



Blog Article

What Inspires, Or Doesn't Inspire, Jewish Day School Alumni to Engage With Their Alma Mater?

By [Dr. Harry Bloom](#), Senior Vice President of Client Solutions, [Measuring Success](#).

As Jewish day schools work mightily to generate the funds to improve the quality of their programs, maximize mission-compatible enrollment, and strengthen volunteer leadership, they need to tap into every potential resource. I would assert that no available resource base offers more potential than that of inspired day school alumni. There are literally hundreds of thousands of day school alumni whose active support could make a huge difference to our schools if it was properly harnessed. This article will share a combination of my own learning from working over the past decade with well over 100 Jewish day schools on strategic, enrollment and development issues, as well as the insights I have garnered from Measuring Success' alumni research. My hope is that this article will inspire your school to pursue alumni research and cultivation strategies with increased vigor and also consider new ones to unlock this potential. I predict that you will not regret your efforts spent in this regard.

Jewish Day School-Alumni Relationships Today: How Inspired are Alumni to Help Their Alma Maters?

My personal experience over the past decade, working with Jewish day schools on the PEJE Recruitment and Retention Academy, Atidenu and Governance & Finance Academy programs involving scores of schools, indicates that while some schools have a relatively easy time inspiring alumni to support them, others find this to be challenging. Less positive alumni experiences in some area of their school lives coupled with the fact that many schools have simply not kept in touch with their alumni to continue to cultivate positive relationships, or only reach out to alumni to solicit funds, has created an environment of alumni ambivalence or even negativity in some cases. Compounding these situations is the fact that alumni relations have simply not been a high priority for many school leaders.

Evidence of the lack of priority starts with the fact that many schools do not have anywhere near comprehensive databases containing current information about their alumni, let alone thoughtful, research-informed programs to engage them in a manner that causes them to feel valued. These shortcomings are especially common for K-8 schools because school leaders have assumed that it would be nearly impossible to compete for alumni support when high schools and then colleges and potentially graduate schools are similarly vying for alumni attention and support. Yet, there is evidence that will be discussed later in this article that even K-8 schools can create and sustain strong alumni relationships—and parent of alumni relationships-- if they start cultivating them early enough and constantly seek ways to add lasting value to their students. I will also describe the areas of value that tend to distinguish schools that succeed in cultivating long term positive relationships with their alumni relative to those who do not succeed in doing so.



Why is it Important to Inspire Alumni?

First and foremost, it is important because a school's alumni are its ultimate "product," its most vivid manifestation of its added value. They are the most informed about what worked for them as students and what did not and invaluable sources of information to school leaders in this regard. They are also the most credible ambassadors to potential students and donors. When schools do not connect prospective families or donors to relevant alumni, who will be positive if not effusive in their support, they indirectly cast doubt about the quality of their schools. Missing out on alumni ambassadorship and advocacy robs a school of its very best tools to build donations, enrollment, and volunteer support.

Now, let's discuss the "elephant in the room." There are some schools whose historical program quality was not at the elevated level of its current program. Such schools may have alumni whose experiences were not the most positive in nature. Current school leaders may find themselves rebuffed in outreach attempts to alumni (particularly when they are geared to "what the alumni can do for their school" and not the reverse). My advice to such school leaders is to face into the problem. Actively engage with your alumni, learn about and accept their criticism and discuss what you have in common and what you can do together to enhance your relationship. Often, within the medley of memories of your school, there are both good ones—often connected to exemplary faculty role models and events—in addition to less positive ones. Take the time and make the effort to learn about and acknowledge both. While not all negative alumni relationships are salvageable, many are.

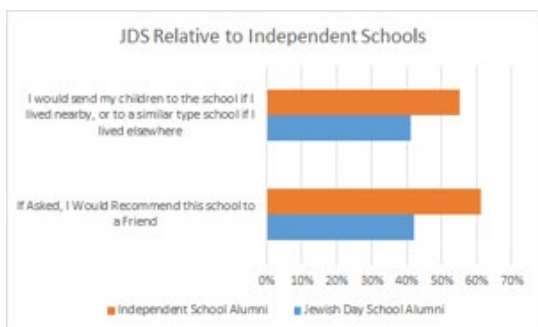
In general, schools that don't stop being in relationship with alumni and to maintain value added connections with their alumni—connections that provide mutual benefit to both parties and are not simply a one way street to get alumni to give money or act as ambassadors—find that they reap enormous dividends. One of Measuring Success' independent school clients that works intensely at alumni relationships generates 20% of its annual campaign from alumni gifts, year after year. And the dividends are not only from the alumni, but often also from their parents who are more likely to continue to support their children's day schools after graduation if their children continue to have a connection to the schools. A good example of such a school is the Solomon Schechter Day School of Metropolitan Chicago, a 50+ year Preschool-8th grade school which, based on benchmarking analysis, generates a highly competitive \$2000 per student from alumni parent

gifts each year. This level of support comes because of hakarat hatov, the Jewish value of desiring to express appreciation, and also a great deal of hard work on the school's part to maintain alumni connections and alumni family connections.

