



Executive Summary

Challenges and Opportunities in the Solomon Schechter Marketplace

In the winter of 2009-2010 the Board of Directors of the Solomon Schechter Day School Association decided to gather data in a systematic manner to assess the vulnerability in the Schechter School marketplace. We engaged Measuring Success®, a company that has done extensive work with Jewish day schools in recent years that specializes in creating quantitative performance tools and models to help managers and boards enhance their organizational effectiveness. We worked with Andrea Litvak, the research director, to design a questionnaire that aimed to identify the issues associated with perceptions of both the strengths and vulnerability of Solomon Schechter day schools and the Schechter Association.

Telephone interviews were conducted by a senior Jewish educator, engaged for this project, and a high rate of participation was achieved. Data were collected from almost 90% of the heads of school and approximately 55% of the chairpersons of the schools' board of trustees during a period of approximately 5 weeks in the early spring of 2010.

The main goals of the survey were:.

- To understand the changing nature of what membership to SSSDA means.
- To explore and identify the factors causing membership to SSSDA to dwindle, including:
 - the principles of Conservative Judaism;
 - the marketplace schools find themselves in
 - issues relating to branding
 - To target specific action steps and follow-up initiatives based on what we learned. We wondered whether a deeper understanding of the challenges schools are facing would lead us to change or adapt the types of services that the SSSDA Association could provide to help schools and whether the provision of services would likely make a difference to the retention of member schools.

Major Findings:

Strengths:

- To a question about whether and how Conservative Judaism helps inform or shape the school in its day-to-day functioning, more than 90% of respondents said that “Our school incorporates the historical approach to teaching texts” and “Conservative Judaism enables us to set clear religious policies (for our school). Fully 100% reported that “Our school practice is egalitarian, and girls and boys have equal opportunities to participate in all aspects of the religious life of the school.” Over 90% replied in the affirmative to

the statement: "We maintain a standard of *halakhic* observance that is informed by Conservative Judaism."

- A large majority of the respondents considered it a positive feature that they connect with the other arms of the movement, such as USY and Camp Ramah "
- Anecdotal comments expressed appreciation for having someone to talk to and consult with in the national office.

Vulnerabilities:

The mirror image question was then posed: "In what ways is it not helpful to your school to be affiliated with Conservative Judaism? "

- Three quarters of the respondents (75%) replied that many prospective families think that "Conservative" is too religious;" a28% stated that they would like to " accept children who are not *halakhically* Jewish", while 25% acknowledged that they "already accept children who are not *halakhically* Jewish", adding "we feel that we can't be forthright about this practice as a Schechter school:"
- For the schools that find the affiliation with Conservative Judaism to be unhelpful to recruitment it is often because they define themselves as pluralistic.
- Anecdotal comments expressed a lack of knowledge of Conservative Judaism, the mission of the SSDS Association, and the value added of network membership.

Needs

We asked whether the member schools were looking for **branding/ collateral** from the Association. The responses indicate that many of them are. Almost half (46%) replied that they would like this kind of assistance from the Association "to a large extent" and fully 70% said "somewhat". The Schechter Tri-State Consortium's branding and marketing initiative, supported by funding from a grant to the NJE-SAJES and by contributions from the participating schools is clearly on the right track in addressing a widely felt need. It can be considered a pilot project for a national initiative. As the Board of Directors of the SSDSA engages in planning for the 2010-2011 school year, we will be guided by what we have learned from the very informative survey results.

A more detailed report is available upon request. Please write to education@uscj.org and we will e-mail you a copy.

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Shabbat shalom,



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