



Character Day Evaluation

Case Study: Yavneh Day School

School Overview

Background

Yavneh Day School is an independent, K-8 Jewish Day School located in Los Gatos, California. Yavneh has a very close-knit student body of 186 (predominately Jewish) students, which makes the community uniquely small. Case in point, this year's eighth grade class is made up of only ten students. This close-knit community has facilitated strong relationships and helped students to feel known and understood by the staff. Many of the teachers have over 20 years of experience in education and teach at Yavneh because of their commitment to teaching the whole child. The school is supported by committed parents, many of whom send their children to Yavneh because of the focus on teaching Jewish values.

Yavneh's mission is to "discover how a child learns in order to maximize each student's potential while fostering curiosity, encouraging risk taking, and ingraining a love of learning." In order to reach their mission, they put a strong emphasis on "living Jewish values" and operate with four fundamental beliefs in mind –

- Learning is effective when it's relevant;
- A diverse learning environment is critical;
- Judaism is an organizing principle;
- Value of community

Yavneh is committed to making socio-emotional growth ***"an equal partner to academic development."*** Leadership shares that "cultivating social and emotional perception in students, encouraging mindfulness, and valuing the ability to be self-reflective and take responsibility are all hallmarks of a Yavneh education," and we certainly observed this to be the case. Yavneh has worked hard to become a place where the religious values from the Torah notably influences the school culture and the decision to implement events like Character Day.

Several years ago, the staff met to discuss the lack of a holistic vision for discipline in their school and instead of focusing on deficits, found themselves explicitly identifying the values and traits that they wanted to cultivate in students. From there, character education found its way into the culture of Yavneh.

"We are interested in developing a whole child, a whole community, whole families. And creating a better path for the Jewish people and world. We are value-based. What is more relevant than the way you live your life? That is all character. That is what Judaism is about. Part of my goal here is to help kids lead meaningful lives, in order to do this you need to understand values." -Rabbi Hahn Tapper

Fast-forwarding to today, staff now claims that these character efforts differentiate them from neighboring academic institutions. Leading the charge on Yavneh's character efforts is Rabbi Laurie Hahn Tapper, the school's Rabbi and Director of Integrated Learning. Constantly searching for new opportunities to build character in their school, Rabbi Hahn Tapper came across Let It Ripple, and the school community was particularly captivated by the "Making of a Mensch" film, which connected character to the Jewish culture. This motivated them to participate in Character Day beginning in 2015.

Character Day Implementation

Sparkling Interest: “The Big Reveal”

“The whole periodic table and other materials gave a boost to our values education at the school. Prior to that, the school leadership would determine the values the school would learn, once Tiffany’s work came to light, it gave us the idea to expose the kids, teachers, and parents to all of the values but let them choose which seven to focus on.”

-Yavneh Day School Teacher

Character Day at Yavneh centers around the “The Big Reveal.” At the beginning of the year, after learning about the values in the Periodic Table of Being a Mensch (included in the Making of a Mensch Discussion Kit provided by Let it Ripple), the Yavneh school community votes on seven character values to focus on throughout the year, which they refer to as their “Keshet of Kevod” or their “Rainbow of Respect.” The “Big Reveal” aims to model and capture the essence of Jewish summer camps, approaching teaching values with a fun, engaging spirit.

These seven values are reached through a voting process. Each class voted on their top values, and those with the highest number of votes “wins.” The voting process fosters a sense of ownership and invites the entire school community (students, staff, and parents) to recommit to Yavneh’s culture of character for the year. As one parent put it, “Other schools focus on athletics. In many ways, the big reveal and our character culture has taken the place of our sports. This is what we are cheering for. Students can identify with it. If you take their energy and pour it into something positive like character development, it meets a need that kids have.”

