
Executive Summary

In recent years, there has been a dramatic expansion of Jewish day school enrollment and capacity, driven by an increase in the number of non-Orthodox schools. Yet, despite their impressive growth, and high expectations for day schools as a strategy to ensure Jewish engagement, they are selected by only a small percentage of eligible families. Non-Orthodox parents are inhibited from selecting Jewish day schools by concerns regarding the quality of the secular education that these schools provide and their ability to address individual learning needs. Parents also worry that the lack of diversity in day schools will leave their children unable to function in a pluralistic society.

The present report describes the first national study specifically designed to determine the near-term effects of day schools on the academic, social, and Jewish trajectories of former students during their college years. The study considers the impact of day schooling in a variety of areas including Jewish identity and connections to Jewish communal life, as well as social and academic integration into college. Second, the study contextualizes the experiences of students from day schools through comparison with Jewish undergraduates from private and public school backgrounds.

The design of the on-line survey used in the project was informed by the results of focus groups with Jewish college students. The survey assesses undergraduates' perceptions of their educational and social experiences prior to college, the capacity of their previous education to address their individual learning styles and needs, their academic preparedness for secondary school and college level work, their social competence and academic self-confidence as they transitioned from high school to college campus, and their sense of individual responsibility for addressing social problems.

A two-frame sampling strategy allowed access to a large group of college-age alumni of Jewish day schools, as well as Jewish undergraduates from other

pre-college educational choices. The primary sampling strategy entailed use of email lists obtained from twelve campus Hillel organizations. The supplementary sampling strategy involved the use of lists of college-age alumni from 16 Jewish day schools. Contact was attempted with more than 9,000 email addresses, and 3,312 Jewish undergraduates completed the survey.

Respondents represent a diversity of educational backgrounds. More than one-third attended a Jewish day school at some point during grades one through twelve. Over half graduated from a public high school, about a fifth graduated from a Jewish high school, and 15% from a non-Jewish independent school. The sample reflects the broad socio-demographic range of the population. The sample is relatively balanced for gender and features virtually equal representation from students in all four years of college. Comparison of the communities in which students graduated high school with the geographic distribution of the total U.S. Jewish population indicates that the obtained sample closely mirrors patterns of residence for American Jews.

Results

Alumni of Jewish high schools gain admittance to colleges and universities that represent the full spectrum of institutions of higher education including the most highly selective. In fact, the majority of the respondents to the present survey attend colleges and universities in the top quartile of ranked schools. For purposes of testing the adequacy of day school preparation for college, and the impact of day school education on the ability of students to function in both Jewish and non-Jewish settings, the responses of day school graduates (Orthodox and non-Orthodox) were compared with those of public and private school respondents.

Academic Preparation in High School

Jewish high school alumni from a non-Orthodox background are the most positive about the level of intellectual challenge and engagement fostered by teachers in classes. This group's ratings of its preparation in the areas of history, writing, and study skills are on par with the ratings of alumni from private high schools and significantly higher than those of either Orthodox raised alumni of Jewish high schools or alumni of public schools. However, in math, science, and computer literacy, Jewish high school alumni from both Orthodox and non-Orthodox backgrounds perceive that they were significantly less well prepared as compared with both public and private high school peers.

Academic Performance in College

There are no significant differences in the self-reported GPAs of those who attended public, private, or day schools. Students from non-Orthodox backgrounds with six or more years of day school demonstrate the highest academic self-confidence. While day school students from an Orthodox background experience lower math confidence, they like other students who attended day schools, do not appear to experience any skill deficits that limit their willingness to select major fields of study that are dependent on skills related to math and science. Nor are they any more likely than other students to feel the need for tutoring or remedial work in math or science.

Response to Individual Learning Needs

Jewish high school alumni from non-Orthodox backgrounds are the most positive about the encouragement and support received from teachers, and are second only to private high school peers when it comes to their evaluations of the availability of extra help or attention to individual learning needs. By contrast, Jewish high school alumni from Orthodox backgrounds are consistently the least

positive in their evaluations of their school's response to their individual learning needs and the availability of supplementary help. At both ends of the spectrum of ability, day schools appear to be less able to serve the needs of diverse learners, both those who are academically gifted and those who need additional or specialized educational supports.

Integration into College Life

Like other undergraduates, students who attended day schools participate in all aspects of undergraduate life and are well represented in the ranks of student leaders. Even as they maintain strong connections to their day school friends, the social networks of Jewish high school alumni are overwhelmingly comprised of new friends they have met in their dorms, in classes, and through the clubs and organizations in which they participate. At the same time, former day school students, especially those with extensive day school experience, have shown themselves to be more resistant than their public school peers to social pressures for the type of heavy drinking that leads to other risky situations and behaviors. The most striking feature of the social networks of those who attended day schools is the density of their connections with Jewish peers. Those with extensive day school experience are also more likely to restrict their dating to Jewish peers.

Jewish Campus Involvement

Whether the criterion is involvement in formal Jewish learning, enrollment in Jewish studies courses, observance of holidays, programs on the Holocaust, Israel and Jewish culture, opportunities to do community service sponsored by a Jewish organization, knowledge of Israel or informal celebrations of Jewish holidays with friends, those who have attended day schools are more involved compared with those who did not attend. In terms of most aspects of Jewish campus life and ritual

observance, former day school attendees from Orthodox homes are far and away the most involved. But perhaps even more striking is the demonstrated power of day schools to build strong Jewish identities and connections among students who come from non-Orthodox backgrounds.

Civic Responsibility

Day schools, especially those that attract students from non-Orthodox backgrounds, succeed at imparting an orientation of civic and social responsibility to their students. Former day school students express a stronger sense of responsibility towards addressing the needs of the larger society by influencing social values, helping those in need, volunteering their time to social change efforts, and finding careers that allow them to be of service to the larger community as compared with their public and private school peers. Students with day school experience, especially those from Orthodox backgrounds, also express a greater commitment to the Jewish community, as reflected in their intent to pursue Jewish communal careers.

Conclusions

The results of the present study provide a very positive portrait of the successes of day school students, both in terms of the ways they are similar to and the ways they do better than their public and private school peers. Nevertheless, the finding that day school alumni, compared to other Jewish students, perceive themselves as less well prepared in math, science, and computer literacy suggests an area ripe for improvement. The present results also suggest that day schools need to attend to the individual learning needs of all their students, including those who may need greater challenge and enrichment as well as those who may require extra educational supports. Neither parents nor students should feel that educational needs are compromised.

Along with drawing attention to these areas for change, this report reveals areas of success and presents a substantial opportunity to communicate that success to a wider audience of parents. Although the present findings suggest that day schools can do more to improve math and science learning and to address the needs of diverse learners, the report also validates that day schools provide top-notch preparation for a broad range of colleges and universities, including those that are the most selective.