

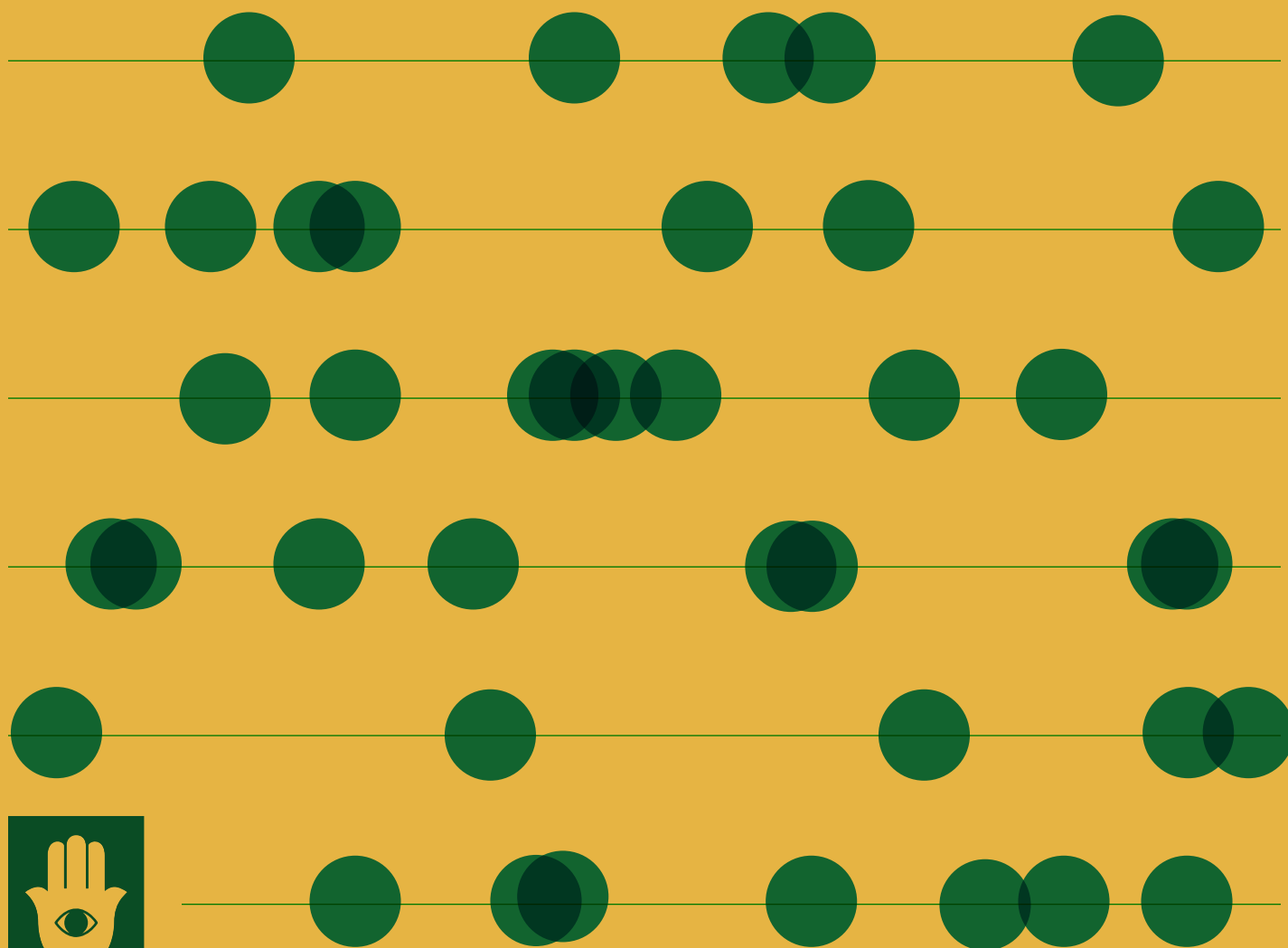
ASSESSMENT OF SEPHARDIC INCLUSION IN NEW YORK JEWISH DAY SCHOOLS

Commissioned by

JIMENA: JEWS INDIGENOUS TO THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Elana Riback Rand, PhD ♦ Rosov Consulting

