3. Parents are familiar with and support the school's policies and procedures.
4. Parents provide a home environment that supports the development of positive learning attitudes and habits.
5. Parents involve themselves in the life of the school.
6. Parents seek and value the school's perspective on the student.
7. When concerns arise, parents seek information directly from the school, consulting with those best able to address the concerns.
8. Parents share with the school any religious, cultural, medical, or personal information that the school may need to serve the student best.

Schools Working with Parents

1. The school recognizes that effective partnerships are characterized by clearly defined responsibilities, a shared commitment to collaboration, open lines of communication, mutual respect, and a common vision of the goals to be reached.
2. The school clearly and fully presents its philosophy, program, and practices to parents during the admission process and encourages dialogue that clarifies parental expectations and aspirations for the student.
3. The school seeks and values the parents' perspective on the student.
4. Teachers and administrators are accessible to parents and model candid and open dialogue.
5. The school keeps parents well informed through systematic reports, conferences, publications, and informal conversations.
6. The school defines clearly how it involves parents when considering major decisions that affect the school community.
7. The school offers and supports a variety of parent education opportunities.
8. The school suggests effective ways for parents to support the educational process.
9. The school actively seeks the knowledge it needs to work effectively with a diverse parent body.

The NAIS Principles of Good Practice for member schools, defining high standards and ethical behavior in key areas of school operations, are designed to help guide schools in becoming the best education communities they can be.

From Elisheva Urbas, President, Solomon Schechter School of Manhattan, NY

The NAIS principles emphasize close partnership between parent and school about the individual student's progress. This is just as true of Jewish day schools. Teacher and parents see different aspects of the child, but the child depends on both to help him or her learn. That makes communication between them essential, in any school. As the Solomon Schechter School of Manhattan's statement of educational principles puts it, "Children never stop learning. The school and the home are equal partners in the child's development."

When it comes to the culture of the school, however — its program, its values, its community and its future — NAIS describes a relationship with more respectful distance in it. The school is fundamentally an independent entity that charts its own course, and parents are invited to sign on — or take their child elsewhere.

Here, in contrast, the case of Jewish day schools differs from that described by NAIS. The great *mitzvah* of Jewish education, *v'shinantam l'vanekha*, "you shall teach your children," is incumbent in the first place on the parent. In consequence, Jewish schools must and do understand themselves as *shlikhei mitzvah*, agents who are helping the parents to fulfill their own goals and hopes for their children's learning and development. Jewish parents are not merely customers, who can buy into a particular school's product as long as it is advertised fairly; they are covenantal partners engaged in the holy tasks of educating their own children and of supporting teachers and other parents who are doing the same.

Moreover, unlike independent schools, we're not marketing just to keep ourselves in business. Many Jewish day schools consider increasing the number of Jewish parents who see intensive Jewish education as the best choice for their families to be one important part of their mission. We don't just want them to enroll their children; we hope the experience will encourage them to build families committed to an authentic Jewish culture and community. But no school can engage parents plausibly in that commitment if it does not acknowledge their capacity for making effective educational, moral, and spiritual choices, for themselves and their children. What that means on the ground is that, while parents don't need to make the school's decisions, they do need to be heard in the decision making process, and to feel that the school is responsive in appropriate ways to what it hears. In other words, how parents feel about the values and policies of the Jewish day school matters to the institution.

To invest parental concerns with the dignity they deserve is not to denigrate the importance of the knowledge, skill, and vision of our professional educators, or the governance skills and vision that animate our trustees. On the contrary, parents need and desperately want those qualities in their schools. Indeed, parents whose aspirations for their children's schools are respected are also most likely to value the skills and qualities that help fulfill those aspirations. Each of us wants the most skilled, wise, loving and responsible teachers we can find for our children. If that sometimes makes our parents more

demanding and even pushy than those of independent schools whose missions are less complicated, it also inspires even more than ordinary admiration and joy in parents lucky enough to find schools run by such skilled and devoted *shlikhei mitzvah*.

From Dr. Penney Stein, Head, Alperin Schechter Day School, Providence, RI

To say that a partnership between parent and school is a necessary component for school success is kind of a "mom and apple pie" issue—what's not to like? At ASDS we include the following in our Statement of Philosophy and Values: "Our school recognizes that a partnership with parents is essential to educating children. We therefore promote open communication with families to encourage continued learning and participation in school life."

