

Challenges and Opportunities on the Jewish Day School Landscape



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February 2018 | Adar 5778

Case Study: **Stepping Back from the Precipice in Diamond City**

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When Todd Brownstein and his wife Cheryl moved from Baltimore to Diamond City, one of the reasons they were prepared to do so was because of the day school. No matter how generous the CFO job Cheryl was offered, they wouldn't have come to what the locals affectionately called "DC" if they couldn't put their six- and eight-year old children in a day school. As day school alumni themselves, and traditionally observant Conservative Jews, they couldn't imagine making do with supplementary school Jewish education.

What Todd had not anticipated was that he would end up serving as the Head of School, in an institution with fewer than 50 students. A public-school Head for the last nine years, he was expecting to take up a position in DC's public sector, easily the best in the State. He could have walked into any job of his choice with his reputation for having turned around a failing 1,500-student Washington-area public school, but when — in the course of a house-hunting tour during the spring before their move — he learned that the Diamond City Hebrew Academy (DCHA) had been unsuccessfully looking for a Head for the previous six months, his head was turned. With the pay rise Cheryl was taking, and the lower cost of living in DC, the family could afford the cut in pay he would have to take. For Todd, this was a chance to follow his heart.

For the Board of DCHA, when Todd Brownstein turned up at their door, it was like finding a winning lottery ticket among a pile of unpaid bills. They would have been pleased enough to welcome a new family to the community with two eligible children. When they learned that one of the parents was a crackerjack Head of School, they were ecstatic. There were long-standing members of the Board who believed that with the right leadership they could turn DCHA into one of the top elementary schools in DC. With a strong educational reputation, they had every hope of dramatically altering the way members of the community, including rabbis and Federation leaders, thought of day school education.

Todd had come into the position with more modest goals. He had simply wanted to stabilize enrollment, at least at first. Historically, throughout its more than 60 years of existence, enrollment at DCHA had rarely topped 70 students. Having fallen below 50 students in recent times, there were Board members who were arguing that the only way to stay afloat was to open the doors to students from non-Jewish families. That's what the JCC preschool in the adjacent building had done five years previously. Today, although 65% of the students were Jewish, they now had a waiting list. Todd saw that as a slippery slope that would quickly subvert the school's Jewish ethos. The preschool was now open 363 days a year, apart from Thanksgiving and New Year's Day. It was even open on Yom Kippur.

Coming to the end of his first year in the position, Todd saw more clearly than ever that maintaining educational quality was just one part of his challenge — perhaps the easiest part. To his pleasant surprise he found that, in the main, the school was blessed with strong and highly committed staff. As a skilled supervisor, he had quickly identified ways to further grow the faculty at his disposal, and which faculty to move on. He also knew how to raise the school's public educational profile. With the financial backing of a wealthy parent, he invested in a new K-3 robotics program to be launched in the fall that had already gained positive coverage in the local media. Together with his own story of making the transition from a school of 1,500 to one of fewer than 50 — a curiosity that was also picked up by the media — there was no shortage of good news stories about the school.

These steps helped take the school away from a precipice where, such was the terror of losing even one child, the previous administration was held hostage by the whims of demanding families. Todd learned that his predecessor had frequently made unsavory deals with families just to hold on to a few children. Making under the table deals was not Todd's style. He made a virtue of speaking truth to power.

As he began to settle into the community, he would make a joke of this obsession with enrollment at the school whenever he was asked to speak to communal groups. He started his presentations by saying "47." People always looked at him confused. Was he telling them how old he was? Was he referring to the year of the UN resolution to establish the State of Israel? He then explained that in his first months in DC, the first question people always asked him was how many students were at the school; not about curriculum or educational initiatives. He was determined to change that.

As the months had passed, Todd saw that the greatest challenges at the school were not about educational quality, but about credibility and communal culture. In terms of credibility, the question was how do you sell parents on the special attraction of a school where average class size was smaller than a moderate sized play group. Todd's predecessor — a veteran day school educator — had made a great play of the social and developmental benefits in combining grades or simply in the more individualized attention children received at the school because of its small size. Todd sensed that these arguments didn't really persuade anyone who wasn't already committed to the value of day school education — unless, that is,

their child had special educational needs. And, being brutally honest, you had to be careful about being too successful in selling the school in those terms. Sad to say, but gaining a reputation for serving kids with special needs put off the parents of mainstream children.

As Todd saw it, the strongest case when selling the school was best expressed in Jewish terms. In a community with just one day school, DCHA provided children with a genuine experience of true community. At a historical moment where adults had fewer and fewer opportunities to mix with and meet with others who have different politics and different values from them, and where the Jewish community was increasingly polarized, this small school created an alternative reality, one where Orthodox and Reform prayed together, and where observant and non-observant played together whatever day of the week. From his viewpoint, having spent his childhood and adult life in large communities on the East coast — and where the community day school he'd attended as a child was really a school for the non-orthodox — he'd been deprived until now of such an authentic experience of community.

What Todd found intensely frustrating was that most Jewish communal leaders in Diamond City — lay or professional — didn't see this. They understood that without a day school, it would be difficult to attract Jewishly engaged families to the city; that the day school offered an intensity of Jewish education that you couldn't get elsewhere in the community — especially when it came to Hebrew. Essentially, these were good tactical reasons for keeping the school afloat, but they didn't get to the essence of why the school was so important to families and to the community.

A few months earlier, he had said as much at a meeting of the Federation's allocations and planning committee. He had thanked them for the generosity of their financial support. He made clear that he didn't take for granted the \$200,000 they provided the school in tuition support each year. But then, lighting the touch paper, he continued: "I realize you don't think of us as an investment, you see us as a charity. After all, how many of you have sent your children or grandchildren to DCHA?" That set off an uproar. What he meant was that the Federation leaders supported the school as if it was of benefit to someone else; a cause that didn't directly touch their own lives, a bit like their (generous) contributions to Israel and Overseas. Perhaps he hadn't expressed himself well, but he had been provoked the previous day by a conversation with one of the clergy at the Reform temple. The rabbi had told him that he didn't believe in Jewish day school education, but that he'd nevertheless be willing to support a scholarship for one of the students. Todd didn't know whether to laugh or cry. He almost turned down the offer. As he saw it, it was well-meaning thinking like this that explained why in a community of 6,000 Jews, fewer than 50 children were enrolled in the community's school. The day school served other people's children.

How to engineer a cultural shift in one of the oldest small Jewish communities in America? That was a turn-around task no easier than saving a failing school of hundreds.

Questions for Discussion

1. Todd Brownstein doesn't hold out much hope of persuading people to sign up for day school who aren't already sold on the value of Jewish education. Do you agree?
2. Are there any other arguments that might persuade someone who is not especially interested in what the school has to offer Jewishly? For example, how effective is it to promote day school on the basis of the brain-development benefits of learning Hebrew? What about the potential of the school community to have a positive impact on the family unit?
3. Are there any resources or knowledge areas, besides its extensive financial support, that the Federation could share with the day school in order to help increase enrollment?
4. What are the implications of expanding enrollment to accept non-Jewish students? Could this be an effective strategy to tackle declining enrollment in a community with just one small Jewish day school?