One important way to stay in touch with alumni, learn about their experience with your school and the difference it made in their lives, and about how they would like to stay in touch with your school, is by conducting relatively frequent alumni surveys. They provide a research based roadmap on how to create positive alumni relationships in the first place and how to maintain them over time. In recognition of the importance of alumni surveys, Measuring Success, in collaboration with Prizmah, is about to launch a new series of alumni surveys (along with a new complement of parent and student surveys) this spring which offer a great opportunity for schools to build their alumni program from a solid fact base informed by peer analysis.

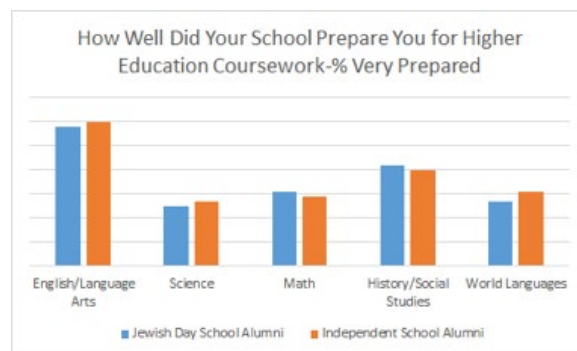
How Does the Level of Jewish Day School Alumni Inspiration Compare to that of Independent School Peers?

A key reference point for how well our schools are doing inspiring alumni affinity and support is how well we perform relative to peer independent schools. Fortunately, Measuring Success has some recent information from alumni surveys that sheds interesting light on this issue. Specifically, during 2013-15 Measuring Success conducted surveys involving over 3000 independent day school high school alumni from six independent schools, three secular schools and three Catholic parochial schools. During that same period of time, it conducted surveys involving over 1200 Jewish day school high school alumni from four schools that spanned the Jewish denominational spectrum. These survey results are, admittedly, from a relatively small number of schools, but they are revealing and suggestive of the need for additional research, which we are intending to conduct, in conjunction with Prizmah.



The survey findings indicate that whereas among the Jewish day schools 42% would recommend their alma mater to a friend, 61% of the independent school alumni would do so. While 41% of Jewish day school alumni would very likely send their own child to their alma mater 55% of independent school alumni would do so. These results are statistically significant at a 99% confidence level.

What is causing the relative enthusiasm gap? In attempting to understand the gap I examined the ratings the Jewish day school alums gave their schools relative to those of the non-Jewish independent schools and discovered something interesting and potentially of great importance. In the arena of academics, there was very little difference in satisfaction with alma mater performance between the Jewish day schools and the independent schools.



However, when it came to believing their schools were very helpful in advancing their time, social relationships and college and career and leadership potential: the independent schools' alumni gave much higher ratings to their alma maters than the Jewish day school alumni gave to theirs.

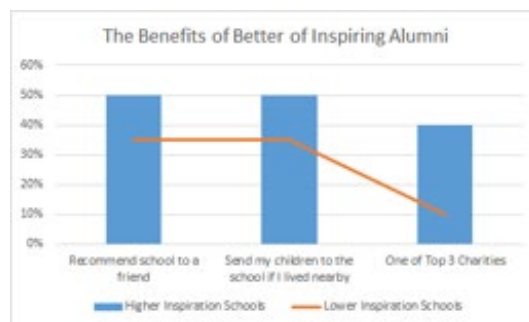
% Strong Positive Impact	How did your school experience impact your efforts to develop the following?	
	Jewish Day School Alumni:	Independent School Alumni:
Managing Time Effectively	38%	48%
Motivation to stay physically healthy	20%	35%
Motivation to maintain a healthy balance in life (mind,body,spirit)	25%	32%

% Strongly Agree	How has your school impacted your life?	
	Jewish Day School Alumni:	Independent School Alumni:
Acceptance to a college that was appropriate for me	46%	56%
Preparation for my professional career of choice	23%	35%
Motivation to take on leadership roles	33%	42%

All of these differences were statistically significant and worth paying attention to as potential levers to inspire greater alumni support. What can Jewish day schools learn from this? Potentially that our schools need to start paying more attention to the quality of life of our students in school and to giving them a foundation that will enhance their future lives following graduation—**and to ensuring the students perceive that they are receiving these benefits while they are still in school.**

What Can We Learn from Jewish Day Schools that Effectively Inspire their Alumni?

