

COMMUNITIES

OF

LEARNING

A VISION FOR THE JEWISH FUTURE



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CREATING SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

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What is the nature of a community that effectively educates its members? This is an issue equally critical for secular as well as Jewish education. Not only does the vitality of Jewish education, but of all education for democratic life depend upon how we answer this question.

So it's odd how rarely anyone bothers to focus on the effectiveness of schools in building communities, when talking about public education. In large measure this may be because schools were not created on the assumption that they were where students were going to get their effective education — not only in matters of communal life, but also on all other matters large and small. Educators and schools were a sideline. The real education took place somewhere else: in the neighborhood, family, workplace and place of religious instruction.

This history helps explain why it is so problematic to view schools as being in the business, first and foremost, of educating our fellow citizens to be powerful and effective participants in a democratic society. But that is the special function of public education, indeed, its central mission.

But this mission, and here's the paradox, requires the existence of a community, and cannot be accomplished in isolation from such an intergenerational community. If it isn't already there, good schools must, by their very being, help to create it. The

obstacles to doing this are enormous. For example, such a community must ask — and tentatively answer — the question, “What does a democratic community need to teach its young?” What are the particular habits, the rituals, the ways of thinking (what we at Central Park East Schools call “the habits of heart and mind”) that citizens of a democratic society must agree upon, or at least must agree are essential to argue about?

I’m talking not just about what we need to know and know how to do, but what we are in the habit of knowing and doing, which is quite a different matter. I think a lot about the role of habits. For instance, I’m just now completing an eleven-day trip. I find I often have to look for my keys as I rush about. And too often I can’t find them. Of course I know how to put my keys away in the right place. I could surely pass a test on putting one’s keys in the right place. I’m just not in the habit of doing so, especially in times of stress. Given a changed context, I lose my least well-grounded habits. The same is true on a much larger scale for a democratic society, especially one that is under stress and undergoing rapid changes in context. We may know how to vote and weigh the pros and cons of candidates, just as we may know how to take apart sentences intellectually. We might even succeed in teaching our students to know how to do these things. But that will not necessarily lead to our getting in the habit. And that’s what a democratic society needs to learn — how to think well on its feet even when the going gets rough and the setting unfamiliar.

CRITICAL HABITS OF MIND

At Central Park East, we refer to five critical habits of mind. These five, we remind our students, are not tablets from Sinai, but we take them very seriously nonetheless. They are:

1. Asking how we know what we know: What is the evidence that we are relying on? What makes it compelling? How credible is it?
2. Noticing how what we see and hear looks and sounds different depending upon our point of view: At best, it includes the habit of stepping into the shoes of others, including shoes that can sometimes make us quite uncomfortable.
3. Seeking out patterns: Where have I seen this before? How might it connect with other things? What came first?
4. Always asking "what if" and "supposing that": Suppose George Washington hadn't been born, or King George hadn't been mad? It's a kind of historical science fiction. If you could go back in time and change one little thing, might it make a difference? Might then the same be true of the present and future?
5. Always asking ourselves, "who cares?" What difference does it make? Why bother with it?

The curriculum of our schools is a medium for helping to reinforce these habits of mind. We have built the curriculum with such habits in mind, so that youngsters can grapple with important topics, re-interpreting them, re-experiencing them, playing with them over and over in ever-changing ways.

I sometimes think I'd settle for just one of these habits: approaching the world and my fellow beings "as if" I might be wrong and they might be right. I want to be open to the possibility that something even my worst opponent is saying might add to my understanding. It's a habit we sometimes call skepticism. I'm inclined to believe that

without being joined to a second habit it could be very sterile — so I'd join it quickly to the habit of empathy — imagining that one's own comfort depends on the comfort of others. Having the inescapable habit of stepping into the shoes of others would make it harder for us to solve the world's problems with only ourselves in mind. Finally, I would add a third habit to skepticism and empathy: sheer wonder and fascination with the world. Getting into the habit of seeing the world as an amazing and interesting place is the glue that holds it all together. Perhaps this is what creates hope! I haven't yet found a way to get it down to less than these three. But how I'd love a debate over the habits of citizenship, rather than over the thousands of little skills and pieces of knowledge all the prestigious task forces are so busy arguing about. Such a debate is sorely lacking in the endless discussions of educational goals and objectives that we are exposed to today.

WHAT I'VE LEARNED IN MY CAREER

I started teaching by accident. I came out of the University of Chicago in the mid-1950s, intending to do something "serious"; I couldn't figure out what, so I had three children instead. It turned out to satisfy my desire for doing something important and serious, at least for awhile. Besides, it was a great and unexpected joy. But I needed a little extra cash to supplement our family income. What could be easier, I thought, than substitute teaching in nearby Chicago public schools? I spent two difficult but also extraordinarily interesting years subbing through Chicago's South Side schools. Then I got an opportunity to teach morning kindergarten across the street from where we lived, and where my own children were starting school. I accepted, thinking it would be somewhat more boring, but a lot easier than subbing. But I turned out to be wrong on both counts. It was neither easy nor boring. It was the most intellectually exciting period of my young life. I was aburst with ideas about everything in the world; the classroom was my ideal lab, and I was naturally a bore to my nonteaching friends as a result.