On Character Day, the school community (students, staff, and parents) convened in the school auditorium with palpable excitement and anticipation to learn of the year’s chosen values. The members of the Keshet Krew (8th graders, the oldest students, who are considered the role models of the school) learned the values (which are top secret) several days early so they could reveal them to the community through a skit. In this year’s skit, each member of the Keshet Krew presented a value through a series of statements/questions in a call and response format. The students created the presentation of each value, giving it a student-friendly feel:

- *When things are hard, I’m not going to give up, coming next Monday....* **“Perseverance”**
- *Sometimes I notice my friends get sad. How can I brighten somebody else’s day?...* **“Kindness”**
- *When I’m scared, I don’t back away from a challenge, I want to conquer my fears....* **“Bravery”**
- *Why work alone when I can work with others? I’m going to be a team player....* **“Teamwork”**
- *When someone’s sad, what’s the best medicine? I can make someone laugh with....* **“Humor”**
- *Why’s all my work so boring and bleh. Add some color and bam you have....* **“Creativity”**
- *Is the glass half empty or half full? I think half full?...* **“Optimism”**



Following the skit, Rabbi Laurie revealed the poster for the year with the new character values and artwork created by the Keshet Krew to symbolize the importance of student ownership. She reiterated that building the Keshet of Kevod requires everyone to put the work in themselves and ask “how do I become a Mensch. Which traits do I need to work on?” Together, everyone’s collective actions builds the rainbow.

Creating Common Language: Periodic Table of Being a Mensch

In addition to “The Big Reveal,” Yavneh uses the Periodic Table of Being a Mensch to inform lessons on Character Day, as well as throughout the year. They’ve found the resources on the Let it Ripple site to be engaging and relevant to informing their character activities. For example, in one classroom, we observed students using the periodic table to reflect on the following discussion prompts:

- *What are five qualities you want to work on? Pick one. What’s something you could do right now?*
- *We rely on different qualities in different situations. What do you find more useful at home? At school? In sports?*
- *What qualities do you appreciate most in others? How is this the same and different from your strengths?*
- *Write your Mensch Code.*

One teacher shared that activities like these “encourage a metacognition amongst Yavneh’s students. They can look and label situations as courage and love. Another kid might not have the ability to reflect on things. We are constantly reflecting and analyzing in the lens of character.” One parent shared, “It is great for the kids to have a sense of what they should become. Sometimes when they fall, this knowledge helps them to figure out the character strengths they need to realign to.” The activities provided by Let it Ripple are not only useful for the students’ current interactions but also in planning for future scenarios.

Sustaining Focus on Student Character: Student Ownership

Following Character Day, The Keshet Krew is then responsible for designing a skit each month to introduce the next character value to the student body. These skits are designed to resonate with the students.

- *For example, the first skit the students planned for this year focused on perseverance. The students’ skit included two groups (good and evil) – the good group, who wanted to make Mac and Cheese at their sleepover, and the bad group who made attempts to thwart their culinary efforts. Ultimately, the good group prevails through **perseverance** but cleverly, the students found a way to set up the teaching of other values for the months to come.*

The Keshet Krew noted that their skits are to “help the younger ones develop and keep these values in mind so they can be righteous people and teach the values to younger generations.” Being taught by their peers not only benefits the younger students as it makes the values more accessible, but it also forces the Keshet Krew to learn the values on a deeper level than they would have if they were just hearing about them in the classroom. One student shared “I think the whole goal of this is to bring these values into the future and we are teaching the younger kids how to use these outside of school in their own lives.” Another said, “It makes me feel respected and feel good that people my age are interested. I really looked up to the eighth graders in seventh grade. I realize we do really make an impact.”

“Kids look forward to leading this charge. It is not just getting up and doing a skit. It is organizing activities in the classroom. They’re always the Keshet Krew – that sense of leadership and responsibility – makes it less of a one-off and it permeates what they do throughout the year.”
-Yavneh Day School Teacher

Year-round Character Education at Yavneh

Character Day launches Yavneh's character work. In effort to sustain the energy generated on Character Day throughout the year, Yavneh makes sure they provide:

- ✓ **A common language for character.** In Jewish tradition, the rainbow is a symbol of God's covenant with all of humanity after the flood in the book of Genesis. The rainbow is a symbol of keeping a promise to behave in an ethical way. Each year Yavneh explores seven overarching values, chosen by the student body on Character Day, that promote good character, which comprise their Keshet of Kevod, or Rainbow of Respect.
- ✓ **Clear structures like the Keshet Krew and the buddy system.** The Keshet Krew is comprised of all of the students in the 8th grade class and as the oldest students in the school, they are tasked with revealing the school's character values for the year (which happens during Character Day), planning a series of skits and activities for the full student body each month to introduce – and reinforce – each value, and serving as role models of good character throughout the school year. Yavneh has a buddy system that pairs younger students with members of the Keshet Krew. One to two times per month over the course of the year, the older student meets with the younger student to discuss the values and make them more accessible.
- ✓ **Activities to reinforce and recognize character.** When students violate a value, they are asked to complete a "Repairing the Rainbow" reflection where they think about their actions, identify how it violated a value, and make suggestions about what they will do differently the next time. Older students write and younger students draw, making it accessible and effective for all grades. This activity helps the students clearly understand that their character is something that can be adapted if they are willing to expend the effort. Not only are students prompted to pay attention to any missteps in character, they are also asked to notice their character strengths by using "Keshet Cards." When students notice their peers exemplifying character values, they can hand them a "Keshet Card" to recognize their effort.