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JIMENA

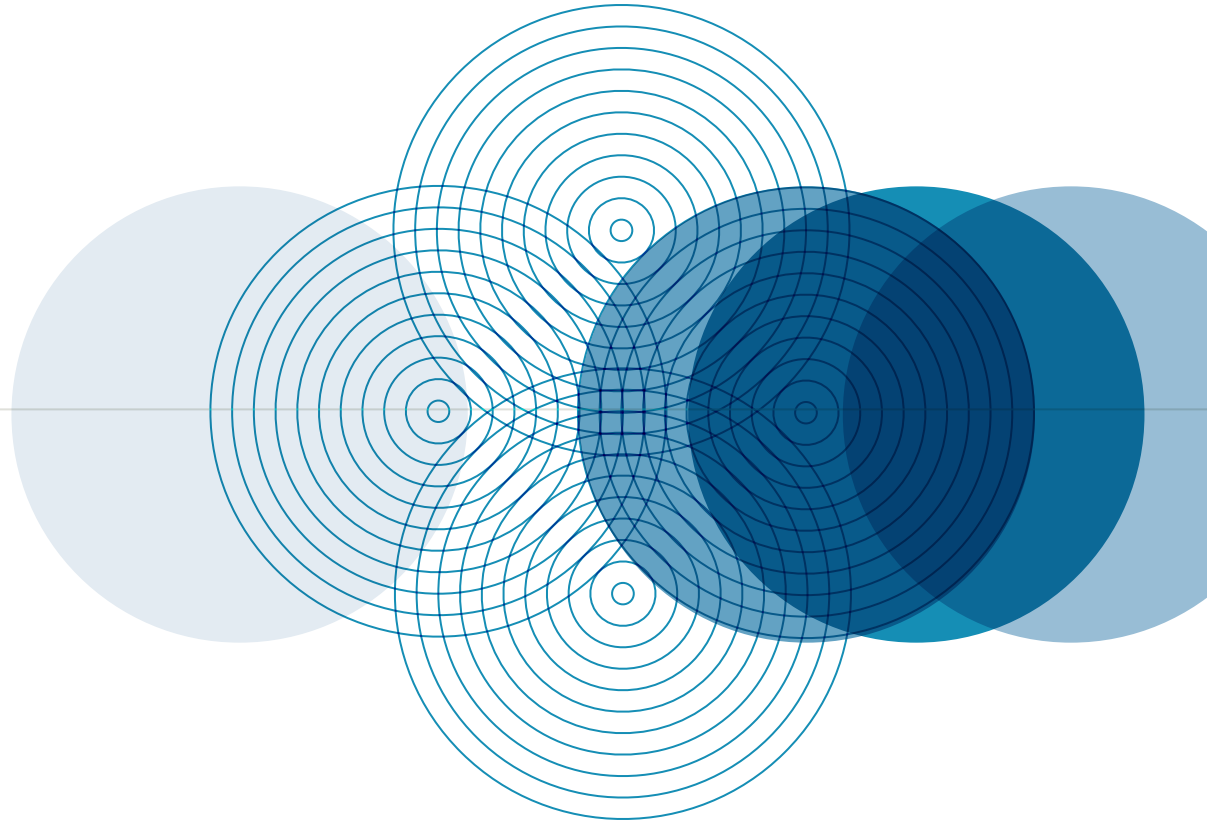


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Sephardic/Mizrahi Students in the Middle Grades of New York Jewish Day Schools. **When Good Intentions are Not Enough.**

BACKGROUND

In fall 2023, with partial funding from UJA-Federation of New York, JIMENA launched a needs assessment study of what was planned to be 20 Jewish day schools in the New York area—the focus of which was to identify the specific types of interventions required to better integrate Sephardic and Mizrahi students, families, and content into these schools. The research findings were envisioned to further enable JIMENA to “design impactful training cohorts and/or curricular content” tailored to the needs of these schools.

As the JIMENA team explained in their grant submission to UJA-Federation of New York, this inquiry was animated by awareness that “Sephardic students are increasing their enrollment and becoming a majority at some Jewish Day Schools in major cities across the United States, including a number of prominent Jewish schools in New York.” These trends, it was explained, are playing out in schools that have been dominated by Ashkenazi Jews, and in these contexts, Jews of Middle Eastern and North African descent have long experienced conditions that center Ashkenazi appearance, practice, history, languages, need, and culture as normative.”

This inquiry was launched with the goal of reliably documenting what is happening in schools and of understanding “the specific needs and appetite for trainings and potentially other interventions to help schools become better equipped at welcoming, including, and meeting the educational and social-emotional needs of Sephardic students and their families.”

DATA SOURCES

The study has recruited eight co-ed Jewish day schools and yeshivot in the New York metro area, the schools' population numbers, administrative structures, and religious world view and philosophies (hashkafah) vary widely from one another. The study was designed to look specifically at the issues of concern within the context of their middle school grades, which, depending on the school, run from fifth, sixth or seventh grade through eighth grade. The schools are not identified by name since Heads of School agreed to participate in the study on the condition that no people or institutions would be identified. This too was a require-

ment of the IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval issued to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

The administrative leadership at all of the schools provided estimates of the proportion of their students from Sephardic or Mizrahi homes. (They could not provide precise numbers about these proportions because none of the schools collects data about the ethnic profile of enrolled families.) School leaders also provided an orientation to the particular Sephardic and Mizrahi communities with which families are associated and where in the New York area they reside.

Parent Survey

Three schools distributed a survey to middle school parents exploring their family's Jewish culture and practices, their child(ren)'s and their own experiences at school in general terms and in relation to their Sephardic/Mizrahi heritage, and any ideas they have for making their schools more inclusive of Sephardic/Mizrahi students and families. In total, 129 responses were collected. (See Survey Data Addendum at the end of this report.)

Teacher survey.

A similar survey was distributed to faculty at four schools. In total, 42 responses were collected. (See Survey Data Addendum at the end of this report.)

Stakeholder interviews.

One-on-one interviews were conducted with a mix of administrators, faculty, and parents at the participating schools. Between 3 and 10 stakeholders at each school participated in these interviews, including typically a minimum of at least 1 administrator and 2 faculty members (although at 1 school no faculty participated), and typically at least 2 parents (although at 2 schools no parents participated). In total, 49 interviews were conducted across the 8 schools.

FINDINGS

Methodological limitation

The range of schools, as well as the varying numbers of interview and survey participants from each school, limit the generalizability of these findings for work in other sectors and within the Jewish day school world more broadly. Even so, the findings lay the groundwork for future inquiry and intervention.

Composition of the Schools

While all eight schools that participated in this study were founded by rabbinic and educational leaders in the Ashkenazi community and were established as institutions aligned with Ashkenazi norms, today their student populations are quite diverse in respect of their Jewish origins, although not in the same ways or to the same extent. In the broadest terms, 3 of the middle schools in this sample include just a small minority of students from Sephardic or Mizrahi families (fewer than 15 percent of the student population), 3 include a large minority of such students (between 20 and 40 percent) and 2 include a majority of students from Sephardic or Mizrahi families (estimated to be between 50 and 70 percent). The ways schools serve their Sephardic/Mizrahi stu-

dents, and the options available to the schools for doing so, are heavily related to the proportion of Sephardic/Mizrahi population they enroll, as indicated below.

