

Schechter of Raritan Valley Garners Blue Ribbon Honors

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THE JEWISH STATE
September 25, 2009

Solomon Schechter Day School of Raritan Valley in East Brunswick was recently recognized as a Blue Ribbon School by the U.S. Department of Education, one of only two Jewish schools in the nation and the only private school in New Jersey that received this honor this year.

Arne Duncan, the secretary of education, announced in a statement the 314 schools that would be designated as 2009 National Blue Ribbon Schools last week, an award that honors "public and private elementary, middle and high schools that are either academically superior or that demonstrate dramatic gains in student achievement to high levels."

Solomon Schechter, a K-8 day school, qualified for the honor under the former category, demonstrating sustained academic achievement over the years, said Dr. Howard Rosenblatt, the head of school.

Each year, only 50 private schools are awarded Blue Ribbon status.

"We're very excited," Rosenblatt said. "It attests to the general public that we not only have an outstanding Jewish studies programs -- which we're known for -- but also outstanding general studies." He explained that the due to the nature of the honor, the school was primarily selected based upon their general studies program, "though our programs go hand in hand."

Upon announcing the Blue Ribbon finalists, Duncan praised the selected schools for demonstrating excellence.

"These Blue Ribbon Schools have shown that all children can learn with appropriate supports. They are producing outstanding results for their students. Some have shown dramatic improvements in places where students are overcoming the challenges of poverty, and others serve as examples of consistent excellence that can be a resource for other schools. They are places where improved teaching and learning benefits every student, and where students are challenged to meet high expectations with the active support of teachers, parents and the community," he said.

In order to qualify for the recognition, schools must be ranked in the top 10 percent in state assessment tests and submit five years worth of data as well as answer a detailed questionnaire regarding all aspects of the school including such factors as standardized test scores, student turnover, and teacher stability.

The Council for American Private Education (CAPE), a national coalition of private schools, nominates the finalists, which are then submitted to the Department of Education for final review.

"We collected a lot of data and we're able to submit it to support our claim to be a Blue Ribbon school," Rosenblatt said.

Dr. Stephen Charton, the school's principal who was in charge of overseeing the application, said that the initial application was submitted last fall and then in February CAPE contacted the school for additional information. Shortly thereafter, the semifinalists were announced and then last week Duncan announced the finalists.

"Honestly, I was really surprised that we we're the only elementary school in New Jersey selected," Charton said, describing his reaction upon hearing that the school was a finalist. "It gives you external validation for what we tell parents all the time."

Rosenblatt credits revisions throughout the school's entire curriculum for Schechter's continued success.

"There have been intense revisions and we're finding that it pays dividends," he explained, citing changes in the math, science, reading, Hebrew language, and Jewish studies programs.

The school has also recently a constructed a science lab, funded through a gift by the Center for Initiatives in Jewish Education, part of the Gruss Life Monument Funds.

Rosenblatt said that the recognition not only serves as a validation for himself and Dr. Charton, but also of all the teachers, parents, and students who make such success possible.

"It is a credit to parents, who in difficult, economic times, decided to send their children to Solomon Schechter," he said. "It should show them that the decision they made -- sometimes at great sacrifice -- was a good one."

Rosenblatt said that the award also reminds the larger Jewish community of the value of a day school education.

"It shows the overall Jewish community that a Jewish day school education is second to none," he said. "Any kid can get a great education through Jewish day school."

On Nov. 3, the 314 finalists will be honored at an awards ceremony at the Omni Shoreham Hotel in Washington, D.C. Since the program was founded in 1982, 6,150 schools nationwide have received this award.