

# Beyond the brochure

## 10 tips on what to look for when choosing a day school

**S**o you've decided to send your child to Jewish day school. Mazel tov! As you've probably already learned – perhaps in these very pages – the benefits of day school education are both numerous and lifelong. Indeed, choosing day school for your child may



**Mindy Schiller**

be one of the most significant decisions you make, because you'll begin to integrate Jewish identity into your family's life in an organic, authentic and joyful way.

Unfortunately, none of this means the decision-making is over. In fact, this is just when it begins to get interesting – and the questions start to multiply. Small or large student body? Traditional or pluralistic philosophy? How much of the day should be Jewish instruction?

Truth be told, choosing day school was the easy part. Choosing *which* day school is the hard part. Here are 10 tips on how to look beyond each school's PR speak and determine which one is the best fit for your child and family:

**Spend a day from drop off to dismissal.** This applies to both you and your child, though not necessarily on the same day. Pay special attention to “down” times: recess, homeroom, lunch, grace after meals and

hallway traffic between classes. These unstructured times will give you a flavor of the school's culture and values – and a sense of what it would feel like to be a student there.

As to the classroom, make sure to stop in on a Hebrew language course. Are the students learning modern Hebrew or the more old-fashioned, Ashkenazi Hebrew? Is the school Zionist?

No matter what your child's age, sit in on an eighth grade class, particularly one in the humanities. Take note of the concepts students raise, how well they listen to one another and the sophistication of their discussions. Eighth graders are the final product of the school and the best barometer of what your child might achieve. Is the average 8th grader a mensch, respectful of peers, capable of speaking in a mature way with adults?

**Meet with the head of school.** Admissions officers will ply you with a plethora of information about a school but essentially are salesmen. The heads of school are the true captains of the ship. Their personalities speak volumes about the school. How do you feel after meeting them? Do they seem genuine? Do they share your philosophy and values? Would you trust them with your child's education?

**Look at the numbers.** With an economy as uncertain as ours, it's important to know how financially stable a school is, especially if there are siblings in the picture. When meeting with the head of school, ask to see a breakdown-by-grade of enrollment numbers for the last five years, as well as any budget figures you think impor-

tant. For instance, what percentage of the student body receives financial aid? How heavily does the school rely on fundraising (i.e., soliciting gifts from parents) to meet the budget? How do the numbers in kindergarten and first grade compare with those in eighth? Some figures are confidential, but most are not – and transparency is a plus. Ask about the demographics of the study body. Do families span the income bracket? The religious spectrum? Do they come from a variety of neighborhoods? Couples differ about what sorts of peer groups they want for their children, but this will allow you to make an informed decision.

### Ask about the alumni.

What happens to students after they graduate, both in the short and long run? Most schools are proud to tell you about their graduates' many achievements and often include information about this on their Web sites.

**Attend a graduation.** No one likes sitting through speeches, but a school's graduation really can be revealing. This is especially true if the students speak. What are they grateful for? Are they sad or relieved to be leaving? Both emotions are normal, but which stands out more? Many a parent has been sold on a school because of witnessing a touching graduation ceremony.

**Read the mission statement.** You can find it on almost anything the school produces: the Web site, brochures, view books, applications. What topics come first? Excellence in academics? Commitment to mitzvot? Menschlichkeit? Is any-

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### Put day school Web pages to the five-second test.

thing glaringly missing? Mission statements are the product of long hours by planning committees, writers and PR professionals. As with the Torah, every word counts. They are thoughtful and intentional.

**Find out who's really in charge.** Look at the communication produced by the school. Where are the names of the board of directors and how prominently are they displayed? The more prominent they appear, the more "helicopter-esque" they probably are. A seemingly minor detail like this may be a red flag about a board that is over-involved or micro-manages the administration. Ultimately, you need to trust the school, and you want the head of school to have a backbone.

**Take the five-second test.** Open up a school's Web site, look at it for five seconds, and then close it. What do you remember? This is a test often conducted by marketing professionals when organizations are trying to hone or revamp their sites, because the average time a person spends is just 5.23 seconds on a Web page. What do you remember? Is it the gold "donate" button? A feeling that the site was outdated? Were photos mostly of younger children (suggesting, perhaps, less focus on older students and college prep)? Was there a sense of joy and vibrancy? Does this school seem to stress prestige and academic excellence or loving and nurturing? (Ideally,

of course, it's both.) Ultimately, you should trust your gut when you look at a Web site. This is a school's "shingle." If the administration doesn't take the time to work at it, then that speaks to its overall savviness – or lack thereof.

**Listen to word of mouth.** Ask the head of school for the names of current parents or recent alumni you might contact (who, at some point, might well become your good friends), and then go ahead and make those

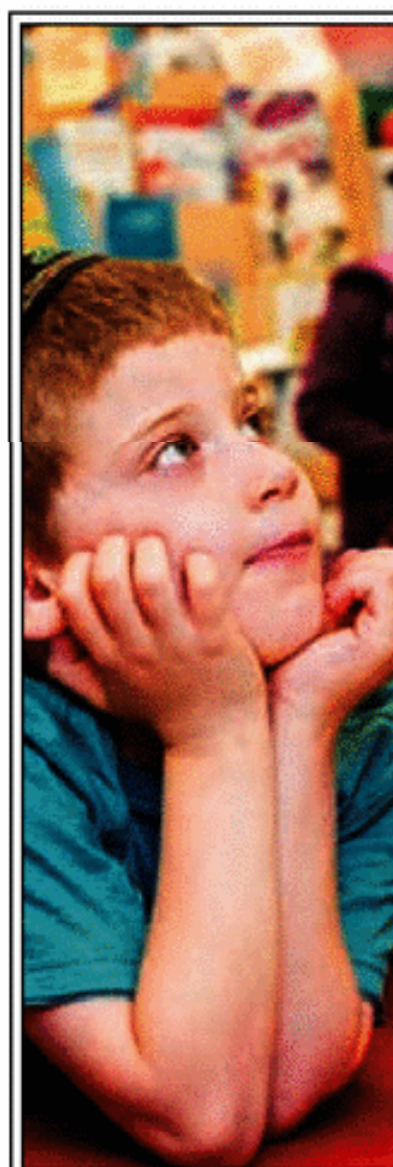
phone calls. Spending a little time schmoozing at Shabbat Kiddush after shacharit services won't hurt either, as you'll be more likely to talk to people who were not selected for you.

**Check out social media sites.** Look at the Internet outlets used by the school: Facebook, Twitter, Blogger. For better or worse, social media has the unique ability to incorporate not only administrators' posts, but also those of the greater Web community. Such sites are more ground-up, community-driven, unpolished and organic. In other words: authentic. Scan through the photos and conversation threads to get a sense of the atmosphere and culture of the school.

**Go to the Source.** If you follow only one tip from this list, let it be this: Talk to the students you pass in the hallways. Stop them politely when they're not running late to a class or surrounded by a posse, and tell them you're considering sending your child to this school. Then ask, "How do you like [insert school name]?"

Most of them will be thrilled to talk to you, and what they say on the spur of the moment is usually more telling than anything else you could find in a brochure or a school tour. If they like school, that will show through. Shake their hand, thank them for their time, and then shout hooray. Your work is done.

*Mindy Schiller just wrapped up a year teaching at a local day school.*



middot  
ruach Torah  
learning nurturing  
Israel community  
creativity  
fun curiosity  
joy mitzvot  
grades K-12

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