There is also a great deal to learn from Jewish day schools that do perform well in inspiring their alumni as evidenced by alums' higher propensities to enthusiastically recommend their alma maters to friends, enroll their own children, and make donations. In the two higher performing schools from our aforementioned four school 1200 alumni respondent research sample, 50%+ of alumni would highly recommend their alma mater to a friend and enroll their children in their alma mater, and in the lower performing schools only about 35% would do so. Alums from the higher performing schools were also more than twice as likely to consider their alma mater one of their top three giving priorities.



Why? Let's start with the factors that did not differentiate the higher and lower performing pairs of schools. The school pairs did not differ in their assessment of the quality of their academic preparation in English/ Language Arts, Math, Science, History and Social Studies or Music/Drama/Dance/Performing Arts or Visual Arts. Nor did they differ in their perceptions of the extent to which they felt their schools supported them in being accepted to an appropriate college or in preparing them for a career of their choice.

Where they differed significantly was in three key areas.



First, in the extent to which the alums felt their schools had a strong positive impact on their **efforts to develop critical thinking skills.**



Second, in the extent to which they felt their school had a strong positive impact on their **efforts to develop empathy for others.**

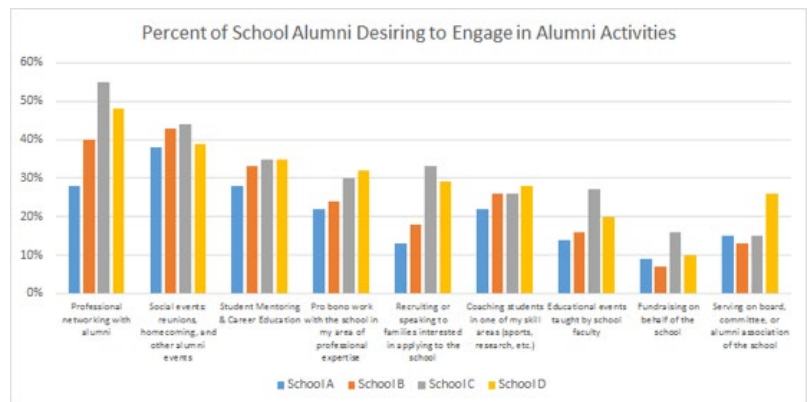


Third, in the extent to which they strongly agreed their schools **supported their motivation to take on leadership roles.**

This is not to say that academic excellence or co-curriculars or college guidance are not important. They are. But it does shed at least preliminary light – which Measuring Success and Prizmah hope to confirm with more extensive research in the spring when we work to recruit a 20 school cohort to conduct alumni surveys—on the factors that students really believe matter in the long run in making their lives successful and worth living. I will call these “the gifts that keep on giving.”

Increasing Alumni Inspiration: Post Graduation

The last question we will deal with is future oriented. What can Jewish day schools do, post-graduation, to positively inspire their alumni? Here too, alumni research provides some answers. There are a couple of engagement strategies including facilitating professional networking opportunities among alumni and organizing alumni social events that tend to be uniformly popular. But there are other strategies that aren't uniformly desired by each school's alumni and this points to the need for each school to do the research that informs its particular alumni engagement plan. Rabbi Marc Baker, Head of School of Gann Academy credits this kind of alumni survey work as having made a significant difference for his school. “As a result of the (survey) work with Measuring Success, we now have a significantly more robust alumni community than we've had before. We've ramped up our alumni activities because we learned from Measuring Success what the alumni actually want from us.”



The Bottom Line on Inspiring Jewish Day School Alumni to Want to Support their Alma Mater

Building inspiring relationships with your school's alumni is strategically important, if not vital, in creating a higher quality, more sustainable school. It isn't easy, but there is evidence that by ensuring that Jewish day schools offer students the kinds of social and emotional and “leg up on post-graduation life” experiences they value, and by viewing alumni as a valuable market segment that your school cultivates with research informed programming, Jewish day schools can succeed and build a foundation for growth and prosperity.

Contact Harry.bloom@measuring-success.com to discuss the research findings.