

Thoughts on Tuition Reduction, Fundraising, and Education

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Over the past few years there has been much talk and some action addressing how to make Jewish education affordable. Most of the discussion has been about fundraising strategies for day schools. For example, George Hanus has proposed the 5% Plan which would allow people to create large permanent endowments by allotting a percentage of their wills to go for Jewish education. More recently, Alan Silverstein and Eugene Korn offered a community tuition support formula for day and synagogue schools at an American Jewish Committee forum. This formula, including contact time and other factors, would help provide an objective mechanism for community funding of day and synagogue schools.

Both fundraising and tuition support discussions are valuable, yet neither focuses adequately on the *real issue of making quality education accessible to all and through different venues*. This goal statement differs from the implicit assumptions of the others in two ways, by its:

- Addition of the operative concepts of quality and accessibility to affordability to assure that participants are getting something worth paying for; and by
- Focusing on the full continuum of education delivery – and not only day schools or formal education.

Accomplishing this expanded goal will require thinking “out of the box,” including re-visiting long-held positions. The purpose of this article is to push the discussion forward, generating debate and local action.

GOALS OF INCREASED FUNDING

Despite good intentions, solely concentrating on reducing tuition will boomerang by *lowering* the quality of Jewish education in the long run, not strengthening it. No one can say with any assurance that reducing tuition costs to parents will automatically improve the Jewish education for which they are paying, nor can anyone say that it is primarily tuition costs that keep marginal parents from enrolling their children. Furthermore, none of the discussions take into account the social and educational factors that can foster a quality educational environment and ongoing improvement. Any educationally sound funding program should, at minimum:

- Assure *accessibility* to a *quality* Jewish education for all Jews;
- Provide *enriched* Judaic and general studies programs, including those that meet the variety of needs and intelligences of all children;
- Address the *growing teacher shortage* by upgrading teacher salaries and benefits, improving recruitment strategies, and/or underwriting initial and ongoing teacher training;
- *Support coordination* of the *necessary educational continuum* of adult, family, early childhood, formal, informal, youth groups, camping, and Israel programming;
- *Upgrade facilities*; and,
- *Foster the use of instructional technology*.

However, having raised all of the preceding caveats, Silverstein and Korn's proposal to *develop constructive community funding formulas for schools as part of a comprehensive support package* should be seriously considered. While their suggestion of using Jewish contact time as the primary factor is useful, it is limited because contact time cannot be the only factor in a funding formula. [I can imagine the first round of debates on what constitutes Jewish contact time!! All schools? Which subjects? Any curricular restrictions? The debate will be as divisive and as difficult to resolve as an internal church-state issue!]

If the goal of these initiatives is *making quality Jewish education accessible*, additional questions should be asked, a variety of strategies should be suggested, and other factors should be considered. Some questions that will advance the deliberations include:

1. *Are there other community goals for supporting Jewish educational programs and institutions?* For example, much yeshiva and day school education takes a text-based and "liberal arts" approach. If, however, there is a long-term interest in some communities in assuring *parnasah* and helping families avoid welfare and/ or becoming drains on family services, shouldn't minimum levels of *general* education performance be required, and even vocational programming supported?
2. *Why do day schools appear to succeed?* Is it solely a factor of time in class, or is it also a matter of self-identification and consonance with the home? The latter suggests curricular and programmatic investment in a variety of family education projects, not only for day schools, but also especially for synagogue schools.
3. *Why is it that, all things being equal, some people do not send their children to day schools?* Is it primarily a function of finances? If so, why do so many send their kids to more expensive private schools? Has marketing to marginal parents ever worked for day school enrollment? Would discounts for new students be useful? These points should be considered, addressed, piloted, proved or disproved before we go to large-scale programming.

STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING PARTICIPATION AND FINANCE

A variety of approaches to increase day school participation and/or financial resources for day schools can be considered. These include:

- Initially charge parents actual full tuition. Or,
- *Announce what it is.* Let people know what the real cost is. People value things that cost more.
- *Optional procedure:* After schools determine the full tuition (full cost / # of students), any parent may receive an automatic and unquestioned tuition reduction of \$X determined by the school by merely indicating their desire in writing, without undergoing the financial scrutiny that many find uncomfortable or demeaning. If they need or want more, they would pursue a more traditional scholarship application procedure.

Charging or announcing full tuition will:

- Provide facts and figures to clarify that the actual costs of day school education exceed tuition. Consequently, this will demonstrate that most students are, in effect, scholarship recipients. This may promote more support and effort from parents and grandparents, even after their children graduate.
- Help assure that if tuition is reduced (thereby reducing the burden on individual families), support from other sources is not concurrently reduced, which would be counter-productive.
- Underscore that paying for a child's education is actually a parental responsibility. Support from the larger community should only be seen as a last resort.

COMMUNITY FUNDING FORMULAS

A community funding formula is predicated primarily on the assumption that there is community interest in the *accessibility of quality Jewish education*. This suggests actions in a number of areas:

1. Develop scholarship or tuition reduction proce-

dures which ensure that no Jewish child is turned away for financial reasons alone.

2. Adopt supportive policy decisions such as:
 - a. Revisiting and/or pursuing other resources, including government materials or transportation support, tax reductions, and/or vouchers;
 - b. Establishing uniform community-wide scholarship procedures and parameters;
 - c. Considering sibling discounts, either per school or by family across community;
 - d. Defining Jewish contact time; and,
 - e. Resolving whether and how the community requires some minimum curricular or performance standards.
3. Support quality teaching through recruitment stipends, subvented training, portable pensions, universal benefits, mentorships, etc.
4. Consider other possible eligibility factors to enable schools to participate in creating a formula for community funding initiatives, especially those including the automatic uncontested tuition reduction described above. For example:
 - a. Analyze schools' scholarship histories for last three years as evidence of experience with scholarship administration and to minimize potential abuses;
 - b. Require schools to raise a specific percentage of funds in order to maintain internal motivation and participation in the initiative;
 - c. Offer incentives for school improvement, for example: X% for credentialed teachers; realistic continuing education and/or benefit funds that are recalibrated on a regular basis;
 - d. Include students' achievement ratings as part of schools' eligibility to receive funding; and
 - e. Make appropriate funding and educational accommodations for schools based on level of schools and types of students. This recognizes that high school education costs more than elementary grades; that schools with high special education or immigrant populations face added costs and challenges; and that early childhood programs should be given special

support as their impact ripples through the entire system from recruitment to better preparation.

This approach is clearly oriented toward day schools. Certain aspects, however, are also applicable to synagogue schools and youth groups for which other strategies should be considered. These might include re-establishing or experimenting with community or regional afternoon school systems. Regardless of the details, the thrust of the debate should not be about tuition reduction, but rather on how to make a quality Jewish education accessible to all Jews.

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