



Teaching Toward Tomorrow

Setting an Agenda

for Modern

Orthodox Education

A Symposium Edited by
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DOING MORE WITH LESS

Marvin Schick

It is true, as the third question posed to participants in this symposium states, that "the Jewish community is constantly founding new institutions and programs." This reality strikes me as a significant part of what is wrong, even dysfunctional, in organized American Jewish life, specifically including education. Although certain additional projects may be beneficial, in the aggregate we are saddled with too many and there is a need to downsize, to get rid of organizations and projects that are essentially dead but are kept alive through public relations and fundraising and because we hardly know how to pull the plug on organizations that no longer have any life to them. Alas, one of the imperatives of contemporary Jewry is, "Thou shalt not kill an organization."

Admittedly, my view is not shared by many and apparently not by the symposium's organizers who ask: "What new programs, initiatives, curricula, institutions, or resources would...[I] like to see the Orthodox community create or expand?" With the exception of additional schools

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to meet inadequately met needs or to provide a meaningful religious education to population segments that are now underserved, there is not much that I would add. The already bloated bureaucracy of American Jewish education – what I refer to as Jewish Education, Inc. – need not become more bloated, although that is likely to happen because there are naïve funding sources that believe that American Jewish education most needs additional programs and organizations that operate away from the school and away from the classroom.

This development reflects in an important way not only the Jewish imperative to create organizations but also the tendency in American life to respond to dissatisfaction with educational performance by creating

new bureaucracies and activities aimed at improving the educational product. It is rarely asked whether the deficit in performance arises from poor teaching and other defects inside the school or perhaps from conditions outside of the school, such things as the destructive social pathologies that for decades have harmed many children and eroded their capacity to study and to be taught. Nor is it considered necessary to assess whether the out-of-school initiatives that are favored and well-fed have resulted in educational improvement. This is an omission that strikes me as arrogant in view of the incessant demand by educational reformers that student educational performance be carefully monitored and assessed.

In the day school world, the expansion of initiatives to improve the quality of education is not accompanied by an examination of whether what is being funded makes any appreciable difference, the assumption being that it must because the intentions are good and schools now have additional resources. Paradoxically, although this should not be a surprise, new projects funded by outside sources may add to the severe financial stress that Jewish schools operate under, because additional staff and other costs may be required. Furthermore, heed is not paid to the difficulty of integrating new projects into dual curriculum arrangements that already operate under time and other constraints.

There is an enormous disparity in per student expenditures in Jewish day schools, a pattern that is remarkable, even stunning, because there is nothing remotely like it in public education. Day schools that serve affluent communities and student populations, mainly in the non-Orthodox and Modern Orthodox sectors, may have per student operating costs of \$20,000 or more per year, nearly all of which is met through tuition and mandatory fees. In the yeshiva world and Hassidic sectors, which constitute more than half of all day school enrollment, the average per student expenditure is about one-third of what it is in the affluent schools. In the incredibly underfunded institutions that serve an outreach function or concentrate on immigrant populations, the average per student expenditure comes to approximately \$5,000 per year. The poorer schools are the ones that most need help, and they are the ones least capable of taking advantage of new initiatives.

Instead of tackling these and other critical in-school issues, the preference these days is to add to Jewish Education, Inc. We revel in the self-delusion that classroom performance will thereby be better. This self-

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delusion is not victimless because in the process badly needed funds that might be available to assist badly underfunded schools are diverted to trivial educational pursuits. Another unfortunate by-product is that as new programs are funded, at least as often as not their senior staff comes

from the top rank of day school educators, the upshot being that our schools are bereft of talented people.

I know that I have said many times over the years what I am saying here, albeit with some variation to reflect changing circumstances. I know that my advocacy has little effect. I continue on this path not because I want to be a scold, but because my active involvement in Torah *hinnukh* which now spans more than fifty years has implanted in me the conclusion that unless we have the intellectual and personal courage to confront the educational bureaucrats, there is little prospect that the situation of our schools will improve. The starting point for day school improvement in North American must be the downsizing of our bureaucracy. In short, we can accomplish more if there were less, if there were fewer projects, fewer conferences, fewer expensive magic carpet trips by North American educators to Israel where we are to believe that their one week or two week participation in a program will transform them and transform their school.