In our school, communication takes many forms including a bi-weekly newsletter with individual classroom updates, specialty newsletters included with report cards, and a school web site with class/teacher web pages. Teachers have voice mail boxes and return all parent phone calls within 24 hours. Parent education programs include preparation for all milestone events (*Siddur* ceremony, *Humash* ceremony) and major school transitions (pre-K to kindergarten, fifth grade to Middle School), parenting issues (e.g., keeping kids safe, developing resiliency, anxiety in children), as well as Hebrew reading and text study. Grade level parent breakfasts are a forum to discuss issues and air complaints.

Our families are very involved in their children's education and we can count on excellent attendance at Open School nights, parent conferences and school events. Volunteerism is at an all-time high, with parents in the school to help in classrooms, cook and serve hot lunch, or work in the library. We urge parents to speak directly to teachers if they have concerns. We work with faculty to make sure they let parents know quickly if there is a problem. We try to be responsive and accessible, proactive and respectful.

Is it enough? Sometimes it seems that with communication, there is no such thing as enough. But in a world where parents are increasingly busy, with increasing demands on their time and attention, it becomes ever more difficult to break through the deluge of e-mail, phone messaging, unsolicited mail and the mountain of paper that passes through everyone's life. And yet, the clamor for better home/school communication continues to grow. An article in an NAIS Newsletter on Admission and Marketing sees this as part of a change in focus toward marketing and customer service and voices concern: "What worries me most about independent schools," says the author, "is that, for the most part, our historical focus on kids and good teaching is being supplanted by an increasing amount of attention to the

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(Stein- cont'd. from page 2)

needs of adults and their frustration with us when we cannot or do not meet their needs.”

In a system that believes that an honest, trusting, open relationship between school and home is crucial to a child's success, we struggle with these issues, re-inventing traditional communication tools to fit contemporary needs and constantly checking to see how we might be doing things better.

From Rabbi Jim Rogozen, Head, Gross Schechter Day School, Pepper Pike, Ohio

It seems to me that there are four items that need emphasis or clarification in order to make the NAIS principle a better “fit” for a Schechter school.

1) I like the fact that the concept of “clearly defined responsibilities” is front and center in this document (see #1). However, the words surrounding that phrase — “partnerships,” “collaboration,” “open lines of communication,” — are ones that often attract a variety of definitions. In Hebrew, the word “*lehagdir*” (to define) comes from the root “*geder*” meaning fence. Defining something implies that some meanings or practices are “in” and others are “out.”

As Robert Frost said, “Good fences make good neighbors.” In all day schools, there are fences between parents and faculty, or between board and administration. In some cases, though, the fences are quite low or have holes large enough for parents and board members to jump through. Putting “collaboration” and “partnership” into a clear context would help create good fences.

In our school community, for example, it is clearly understood that all academic and personnel issues are decided by the faculty and administration. As administrators we certainly consult with board members on some issues, as well as keep our “finger on the pulse” of the parents. In the end, however, we make the decisions, we implement them and we accept responsibility for any failures. This “good fence” actually reduces anxiety among parents and faculty, and eliminates politicking and manifestations of “influence.” If I could change the NAIS document I would write: “...a *shared understanding* and commitment to collaboration, etc.”

2) In the “Parents” section we read that “parents seek an optimal match for the needs of the student” (see #2). This sentiment needs to be expressed in the “Schools” section, as well, but in reverse. Schools need to be careful that the students and families they accept are “an optimal match for the needs of the school.” Put another way, just as a Schechter school cannot meet every student's needs, not all students (or their parents) add to the school's mission or to the school community. If a child's behavior or attitude has a negative impact on the learning or religious environment, the school should take action. We cannot educate all children who come our way — financially, academically or religiously.

3) I like the concept of directing issues to “those best able to address” them (see #7). The way to make this happen is by distributing a “Whom to Call” chart to parents several times each year.

4) Finally, the phrase “common vision” appears in both

sections of the NAIS document. I would encourage schools to clearly define that vision and ensure that all stakeholders understand it. Because people understand Jewish Law (*halakhah*) so differently throughout the Conservative Movement, it is a challenge for the leadership of Schechter schools to create and hold onto a consistent, common vision of the religious components of their schools. What do we believe about *mitzvot*? Who decides questions of *halakhah*? What does *kosher* mean? What does the “ideal” day school graduate look like? What kind of teachers are acceptable role models in our schools?

