

**THE EPSTEIN SCHOOL
SOLOMON SCHECHTER SCHOOL OF ATLANTA**

**HEAD OF SCHOOL SEARCH
LEADERSHIP STATEMENT**

April 3, 2001

- **Introduction.**

The Epstein School, Solomon Schechter School of Atlanta, is commencing a search for the position of Head of School. Our current Head of School, Cheryl R. Finkel, has announced her intention to step down at the end of the 2001-2002 school year, after 19 years as the Head of School, to pursue writing, consulting and teaching Jewish educators.

While we are mindful of the extraordinary gift of having benefited from such an esteemed leader and great educator, the entire school community recognizes that this search is also a moment of great opportunity. The introspection required in identifying the necessary attributes of new leadership provides an opportunity for building institutional consensus on the state of the school, its needs and its goals. With new leadership comes new energy and perspective to address these needs and goals. Thus, The Epstein School community approaches this search with great excitement as we imagine anew what is possible.

This Leadership Statement is intended to provide prospective applicants for the position with history and background information about the school, and a statement of the opportunities and challenges for the new Head of School.

- **Mission Statement.**

The Epstein School, Solomon Schechter School of Atlanta, guided by the principles of Conservative Judaism, prepares today's Jewish youth to become knowledgeable, committed Jews and responsible citizens. Our integrated dual-language curriculum combines innovative and traditional teaching methods, creating the highest quality general and Judaic education for children from preschool through the eighth grade. Our staff provides a nurturing, respectful and stimulating environment. Our teachers actively engage each student. They foster a love of learning and discovery, encourage students to reach their individual potential, and equip them with the tools for critical inquiry and responsible leadership. Strengthened by a commitment to God, Torah, and Israel, The Epstein School, in partnership with family and community, prepares our students to meet the challenges of an ever-changing world.

- **Background and History.**

The Epstein School was founded in 1973, when Rabbi Harry H. Epstein and the leaders of Atlanta's Ahavath Achim Synagogue recognized the need for a new Jewish day school that would serve the needs of modern Jews who were well-aculturated into American society. Since then, The Epstein School has devoted itself to fostering pride in the unique heritage, customs and

traditions of Judaism while providing its students with the educational foundation necessary for the fast-changing pace of modern society.

The school was initially housed in the educational wing of Ahavath Achim Synagogue. By 1986, however, enrollment exceeded 300 students, and the synagogue's facilities had become inadequate. Moreover, the northward demographic shifts of Atlanta's Jewish families had made it desirable to locate the school's main campus to the north. The school secured the lease of a Fulton County elementary school that was being closed due to declining enrollment. The school relocated its main campus to this site, in the Sandy Springs suburb of Atlanta, in the fall of 1987. The move to the new building in the fall of 1987 was a milestone in the evolution of the school into a vital, independent institution. As long as it was housed in the Ahavath Achim building, the school was viewed as more or less "belonging" to the synagogue, in spite of the fact that the student body represented many elements of the Jewish community.

The move also ushered in an era of dramatic growth and accomplishment for the school. The Epstein School was recognized by presentation of both a Solomon Schechter Award for Excellence and a major grant for Program Excellence from the Jim Joseph Foundation. In 1991, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) granted the school full accreditation and membership. The school was reaccredited in the spring of 1996, and is currently in the process of its second reaccreditation.

The school has built a Jewish educational culture in which teachers continuously assess and improve their own methods in light of current research findings on effective educational practices. Using the original SACS self-study as a planning model and outside consultants as expert advisors, the faculty and administration have developed a pattern of continuous improvement that has made the school an exciting, superior institution. Each year they concentrate on particular academic and religious disciplines, evaluating curriculum, teaching and school culture in the light of student achievement. In addition, they set goals for improvement, provide professional development to implement the new programs, assess the results, and then establish new goals. Thus, they have enriched and transformed all areas of Judaic and general education and introduced a wide range of innovative programs.

Perhaps the underlying educational philosophy guiding the school is the concept that each student should have every opportunity to achieve his or her fullest potential. A program called REACH (which stands for Reach Each CHild) exemplifies this concept. The program constantly monitors the progress of each student. Through careful evaluation, the program assists the remedial student, advances the achiever, and carefully supervises the needs of those in the middle. This outstanding academic innovation was recognized with an Award for Program Excellence from the Jim Joseph Foundation.

