

**Opening the Gateway from Early Childhood Programs into Jewish
Day Schools**

Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education

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Compiled by Devra I. Weiss

PEJE

**Partnership for Excellence
in Jewish Education**

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חורים אלו עלמדו
חייקיות באמונה
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*Teachers and school children –
precious jewels of our community*
MIDRASH RABBAH, SONG OF SONGS

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Background

PEJE provides grants to Jewish day schools to build capacity in various areas that are believed to have an impact on enrollment growth. Grants include, at a minimum, funding for a coach to work with the school on a certain set of issues.

One focus of PEJE grants and coaching is the development of a rich relationship between the school and its key feeder¹ organizations, and the leveraging of those relationships to grow enrollment. The Grants and Coaching Departments conducted research in early 2005 to better understand success factors, obstacles, and opportunities with regard to JDS relationships with early childhood education (ECE) programs. Eight experts in various aspects of the field were interviewed about what kinds of interventions PEJE might fund in this area, what coach competencies would be valuable, what obstacles schools may face, and what best practice and success look like. This document summarizes the findings of and new thinking sparked by that research. *It is not meant to be an exhaustive treatment of the subject, but rather a compilation of information and insights from the research.*

Situational Analysis

A challenging history and environment

Jewish day schools as a group have had little or no relationships with preschools historically; recent attempts to develop relationships have been perceived as purely attempts to recruit new students, with no benefit to the preschools. The use of the term “feeder” embodies the nature of this potentially predatory relationship.

Early childhood educators have been marginalized and not recognized by society in general as educators, and not recognized as Judaic educators by the Jewish community. Their work is often regarded as “day care” and not as education. In fact, many have not viewed themselves as part of an educational or Jewish educational system.

Among Jewish day schools that have their own preschools, it is not uncommon to see that preschool teachers are paid significantly less than elementary school teachers. (The pattern continues in upper grades as well, as teachers at each level tend to earn more than those teaching at the level below.)

Opportunities and trends

Early childhood Jewish educators are starting to view themselves as educators and as part of a system. They are starting to pay attention to whether the children they teach as toddlers continue their formal Jewish education. National organizations working to strengthen this trend include the Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative (JECEI) and the Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education (CAJE).

Adult education for young parents is proving to have a positive impact on the parents’ choice of day school education for their children.

Many Jewish religious schools don’t start until 2nd grade, such that many children get no formal Jewish education during kindergarten and 1st grade.

Common mistakes and stumbling blocks

Of particular importance in recruiting from early childhood settings, and often relevant beyond

- The “relationship-building” and recruitment activities of many Jewish day schools send the message that they are primarily interested in their own enrollment. Even in PEJE’s research

¹ As will be explained later in this document, the term “feeder” should be avoided, yet is used here for clarity.

on this subject, we ran into obstacles simply by talking about wanting to “help schools build relationships with preschools to grow enrollment.” The up-front objective needs to be articulated to reflect the larger picture of wanting to strengthen Jewish education in the community, and wanting to keep Jewish children in formal Jewish educational programs.

- There is a systems element to this issue – it is not only about moving students from one school to the next but also about the community view (or lack thereof) of the system of Jewish education. Reframe the question as: How do we ensure that Jewish children in Jewish preschool will continue their formal Jewish education? What role can Jewish day schools play in this?
- When working with a particular ECE program, it is important to understand the value and culture of the program. What makes it successful? Why do parents choose it? This provides context for why the program does or does not (or should or should not) send children to the day school. For example, if a preschool is full because of its excellent track record of sending students on to the local prep school, then there is more at stake than simply convincing the director and teachers to recommend the Jewish day school.
- Understanding the value and culture of the ECE program also allows the JDS to show honor and respect for the preschool. Show appreciation and pay attention – it might not be “just another preschool.”
- The day school needs to help the preschool professionals learn the value and culture of the day school, particularly what Jewish education can offer the entire family. What do day schools offer beyond education for the children?
- Many early childhood educators feel that day school professionals often send the message that they are “holier” or more important than the preschool teachers. From all sides, there is a lack of both collegiality and the sense that everyone is working toward the same goal – raising and educating Jewish children.
- Day schools should be careful to involve representatives of other institutions in the development of programs when the other institutions are the audience. For example, rather than offering to send a teacher to teach Hebrew songs to the preschool children, talk to the preschool teachers about the role of Hebrew in their programs, and ask how your resources can help them achieve their goals. Don’t create programs for others or assume that others want what you have to offer. Create dialogue that lets everyone know we’re all in the same business and working toward the same goals.
- Day schools should be careful to communicate their acceptance criteria to the preschools, particularly their positions with respect to special needs. In the absence of this communication, a preschool may end up promoting the day school to families whose children are not appropriate and might not get accepted or be successful at the day school. This, in turn, reduces the likelihood of the preschool recommending the day school in the future.

