

**Back to School: Jewish Day School in the Lives of Adult Jews**, by Alex Pomson & Randal F. Schnoor. Wayne State University Press, 2008. 184 pp. \$26.95.

This important work summarizes, in an engaging, highly readable manner, research that demonstrates convincingly that the Jewish day school plays a vital role, not only in the educational, social, and religious lives of its students, but, surprisingly, in the lives of many adults who send their children to day schools. A quintessential study of parent-school relations, this book iconoclastically shatters commonly held assumptions about the nature of involvement parents seek with schools. Well researched and appropriately documented, *Back to School* is indeed a groundbreaking study that deserves the attention of board leaders, school administrators, teachers, parents, professors of Jewish education, and all others concerned about the state and growth of Jewish day schools.

The book begins with an astute assessment of the Jewish day school movement by Jack Werthheimer. Identifying the unique contribution of the research study, Werthheimer underscores two "guiding assumptions": first, that parents must actively engage in their children's education as frontline educators in their own right, and second, in almost Deweyian fashion, Jewish education must be seen as a "lifelong process."

Conversant with extant literature in educational sociology and the expanding role of Jewish day schools in the lives of adult parents, the authors propose a case study methodology to examine, in depth, one non-denominational school in downtown Toronto. Relying on interviews, observations, and document analysis, this well-crafted case study provides detailed analyses of one school. Yet the study is situated and explicated within a broad research paradigm that has interesting implications for Jewish day schools, particularly for parent involvement. The authors view their subject from a sociological perspective, relying on research in ethnic and religious studies. The authors conclude that Jewish identity today, as compared to research of past decades, is socially constructed, not always predictable, and very fluid. "Alternatives to being Jewish" are more commonplace than ever, they assert.

Given these changing views of "Jewishness," the authors draw important implications that focus as much on the parents as they do on the students. Parents, they say, not only look for high educational excellence and quality of a school for their children, but also want a school that "fills" their own social and educational needs. They explain:

[1]f parents are to decide whether an institution fits them and their child, the school must promote itself in language that goes beyond generic promises of

educational excellence. If parents are prepared to select a school rather than simply send their child to the most convenient local option, they seek clear and authentic alternatives, not cookie-cutter institutions whose mission statements are barely distinguishable from one another. (pp. 157–158)

Parent involvement, the authors explain, can take many forms. Parents need to better communicate their expectations about the nature of such involvement. Educators need to realize that day school parents today wish to participate in traditional but also, and more importantly, in non-traditional ways. Parents are motivated to participate if such involvement further develops their own sense of Jewish identity. The authors explain the changing nature of the Jewish day school in this way:

For many . . . parents, their children's school has replaced the synagogue as their primary point of engagement with Jewish life. . . . Many rely on their children's schools to provide the Jewish knowledge, inspiration, and community they don't possess at home. (p. 159)

Schools, the authors observe, may not be prepared to meet parent needs and expectations, a problem they discuss at length.

The volume concludes with several relevant "educational prescriptions" that may be drawn from the aforementioned implications. More details, however, could have been offered in terms of practically implementing such recommendations with specific examples or actual cases. Yet the authors have conducted a methodologically sound, worthy study of parent involvement in Jewish day schools. As educational sociologists, they have admirably adhered to the academic rigors of their discipline in conducting and explaining their study. Practicing Jewish educators, however, looking for specific strategies or tools "of how a day school can serve as a source of meaning in the lives of adult Jews," will find the book a bit wanting.

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