There are many wonderful resources to be found from our colleagues in the independent school world.

From Adam Brown, Chair of the Board of Trustees of the Schechter Regional High School, Teaneck, NJ and past president of Solomon Schechter Day School of Bergen County, NJ

The NAIS principles represent a beautiful ideal: a strong, productive working partnership between parents and their school. This partnership, like any long-lasting relationship, is based on a level of goodwill and “benefit of the doubt” that gets partners through inevitable rough spots. But I would add a bit of caution. The partnership that it describes is not something that can be achieved by direct action alone. Rather, it results from collateral action, first and foremost the development of a healthy board culture that engenders from parents the one commodity that school partnerships cannot live without: respect.

Parents will respect school decisions that are part of a larger plan. A board of trustees that (together with the Head) has (1) wrestled with the school's reasons for existence, (2) developed and repeatedly communicated a powerful statement of its short and long-term objectives, and (3) harnessed all of its efforts – and those of its head of school - into achieving those objectives, is one to which parents, faculty and funders will be respectful.

Parents will respect decisions by a board that is impartial and objective. Boards that allow board members as individuals to influence day-to-day school matters, or give that impression, give up the moral high ground. Parents in such a school will lose confidence in the quality and impartiality of board decisions, essential elements of a successful and respected school administration.

Parents will respect a school that has a Head of School who is firmly in charge. Parents like to know that the education of *their* children is in the hands of professional educators, not the lay leader currently serving as board president. Respect for the professional administration flows naturally from a series of board decisions. First, boards must declare and implement a policy under which it is understood that the education of current students is solely the responsibility of the Head of School. Second, boards must disclaim any right to hire, fire or influence any employee of the school other than the Head. Third, boards must resist the temptation to “augment” an unqualified Head by taking on some of the Head's responsibilities. Instead, unqualified Heads should be replaced. Lastly, Heads and board chairs

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learning how to use parent power to advance our goals and increase student success. It makes sense that since educators and parents share a common interest, the child's success in school, we should be pooling our respective efforts to ensure that success. There is no doubt that family engagement is critical to student achievement and that shared responsibility for a child's performance increases that child's success in school.

In order to more effectively communicate we need to examine the relationships that exist between parents and students. One aspect of a successful relationship is trust building. "Easier said than done" you say. Not really, we have the same interest — the success of the student. Educators need to be mindful that honesty, truthfulness, and sincere concern all build trust and parental support. Another critical component of a successful relationship is for each to understand its responsibility to the other and to communicate openly. Parents need to seek out and listen to the school's perspective on the student, and when there are problems be prepared to reach out to teachers directly. Parents should share with teachers any physical or familial situations that may impact the child's performance.

Teachers also need to recognize the necessity of an open dialogue. They need to clearly identify problems and provide ways parents can support the teacher's efforts. It is imperative that teachers keep parents informed. Report cards and parent teacher conferences should not be full of surprises. Teachers need to view parent involvement as a way to increase success in the classroom. We best prove our commitment to student success by keeping the parent in the loop. If we are assured that nothing is being hidden we tend to be more willing to engage in shared problem solving, and can focus on ensuring optimum achievement for the children in our schools.

(Brown -cont'd. from p. 3)

should be disabused of the notion that they have an employer/employee relationship. The head and the president are servants serving a common master: the board of trustees.

Parents will respect institutions that have a clear division of labor. All of the above boils down to a simple notion: the Head of School is the sole authority for decisions that are made pertaining to the education of today's students, and his performance is judged solely by the degree to which those decisions serve the school's short and long-term interests. The Board's performance, on the other hand, should be judged by its success in hiring the Head, by providing the school with a compelling strategic vision, and by developing the resources with which that vision will be carried out. A board that can accomplish these tasks will create a school and an administration that has the respect of its parents, and the parent/school relationship will be a strong one.

From Dorothy Bowser, Head, Solomon Schechter High School of New York, NY

There is nothing that parents care more passionately about than their children. Parents are committed to their children's success in life and in school. Educators share that commitment to the child's success in school and are driven to facilitate that success. In fact, an educator's belief about his or her effectiveness often hinges on the number of light bulbs that go on in the classroom. Unfortunately, what we too often overlook as a means of increasing that effectiveness is

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Remarks at the 20th Biennial

by Deborah Astor, Past-President, Solomon Schechter Day School Association

"What you are seeing at this conference is an intricate partnership of skills — Heads and Presidents, leadership teams and business managers, admissions and development directors, school Rabbis and school counselors, whose hearts drive them in the task of educating Jewish children and whose shared goal is to do it better. I find that the makings of a unique and exciting presidency.