The training train is not going to be taken out of service anytime soon. One reason is that the notion of training educators is seductive. Another factor is the seismic change in Jewish philanthropy. There has been a shift away from Federation to private foundations and the latter are more dynamic and they have created a new dynamic. For all of their shortcomings, notably in assisting day schools, what Federations gave went directly to the schools. They were helped, not very much in most localities, yet they were helped.

Those now calling the shots are the private philanthropists, often super-rich and generous people who made their mark by being creative and bold in the business world. In their philanthropy, they tend to get their kicks out of supporting that which has their logo on it. They seek new challenges and new zones of creativity, and this impels them to favor initiatives that purport to reform. They do not want their funds to serve as a xerox of what already is. They favor activities that occur outside of the school and since there is little coordination in this new world of Jewish philanthropy, there is an excess of duplication, as is evident in the multiplicity of training programs for principals.

For all of my disdain for what is transpiring, I recognize that there are activities that occur outside of the classroom and school that can have a positive bearing on what goes on inside of school. The key requirement is linkage. Curriculum development illustrates the point. Our schools need guidance on curriculum matters, on both the religious and secular side. This includes questions arising out of the inevitable time constraints schools face, as well as issues related to their diverse school populations. There is the challenge of how best to teach Hebrew and there are critical deficits in the teaching of Tanakh and Jewish history. New approaches are needed.

A different set of curriculum challenges arise from societal and technological changes. An example of the former is the painful question of how to educate or attempt to educate at-risk children. As for technology, the internet and other advances have opened opportunities that have not been sufficiently explored. A greater effort has to be made to introduce distance learning into our schools, even for the elementary grades. This is an urgent matter for day schools located in communities where qualified faculty to teach Judaic subjects are difficult to come by. This is also an issue for small day schools that may not have sufficient funds to hire top-notch faculty.

Rather than spending millions on principal training which is an inorganic activity whose transient impact wears off as quickly as a summer tan vanishes, we need to allocate serious resources to mentoring

arrangements whereby respected veteran educators are available to counsel on an on-going basis new teachers and educational leaders, as well as veteran educators who have limitations or who face issues on which they need guidance. Mentoring is best conducted not via an outside program but inside of a school where there is physical proximity and perhaps also emotional affinity between the mentor and the educator who is being guided. Admittedly, this isn't always possible. Outside intervention, including through internet communication, should be tested.

We need to encourage experimentation in Jewish education because overwhelmingly American Jewish youth are not receiving a meaningful Jewish education. There is no prospect that what is needed can arise inside of our schools, so that outside intervention is the way to go. Here are three areas:

1. Is it possible, at least for the larger day schools, to create school within a school arrangements, the purpose being to meet the particular abilities and interests of students who do not fit into the regular class structure?

2. The tuition crisis rolls merrily along, worsening each year. There isn't a ghost of a chance that private philanthropy will come to the rescue, nor is there significant governmental support in the offing. Is it possible to establish cooperative arrangements amongst schools within the same community, the aim being to create economy of scale? Along the same lines, is it possible to forge relationships whereby faculty, primarily those with specialties, will be shared by two or more schools?

3. There are thousands of children from fairly traditional homes whose parents do not send them to a day school, either because of an attitudinal barrier or a financial barrier. Typically, supplementary schools are insipid and ineffective. There is an incipient movement among the Orthodox, primarily involving persons with an outreach orientation, to establish new and more religiously purposeful supplementary education arrangements for children from traditional homes who are being educated in public schools.

A common feature of these examples - there are others - is that reform and improvement can come if they are linked with schools, which are the

primary instrument for providing a Torah education. Outside intervention is needed if only because day schools are not going to engage in experiments. As we all know, a day school is a busy place and principals are busy people. They are under constant pressure. There is an endless stream of problems and there are several different constituencies. Each day there are challenges relating to faculty and other staff, parents and students, lay leaders and perhaps contributors. Creativity is scarcely on the agenda.

Without outside help, it is hard to bring about significant improvement. In turn, this requires that those on the outside understand that their activity is not an end in itself. They must recognize that education occurs in classrooms, in the mysterious encounter between teachers and students. If we do not oversell what outside projects can accomplish and if they are conducted with a sense of modesty and respect for those who have direct responsibility for the education of our children, there is some prospect that outside initiatives and activities can bring about meaningful improvements inside of our schools.

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