

# Schechter Boasts Spirit of Renewal

---



Hildy Zonis, an on-site manager for the new language arts and math resource center at the Solomon Schechter Day School of Raritan Valley, shows students Lindsey Schafer of East Brunswick and Jared Abraham of Edison how to use specially equipped computers donated through the Caroline and Joseph S. Gruss Life Monument Funds. Photos by Debra Rubin

by [Debra Rubin](#)

NJJN Bureau Chief/Middlesex

09.14.07

Buoyed by an expanding endowment fund and rising enrollment, the Solomon Schechter Day School of Raritan Valley in East Brunswick has begun the new school year on a high note.

In addition to new computer labs, technology, and libraries, a school that was closing out last year with virtually no endowment now has the potential to end the current year with \$3 million and the ability to offer tuition assistance to any qualifying youngsters.

"This is my 10th year here, and this is the most excitement I've ever seen," Gail Fellus, the school's guidance counselor, said. "I got a call just yesterday from a mom. Her son came home from school so excited. She called to tell me about how he said the school was in wonderful shape and had wonderful new programs. You can just feel the excitement reverberating through the school."

That contrasts with the mood last year when, as new head of school, Howard Rosenblatt went to a parents' meeting and felt "a sense of crisis."

"This year there was a feeling of relaxation," he said. "Parents were calm and relaxed and asked us questions. It really makes us feel like we accomplished the objectives we set out to do. There's a general feeling the ship has been righted."

The 27-year-old day school, affiliated with the Conservative movement and housed in the East Brunswick Jewish Center, had suffered in recent years from declining enrollment — including a

five-year period in which it lost half its student body — and limited options to offer tuition assistance.

Nothing was more reflective of the shift in enrollment than the numbers in the upper and lower grades. Rosenblatt pointed out there were only 19 students in last year's eighth-grade graduating class. This year's class has only 10 students.

However, last year 161 youngsters were enrolled overall in the school and another 158 students this year. More importantly, 23 youngsters have enrolled in kindergarten, which bodes well for the future: Historically, students who come to the school in kindergarten or first grade tend to stay there, said school president Mickey Kaufman.

"We have an exceptionally high retention rate," he said. "When they come in and see what we do for their kids they don't leave. Truthfully, we don't get kids past the first grade unless they just moved to the area and are coming from another Schechter. We want to focus on increasing our entry-level enrollment. We did increase this year, but not as much as we'd like. Next year we hope to go up to 30."

In May, the school announced it had received an unsolicited donation of more than \$1 million, the largest in its history.

The contribution toward the school's scholarship fund was made by a woman from outside Middlesex County who wished to remain anonymous.

Building on that, a grandparent of a current student this summer offered Schechter another \$1 million if it can raise an equivalent amount on its own.

"She gave us this challenge," said Kaufman. "She is saying, 'Look, I don't live here. I want to see if your community believes in the school enough to come up big.'"

The board has come up with a plan targeting 10 potential donors who it believes would be interested in contributing \$100,000 each. Kaufman said he feels the school will be able to meet the challenge in about a year.

"Then we will go out into the community and long-term solve our need for tuition assistance," he said. "Last year we raised enough to cover tuition assistance, but we'd like to have enough so that it doesn't have to come from the endowment. Then the money we raise from our fund-raisers can be used for expenses, and we won't have to worry about having enough to cover our tuition assistance scholarships."

## New Goals

At its annual summer retreat, the board set fund-raising as one of its five major goals. Kaufman said other goals included bolstering its Judaic studies program — it pushed its general studies

last year — upgrading communication with the community and revamping its Web site, and completing resource centers.

School officials are working with the Jewish Federation of Greater Middlesex County, described as a "strategic partner," to come up with ways of "tapping into" the community.

Will Schafer, the school's vice president of fund-raising and the parent of three Schechter students, said the combined effect of the academic program and tuition assistance would be "a huge selling point."