This attention to each student strongly influences the manner in which the faculty evaluates itself, and has motivated the faculty to develop and implement other forward-looking methodologies. A direct outgrowth of REACH is the *Sha'ar* (Gateway) Program, which addresses the special needs of children who are challenged by the dual language curriculum of the school. It has given many students the ability either to reenter the school from special education placements or to remain and progress with their peer groups.

During the 1990's the school pioneered many other rich curriculum innovations and extracurricular enhancements. These include the *Na'aseh V'nishma* (To Perform and then to Study) Program, a talmud-based *mitzvah* program for middle school students; Science on Wheels; the *Tal Am* (Beginning Hebrew) Program; and the *Derech Eretz* (Responsible Citizenship) Program, which encourages appropriate student behavior and personal interaction.

As core programs for students were established and improved, there was a recognized need to expand the Jewish mission of the school to include parents, who in the final analysis are the primary educators of their children. Learning opportunities for the adult members of the Epstein community have expanded and matured with the support of special grants from the *Avi Chai* Foundation. A full time Jewish Family Educator coordinates ongoing parent education, offering adults numerous opportunities throughout the year to broaden their Jewish horizons.

One of the most innovative and exciting programs is the eighth grade Israel study tour, initiated in May, 1995. This two and a half weeks of intensive field work in the Jewish homeland is a culmination and commencement experience for Epstein graduates. Parents are urged to begin planning for the trip several years prior to eighth grade and children are encouraged to earn a portion of the cost themselves. Over the years, small supplements from other sources have made it possible to remove any cost barriers, thus allowing all children to participate. Predictably, the impact on Epstein graduates has been enormous.

Since 1987, the school has been housed on two campuses. A portion of the Early Childhood Program is housed in the recently renovated educational wing of the Ahavath Achim Synagogue, site of the original campus. The main Sandy Springs campus facility originally consisted of a 52,000 square foot public school building built in 1954, which included a cafeteria that doubled as the auditorium, three converted classrooms that served as the library, a computer laboratory housed in a former tutorial room, and assorted areas dedicated to support functions. The school initially modified that facility to include six modular trailers (housing a total of 34 middle school classrooms).

Between September 1990 and June 1991, the Board of Trustees undertook an extensive search for a permanent home for the school. After studying more than 20 possible sites in the Atlanta metropolitan area, the Board decided to remain at the Sandy Springs campus and to purchase the facility from the Fulton County Board of Education. The Sandy Springs facility was chosen because it was in the geographic center of the school's constituent families, and offered the most cost effective solution to its space needs. The purchase was concluded in 1994.

Between 1995 and 1997, the Sandy Springs campus was fully developed with a gymnasium and new athletic fields (completed in 1996), and a new educational building. The new educational building is a two-story structure, housing the middle school on its second floor and providing on its first floor a new enrichment wing (including the *Bet Tefillah*, a large media center, a science laboratory, computer labs, an art studio, a drama studio, and multiple tutorial rooms), as well as office facilities for the head of school and senior administrative staff.

At present, the Epstein School is at full enrollment, serving 650 students, pre-school through eighth grade, at its main campus, and an additional 50 preschool students at the Ahavath Achim Synagogue.

The Board of Trustees has identified the following areas (not in any particular order of priority) as the most critical to be addressed by the new Head of School:

- **Mission.**

Although the school has been a Solomon Schechter School since its formation, it has historically drawn students from families representing the entire spectrum of synagogue affiliation, and continues to do so today. Thus, maintaining and articulating the Conservative Jewish mission of the school remains a constant challenge; and the ongoing process of educating and orienting parents and other constituencies regarding the mission remains a constant priority. Although blessed with a substantial and committed core of mission-focused leadership, the school continues to look to its Head of School as the principal “keeper” of the mission.

Thus, the new Head of School must have an unqualified belief in Jewish day school education, unconditional support for the School’s mission as a Conservative Solomon Schechter Day School, and the demonstrated ability to assume the principal responsibility for the ongoing refinement of the School’s mission and communication of the mission to the School community and the broader Jewish community.