The Solomon Schechter Day School name is valued and valuable. Why? Every Schechter school, no matter how new, inherits a shared history going back to 1951, when the first school sponsored by a Conservative congregation was established in Rockaway Park, NY. And to 1956, when a Solomon Schechter Day School was organized in Queens, NY. Every school shares standards of religious practice, a common mission, educational standards and goals, and curriculum interests. Every Schechter school reaps the respect earned by all Schechter schools. Every school professional and lay leader gains a community of counterparts among our 75 schools. Every Schechter school is a member of the Association and its president is a member of the Association's Board. And every school has available to it our Association's resources for learning and sharing.

I am happy to report that significant expansion of those resources for learning and sharing has been accomplished, and a three-year plan is in place so that the process of growth can move forward. I am proud that the partnership among the Association's professional and lay leadership means that we:

- Established six listservs — for Heads, Presidents, Business Managers, Development Directors, Admission Directors, and School Counselors.

- Developed and distributed Media Kit #1.

- Developed an ongoing series of conference calls for Presidents across North America with expert consultants skilled in several important areas including development, fundraising, legal issues, governance, and board development. With their convenience and superb content, these conference calls have engaged users from across North America, allowing us to be a truly continental organization.

- Selected consultants expert in their fields and knowledgeable about day schools, and published and distributed a Directory of Consultants.

- Revised the President's Handbook for incoming presidents.

- Provided conference call training for new presidents.

- Prepared and placed ads in Jewish and secular press seeking qualified teachers on behalf of Schechter schools everywhere and maintained a secure website of resumes — available to every school Head.

- Partnered with the Seminary's recruitment office to cultivate day school career path options among our middle school and high school students, and to advocate among current undergraduate and graduate students at List College

Excerpts from Conference Address

by Dr. Karen Ceppos, President, Solomon Schechter Day School Association

"Shalom. Perhaps you'd like to know more about how I came to be president of this organization and about my goals for my tenure as President of the Solomon Schechter Day School Association.

I first want to tell you what big shoes I have to fill. Debbie Astor accomplished incredible things over the past four years.

Debbie has moved this organization forward and has left a great legacy for all of us including a full three-year action plan for implementation. We are forever indebted to Debbie, for her outstanding leadership, deep commitment to our cause and devotion to the task.

Why are Schechter schools so important to me and what do I hope to accomplish as the national SSDSA president?

I think Rabbi Abramson hit the mark yesterday when he talked to us about his vision for Solomon Schechter Schools. Conservative Judaism links our ancient tradition to the modern world. As Conservative Jews we are bound by the obligation to perform communal *mitzvot* in our modern day communities. No matter how individual we are, we come together to act in this world as God commanded us at Sinai —to live and pray together so that the community as a whole will flourish and prosper.

As I raise my children in a home filled with a reverence for God and with a strong commitment to a faith based tradition I feel I am part of a great covenantal relationship begun at Sinai. We Jews are a small minority on this earth, but we have sustained ourselves through our covenant, our commitment to education and our willingness to give of ourselves for the good of the community. Our people have survived for thousands of years, always warriors of God, always people of the Book, guided in all that we do by our most precious treasure, the *Torah*. It is a font of knowledge that not only details the early history of our people, but provides a roadmap for how we live our lives. I believe it is my responsibility to ensure that future generations are well versed in the text, the traditions and the values that we as Conservative Jews hold so dear.

As the next Schechter president, the first item on my agenda is to re-visit and revise the Schechter Statement of Requirements for Affiliation and Accreditation. This document has not been reviewed in some time, and we need to be sure that it accurately reflects who we are and what we stand for in the 21st century. I plan to appoint a committee comprised of two Heads of School, two Conservative Rabbis and two delegates from the SSDSA board to begin working on this revision.

During my tenure we will test the efficacy of having regional meetings around the country in the year that we don't have a Biennial Conference. Approximately one year from now, we hope to hold meetings in the south and in the

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(Ceppos -cont'd. from p. 5)

northeast. It is my hope that both professionals and lay leaders will attend these meetings and that the meetings will provide an opportunity for enhanced communication and sharing.

Another goal will be to try to develop better relationships between our synagogues and our schools. We hope to create a plan for developing and maintaining positive synagogue/school relations.