Adding a further layer of complexity, “there’s no one kind of Sephardic,” as a number of interviewees conveyed; there’s Syrian, Yemenite, Bukharian, Persian, North African and subgroups within some of these groups. Parents within these various minority groups exhibit diverse norms in relation to authority, they live in neighborhoods with varying ethnic makeup, and they have different socioeconomic statuses, all of which influence their interactions with schools and how, in turn, schools interact with them. This study could have examined the experiences and needs of each sub-community (and it might be useful to do so on a national scale), but given the relatively limited focus of this inquiry, this report instead adopts a broader-stroke view, only calling out the experiences of one community or another when especially visible or exceptional.

The schools’ relationships with Sephardic/Mizrahi students and families, and their provision of educational and Jewish experiences that expose students to and instruct and acculturate them in the particularities of Sephardic/Mizrahi culture, can be best understood in relation to four dimensions of school life. These dimensions are explored below drawing on quotations that reflect broadly expressed sentiments rather than exceptional sentiments or experiences.

1. Cultural Representation and Inclusion in Curriculum and Rituals

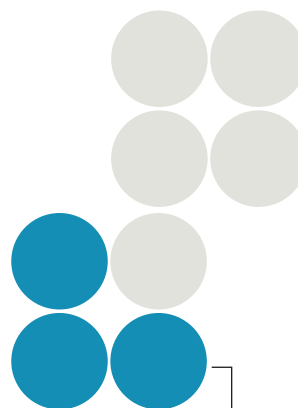
In many schools, the default mode of religious instruction and practice remains Ashkenazi, reflecting the majority background of faculty and leadership, and the schools’ historical origins. While some schools offer occasional Sephardic minyanim or bring in Sephardic rabbis for special occasions, there is a general tendency to revert to Ashkenazi practices. Some efforts are made, such as providing Sephardic siddurim or organizing events highlighting Sephardic food or holidays, but these are often seen as token gestures rather than consistent, meaningful expressions of inclusion. In many cases, teachers and administrators lack sufficient knowledge of Sephardic customs to incorporate them fully into daily routines, and this is in large part why schools also struggle with adequately integrating Sephardic/Mizrahi traditions and experiences into the curriculum.

INCLUDING SEPHARDIC MINYANIM AND TEFILLOT

Most schools make available Sephardic siddurim to all students who desire them. Many encourage students to pray privately in their own nussakh (cultural style), and—when the numbers allow—some offer Sephardic minyanim although it does not seem to be frequently than on a weekly basis. Parents argue that offering a Sephardic minyan just once a week is insufficient, as it relegates Sephardic customs to a secondary status, making students feel like their customs are a minority practice rather than a fully integrated aspect of school life. However, as the following comments drawn from interviews with educators indicate, this is not a one-dimensional issue; inclusion conflicts with other community-building values.

DATA SOURCES

The study has concentrated on **eight co-ed Jewish day schools** and yeshivot in the New York metro area.



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In total
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In many schools, the default mode of religious instruction and practice remains Ashkenazi, reflecting the majority background of faculty and leadership, and the schools’ historical origin.

An administrator from a school with a large Sephardic population spelled out some of the competing values:

The school was founded as an Ashkenazi school, so the minyan of the school davens Ashkenaz...But when boys read the Torah, they'll read as they learned how to read the Torah...We're proud that we are able to provide the boys with their own minyan on a weekly basis... I've often been asked why not do it more often than just once a week? And my response has always been that we're trying to maintain one school under one roof. We want everyone to feel that they're part of one school, and we want to daven together. We respect that the individual davens in the nussakh that they're comfortable with. But we don't want to create a polarized situation where it's two different groups in the school.

An administrator at a different school with a much smaller proportion of Sephardic students reflected on the same concerns and came to a different conclusion:

I think [a weekly Sephardic minyan] is actually worse in some ways. It's like, oh, you can praise Gd in your way once a week, and we'll do it our way the rest of the time. I think that's pretty awful...But how do you implement that when it's so few people asking for it?"

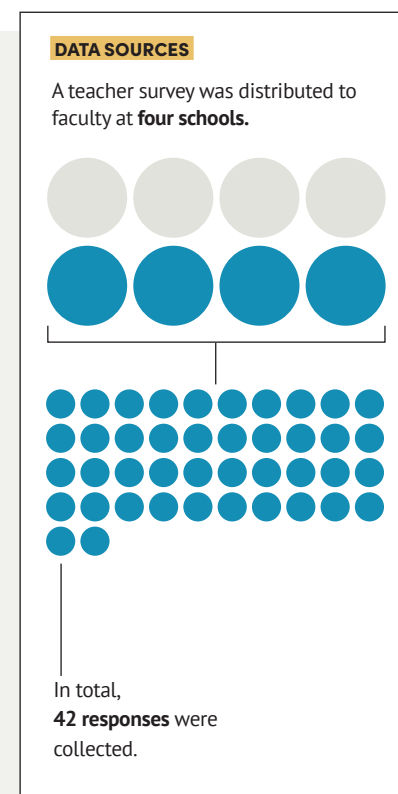
INCLUDING SEPHARDIC TRADITIONS IN THE CLASSROOM AND SCHOOL EVENTS

While the Judaic studies curriculum in all the schools continues to be predominantly focused on Ashkenazi tradition and the Jewish history curriculum continues to be Euro-centric, schools do attempt to incorporate aspects of the history of Mizrahi Jewry, for example by teaching about the Farhud (the 1941 large scale anti-Jewish pogrom in Iraq) alongside the Holocaust and by integrating Sephardic culture in broader ways, such as through cultural food events. Educators express good intentions, as in the following case:

We made an effort when we were doing a Tisch for eighth graders. And we wanted to have typical Shabbat food. So we did cholent and kugel. When we did the next one, I said, we have to order lachmagine, and kibbeh, and all of that, just trying to make the foods even more representative of who is in our school.