- **Fundraising and Endowment.**

Between 1992 and 1995, the school conducted a phenomenally successful capital campaign to finance the acquisition and improvement of the Sandy Springs campus. Although professional fundraising consultants had indicated that the school should anticipate a maximum capacity for its capital campaign of only \$3.5 million, the campaign raised over \$6.1 million. The school received wide support from its traditional sources of support in the Atlanta Jewish community. However, the most dramatic element of the campaign’s success was the amount of money raised from parents of students then currently enrolled in the school. By the overwhelming generosity of those most affected and directly impacted by the school’s capital project, the school was able to far exceed the potential fundraising projections.

Since the conclusion of the capital campaign, the school’s annual fundraising efforts have become increasingly more successful each year, and annual fundraising for the current fiscal year is projected to exceed \$400,000. The school’s annual fundraising has progressed from being largely event-based to a significant annual campaign. However, participation by parents in the annual campaign is currently less than 60%; and there is a need for continued strengthening of the development office.

The Board has stated that the creation of an endowment of not less the \$10 million (currently approximately \$1.5 million) is the single most pressing institutional priority of the school, and has authorized the preparation for an endowment campaign for the school, which is in its formative stages. The objectives of the endowment campaign include faculty recruitment

and retention (including compensation); faculty professional development; technology; physical plant improvements; and academic and non-academic program enhancements. Only through a strong endowment can the school achieve the requisite level of financial security and independence while avoiding excessive tuition increases.

Thus, the new Head of School must have a strong commitment to institutional advancement, and must have the demonstrated ability to work in partnership with the school's lay leadership, and to perform key internal and external roles, in evolving the school's annual fundraising, building the school's endowment, and otherwise moving the school toward financial independence.

- **Academic Administration.**

Due to the school's strong growth, the development of the appropriate academic administrative structure has remained a constant challenge. While the school is fortunate to have an excellent corps of academic administrators and numerous innovative structural approaches have been implemented over the years, there is a need for continued improvement of the structure to achieve optimal performance.

The new Head of School must have the demonstrated ability to structure, organize and lead the school's administrative team, and the willingness to delegate both responsibility and authority.

- **Faculty.**

The Epstein faculty is composed of over one hundred full-time and part-time professionals, almost all of whom hold Masters degrees. Since 1997, the faculty has included a Rabbi in residence. The faculty is encouraged to pursue professional development and advanced academic degrees. All of the faculty members bring to the classroom a proven commitment to education and an intimate knowledge of their subject matter. They constantly refine this knowledge through continuing education programs, in-service training and educational conferences. The student/teacher ratio allows substantial opportunities for the faculty to provide individual attention to each student. However, the school has experienced some untimely teacher attrition. Additionally, the faculty has expressed the need for more consistent and uniform administrative support.

The new Head of School must have the demonstrated ability to recruit and retain excellent faculty, enhance faculty satisfaction and sense of full administrative support, refine the procedures for faculty evaluation, and develop programs for the constant enhancement of faculty expertise.

- **Curriculum and Programs.**

Regular curriculum development and refinement is a central part of the ongoing work of the faculty and administration. However, curriculum development must proceed more rapidly to remain consistent with best practices, particularly in the areas of science, math, Hebrew and

Tanach. The Administration, which articulates a clear commitment to curriculum excellence, needs to assume a more “hands on” role in the substantive aspects of this process. Further, there is work to be done in developing the school’s programs for both gifted students and students who learn differently (particularly at the middle school level), evolving the distinct middle school curriculum, and enhancing the school’s extra-curricular and non-academic offerings.

The new Head of School must have a graduate academic degree, be Jewishly educated, and have the demonstrated ability to lead the evolution and consistent improvement of both the Judaic and general studies curricula of the School.