We will continue our work with board development, our partnership with PEJE, the development of media kits for member schools, outreach for teacher/educator recruitment and training, *MaToK* curriculum development. We will certainly continue to aggressively pursue the use of technology to facilitate our meeting and communicating with all our schools, perhaps even adding video-conferencing capabilities to our presidents' conference calls.

I seek your assistance — Your energy, effort and commitment will help to make a reality so that we can go about the business of what we do best in the Schechter movement: educating our future leaders."

(Astor -cont'd. from p. 5)

and the Seminary for career choices in the day school setting.

- Published *Shibboleth Schechter* edited with an orientation to the needs of school leaders.

All of this is in addition to ongoing core services.

Your Schechter Association, like well governed schools, needed to bring its written by-laws into skew with the times and practice. Copies of the revised by-laws were sent to school presidents in early November.

These revised by-laws were reviewed and approved unanimously at the October 7, 2002, Board meeting. **[At the Biennial, the by-laws were unanimously approved.]**

Two Charters Presented at 20th Biennial

by Deborah Astor

Where do new Schechter schools come from? Do they start from a dream? From a huge, audible demand? Or from something inevitable in a community's demographics? Or from something specific to that community?

I prefer to envision the origins as a sacred task waiting to be done — and when the people are right, the dream powers the hard work of all the details.

We have the privilege to welcome two new partners:

- To Arthur Harrow, President, of the Solomon Schechter Day School of Greater Richmond, VA

The idea of reestablishing a Conservative day school in Richmond evolved during informal conversations among a number of parents with young children. Arthur and his wife had just adopted two daughters and taken them to *mikveh* and were concerned about their Jewish education. As these discussions took form and energy, the group volunteered Arthur who, having just completed his term as president of the synagogue, would have the time and skill set to move the project forward.

Mazel Tov to Arthur and Judy who have worked to open a K-1 school in September 2003.

- To Adam Brown, Chair, of the Schechter Regional High School, Teaneck, NJ. Adam is a man with a full plate. He has been a valuable member of the Association's Executive Committee and will continue as a Director for the coming two years. He was a co-chair of the Biennial Conference; Adam is past president of the Solomon Schechter Day School of Bergen County, NJ.

Mazel Tov, Adam. Our People will be strengthened by all the effort you and your Board have given for the Schechter Regional High School to open in September 2003!

Second Middle School Conference

The second Middle School conference was held at the Epstein School, Atlanta, February 23-25. Topics included: Cementing Jewish Identity in the Middle School; Where is God in Our Schools?; Creative Scheduling; School-wide Enrichment Model; Lifting Staff Morale; Making the Transition to High School; *Ha-Matzav* — Israel Today; Including Informal Education in our Programs; Integration of Curriculum. *Kol hakavod!*

Conference '02 Headlines

- Largest attendance — 300
- 80% of schools in attendance
- 24 teams (Head, President, minimum of 2 lay leaders)
- Tracks for Admissions Directors, Business Managers, Development Directors, Counselors
- First time Partnership with PEJE

A Shibbolely Sequel

Join Schechter in Cyberspace

There are now 6 Solomon Schechter listservs:

Roshnet@uscj.org — for Principals

SSDS-Prez@uscj.org — for Presidents

SSDS-Business@uscj.org — for Business Managers

SSDS-Development@uscj.org — for Development
Directors

SSDS-Counselor@uscj.org — for School Counselors
and the newest:

SSDS-Admissions@uscj.org — for Admissions Directors

A listserv allows people with a particular interest — in our case, Schechter — to share information regarding that interest. Once you sign on, all participants in the listserv receive all postings via e-mail. Registrants are encouraged to be active participants by posting questions, concerns, and ideas to the group regarding issues of interest to the Schechter organization.

To sign up for the appropriate listserv send an e-mail to education@uscj.org. On the subject line type in "new sign up for" (choose appropriate listserv: Roshnet, SSDS-Prez, SSDS-Business, SSDS-Development, and SSDS-Counselor). You will receive a message welcoming you to that listserve. You may then send a message, question or comment and it will be distributed to everyone on that list. Enjoy!

Open A Schechter Website!

United Synagogue invites all Schechter schools to open WEBSITES. Contact Martin Kunoff, kunoff@uscj.org, for immediate attention. Many Schechter schools have already taken advantage of this opportunity. There is no fee.