Relating to recruitment in general

- A school should never badmouth other schools or programs – schools should be able to sell themselves without denigrating others.
- Not every school has or can afford an admission director. Nonetheless, every school needs someone who directs recruitment activities and relationship-building work. One point person must be able to give a lot of time and personal attention.
- Remember that the admission process does not end with the submission of an application. Schools need to continue cultivating the relationship until the child enters the classroom – and then it is still helpful to check in with the family regularly, including during the first week of school and at the end of the first year.
- Don’t ignore the community politics.

Knowledge Base

The key message learned through our research is that relationships are central to this work. Successful enrollment of children from preschool into Jewish elementary school has more to do with the relationships between the institutions, and between the day school leaders and other community leaders, than any other individual factor.

To do this work, a school needs people involved in building and stewarding key relationships who collectively have the following knowledge, some of which may be brought in by a coach.

Key influencers in the school selection decision

- Preschool directors: very important; they set the tone for the preschool.
- Pre-k teachers: they have much more frequent contact with the parents and know the children better than the directors.
- Parents who have sent children through the program already (parents of older children): they strongly influence parents of younger children.
- Rabbis: Whether or not a pulpit rabbi plays a strong role in the synagogue's preschool, the rabbi may be consulted by parents making decisions about Jewish education. Some rabbis can be vocal day school advocates in the preschool and synagogue settings.

People who can gain access to the key influencers

- Day school parents who have relationships with the preschools, synagogues, rabbis, etc. – they can serve as parent ambassadors to other programs and institutions.
- Some communities have an early childhood specialist at the central agency who meets regularly with the preschool directors.

Academic philosophies and key terminology

There are a number of different approaches to preschool and elementary education. A basic understanding of the common approaches is helpful to appreciate the differences between various programs at the same level and to ascertain whether students from one program will be appropriate for a program at the next level. Examples include:

- Reggio Emilia
- Montessori
- Whole Child

Importance of language

The word “feeder” can imply that one institution is defined solely as it relates to another, a potentially negative and narrow connotation. Used as a technical term to describe the institution that serves students prior to their enrollment at a school, it is seen as judgmental, implying that this is the only purpose of the other institution. What other words can be used? The term “partner institution” has been suggested, which describes all the institutions that can collaborate with a day school in the achievement of its mission.

The term “preschool” is also avoided by some, as it implies the entity is not a school, connoting “day care” as opposed to an educational program. The term “early childhood Jewish education” is preferred.

Best practice activities and programs

The most successful activities and programs for building relationships and ultimately strengthening enrollment offer a benefit to all parties involved (i.e. are not measured solely on their yield of new students at the day school), and involve all the relevant parties in the planning. This is one area where

a coach might be able to provide a number of ideas to get the juices flowing. Note that a program is more likely to succeed if the day school does not single-handedly initiate the program.

- Execute joint ECE/day school programs for parents on issues of common interest.
- Have day school teachers do an activity with the ECE children.
- Identify day school parents with relationships with key institutions in the community, and train them to build the relationships between those institutions and the day school.
- Invite pre-k classes to a field trip to the day school for a “taste of kindergarten” – this gives the ECE teachers a morning off from running the show and an opportunity to see the day school teachers in action.
- Execute a spring holiday program for parents of 3-4-year-olds during the time that parents are finalizing their decisions about the coming year.
- Develop programs with a synagogue – ideally with the rabbi present, or even better, hosted by the rabbi in his/her own home. This can be very effective if the rabbi is younger and has children in the school.
- Partner with a synagogue for a program, e.g. a confirmation ceremony for all kids of a particular age, highlighting both the religious school and the day school, and spotlighting the heads of both schools.
- Share a teacher with a preschool, particularly a resource whom the preschool might not be able to hire alone, such as a Hebrew teacher.
- Host an adult education program, particularly targeted at young parents (e.g. Melton, Ikkarim, Meah). Find a sponsor to underwrite the cost of babysitting; ideally both parents should be in class for this strategy to influence the parents’ shared values and choice of day school for their children.

