



KAYITZ 5777

SUMMER 2017

this issue

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Looking Forward

Looking Backward

חֵסֶד service

One of the hallmarks of the 7th/8th grade Judaic Studies program is the Annual Chesed (service) Project. It launches at the end of 7th grade,



when each student researches an organization to “adopt” during 8th grade. This research includes a field trip to several Chesed organizations in the Chicago area, meeting with Chesed professionals, and creating a strategy to promote their pet project. Students were excited to make phone calls, raise funds, set up collection boxes and get to work.

One Chesed project by Sydney Goldberg included raising money to buy holiday gifts for sick children in the hospital. When enough money was raised, the students took a class trip to the store to buy toys. Eva Basa organized a Chanukah event to entertain the elderly at an assisted living facility. Tali Rosenzweig organized bake sales, solicited bakeries and raised funds for Chai Lifeline, an organization that helps sick children.



▲ Lower Schoolers celebrate Yom HaAtzmaut (Israel Independence Day).



▲ “Moses” rides in his basket at the Kindergarten’s Model Seder.

◀ The 8th graders had a great graduation trip to Israel, accompanied by Mrs. Brackman and Mrs. Gold.



LEADING THE REVOLUTION: A VISION FOR OUR FUTURE

Nearly 3000 years ago, King Solomon suggested that if we “educate a child according to his way, even when he is old, he will not depart from it.” Sadly, this wisdom is often quoted, but rarely seen. This is further exacerbated by the fact that we have a history of innovation in Jewish education, yet the field has become stagnant as of late. Many claim a tradition of teaching that can’t change when in fact it has often shifted to ensure Jewish education remains the highest priority. There are many that call for educational reform, but that is not enough. We need a revolution, not evolution.

When I visited Akiba-Schechter as a Head of School candidate, it became apparent to me that the school was preserving the



Dr. Eliezer Jones, Head of School

tradition of teaching King Solomon advised. At Akiba, we teach students, not subjects. This mindset is years in the making and is a credit to my recent predecessor Mrs. Miriam Schiller and the fantastic team of Akiba educators. It is this mindset of excellent personalized education that has laid the solid foundation on which the

bright future of Akiba will stand. This bright future will be one where Akiba leads the revolution and, unlike as the poet Gil Scott-Heron suggested, the revolution will be televised.

Akiba is positioned to be a model of education for Jewish Day Schools around the world. Our multi-age classrooms, inquiry-based learning, Reggio inspired preschool, and personalized teaching and learning are just a few aspects that have

helped revolutionize Jewish Day School education at Akiba. We recently announced the development of the Akiba Research and Development Department (see below) which will guide future innovation at the school and be shared with the field. We also have an incredible resource in our teachers who remind me of Robert Frost’s statement, “I am not a teacher, but an awakener.” I want to ensure they have every opportunity for growth and positive impact in and outside the classroom. Of course, in the end, it is our students who matter most. We must continue, as we have for decades, to celebrate and preserve their childhood because the future lies with them. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks so eloquently put it, “while we can remember the past, we cannot write the future. Only our children, the future of our community, can do that.” They are the reason Akiba exists, and they are the reason we must continue to lead the revolution.

R&D @AKIBA

We are happy to announce that Akiba has been awarded a grant from the Jewish Education Innovation Challenge to develop the first and only Research and Development Department in a Jewish Day School. We were only one of two awardees out of 50 proposals. The R&D Department is designed to address

a lack of innovation in Jewish education, which we hope to use to incubate new ideas for Akiba and share with schools around the globe. This summer the leadership team and a task force of teachers worked with the American School of Bombay R&D Lab creators to begin the work of designing our R&D Department.



Head of School Dr. Eliezer Jones and Preschool Director Carla Goldberg on the first day of a week of R&D.