Unfortunately, these well-intentioned efforts often feel limited, piecemeal, and tokenistic—especially when, as in the previous interview excerpt, they come from a school with a sizable minority of Sephardic students. This was the view of many respondents to the parent survey: they drew attention to the lack of attention to Sephardic and Mizrahi customs, prayers, and Halachot in curriculum time which, they perceive, continue to be predominantly Ashkenazi in nature.

The problem as both parents and educators indicated is that schools rely heavily on Ashkenazi teachers who may not have a deep understanding of Sephardic minhagim and halacha. While some teachers try to include Sephardic halakha in lessons, they often feel under prepared to do so. As a teacher admitted, while he tries to point out differences in Sephardic minhagim during halakha lessons, his own lack of knowledge makes it difficult. It is certainly hard to imagine many other



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school subject areas where an administrator would say:

“It seems like a lot of teachers aren’t well-versed...Students need to correct their teachers...I’m telling [the teachers], ‘Ask the students!’...They [the teachers] don’t need to know everything, but they need to be open.”

2. Leadership and Faculty Diversity

The lack of representation in rituals and curriculum is nested amidst other factors, not least the profile of school leadership. The administration and faculty in most schools are predominantly Ashkenazi, with limited Sephardic/Mizrahi representation.

This lack of diversity contributes to the underrepresentation of Sephardic voices in decision-making and curriculum development. In some schools, there have been efforts to hire more Sephardic staff, but this is not consistent across the board. The absence of Sephardic leadership creates a disconnect between the school’s leadership and Sephardic communities, often leaving families feeling underrepresented, and creating a gap between the needs of Sephardic families and the policies or culture of the school. This dynamic affects both how cultural differences are acknowledged and how Sephardic parents feel about their role in the school community.

LIMITED SEPHARDIC FACULTY AND LEADERSHIP

In most schools, Sephardic or Mizrahi teachers and leaders are a small minority. For example, at one school, where the majority of the student body is Sephardic, the leadership remains predominantly Ashkenazi. This creates tension between parents who feel their voices are underrepresented and an administration that may not prioritize Sephardic-specific needs. At another school with a substantial minority of Sephardic students there has been a greater effort to hire Sephardic staff, but it is still clear that leadership roles are largely held by Ashkenazim and that results in parent skepticism about the school’s commitment to diversity. Ironically, in one of the schools where Sephardic students are a majority, a parent complained that:

“Ashkenazi kids frequently can’t find an Ashkenazi Rabbi in school to help them prepare for their bar mitzvahs because they’re so few and they’re really busy.”

Clearly, finding culturally aligned leadership is a multifaceted and shifting challenge as the demographic makeup of schools evolve.

EFFORTS TO ADDRESS THE IMBALANCE

Some schools have made purposeful efforts to hire Sephardic staff to better reflect the student population. For instance, one reported having hired a Sephardic rabbi to help run the Sephardic minyan and generally provide representation. A different school, with fewer students from Sephardic homes also hired a few Sephardic rabbis, which parents appreciate as positive: both as a step toward better representation and to the school being better qualified to introduce Sephardic content.

Now we have to rabbis who are Sephardic on staff, which is

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really great. I think that goes a long way. So, I think we probably have enough knowledge in the building to make it work right.

While such changes are indeed positive, these efforts vary widely across schools, and many institutions still face a leadership gap that affects how policies and practices are shaped.

3. Social Dynamics and Community Integration

Socially, Sephardic/Mizrahi students and families often form distinct groups within schools, particularly when they form larger communities. This segmentation can lead to a lack of full integration with Ashkenazi peers. In many cases, cultural and geographical factors play a role in this divide, with Sephardic families often sticking to their own communities outside of school, forming what sociologists call “ethnic enclaves.” While the students themselves may not always experience overt friction, parents and community structures (especially synagogues and community centers) can reinforce these divisions.

CULTURAL AND COMMUNAL SEGREGATION

In schools with larger Sephardic/Mizrahi populations, students from different ethnic backgrounds often socialize within their own groups, such as Syrians from Brooklyn, Persians from Great Neck or Bukharians from Queens. The variables can be quite extensive, as one teacher explained:

Within each grade the groups of friends are the Sephardic kids [from neighborhood A], the Ashkenazi kids [from neighborhood A], the Ashkenazi kids [from neighborhood B], the Sephardic kids [from neighborhood C], and the Ashkenazi kids [from neighborhood C]... I don't know if the school could do anything differently. But I think naturally...it's due to logistical stuff, like where people live and what shul they daven in. You end up having like cliques that are separated by neighborhood and Sephardic subgroup.”

This segmentation, then, is driven not only by cultural similarities but also by geographical proximity, as students tend to socialize with those they see on Shabbat in their neighborhoods. In one school where one Sephardic subgroup is prominent, the division between Sephardic and Ashkenazi students can sometimes feel like two different groups under one roof, even while there are efforts to create more integration. A parent helped shed light on the deep roots to this reality:

We are open, like our friends or our community will be open to becoming friendly with the Ashkenazi community, and they are as well. But at some point, there is also a sense of separation as well. You're not fully in their world, and they know they're not fully in our world.

These sentiments help explain why a teacher, from the same school, expressed pessimism at engineering a different social dynamic:

I'm a little bit of a I'm a little bit jaded with this, because I think the school has tried to bring in, you know inclusiveness, and they have... It's just if the community isn't receptive then it's really really hard. It's just really hard...I'm not sure what else they could do, because you

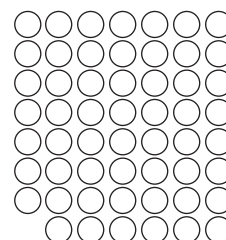
DATA SOURCES

Between
3–10
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Including typically a minimum of at least:

- 1 administrator
- 2 faculty members
- 2 parents

In total,
49
interviews were conducted across the **8 schools**



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can't undo cultural biases...These kids are 12 years old. 13...They're just echo chambers for their parents.