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Yet, despite my enthusiasm, these initial years of subbing, like my first experiences as a kindergarten teacher, suggested two things to me: first, that our public schools were the most disrespectful places I had ever experienced. Teachers, parents, and kids were subject to numbing abuses, mostly petty. Second, they seemed to have been purposely designed to be as uninteresting as possible. After kids got out of kindergarten we seemed to have said to ourselves: "How can we make sure that we don't distract children, don't let them engage by accident in something that might really interest them? How can we create as bare an environment as we can, so that the only thing the young can pay attention to is us (their teachers) and the "basic essentials" we are obliged to impart?" But why we want to impart these "basics" to them is, naturally, undiscussable. Also undiscussable is whether their boredom is healthy to the development of sound habits of work and heart. We unfortunately assume that this is just what must be.

I had, in contrast, a counterproposition, based on my own educational history and my early years as a kindergarten teacher: if we could create places that were respectful to all their members and also interesting, all the way from kindergarten through 12th grade (and perhaps through life itself), then maybe we would have solved the problems facing democracy. That was a nice way to think about it at first, because it made it seem both simple and yet extremely ambitious! It turned out that "just" creating those two conditions — a respectful and interesting environment — was enormously difficult.

WHAT SCHOOLS NEED

We discovered, over time, that there were four ingredients essential to making ordinary schools respectful and interesting places.

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First of all, it turns out that you are not likely to feel valued and respected if you are treated like an anonymous statistic. Human beings like to be known — by name, for starters. No good organization allows its members to feel the way too many kids, parents and teachers feel in our schools — like interchangeable parts. But to create a community in which everyone is known and valued means dealing with the question of size and scale. Since 1950 the size of American schools has more than doubled. We have huge school buildings. This is bad enough, but to make matters worse, we have designed what goes on in these large buildings to make sure that it is extremely hard for anyone to be known well. Youngsters change classes every forty to forty-five minutes, and change courses every semester. The chance of developing a stable relationship between a student and an adult is thus remote, except for a small group of the most academically elite. While youngsters successfully overcome this anonymity to create peer subcultures, they do not manage to create one that includes adults. Instead, they create tight age-grade peer cultures that provide them with needed safety and comfort. A good school would offer them a shared community that at least part of the time joins students, teachers and families together — one that bridges the age-gaps rather than compounds them.

The second quality of a good learning setting is that there is something important going on there. The only thing of importance going on in most schools is the reputation of its athletic teams. I think, sometimes, that we have glorified sports in our high schools because there is nothing else to glorify there. There is no other agreement that crosses the entire school and community about what's important, what's compelling. A good place of learning needs clear and compelling devotion to a set of values that explains and gives coherence to what the central mission of the school is.

And third, in a good school, all the constituents have a voice, and an influence on the life of the school. It matters what each member says. People listen to each other, demonstrating daily the importance of their ideas and their capacity to express

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themselves clearly, persuasively. Communications and language arts are not the names of school subjects, but a daily reality.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, a good school is a community that includes experts and novices, adults and children. We learn how to do something by joining a club that includes members who already know how to do it and have a passion for it. We learn it from the heart. It is through such a community that one creates a picture of what it might be like to become an expert. You walk into a music school and it is filled with music and musicians. You walk into a soccer camp and it is filled with soccer. You know that these are places where the people who organized them have a passion for what you are there to learn. You learn by vicariously experiencing what it is like to do it well; you join those who already have the know-how. How does a soccer player move when he blocks a shot? What does her body look like when she moves down the field? When we go to music school, we don't just learn to play the clarinet or the piano. We learn how to think and be a musician. We join a club that invites us into its circle.

STARTING A NEW KIND OF SCHOOL

In 1974, I had an extraordinary opportunity to start a school. It was a startling idea at that time to be asked to start a public school of one's own. A superintendent in East Harlem offered me the chance, though I didn't believe him at first. But I took a gamble, got some friends involved, and we started Central Park East. Four years later, the demand was so great we started Central Park East II. Two years later, we started River East, and in 1985 we started the CPE Secondary School. We never got any official status, much less official autonomy, for the three elementary schools, but we acted on the "as if" principle. We pretended. And, in fact, if you were to go to the Central Board of Education in New York and ask today for information about any of

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the Central Park East elementary schools, they would say they don't exist. Central Park East schools, with the exception of the high school, are figments of our imagination. But over the twenty-two years that they have now existed and thrived, they feel like real schools to their constituents. Our graduates are now among our teachers, and their children among our youngest students.

