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DEFINING THE GOALS OF DAY SCHOOL EDUCATION



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THE CASE FOR CORE VALUES

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Micah Lapidus describes how one school re-wrote its core values.

What impact could five Hebrew words have on the culture of an already thriving, mission and vision driven Jewish day school?

Proposition: Jewish day schools need core values. We need core values that are embraced by everyone in our schools. As school leaders we need to understand and harness the power of core values. This article is intended for schools that a) do not have core values, b) have core values but are dissatisfied with them, or c) have core values and are interested in fully realizing their transformational power.

Background

The Alfred & Adele Davis Academy is Atlanta's Reform Jewish day school. The Davis Academy has always had core values. Over time, we felt that the core values that had served our school during the first chapter of our history grew stale and ossified. As part of our 20th anniversary celebration in 2012 we decided that it was time to revisit our core values, what we at Davis call, our *menschlichkeit* values. The bold choice to revisit our core values rather than resuscitate the stale ones has proven to be a deeply rewarding and insightful process.

Interestingly, the initiative to create new core values encountered very little resistance from parents or teachers – another sign

that the time had come. The resistance we did encounter came mostly from a place of caring and concern that somehow new core values meant a shift in our school's mission while, in fact, the opposite was true. Core values actually help clarify and concretize mission. At a certain point most Jewish day school missions start to sound the same. One could argue the same regarding core values, but our experience has demonstrated that core values that are rooted in the school's mission and vision actually help transform the mission and vision of the school into something that all stakeholders can understand, articulate, and support. Presently our core values are helping us fulfill our mission in a variety of exciting ways.

Protocol

Our hope from the outset was that our new core values would reflect both who we are and who we want to be. In that spirit we knew that we had to engage parents, faculty, and even students in the process of selecting these values.

An initial list of core values was generated during a brainstorming session that combined teacher leaders and school administrators. As the school rabbi I took this list, edited it, and attached the most compelling Hebrew corollaries to the list since

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most values were articulated in English. This process yielded a list of approximately 20 potential core values that served as the basis for subsequent focus groups with various stakeholders – parents, faculty, and community rabbis.

Each focus group met for approximately one hour. Each of the potential values had its own poster clearly on display. In addition to the 20 potential values we also made sure to have a poster labeled “Other” so that individuals could write in values that they thought were absent. Focus groups began with clear instructions – a period of silent, individual voting, would be followed by a period of sharing and discussion. Each individual was allotted a certain number of stickers that they could “spend” on whichever value they wished. If someone felt very strongly about one particular value he could place all of his stickers on that value. Key was the fact that there were more values on display than there were stickers per person. This meant that individuals had to make decisions about where to place their stickers.

After the silent voting period, we used a simple protocol to facilitate group dialogue. Individuals were asked to share “warm” or “cool” feedback about different values as well as reflect on any trends they saw in the voting distribution. Robust conversations ensued with some important outcomes – some values were clearly not going to gain traction, some values were vague and required additional explanation, and some values seemed to be closely related to others (for example *chochmah* [“wisdom”] and *limmud* [“learning”]). At the end of each focus group the votes were tallied. Each focus group had the chance to vote on values without knowing what other groups had prioritized. Patterns quickly emerged and soon a general schema of values began to manifest itself.

Outcome

In the end we adopted five core values which we call our *menshlichkeit* values – *chochmah* (“wisdom”), *ruach* (“spirit”), *cavod* (“respect”), *kehilah* (“community”), and *tzedek* (“righteousness”). But adopting these values was anything other than the final step in the process. It really marked a much more important beginning – the beginning of making these values an integral part of our school culture. That work commenced during the 2013-2014 school year and will continue for the foreseeable future. It is without a doubt the most exciting and important part of the entire core values exercise.

Staff week, known at Davis as pre-planning, was organized according to our core values. Our opening morning activities cen-

tered on *ruach*; professional learning days were dedicated not to “in-service” but to *chochmah*; our annual faculty t-shirts, worn on spirit days and other special events, feature *menshlichkeit*. Most faculty members agree that they’ve never been more proud to wear official Davis Academy gear.

By the first week of school every student had created a self-portrait in art class. These portraits were displayed prominently in our central hallway with a bulletin board that read, “The faces of our *kehilah*.” Faculty meetings, board meetings, weekly *Kabalat Shabbat* stories from community rabbis, “read alouds” in classrooms, young author’s night literature themes, and more embraced our new *menshlichkeit* values. Prior to Winter Break I had a 20 minute meeting with every faculty member to hear about how the *menshlichkeit* values were going in their classrooms and in the school more generally. After these meetings it was clear to me that these values were having a transformational effect on multiple levels.

Principles guiding core values

I attribute this transformational effect to a number of key factors. These factors are worth keeping in mind for any school seeking to develop core values or make core values a focus area in future years.

1. Good core values are both descriptive and prescriptive. Ideally they describe “who” the school already is as well as what the school aspires to become. It was a source of pride for all of us at Davis to know that we were already living our values. At the same time it was a challenge for us to realize that we could be living them more fully and that in order to keep living them we had to dedicate our hearts and minds focused on them.
2. Good core values articulate a shared vision as well as common language for achieving the vision. The value of *chochmah* is a great example. A school that doesn’t value wisdom doesn’t deserve to be called a school. But many faculty members don’t connect the knowledge that they are imparting to their students in areas like math and language arts with the idea of *chochmah* as a core value. Reframing the building blocks of learning as steps on the path toward living the value of *chochmah* is a powerful reframing of what teachers really do on a daily basis.
3. Good core values must be generative and generous. They must be generative insofar as they must continually spark new ideas – inspiring teachers, parents, and students to think differently and dream big; they must be generous insofar as they must energize all stakeholders.

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