STRONGER INTEGRATION IN SMALLER SCHOOLS

In smaller schools, even with substantial minorities of Sephardic students, there is a greater emphasis on warmth and inclusivity. In these places, students report fewer issues around ethnic divisions. In one such setting, teachers mentioned that while students may be aware of differences between Sephardic and Ashkenazi practices, these distinctions do not carry a negative connotation. Perhaps the smaller school environment allows for more cross-cultural friendships, even while some social dynamics still reflect ethnic backgrounds. A teacher provided some texture to this phenomenon.

When the kids tease each other, they tease each other as if there's no difference between them. Ashkenazi-Sephardic is not one of those things that they're teasing each other about. It has nothing to do with any of that...There are too few Sephardim in the school, and they're not all from the same [Sephardic] group...It's not that they don't have cliques. ...They're with each other all day long...Kids feel like, you're Sephardic, you're Ashkenazi. It doesn't mean anything, it's not a thing that affects them.

PARENT-DRIVEN SEGREGATION

As will be explored more fully in the next section, in some cases it is the parent body rather than the students who drive divisions. Parents might limit invitations to community or family events to members of specific synagogues even when school policy calls for all students to be invited. Not surprisingly, this leads to feelings of exclusion among students. An administrator helped explain this phenomenon, attributing it not to tribalism or chauvinism, but to cultural insularity and a determination to preserve a minority counterculture in contemporary America.

I think the issues come where groups are very close...They have their practices, and they are quite insular in those practices... Their traditions go very deep, and I think in many ways there is a fear of losing your identity...We're trying to be so protective of our own practices in our own traditions, that if we open it up to the world, it's going to mix with others...I think that the [Sephardic] families in particular, are very close knit, and very protective of their traditions and the way they do things.

4. Parent Involvement and Advocacy

Sephardic/Mizrahi families often feel less empowered or knowledgeable about how to advocate for their needs within the school system. Some parents express discomfort or a lack of familiarity with the norms of American Jewish day schools, resulting in less frequent communication with teachers and administrators. This contrasts with the more active involvement of Ashkenazi parents. Additionally, some Sephardic parents feel that their feedback is not adequately considered by school boards, which are often dominated by Ashkenazi members.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Sephardic parents may come from cultural backgrounds where involvement in school boards, PTAs, or fundraising activities is

SCHOOL COMPOSITION

Out of 8 schools that participated:



3 of the middle schools include just a **small minority** of students from Sephardic or Mizrahi families—**fewer than 15% of the student population**.



3 include a **large minority** of such students—**between 20% and 40%**



2 include a **majority** of students from Sephardic or Mizrahi families – **estimated between 50% and 70%**

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In smaller schools, even with substantial minorities of Sephardic students, there is a greater emphasis on warmth and inclusivity.

less common. In a couple of schools, parents from Sephardic backgrounds were noted to be less involved in PTA activities or on school boards, in large part due to different cultural norms regarding how education is supported. As one parent of Sephardic/Mizrahi background explained:

The school tries. I'm on the Board. The school tries really hard to have board representation from the communities...And sometimes the culture is not there from the [Sephardic/Mizrahi community] of like joining a board and volunteering. They're like, I pay my tuition, leave me alone...That's not to say that every single family is [like that], but we have a hard time getting board representation from some of the communities.

Generally, Ashkenazi parents are more accustomed to active involvement and advocacy, which undoubtedly gives them more influence in shaping school policies. The forces that shape board composition do not, however, only seem to be cultural, they are tied up with institutional histories that have resulted in some stakeholders seeking to preserve the Ashkenazi identities of schools even if the makeup of the student population has substantially changed.

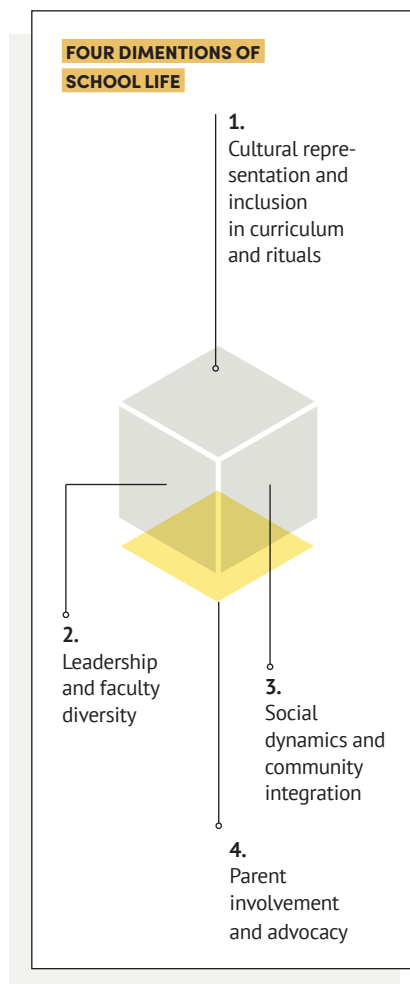
Even though the school is, I could safely say, 50/50 Ashkenaz and Sephardic, the lay leadership, the board is probably [very heavily] Ashkenaz. Some of that is just the history of it, some of it, it's not clear to me, is an unwillingness of the Sephardic parents to get involved, and unwillingness of the Ashkenazi parents to bring them on. It's probably a combination of those two.

These structural phenomena have everyday corollaries. Some Sephardic parents feel that their concerns are not adequately addressed by school administrators, particularly when boards are Ashkenazi-dominated. This inevitably creates frustration among Sephardic families, who feel their voices are marginalized. When they do try to gain influence or advocate their case, their communication norms can grate against school norms and further exacerbate social tensions. An administrator offered a vivid example of this dynamic, colored by a good deal of empathy.