"If the tuition assistance doesn't garner higher enrollment, the sheer academics and level of programming will be more than sufficient to make it a no-brainer decision for any parent to want to send their kid," he said.

Schafer said the school has a new board of "business-minded people used to running teams and budgets, all dedicated to Judaism, but who have what it takes to survive in this world from a financial standpoint."

Planned fund-raisers for the coming year include appearances by Dr. Ruth Westheimer and author Eva Mekler.

The improvements at the school begin on the outside, where a new security system, including cameras, allows the school to keep the doors locked at all times. Staffers scan an attachment kept on their key chains to open the door.

"The primary concern of any school should be the safety of its students before everything else," said Rosenblatt as he demonstrated the system. "Any school that says differently shouldn't be in business."

Classes and the office have also been moved for security reasons.

A resource room is filled with 20 new computers courtesy of the Caroline and Joseph S. Gruss Life Monument Funds, Inc., which provides funding for yeshivot and day schools in the metropolitan area for initiatives to improve secular education (*see sidebar*).

Rather than replace a library shared with the East Brunswick Jewish Center that was decimated by a flood in May 2006, the school decided to create two libraries, one for the upper grades and one for the lower. Rosenblatt said both would be equipped with wireless Internet.

Schechter's religious leadership will also change. Since its inception the school has had Rabbi Chaim Rogoff, who recently retired as religious leader at EBJC, serving in that role.

Now, instead of one permanent rabbi, the position will be held on a revolving basis by members from a newly formed rabbinic advisory committee. Rabbi Eliot Malomet of the Highland Park Conservative Temple-Congregation Anshe Emeth will fill the post this year.

However, a rabbi from EBJC will always work in concert with whoever heads the committee because the school is in the synagogue's building.

"The board, parents, and faculty are very receptive to this," said Rosenblatt. "We've invited all Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform rabbis in this area to be part of this. We have kids from those other movements. The decision to invite Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis came at the suggestion of our Conservative rabbis."

Two sixth-grade students, Lindsay Merkel of East Brunswick and Jonathan Lebeau of Princeton, had nothing but good things to say about the school.

Lindsay praised the language arts program and recalled last year she had gained a lot of insight into the Ten Commandments. Jonathan felt the school excels in math instruction and said that just that morning he had learned a lot in Mishna class.

And, he added, "I learned about our ecosystem just today in science."

## School Gets Technology Boost



Aliza Bernstein of East Brunswick listens as Rabbi Stuart Warner teaches her eighth-grade Mishna class.

TECHNOLOGY HAS GOTTEN a boost at the Solomon Schechter Day School of Raritan Valley courtesy of the Caroline and Joseph S. Gruss Life Monument Funds.

Twenty new computers, each equipped with an electronic courseware system, will be used to teach math and language arts to youngsters in grades one-five. Additionally, the foundation is providing supervisory support and liaisons from its education department as well as an on-site lab manager.

Four more computers supplied by the foundation, which will be shared by the school's kindergarten and the preschool of the East Brunswick Jewish Center, will be used to teach early reading and math.

A math and science program for grades six-eight that utilizes materials developed by top researchers in Israel is also being implemented with assistance from the Gruss Foundation, which trained math teacher Stephanie Kovler and science teacher Andrea Barnett. Barnett was also sent to Israel this summer for additional training.

Students who participate in the program will be eligible to participate in an international science and math challenge held via video hook-up.

The foundation is also providing two Smartboards, large touch-sensitive displays attached to a computer. The school has purchased two additional Smartboards, one for use in its upper school library, in part using funds allotted by the East Brunswick School District for secular studies.

Head of school Howard Rosenblatt said it was hard to quantify the Gruss contribution in dollars but estimated the foundation's donation to be "well in excess of six figures."

"This shows how we're stepping into the 21st century, " said Hildy Zonis, one of two on-site managers for the language arts and math program, as she showed off the new computers.

— DEBRA RUBIN