Admission-related knowledge

Underlying a successful approach to recruiting a new entering class is a well-functioning admission department. A wealth of information about this topic is available; here are some specific points emphasized by our informants:

- Acceptance criteria are critical to ensure that the children who enroll have the greatest likelihood of staying in the school and being successful in the school.
- Clear roles and role boundaries for the admission director, head of school, and volunteers supporting the admission function must be established and documented.
- Note that even if a JDS does have an admission director, there are some times when the head of school needs to be the one to deliver a message to a particular person.
- Successful admission work relies on good data and analysis. Familiarity with the school’s data and the management implications of the Day School Peer Yardstick can greatly inform decision-making and goal-setting. For example, leading indicators from the Yardstick suggest that enrollment and growth are affected by:
 - The frequency and content of personalized admission tours
 - The number of previous-level schools represented in the entering class
 - The diversity of placement of graduates into the next level of schooling

Tools and Resources

Admission and early childhood resources specifically identified by informants include:

- Admission calendars, statistics, and tracking documents

- Admission, enrollment, and placement sections of the Day School Peer Yardstick
- Networks for admission directors (e.g. the Schechter Association network, the PEJE Community of Practice for Admission)
- PEJE, ISM, and NAIS training programs on admission
- Parent ambassador program information
- Head of school networks
- “Untapped Potential: The Status of Jewish Early Childhood Education in America”, by the Jewish Early Childhood Education Partnership (JECEP), available from <http://www.caje.org/earlychildhood/ec-research.htm>
- “Jewish Preschools as Gateways to Jewish Life”, by Pearl Beck, available from <http://www.caje.org/earlychildhood/ec-research.htm>
- “Toward a Proactive, Comprehensive Admission Program: What Every Head of School Should Know About Supervising the Admission Director” by Rheua S. Stakely, available from <http://www.peje.org/publications/Publications.asp>
- Day School Peer Yardstick Executive Summary, to be published by PEJE Fall 2005

Stages of development in relationship between a feeder organization and a Jewish day school:

- Stage 1: Listen! At the start of the relationship (or when looking to improve a relationship), ask people what they are thinking and feeling. Apologize when necessary! Do this with preschool teachers, directors, rabbis.
- Stage 2: Identify who the key players are to get involved and to cultivate. Who can provide the JDS with entree into the other organization? For example, if a teacher or principal at the school is a rabbi, then he or she might be able to talk to the local pulpit rabbis in a way that the head of school (as a non-rabbi) never can. Other people in the community might only speak with the head of school. Which parents can liaison to and open dialogue with other key institutions? Some discussions need to happen professional to professional, peer to peer, parent to parent.
- Stage 3: Establish ongoing modes of formal and informal communication. Give all parties recognition and acknowledgement. Establish the role of the parent ambassador as the person with an ear to the ground within the other organizations. Formal activities include adding rabbis and preschool directors to the school newsletter mailing list.
- Ideal stage: Establish a coalition involving all the related organizations.

Human development

Two open questions:

- What should PEJE, day schools, and coaches each know about child development, specifically from ages 4-6?
- What should PEJE, day schools, and coaches each know about the parent experience during the time that the child is developing from preschool to elementary school – particularly when dealing with the first child?

Typology: School and community structure

Dynamics and issues may relate to what kinds of organizations and schools exist in the community. What issues are likely to be important in the following situations?

- Community has only one Jewish day school versus multiple Jewish day schools

- Jewish children primarily attend Jewish preschools versus non-Jewish preschools in significant numbers
- The Jewish day school has a preschool versus does not have a preschool versus is not allowed to have a preschool
- What other types of situations should be considered?

Marketing knowledge

- Concept of key messages
- Evaluation of materials, school facility, behavior and language, etc. to see what messages are being sent
- Development of appropriate key messages and communication of messages through various media to various constituencies
- Selling without overselling
- Selling without denigrating other schools or programs
- Talking to young families: understanding parents' expectations for their children's Judaic and general education. Helping them understand what the day school offers the entire family. Parents have hopes and values and fears with respect to children's education.

Coach Competency Profile

We need at least one coach in the cadre or another accessible resource with deep early childhood expertise, to whom all the coaches can turn for guidance.

Necessary skills and experience

The following items were raised by informants in our interviews and have been classified according to coach competency model. The current definitions of these competencies align with these statements and provide additional richness and nuance.