HAGGADOT

In anticipation of the holiday of Passover, the 7th/8th grade students were treated to a private showing of Haggadot by Mr. Stephen Durschlag, owner of the largest known private collection of Haggadot in the world. “It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for the students,” says teacher and coordinator Baila Brackman. “These were Haggadot they will never see or touch again or touch again.” Durschlag’s Haggadot were featured in an exhibit at the University of Chicago’s Library called “Archetype and Adaptation,” which explored the enduring influence of Haggadot to reflect political and social developments such as the Holocaust, Zionism, and feminism.

◀ *Elie and Eli examine one of the Haggadot together.*



STUDENTS, NOT SUBJECTS

Miriam Schiller reflects on almost 30 years at Akiba

Q>A

When Miriam Schiller started at Akiba in 1988, she wasn't sure if she would be there a year later. The School Board told her they were giving the school one more year before closing it, and she was their best shot at its survival. She took that mission seriously. Over 500 students and almost 30 years later, she reflects on her tenure as she retires.

Q> What was the school like when you first arrived?

A< When I started, the school was Kindergarten to 5th grade, with only two preschool classes. We had 32 children in the grades. My teaching staff was four people, and I taught 1st grade. We had multi-age classes, but not for the right reasons. The teachers were uninspiring, not ambassadors for the school. None of the Kindergarteners came from the preschool. The preschool was totally disconnected from the grades. The preschool teachers didn't feel comfortable being ambassadors for the school because they realized how poor it actually was. Many of the rooms were cluttered with 20 years worth of stuff. I remember going through some books that were 20 years old, and there were maybe 30 copies. I threw away 20 and kept 10, thinking, "If I ever get to the point where I have 10 students in each grade, I'll be able to afford new books." That first year I revamped the staff, added new grades, and worked my tail off. I realized early on that if I didn't make dramatic changes to this little, fragile school, it wasn't going to survive beyond that year.

Q> What was your biggest challenge when you arrived and how did you envision overcoming it?

A< I realized that the school had a terrible reputation. It was perceived on the South Side as a school for misfits or very religious children. And we didn't have North Side students. It was hard to recruit staff because they didn't want to be associated with us. At the end of my first year, I heard there was an Israeli family coming to the University of Chicago, and I got that professor's name and called him in Israel. I promised him that I would do everything in my power to make sure his children got a top-notch education. They arrived with five children, which, with a school of 35, raised my enrollment by a 7th. When I met with the father he told me, "I just want you to know that I asked colleagues in Israel, and they told me your school has a very bad reputation, but you called me and I believed you, and so I decided to give it a chance." This was my first Israeli family. They had an amazing year, and went



▲ An iconic image: Mrs. Schiller teaching a child to read.

back to Israel raving about our school, which then brought the next Israeli family. Now the children of the current Israeli Consul General in Chicago attend Akiba. Our growth has been family by family, word of mouth. Our families and students are our best ambassadors.

Q> What was your favorite part of the job?

A< The children. When I started, I was the 1st graders' General Studies teacher. Eventually I cut back to only teaching reading, but I also taught other classes when needed: Algebra, English. I've always been involved with the 7th and 8th graders, going with them to Israel, New York, Springfield, and chaperoning countless Shabbatonim. They have their own projects—like the basketball team—that they come to me with. Every age is different, but also the same, because treating students with respect, listening to them, and hearing them is constant. That's true for Kindergarten, 3rd grade and 8th grade. They need to feel heard, and my goal has always been for them to know that they can come talk to me and feel empowered. I never wanted them to see teachers as "keepers of knowledge," whom students should listen to and obey. This doesn't minimize students acting respectfully to teachers, if students feel empowered and understood, you can talk to them about anything, and they own their education.

Q> What's changed and what's stayed the same?

A< Many things have changed. There's more of everything: students, staff, buses, hot lunch. All that makes a school mainstream. What's stayed is the goal for an amazing education, the need to find teachers who are not just teachers but inspiring people. I didn't want a teacher who wants me to hand them a curriculum, and who says great, now I know what to teach. We're looking for someone who is going to develop and create and look at individual students. And it's not just about the number of students. What's true of 7 is true with 27. If your goal is to individualize, then you find a way to do that. It was easier with 7 children, but it's more interesting with 17.

Q> Most joyful moments?