What we have discovered in these schools is that if we get the relationships right, the results can be quite amazing. Ten years after we graduated our first sixth graders, we did some calculating. Over 90% of our elementary school students went on to graduate from high school and over 67% went on to college. Now, that's almost double the city-wide rate. For the high school, the figures are even better: more than 90% who start our high school graduate, and most of these go on to four-year colleges.

Many things have gone into this success. More than anything else, creating such powerful communities depended upon talk. What is most striking about all these schools is the amount of talk that goes into creating and sustaining them. It takes the very special talk of people who know each other and care about what they are saying.

But such talking takes time. Time for talking between teachers and students, and time for talking among the staff, and between school and family. So we designed our schedules for this kind of time. In our high school, for example, we built in six hours a week during school hours for teacher-talk of various sorts, plus at least one retreat a year, day-long seminars, preschool sessions and voluntary meetings before and after official school hours. We also built in five hours a week in the high school for each adult to meet with a group of 10-15 students, with whom they would be meeting for at least two years: five hours a week for talking things over, tackling all the loose ends of our intellectual and moral lives. And then, we built in a minimum of two family conferences annually, each lasting no less than 45 minutes, and often much longer. At these meetings, every family member we can induce to join us comes, together with

the student and the student's teacher or advisor. They come together to examine his or her work and to discuss, argue, argue, argue and plan together. And then we built in time for outsiders to come and observe us, to look over our work, and we built in time to listen to their criticism of it and to reflect together about their viewpoints.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

We have made talking and reflecting and being thoughtful about our work part of the organization of the school. To do that, we took Ted Sizer's dictum seriously: keep it simple. In the interest of simplicity, the closer you can get to home schooling, the better. Not the structure of the school, but the students and what you want to teach them are what need to be complex. The traditional school reverses this. The structure and organization of the traditional school is so complex that only a full-time programmer knows what, and how and why it fits together. Such schools have simplified the curriculum and our conception of children. We have turned the curriculum into a string of bits and pieces, and measured children's progress in mastery by multiple choice tests of the various bits. We have, in short, made children and teachers as nearly as possible interchangeable so that we can all live within the complex structure that we so meticulously designed.

In contrast, the CPE schools are designed to be as seamless and simple as we could make them, so that every uninterchangeable adult would be required to exercise the most complex judgments over our equally unique children. Even in the high school, most students deal with only three or four different adults each year, and remain with the same team for several years. Teachers work in small clusters and can change virtually any part of their schedule at a moment's notice without checking with higher authorities. This simplicity allows us to focus our energies, not in coping with the system, but rather in coping with our ornery natures and the complexity of what we are

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trying to achieve. Thoughtful students must grow out of thoughtful schools. There isn't a shortcut for this. Thoughtfulness takes time — time spent on substance, not process.

Such teachers must know each other, not just in teacher lounges, but as colleagues. They must be able to distinguish between who talks well and who teaches well. They must know how to disagree and how to argue, and they must learn how to change their work in response to such dialogue.

Because of all this dialogue, the kind of community CPE and its now dozens and dozens of cousins have built provides children with the experience of a richly shared culture, where adults and young people work at answering the question: what are we all here for anyhow?

We know that the young learn most of what they know by being immersed in a culture created by its more experienced members. How did we forget that when we invented schools for our youth less than a century ago? We are depriving ourselves of the most powerful pedagogical tool when we create institutions in which the novice does not belong to the same community as the expert. The mantra that it takes a whole village to raise a child is a cliché by now. But a village that studies together must also celebrate and mourn together. I imagine sometimes what it would be like in New York's big high schools if they really did celebrate, and especially if they did mourn together. It would be a perpetual place of mourning if every human tragedy were taken seriously in most of the schools to which we now send our young.

A new kind of school requires a different notion of leadership. Rather than seeing leaders as administrators, removed from the school's central mission of learning, the leaders in small self-governed schools are models of the habits necessary for teaching and learning. This shift in understanding leadership opens up new possibilities for who might aspire to be principals of our schools. When people say to me, "But,

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Debbie, there aren't enough people who want to be your kind of principal," I remind them that we cannot know, because the kind of people I am describing never applied for the job of principal. We've already weeded out the people who could be such leaders.

We will improve the education of the young when we create learning communities for all the parties involved, not just for the children. This will mean communities that accept responsibility for their own behavior and their own work. Only then will it seem reasonable to ask: so what's so important about what we're doing? and why are we doing it anyhow? and are we doing it well? From schools that ask such questions, and from schools that are in the position to answer such questions, will come the needed questioners, the young people who will create the possibilities that lie ahead for democracy.

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