Knowledge of Jewish Day School Culture and Organizational Practices

- Gets the importance and vibrancy of Jewish education
- Has understanding of Jewish communal structure as relates to day schools
- Has general understanding of academic philosophies – can compare different programs to understand differences between preschools (which may influence how a day school markets itself to a preschool) and to help preschool teachers understand the approach of the day school in order to identify which elementary school is right for each student.
- Familiar with the issues discussed in this document, particularly those from perspectives other than the day school perspective, such as the challenges faced by and frustrations felt by preschool teachers

Coaching

- Able to ask questions that get at the real politics of a situation
- Able to help the school to 1) ask the right questions and 2) make use of the answers.

Facilitating

- Able to bring people on board, or coach others in bringing people on board – e.g. how to ensure that elementary school faculty feels part of the admission process, how to ensure that preschool directors feel valued and part of the Jewish educational system

- Able to guide school leadership in navigating complex relationships, e.g. courting a preschool director from a preschool whose graduates go on to multiple elementary schools
- Able to build trust and relationships (not e.g. to be the one building the relationship with the preschool on behalf of the day school, but rather to bring people to the table so that the local people can build their own relationships). The coach can't be the convener, but can support the convening and facilitate.
- Nonjudgmental – able to work with (and help others work with) people with a variety of backgrounds, philosophies, and religious affiliations
- Good at working in communities that need to be brought together. Knows how to build bridges between communities that have more similarities than they might believe.
- Creates coalitions
- Sensitive to politics, issues, priorities and able to coach others to be sensitive to these things

Assessing School Needs

- Doesn't superimpose a template on the school
- Able to size up competition – give school an honest assessment of what they are up against

Managing Consulting Process

- Determines the goal of the coach-school relationship jointly with the school, e.g. to guide the school in strategic thinking, to enable the school to implement tactics, etc.

Enabling Change

- Able to move a school to implement, not just analyze
- Able to transfer knowledge and skills – build the capacity of the people at the school to do the work
- Background might include social work, communal work. Able to have a good relationship with others but not be afraid to push them and make them uncomfortable.
- Able to push the right buttons
- Motivates people

Consulting

- Knows stuff well – is highly competent in area of expertise – can't fake it. Has the ability to do it yet enable others to do it.

Other skills

- Strong communication skills, and able to help people give focus to their messages and see what messages they are communicating
- Understands marketing writ large
- Great interpersonal skills

Additional relevant skills and experience

- Internal and external marketing focused expertise to support enrollment: the development of key messages; assessment of existing materials, facility, language, and behavior in the communication of key messages; and the implementation of changes to incorporate new key messages.

- Direct prior experience with the work, as a head of school, admission director, marketing professional, or consultant, including the creation and implementation of a multi-year admission plan.
- Understanding of models of best practice in early childhood education.
- Familiarity with admission and early childhood resources and the ability to explain the theory behind the tactical. The ability to connect the school to the resources, even when there is no admission professional.

Preparing for Intervention

Fact-finding

The following questions were identified as critical to answer before or at the beginning of the intervention. PEJE may be able to answer some of the questions prior to giving a grant and/or assigning a coach. Other questions should be addressed by the coach. Some questions might be given to the school to guide the school's orientation of the coach to the work at hand.

Information PEJE is likely to have

- How many day schools are there in the community? What are their denominations and grades served? How are they positioned?
- How many preschool programs are in the community? How many are identified as Jewish? With what organizations (JCC, synagogue, day school, etc.) are they affiliated?
- What has been happening in the day school with respect to recruitment and attrition in the last 5 years?
- Is JECEI (Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative) working in this community, and can the coaches coordinate? Can the JECEI staff help during their visits to those communities?

Information the school should be able to provide

- Who is ultimately responsible for this work? Is there an admission professional? Either way, what is the role of the head of school?
- Does the school have acceptance criteria? What are they (or what should they be)?
- Who is the key contact person for people who are interested in the school? Who would a parent call if interested in the school? Who would a parent ambassador notify if a strong prospect was identified?
- What are the existing programs at the day school that relate to recruitment (and attrition prevention)? E.g. programs directed at preschool parents, preschool children, preschool directors, preschool faculty, etc.
- If the school participated in the Day School Peer Yardstick, a review of the school's customized report should provide insight into areas of focus for the work. Even before a school submits data for the Yardstick in a given year, the tracking sheets used to collect data can be valuable sources of information.

Questions the school may be able to provide insights about

- What is the relationship between the admission staff and the rest of the staff? Do the teachers and other staff members see themselves as part of the admission process? Why or why not?
- What are the existing dynamics and programs in the community relating to preschools? For example, is the central agency involved in supporting these programs?
- What are the philosophies and educational practices of all the schools involved?