A< Seeing a student read who thought he couldn't. Watching 8th graders graduate. Watching the little school that no one thought would survive build its own new building. Talking to alumni who come back and tell us we changed their lives.

Q> Saddest?

A< We've had some personal events—really sad events. The students are... it's a community. They're close knit. So when Mr. Chez, who personally served the students lunch every week, passed away, it was a tragedy for everybody. When we had a graduate suddenly die as a high schooler, it was tragic. The entire Middle School attended those funerals and we grieved together. Those moments were so sad, but there was comfort in leaning on each other.

Q> Funniest?

A< I remember the time when I was driving the school's van—in the pre-bus days—and it stalled every time I came to a stop. I'd have to get the motor started again, which took a while. So I drove the whole way to school trying to never come to a complete stop, not even at red lights. We got to school alive, but then I got a call from a good Samaritan who had noticed the school's logo on the side of the van and reached out to let me know that I should fire my driver, who was obviously unsafe. "Of course," I told her. "Thank you so much for calling. I completely agree."

Q> When you started, you were the mother of four children under age 11. What was it like to manage this job and raise a large family?

A< Impossible! My youngest was in Kindergarten when I started. Between going through dusty old books, preparing for my own class, spending time recruiting teachers, meeting people... there were never enough hours in the day. So I would leave in the morning before 5:30 am, and bring my 5 year old in her sleeper pajamas, blanket and pillow that were permanently in the car, and Rose (a"n) and Millie would keep an eye on her in the office until she woke up. Then she would eat breakfast, get dressed, and go to school—and then stay with me until I left at night. In the winter months, she never saw daylight. There were so many crazy events that went along with that... One morning we got to school and I realized I had forgotten her shoes, so I called a parent in her class and asked her if she could bring an extra pair.

Q> What do you think makes Akiba unique?

A< The individualized attention we give to each child. Every school says this, but we really do. In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the second need after physical survival is self-concept. If children feel good about themselves, we can teach them values: caring for others, empathizing, supporting one another. I'm always skeptical of programs and rules, like those will fix things. Rules don't stop bullies from bullying. Students feeling good about themselves changes their need to bully. And teaching them higher values of *menchlechkeit*. That's what I'm proudest of. Not just the academics, which our students excel at, but their character. Every one of our 8th graders has a buddy, and I never hear them complain, "Why do I have to give up my time for this?" but instead, "So and so is not here, do you want me to take care of his buddy today?" They feel good about themselves and so they have the energy to care about others. That's why individualization is critical for any school, but certainly a Jewish school.

Q> Last words for this community?

A< Akiba gave me the opportunity to try out all these ideas I had about education, and I'm very grateful for that. But the main thing—the compass that always guided us and I hope will continue to, is that while it's a given that the academics have to be excellent, that just isn't enough. You have to teach the soul.



*Hoffman House,
where the Middle
School was housed
for over 15 years.*

MYTH-BUSTING 101: #DiscoverJewishDaySchools

For as long as it's existed, Akiba-Schechter has had to fight misconceptions about Jewish day school education. In fact, it's not alone in this regard. As a 2016 study funded by PRIZMAH, the Center for Jewish Day Schools, recently revealed, myths about day school education are not only prevalent, they are effective deterrents to families who might otherwise enroll their child in a day school program. Myths like: day school graduates won't get into the college or high school of their choice, won't score well on



IMAP or ACT tests, won't qualify for national merit scholarships, won't integrate well into non-Jewish settings—to name a few. Not only are these misconceptions ungrounded, the truth is that day school grads excel in all of these areas and more—in fact, far above their public and private school peers. But this year, with the help of a PRIZMAH grant and a Chicago-based brand-management firm, we finally have the data to prove it.

The grant, the Day School Branding Project, began with data collection in the Spring of 2016. Along with three other Chicago day schools in this pilot cohort, Akiba contacted its alumni, crunched numbers, ran statistics, and tried to find measurable data to answer the question: do Jewish day school grads do better than their peers? The answer was a resounding yes. This data was then used in a branding campaign, #DiscoverJewishDaySchools, whose purpose was to provide prospective families with the data that could help them make informed decisions about day school education.

