

Book Reviews / Comptes-rendus

Alex Pomson and Jack Wertheimer, *Inside Jewish Day Schools: Leadership, Learning, and Community* (Boston: Brandeis University Press, 2022). 308 pp., ISBN: 978-1684580705.

With declining levels of religious observance and Jewish cultural engagement in North America, formal Jewish education, particularly the Jewish day school, has assumed much of the responsibility for sustaining Jewish identity and continuity. Jewish day schools achieve this goal by imparting Jewish literacy (Jewish texts, rituals, and culture) as well socializing students to feel a sense of belonging to the Jewish community. Studies of the inner workings of day schools are sparse and Alex Pomson and Jack Wertheimer's unique project is a much-needed contribution to the field. Jewish day schools are a particularly vital part of the Canadian Jewish landscape. Compared to the United States, Canada has thrived in this regard. Jewish day school enrollment in Canada gained substantial momentum in the mid- to late 1970s, more than a decade before similar momentum was observed in the United States. Some 43 percent of adult Canadian Jews report having attended Jewish day schools for some part of their schooling, compared to 24 percent of American Jewish adults. Furthermore, Canada has more variety of Jewish day schools, particularly for the non-Orthodox. Only 10 percent of high school students in American Jewish day schools are in non-Orthodox schools. In Canada this number is close to 40 percent. TananebaumCHAT, one of the schools featured in this book, is a prominent example of this. Located in Toronto, this "community" Jewish high school is one of the largest non-Orthodox Jewish high schools in North America with over 1300 students in 2024.

Pomson and Wertheimer's timely study serves as a valuable "guide to those wishing to understand the contemporary Jewish day school" (3). The book is comprised of instructive case studies of nine schools in North America. The authors succeeded in locating a great variety of schools: geographically these schools come from various regions of the United States and one in Canada; both elementary and high schools are included; the schools range in size from seventy-five students (Akiva School in Nashville) to over 2000 students (Yeshiva Darchei Torah in Far Rockaway, New York); and ideologically the schools span from pluralistic/community to Haredi.

Full disclosure: I have worked with both authors on a number of studies of Jewish education and I have seen first-hand their level of commitment and expertise in the subject. They are leaders in the field who come to this project with decades of experience. Both researchers visited the schools at separate times for several days at a time. In addition to observations of the schools' classes and special events, they interviewed teachers, administrators, students, board members, and parents, as well as local community leaders connected to the school. I find it interesting that the book provides the real names of schools and staff. This is in contrast to a 2009 volume edited by Wertheimer on Jewish supplementary schools that used pseudonyms.

It would be interesting to hear more from the authors on how they came to this decision.

Inside Jewish Day Schools is quite readable with much to offer for Jewish educators, Jewish community leaders, or a lay audience. The authors are candid in their assessments and offer criticisms of schools without hesitation. While there is much to admire of the Hillel Day School in Detroit, the authors report, for example, that “on the eighth-grade class trips to Israel, students generally don’t function in Hebrew” (58) and “Tefila [prayer] in the older grades is painful” (59).

In reading these fascinating case studies, two important themes stand out to me as particularly important for the future sustainability of Jewish day schools: the challenge of navigating pluralism and the affordability crisis.

The aforementioned Hillel Day School of Detroit provides an important example of the challenges of pluralism. The school used to be under the umbrella of Conservative Judaism, but, as a reflection of the changing ethos of American Judaism, the school determined that to remain viable and attract more families it would develop into a pluralistic community school. The benefit of casting this wider net is that it brings more families to Jewish day schools that might not have felt comfortable with this option. But with this larger variety of families competing priorities come to the fore. For example, the school’s desire to instill love of prayers or Jewish Studies is undermined by some parents who themselves have little interest in prayers and find Jewish Studies to be relatively unimportant. These parents are thus sending a message to their children which is diametrically opposed to the school’s core Jewish values.

These tensions become even more acute in the case of Brandeis–Marin School in San Rafael, California (a suburb of San Francisco). Reflecting the progressive culture of Marin County, two thirds of the students in the school come from intermarried families, and 10 percent of the students are not Jewish. While the school strives to inculcate its students with Jewish literacy and values, this must be balanced with the reality that there are a number of parents who come to the school with negative experiences with rabbis and Jewish educators. Some parents resent the fact that the school closes on all Jewish holidays and does not celebrate Valentine’s Day or Halloween. The content of Jewish Studies is not particularly important to many parents, although they are concerned about excessive “God talk” or indoctrinating the students with too many Jewish rules. While it is an ongoing process of negotiation, the school strives to navigate these complexities by framing Jewish values in more universal, less parochial, terms.

The Pressman Academy, a Conservative elementary/middle school in the Pico–Robertson neighbourhood of Los Angeles, illustrates the seemingly intractable problem

which besets many day schools. With an annual tuition fee upwards of twenty-five thousand US dollars per child, the school is concerned that it is pricing its families out of its market. For those families who have stayed, the rising costs have emboldened parents to make more demands of the school. This leads to a situation where teachers become concerned about the growing influence of parents and the school's inclination to cater to their every need. While 40 percent of families receive some form of tuition assistance, the affordability crisis remains and only worsens each year. TanenbaumCHAT in Toronto has long been burdened by an affordability crisis. Between 1999 and 2016 it was trapped in a problematic spiral where each year, to ensure costs were covered, tuition was raised. With each tuition increase, enrollment declined further, only exacerbating the situation. To their credit the school, with the partnership of the Jewish Federation of Toronto, moved into action. Engaging in a market research study, the school concluded that a 25-30 percent reduction in tuition would yield a dramatic change in demand. With this information in hand, Federation leaders recruited two major local donors who made a joint gift of \$14 million. This ground-breaking philanthropic experiment made it possible to reduce tuition from \$27,000 to \$18,500 beginning in 2017, and guarantee the tuition would remain below \$19,000 for the next five years (all figures here in Canadian dollars). Enrollment in the school increased quickly and the school is currently bursting at the seams, struggling to find enough classroom space for its growing student body. While there is concern whether TanenbaumCHAT can sustain these tuition freezes, their success story in Toronto is a model that has been observed with great interest from other Jewish day school in the United States and Canada.

Challenges aside, the authors help readers understand how Jewish day schools have evolved over the last decade or two to meet the challenges of contemporary students and families. Almost across the board, these schools feature new student-centered pedagogies (rather than old-school frontal lectures), advanced technologies (including digital learning platforms), and, perhaps most importantly, a more dedicated commitment to catering to the mental health and social/emotional needs of students. As institutions that successfully instill a sense of collective Jewish values and serve as powerful mechanisms of community-building, day schools remain a vital strategy in safeguarding Jewish continuity. This book serves as an essential guidebook on how to ensure the sustainability of these important Jewish spaces.

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