I think with some of the Sephardic parents, they can sometimes, when they're upset, come off as maybe more aggressive. I think they're not so worried about how their words are perceived. They're just hurting because their child is hurting, and they want to share what they want to share. I think for our faculty members, if they're not so familiar with that culture or that background, they can become very defensive, and something that can maybe be solved more easily can escalate.

EFFORTS TO IMPROVE ENGAGEMENT

Some schools, and especially those with the largest proportions of students from Sephardic homes, are making efforts to bridge these gaps. At one of these schools, Sephardi parents on the board act as "delegates" for their communities, advocating for Sephardic families who may be less comfortable raising issues directly with the school. At another school, parents recognize the importance of demystifying Sephardic practices for



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Sephardic/Mizrahi families often feel less empowered or knowledgeable about how to advocate for their needs within the school system.

Ashkenazi families to reduce cultural barriers especially within the framework of the PTA where the composition is much more representative of the study body. These efforts are still in the early stages and vary widely across institutions.

CONCLUSION

This inquiry underscores the importance of addressing the growing socio-cultural diversity within Jewish day schools in the New York area, specifically focusing on the experiences of Sephardic and Mizrahi students and families. While schools have made efforts to include Sephardic traditions, a significant gap remains between the good intentions of the administration and the experiences of many students. The tendency to revert to Ashkenazi norms, both in religious practice and curriculum, continues to marginalize Sephardic customs, leaving students and their parents feeling underrepresented.

These findings suggest that more consistent and meaningful integration of Sephardic culture, beyond token gestures, is necessary for schools to create truly inclusive environments that would enable all students, whatever their backgrounds, to be better educated about Jewish history and culture in all its richness. This includes offering more frequent Sephardic minyanim, hiring more Sephardic staff, and providing teachers with adequate training in Sephardic traditions. Additionally, it will be important to address the social dynamics that often segregate students along ethnic lines and ensure greater Sephardic representation in school leadership and parent bodies, as critical steps toward fostering a more unified school community.

In an ideal world, the agencies and institutions that prepare Jewish educators to teach in Jewish settings would ensure that their graduates are properly trained and educated in Sephardic customs, histories, and practices. A shift of this kind would help address some of the challenges described here. Unfortunately, because the pipelines that bring Jewish educators to work in schools are so fractured and fragmented, with many educators not receiving substantial preservice training, solutions to these issues will need to be addressed at the school level, in the short and medium term, at least.

If the schools do embrace the changes proposed, they can better meet the educational and social-emotional needs of their diverse student populations, ensuring that Sephardic and Mizrahi students feel fully welcomed and supported in their educational journey.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Interviewees and survey respondents made many suggestions for how to advance such changes in the culture, practices, and organization of schools. Furthermore, examples that interviewees offered from their own schools can serve as models for other schools determined to address these issues or as examples of what others should try to avoid. In this last section we summarize some of what surfaced in the data, recognizing that this is only a starting point for a more extensive deliberative process.

1. Enhancing Cultural Representation in Curriculum and Rituals

(A) INCORPORATE SEPHARDIC CONTENT ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Schools should proactively include Sephardic history, customs, and halakhot throughout the curriculum, not just as isolated events. For instance, in Jewish history, they could teach about Sephardic experiences such as the Spanish Inquisition, the Farhud, and Sephardic scholars like Maimonides and Rav Ovadia Yosef. Holocaust education should also include Sephardic narratives, as some Sephardic students feel disconnected from Ashkenazi-focused accounts.

Example: One of the schools has made a point of including content about Sephardic rabbis and the Farhud in its history curriculum. This model can be expanded to other topics.

Practical Action: Schools can develop supplemental materials that highlight Sephardic halakhot and traditions and provide professional development for teachers to deepen their understanding of Sephardic customs.

(B) ESTABLISH REGULAR SEPHARDIC MINYAN AND RITUALS

Rather than limiting Sephardic minyanim to once a week, schools could offer daily options or rotate Ashkenazi and Sephardic customs more regularly, when the numbers allow. This would give Sephardic students more consistent opportunities to engage with their heritage and make Ashkenazi students more familiar with Sephardic customs.

Example: At one school, with a substantial minority of students from Sephardic homes, efforts have been made to switch between Ashkenazi and Sephardic nussakh so that students can experience multiple traditions.

Practical Action: Implement rotating customs for tefillah and ritual practices to normalize Sephardic traditions within the broader school culture.

(C) INTEGRATE SEPHARDIC PRACTICES IN SCHOOL RITUALS

Schools can incorporate Sephardic customs in communal events, such as their chagigat hasiddur, holiday celebrations, and Shabbat events, where Sephardic tunes and foods are part of the event.

Example: At one school with a substantial minority of students from Sephardic homes inclusion of Sephardic food in events

FACULTY PERSPECTIVES

Faculty surveyed state that:



79% are comfortable teaching about other cultures



50% say their curriculum represents culturally diverse voices



31% feel confident in their knowledge of Sephardic/Mizrahi cultures of history



71% say they are curious to learn more about Sephardic/Mizrahi history and culture,



...but only 17% say that their schools provide them with opportunities

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Encourage and support Sephardic parents to take active roles in PTAs, school boards, and volunteer committees.

provide good models for integrating cultural diversity into school-wide programs.

Practical Action: Include PTA leaders, a school body where Sephardic/Mizrahi families are often better represented, to help design such events and ensure their authenticity.

2. Increasing Leadership and Faculty Diversity

(A) RECRUIT MORE SEPHARDIC/MIZRAHI FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATORS

Recognizing that the labor market does not always make it possible, schools should prioritize hiring teachers and leaders who are knowledgeable about Sephardic/Mizrahi history, culture, and customs. This would also help ensure Sephardic customs and practices are represented more authentically in the classroom and school decisions, and would likely diversify the role models available to students.