Launched by a student video contest and backed by a website, informational video and fact sheet, the campaign took off in May 2017. Now, the schools in this cohort will be collaborating on ways to harness this momentum and continue to raise awareness about the measurable—and not-so-measurable—benefits of Jewish day school.

LEFT: *the campaign website, discoverjewishdayschools.com.*

BELOW LEFT: *8th grader Eva Basa's video was 1 of 4 winners of the video contest. Watch it at www.discoverjewishdayschools.com/Voting.*

#theStats

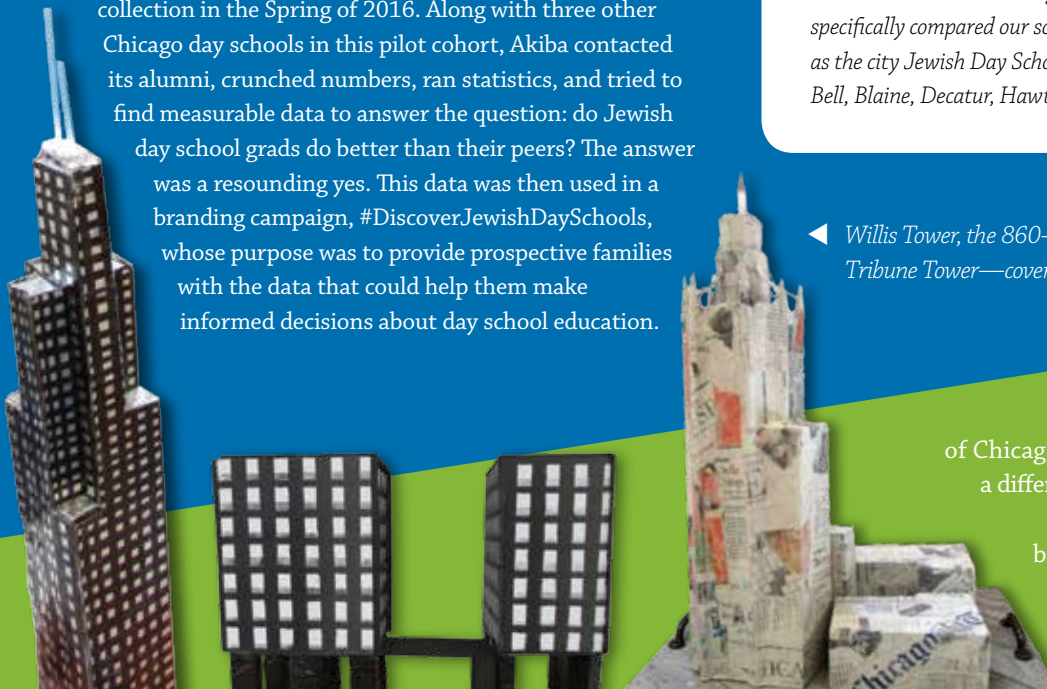
Just a few statistics borne out of the branding project:

- **96%** of JDS students score above nat'l average in reading on the MAP test, versus 86% CPS students.*
- **95%** of JDS students score above nat'l average in math on the MAP test, versus 79% CPS students.*
- **90%** of JDS students who apply to Chicago's CPS selective enrollment high schools are accepted.
- JDS alumni perform much better on the ACT than students in public high schools.
- A greater percentage of JDS alumni take AP courses than their CPS peers.
- More JDS alumni are recognized as National Merit Scholarship Semifinalists than CPS or North Suburban school students.
- **70%** of JDS teachers have advanced degrees.

** Because CPS has such a large range of student achievement, we specifically compared our scores to schools in the same catchment area as the city Jewish Day Schools—including, but not limited to: Ray, Bell, Blaine, Decatur, Hawthorne, Lincoln, Nettelhorst & Ogden.*

◀ *Willis Tower, the 860-880 N. Lake Shore Dr. building, and the Tribune Tower—covered, of course, in the Chicago Tribune.*

The 3rd/4th grade embarked on a full blown study of Chicago architecture. Each student researched a different building, created visual and written presentations, built 3-D models of the building, and served as docent on a class field trip to all of the buildings.



