

Blog

A Jewish Independent School... Or Something Different?

By [Ken Gordon](#) on March 09th, 2010. Posted under: [Field Advocacy and Advancement](#)

The following is a guest post from Renee Rubin Ross, Ph.D., a postdoctoral fellow at the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University. If you would like to learn more about her research, she is leading a [webinar](#) on April 14.

Some might suggest that Jewish day schools are just like independent schools, except Jewish. Day schools are often encouraged to think about their similarities with independent schools and draw on the governance, fundraising, and administrative practices of independent schools.

But my dissertation research suggests that a Jewish day school is something quite different than a “Jewish independent school.” For a year, I conducted ethnographic research at a Jewish day school, a Catholic school, and a secular independent school, exploring how parents were involved in each of the three schools. I interviewed administrators, teachers, and parents, and attended parent events. What I found was that the terms of the relationship between parents and administration were qualitatively different across the schools.

What do I mean by this? At all three schools, parents were concerned about their children’s academic success: They attended parent conferences and back-to-school nights, helped their children with homework, and spoke to teachers and administrators when they had a concern about their children’s learning. But at “Jewish Day”[*] and “St. Cornelius,” parents had a more robust relationship with the school.

How could I tell this? One fascinating piece of evidence was that parents at Jewish Day and St. Cornelius had *much more to say* about their schools. My conversations with parents at “College Prep” (the independent school) centered around the fact that the school was a good fit academically and socially for their child. Most parents were not looking to build community around the school, and those who were interested reported that others families were often “busy.”

In contrast, parents at Jewish Day and St. Cornelius also spoke about the fact that these schools were a good fit academically and socially for their children, **and** how meaningful it was to support and be involved with a community institution; how they celebrated religious holidays with other families from the school; how families supported one another in times of need; and how they trusted the other families to help them raise their children. When I interviewed parents at each of the three schools, I asked the same questions, but the interviews with Jewish Day and St. Cornelius consistently took longer, because these parents had many more ways of connecting with the school.

It may not be surprising that families connected to a Jewish or Catholic school had more to talk about than academics. But what was a little more surprising was that this different kind of relationship helped to buffer conflict between administrators and parents when it inevitably occurred. For example, when several students at College Prep were reported to have fallen behind, parents were angry, some to the point of being litigious. In contrast, when students at Jewish Day were reported to have not met curricular standards, parents were also angry, but they worked with the school to find solutions and improve teaching and learning.

So a Jewish day school can be more than a Jewish independent school; parents' emotional investment in the school may be deeper and exist on many more levels. At a time of thinking about how to strengthen Jewish day schools financially, the impact and importance of this emotional investment should be carefully considered.

[*] All names are pseudonyms.

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