Example: Some of the schools have started hiring Sephardic rabbis to lead Sephardic minyanim and update curriculum. These schools show that it is possible find and recruit more diverse faculty.

Practical Action: Make recruitment efforts more intentional by advertising job openings in communities with a significant Sephardic population and offering professional development on Sephardic customs for all teachers.

(B) CREATE LEADERSHIP TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT FOR SEPHARDIC FAMILIES

Encourage and support Sephardic parents to take active roles in PTAs, school boards, and volunteer committees. This will help ensure that Sephardic voices are part of the decision-making process and make parents feel more empowered.

Example: A school with a majority of Sephardic students has acknowledged a gap in Sephardic representation on the board and is proactively working to address it through the efforts of its nominations committee. Encouraging participation from Sephardic families in leadership roles is a practical next step, with change like to play out in an accelerating fashion once the first steps are taken.

3. Fostering Social Integration and Addressing Cultural Divides

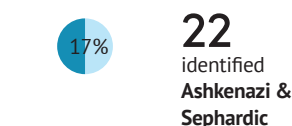
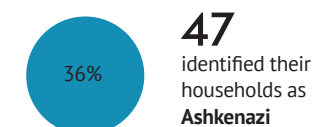
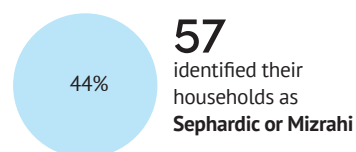
(A) ENCOURAGE MIXED SOCIAL EVENTS

Schools can organize cross-cultural events, such as Friday night dinners, where students from different ethnic groups are encouraged to interact. These events should be structured in a way that fosters dialogue and connection across cultural lines. Schools could also create buddy programs pairing Sephardic and Ashkenazi students to help break down social barriers.

Example: A school with a substantial minority of Sephardic students has made attempts to organize Shabbat dinners across ethnic lines, but these events have faced resistance.

HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION

Out of 129 parent respondents to our survey:



3 respondents did not identify themselves.

These subgroups report different experiences at schools.

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Schools should proactively include Sephardic history, customs, and halakhot throughout the curriculum, not just as isolated events.

Practical Action: Schools need to facilitate these programs more actively to break down cultural silos.

(B) WORKSHOPS ON CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

Schools should offer workshops for faculty and students on Sephardic and Mizrahi customs to increase awareness and reduce cultural misunderstandings. This can help avoid situations where teachers or peers make assumptions based on Ashkenazi norms and help the entire school community appreciate the diversity of Jewish traditions.

Example: At a school with a majority of students from Sephardic homes, teachers recognize the need for more training to better understand Sephardic cultural differences, particularly in how parents communicate with the school. School leadership needs now to respond to this interest.

(C) SUPPORT PEER RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH EXTRACURRICULAR PROGRAMS

Schools could introduce extracurricular clubs or after-school programs focused on Sephardic traditions, such as cooking classes featuring Sephardic cuisine or music and art programs that showcase Sephardic heritage. This can help build friendships across cultural groups.

Example: A school with a minority of Sephardic students has incorporated diversity into its music curriculum by featuring Mizrahi and Ethiopian singers alongside Ashkenazi music. This would be a good starting point for other cultural programming in extracurricular frameworks.

4. Increasing Parental Involvement and Advocacy

(A) PROVIDE ORIENTATION FOR FAMILIES

Schools could offer orientation sessions for families to explain school norms and encourage their participation in school activities. This can help address the discomfort some Sephardic parents feel about engaging with the school in ways that differ from their cultural norms.

Example: At a school with a majority of Sephardic families, parents report that Sephardic families often feel unsure of how to navigate the school system. In this instance, a proactive approach to orientation and engagement could help bridge this gap.

(B) CREATE FORMAL FEEDBACK CHANNELS

Schools should establish formal, structured ways for Sephardic parents to provide feedback, such as regular surveys or town hall meetings. This can ensure that their concerns are heard and addressed by the administration.

Example: At a school with a small minority of Sephardic families, the board resisted efforts to involve Sephardic parents in formal surveys. Implementing these kinds of feedback mechanisms could increase engagement and improve integration, especially when parents are uncomfortable using existing systems.

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Recognizing that the labor market does not always make it possible, schools should prioritize hiring teachers and leaders who are knowledgeable about Sephardic/Mizrahi history, culture, and customs.

(C) ENCOURAGE SEPHARDIC REPRESENTATION ON SCHOOL BOARDS

Schools should actively invite Sephardic parents to join school boards or committees, ensuring their perspectives are part of policy discussions. In cases where Sephardic parents feel hesitant to join, schools could appoint community liaisons to bridge the gap between Sephardic families and school leadership.

Example: At a school with a majority of students from Sephardic homes, interviewees recognized that the board is not representative of the student body. Improve representation is unlikely to happen without active encouragement.

By taking these practical steps—integrating Sephardic content into the curriculum, recruiting more diverse faculty, fostering social integration, and increasing parental involvement—schools can create a more inclusive and cohesive environment for Sephardic students and families. Schools that proactively embrace the diversity within the Jewish community will not only fulfill their mission of inclusion but will also enrich the educational experience for all students.

SURVEY DATA ANALYSIS ADDENDUM

Background

JIMENA's study of Sephardic and Mizrahi students, families, and content in the middle school grades at eight New York area Jewish day schools included 49 interviews with a mix of administrators, faculty, and parents at the participating schools. In addition, three schools distributed a survey to middle school parents and to faculty who work with students in those grades. The parents survey explored the families' Jewish culture and practices, their child(ren)'s and their own experiences at school in general terms and in relation to their Sephardic/Mizrahi heritage, and any ideas they have for making their schools more inclusive of Sephardic/Mizrahi students and families. The teacher survey explored teachers' relationships with students from Sephardic and Mizrahi families, the content they employ in their teaching, and their sense of self-efficacy in teaching about Sephardic/Mizrahi content.