- Do the preschools in question conduct exit surveys and monitor where their children go for kindergarten?
- What is the Jewish community culture like? Are Jews of different affiliations insular or open to one another; do they view themselves as part of the same or different communities?
- How many schools does the preschool feed into? Who is the day school's competition as it seeks graduates from each preschool?

Assessment Questions

As an outsider, the coach is in a good position to assess these issues or help the school to do so.

Questions the coach may wish to explore

- What is the role of each preschool in the community and within its host institution? What is the role of the host institution within the community? What is the role of the preschool director within the host institution and within the community?
- What is the real relationship between the day school and each of the other organizations?
- What are the enrollment patterns at the day school? What questions need to be asked about that history?
- What does the school look like to an outsider? What does a visitor see when on site? How does a visitor's perception of the school compare with what the school says it is? How does it compare with what potential parents hope to see when visiting? For example, how would a parent who doesn't know Hebrew feel in a school with a lot of Hebrew on the walls?
- What messages come across in marketing materials, other written communications, oral communications, language used?
- What do the preschool directors know about the school? What do the teachers know? What do the rabbis know? What are their perceptions?

Structuring the work

Note: Some findings in this section were not possible to incorporate into this year's grant program. We have captured these insights for future consideration.

The best time to work with a day school on issues relating to admission and the pipeline is during the summer. This allows for research, analysis, and planning in time to begin executing a recruitment plan in September. Also, relationship-building activities can begin before the start of school; preschool directors tend to be back at work by the second half of August.²

The number of days of coach time that a school may need will depend on where the school is in the process. Ideally there should be an extended period of time with a coach during the summer to develop a plan, and then some interaction with the coach during the year, mainly by phone and email, for check-ins but possibly also for at least one visit.

Insights on building relationships

Relationships are the foundation for all the work that a Jewish day school does to strengthen its enrollment.

- Identify the key people with whom to build relationships, and the people who can help you get access to them. This involves a lot of legwork – one school had a lot of lunches with people in the community while identifying potential allies and influencers prior to opening the school.

² PEJE recognizes that due to the timing of the grant cycle, a Pipeline grant may impact the following year's admission cycle, rather than the current year's cycle.

- A relationship with a preschool director might be initiated via the host organization, e.g. the JCC or synagogue.
- When you get access to key people, do a lot of listening.
- Study the concept of high-end customer service – and use it to ensure that the other people and organizations are treated with honor and respect.
- Note that the relationship between an organization and a preschool is heavily dependent on the preschool director; a change in personnel may mean that the relationship needs to be rebuilt from scratch.
- Start with methods for initiating and facilitating dialogue, and ultimately build towards the development and implementation of ideas.
- Bring all the preschool directors together for activities in which they can build collegiality and network with their peers (while they get to know the day school and its leadership).
- Collaborate with the preschool teachers and parents – on how you can do things better, how you can better work with each child.
- Notify preschool teachers when their students are accepted at the day school.
- Talk to the pre-k teachers when assigning children to classrooms, for example, to incorporate their feedback regarding class placement.
- Invite preschool teachers to the school, feed them, give them a tour. Pay attention to them. Let them see or visit with their former students.

Visions of Success

Establishing a vision of success is important for setting goals, defining a work plan, and being able to evaluate whether an initiative was successful. Here are some examples of images that go beyond the number of children enrolled in a Jewish day school.

- A preschool teacher is able to tell a parent, “Your child would thrive at XYZ JDS for the following reasons.” This implies that the teacher is aware of the school, knows what it offers, knows what kind of student is right for the school, and can match the school with the child’s (and family’s) needs.
- A preschool director (or congregational rabbi) tells the staff, “Our mission is to send our children on to Jewish day schools.”
- By the end of the coaching relationship, a school has a 3-year plan with clear and measurable goals.
- A synagogue has a day-school-led Kabbalat Shabbat.
- Pulpit rabbis have lunch regularly with the day school students.
- The day school is in a collaborative partnership with other local institutions to ensure that Jewish children are enrolling in the appropriate Jewish educational programs. Leaders of schools, synagogues, religious schools, preschools engage in dialogue and develop programs together to meet this goal. Professional dialogue takes place about how to better prepare children for the transition from pre-k to kindergarten. A “Community of Practice” of pre-k teachers, k teachers, directors of preschools, and admissions directors is established and functioning.