THE BEAUTY AROUND US

Inspired by her visit to the early childhood center at Reggio Emilia in Italy this March, Preschool Director Carla Goldberg and her team brought the Reggio-inspired “deep dive” into an everyday subject (as opposed to a broad, surface approach to learning) to the preschool’s summer program: They embarked on a study of public art with the children, making use of the art and artists in our neighborhood. This incorporates another Reggio concept: bridging school, family and community.

For example, the older students made paper with our resident artist and teacher, Susan Carton, then used their paper to create sculptures. They visited Yoko Ono’s sculpture “Sky Landing” in the Japanese Garden, carefully drew it and figured out how to create replicas. They toured the Smart Museum and chose sculptures they

wanted to draw there. All the while, they were using Reggio’s “one hundred languages of children:” drawing an idea, and then moving on to many different ways of expressing that idea such as sculpting, singing, or dancing.

The younger children explored different materials, such as clay, model magic and play dough to learn about three-dimensional art and how to create art with these materials. They used blocks, cardboard tubes, shells, rocks and other recycled materials to create transient art. The children were given the space and time to reflect as teachers asked: “Tell me about what you created?” - “How does it make you feel?” - “What does it make you think about?”

This study culminated in a gallery opening on July 28, showcasing the children’s amazing creations. Sure enough, it was attended by not only our program’s families but also by people from the neighborhood. The Hyde Park Herald sent a reporter. Clearly, this project opened the children’s (and lots of other people’s) eyes to their community and the beauty that surrounds them. One parent said it best: “The culmination at the sculpture show really showed that everything the kids do - even when they just think they’re playing - is truly thoughtful and purposeful. [...] Inspired by Akiba, we spent a day downtown playing on a giant Picasso and reflecting at the Cloud Gate.”

▼ *More sculptures were created at the gallery opening.*





RUBE GOLDBERG: NOT-SO-SIMPLE MACHINES

How many steps does it take to make a cup of tea? That depends on whether you're using Rube Goldberg machines—contraptions that involve multiple chain reactions to accomplish mundane tasks—to do it. A staple of the 5th/6th Science curriculum, the Rube Goldberg project is an engineering challenge. Students are grouped into teams for about two months. Each team must build a machine that accomplishes a simple task. This year's included making tea, playing a video, watering a plant, dipping an Oreo into milk, and putting toothpaste on a toothbrush. Machines must include seven distinct steps, four different simple machines, and clear transitions of transfer of energy. "The hidden goals," says Science teacher Michelle Rotfeld, "are to teach perseverance and problem solving skills using a more authentic approach."

So how does one start on such a project? First is brainstorming, followed by design and planning. Then the building begins. The students rotate jobs in their team each week so that everyone has a role and experiences a leadership position at least once.

Rube Goldberg machines are known to be problematic. As problems arise, the groups need to figure out why, using the physics lessons from the year as their guide. For instance: Is there enough force or mass? Should we use a spring scale to find out? Is there enough momentum? Let's calculate the mass and speed to determine if we need to adjust.

On test day, most of the machines don't fully complete the task. This year, only two of the eight were successful. "But that's okay," says Michelle. "The world didn't end. The idea is to persevere through the challenges." In addition to building the actual

machines, students are also asked to analyze their work, identifying energy transitions, calculating gravitational potential energy, speed, and momentum; and locating which of Newton's laws are at play and when. Ms. Rotfeld says it took her a year to design this project, because her goal was to teach engineering and design authentically. "I love pushing students out of their comfort zone. I love challenging them to apply the concepts they know to solve problems when they arise. And, I love the cheers that come with each success after many failures."



◀ To get toothpaste on a toothbrush, this team's machine culminated in knocking down dominoes.

▼ Jed's machine made a baking soda + vinegar chemical reaction, but a side benefit was raising a flag with the team name on it.