129 responses were collected to the parent survey, and 42 responses to the teacher survey.

JIMENA committed to preserving the anonymity of participating schools. It is therefore not known which schools distributed these surveys, how many parents and teachers received the surveys, or what proportion of recipients responded. Lacking contextual information of this kind, findings derived from the survey data should be treated with caution. This is why they have not been integrated into our report "Sephardic/Mizrahi Students in the Middle Grades of New York Jewish Day Schools." Instead, we present them here as an addendum, viewing these findings as directional. We do not know to what extent they represent the views and experiences of other parents and teachers in the participating schools, let alone in other schools.

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Schools that proactively embrace the diversity within the Jewish community will not only fulfill their mission of inclusion but will also enrich the educational experience for all students.

FINDINGS

47 (36%) of the parent respondents identified their household as Ashkenazi, 22 (17%) as Ashkenazi and Sephardic, and 57 (44%) as Sephardic or Mizrahi. Three respondents did not identify themselves. These subgroups report different experiences at schools.

Relationships with schools

While a higher proportion of Sephardic/Mizrahi and "mixed" families say they are involved in school and on parent committees, and they report feeling welcome on parent committees, they also report having generally poorer relationships with the school's administration and teachers.

TABLE 1. PARENTS' RELATIONSHIPS WITH SCHOOLS

	PARENT/FAMILY IDENTIFIES AS:		
	Ashkenazi (n=47)	Ashkenazi & Sephardic/ Mizrahi (n=22)	Sephardic or Mizrahi (n=57)
If I have a concern about something happening in school, I feel comfortable voicing my concerns to someone in the school.	4.11	3.73	3.85
I feel like the school administrators understand my family.	4.15	3.05	3.53
I feel like my child(ren)'s teachers understand my family.	4.02	3.14	3.49
I regularly communicate with my child(ren)'s teachers.	3.81	3.55	3.41
If I have an idea for a change to the school, I feel comfortable sharing my ideas with someone in the school.	3.85	3.41	3.29
I am very involved in my child(ren)'s school.	3.23	3.36	3.64
I feel welcome on parent committees.	3.13	3.50	3.56
I feel that my concerns are appropriately addressed by the administration.	3.34	2.86	3.32
I feel that my concerns and ideas are appreciated and valued by the administration.	3.36	2.77	3.17
I am involved in parent committees.	2.51	3.09	3.14

Table shows aggregate responses on a five-point scale from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5). The responses are organized in a "heat map" from red (lowest levels of agreement) to green (highest levels of agreement).

Curriculum focus

Parents have different perspectives on what content is being taught in schools. Some (mostly Ashkenazi) parents perceive schools to be teaching about "different cultures." Most, however, do not perceive the schools to be teaching about Sephardic/Mizrahi history and customs. Sephardic and "mixed" families are most doubtful that Sephardic/Mizrahi history and culture is being taught.

TABLE 2. CURRICULUM FOCUS

	PARENT/FAMILY IDENTIFIES AS:		
	Ashkenazi (n=47)	Ashkenazi & Sephardic/ Mizrahi (n=22)	Sephardic or Mizrahi (n=57)
In history classes, my child(ren) learn(s) about different cultures.	4.06	2.86	3.68
In history or Jewish history classes or programs, my child(ren) learn(s) about Sephardic/Mizrahi history and communities.	3.49	2.14	2.61
My child(ren) learn(s) about Sephardic/Mizrahi laws and customs in school.	3.26	2.09	2.54
My child(ren) learn(s) about Sephardic/Mizrahi laws and customs as often as Ashkenazi laws and customs.	2.79	1.91	2.17

Table shows aggregate responses on a five-point scale from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5). The responses are organized in a "heat map" from red (lowest levels of agreement) to green (highest levels of agreement).

Cross-community mixing and bullying

Students from Sephardic/Mizrahi homes tend to be more comfortable mixing with other members of their own ethnic communities both inside and outside school. They also report being aware of ethnic bullying and harassment, although at quite low levels.

TABLE 3. CROSS-COMMUNITY MIXING AND BULLYING

	PARENT/FAMILY IDENTIFIES AS:		
	Ashkenazi (n=47)	Ashkenazi & Sephardic/ Mizrahi (n=22)	Sephardic or Mizrahi (n=57)
The school is good at addressing bullying among the students.	2.83	3.09	3.24
Out of school, my child(ren) feel(s) the most comfortable with peers whose ethnic and cultural backgrounds match the background of our family.	2.98	2.50	3.32
In school, my child(ren) feel(s) the most comfortable with peers whose ethnic and cultural backgrounds match the background of our family.	2.91	2.59	3.27
I have heard about students being teased because of their ethnic or cultural background.	2.19	2.59	2.61
I have heard about students being bullied or harassed because of their ethnic or cultural background.	2.13	2.45	2.56

Table shows aggregate responses on a five-point scale from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5). The responses are organized in a “heat map” from red (lowest levels of agreement) to green (highest levels of agreement).

Faculty perspectives

The faculty surveyed state that they are comfortable teaching about other cultures (79% agree or strongly agree). Many fewer (50%) report that their curriculum represents culturally diverse voices (50%) or includes content that reflects the cultural diversity of their students (48%).

Less than a third (31%) feel confident in their knowledge of Sephardic/Mizrahi cultures of history. More than two thirds (71%) say they are curious to learn more about Sephardic/Mizrahi history and culture, but only 17% say that their schools provide them opportunities to learn more about Sephardic/Mizrahi history and culture.

Two thirds say they know their school’s policy on addressing ethnic-related teasing or bullying (67%); a third (31%) have observed students being “teased” because of their ethnic background; one in five (19%) have observed students being “bullied or harassed” because of their ethnic background.