- **Technology.**

The Board has endorsed the development of leading edge technology as a top priority for the school. Over recent years, substantial strides have been made in this area. The school has created a department of media and technology, and is committed to the integration and application of media and technology in all academic programs. There has been increased use of technology in planning; and technology has been integrated into all areas of the curriculum. A website has been developed for the school and continues to evolve as a communications tool. In addition, a state of the art television studio has been donated to the school and is due to be operational by the fall of 2001. There is a continuing need for faculty training in the educational uses of technology; and the school has not yet succeeded in incorporating into its annual budgeting the funds necessary to address the rapid pace of evolution and obsolescence of technology.

The new Head of School must have a demonstrated understanding of the use of technology as an educational tool, as well as in all other aspects of school operations, and a strong commitment to the establishment and maintenance of the school as a state of the art technology environment.

- **Physical Facilities.**

The school’s Sandy Springs campus is fully developed, with all facilities for operation of that campus at full enrollment. However, the majority of available funds have been devoted to construction of new facilities and only limited renovation of the original public school building located on the campus has been accomplished. Thus, there remains a need for a comprehensive renovation of the original facilities, which house the pre-school and elementary school, the business office, and the cafeteria/auditorium facility.

The new Head of School must have the demonstrated ability to provide leadership in the evaluation and development of the physical facilities.

- **Business and Financial Administration.**

The school’s business operations are currently sound and well managed, having successfully navigated the transition from the operations of a small, growing school to the management demands of a mature school whose annual budget exceeds \$7 million. Having

reached effective full enrollment, the school is now operated on a business model that can no longer rely upon annual enrollment growth to provide the financial resources for increased budgetary demands. Rather, the challenge has now shifted to management of the school from a stable enrollment base.

The business management of a mature school demands that the new Head of School have knowledge and understanding of prudent fiscal practices, and the ability to operate the school within budgetary constraints.

- **Board of Trustees.**

The Epstein School enjoys both the strengths and challenges that are inherent in a Board of Trustees composed largely of parents. The Board is active, involved, committed and supportive. At times, however, Trustees may have difficulty distinguishing between parent and Trustee roles. Additionally, there is a continuing need to educate the Board, and to orient the Board regarding the school's mission.

The new Head of School must have the demonstrated ability to develop and cultivate the appropriate partnership with the school's Board of Trustees for the advancement of the school and its mission, and to foster and promote the evolution of the proper Board role in the active management of the school.

- **School Community.**

The Epstein School is blessed with an extraordinary school community, a "family" in the truest sense. Parents interact with the administration and faculty regularly and closely; parents and other volunteers are a constant presence in support of school programs and activities; and virtually all Epstein families have close relationships with many other school families, beyond those that are inherent in the shared school experience.

This environment demands a unique leadership style. The new Head of School must have a style of leadership that is candid, caring, creative, perceptive, open and team-oriented; must have deep sensitivity to the academic, spiritual and emotional well being of our students and their families; and must have a commitment to clear communication with students, parents and the broader school community.

- **Community Relations.**

As is the case with all Jewish day schools, The Epstein School plays an important role in the broader Atlanta Jewish community. The school is a beneficiary agency of the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta, and also continues to receive financial support, both monetary and in kind, from the Ahavath Achim Synagogue. The school is one of four Jewish day schools in Atlanta providing elementary and middle school education. There are three Jewish day schools at the high school level, and an additional evening program for high school students, all of which provide Epstein graduates the opportunity to continue their Jewish education. Atlanta has over

30 synagogues, including four Conservative synagogues. Thus, the relationship of the school to the broader Jewish community, and its participation in that community, is extremely important.

The new Head of School must have strong commitment to assuming a leadership position in, and building strong relationships with, the broader Atlanta Jewish community and its schools, synagogues and other organizations.

- **Application Procedures.**

Interested candidates are encouraged to submit a letter responding to this Leadership Statement, together with a resume and professional references, to:

M. Andrew Kauss and Judy D. Wolman
Epstein School Search Committee Co-chairs
c/o Kilpatrick Stockton LLP
Suite 2800
1100 Peachtree Street
Atlanta, Georgia 30309

The Search Committee will maintain the confidentiality of all applications. Only the name(s) of the finalist candidate(s) will be announced to the school community, and then only after the candidate has been informed and has agreed to continue as a finalist candidate.

Source: Andy Kauss and Dr. Judy Wolman, co-chairs of the Search Committee.