"We are paired with the kindergarteners to show them we aren't scary. They get to know us and get interested in what we have to say. They are immediately integrated in our community."

-Keshet Krew Member

These activities and systems help to make character a part of everyday life at Yavneh Day School. As one teacher stated, *"I've never seen a program that had a bigger impact on character development than the program that is here. It permeates everything."*

Impact of Character Day at Yavneh

Impact of Character Day on Individuals

- ✔ **Character Day helps staff and students concretize the value of character.** Teachers reported that Character Day serves as a critical reminder of the importance of character. One teacher shared, “Making sure there is time in the schedule is not insignificant... It is not just an extra thing to me.” One student shared that Character Day reminds her to think about specific values and their importance. For example, she shared that justice was one of her favorite values, and that Character Day reminds her how important it is to not “treat people differently from other people.” Clearly, Character Day not only drums up excitement for the work ahead, but it winnows down the multitude of character values to just seven, allowing students the opportunity to focus and find purpose in each value. Likewise, Character Day draws undivided attention to what Yavneh feels is an integral part of leading a life consistent with Jewish text – character.
- ✔ **Student leadership opportunities offered through Character Day and the Keshet Krew build students’ efficacy.** Several eighth grade students reported that the leadership opportunities offered on Character Day helped them to recognize that their ability to change or improve their character is well within their control. Students shared that their Keshet Krew role requires them to call upon their organizational and planning abilities, to stretch out of their comfort zone and to exercise patience as they have a short runway to prepare for Character Day. This degree of responsibility comes with a corresponding degree of learning, failure, recalibration and perseverance. One teacher shared that *“the ownership piece, the self-awareness piece”* is what facilitates improvements in students’ self-efficacy, and the students certainly echoed this sentiment.
- ✔ **Character Day activities provided students with an opportunity to intentionally plan how they would improve their character.** Character Day reminded students about the importance of creating concrete plans to improve their character. The Let it Ripple materials provided a platform for students’ to channel their energy and organize their thoughts into an actionable plan. For example, in the character lesson we observed, we saw students thinking through the prompt “What can you do right now to work on [the five character traits of their choice]?”

Students shared a number of ways they intended to apply character values in their lives. Many of them talked about the importance of kindness:

“You need to seek out moments to be kind because the smallest thing can change someone’s day. You have no idea what people are going through – maybe parents’ are going through a divorce or losing their home. You’ll never know. But just saying ‘Hi, how are you? I hope you have a good day.’ Actively seeking out those moments to be kind to be good to other people, that could completely change someone’s life.”

Impact of Character Day on Yavneh's Community

- ✔ **Character Day reinforces the Yavneh community's investment in character education.** The school community's excitement surrounding the big reveal, their engagement with Let it Ripple exercises and their enthusiasm for ongoing programming demonstrates the value they place on character. One parent shared that this focus on character education is what makes Yavneh's students truly unique, "It was a hard decision (sending my child to Yavneh) because I'm a public school teacher. But I noticed something different about Yavneh students – they make eye contact, they are confident, they hold the door for me. The character they exude and the way the teachers embrace the children – made me want to send my kids here. Now, in my son, I see his deep connection to what is right and wrong." Another parent shared that he makes the commute and pays the tuition because he truly feels the values of becoming a mensch are enforced at Yavneh.
- ✔ **Character Day serves as a launch event and a time for the community to recommit to its values.** In addition to promoting Yavneh's value for character, Character Day launches the character curriculum at the beginning of each school year. It falls at just the right time in Yavneh's academic year. The beginning of the year excitement and busyness dies down just before Character Day. One teacher shared, "We are in a month of reflection in terms of the Jewish New Year. So the Jewish New Year is centralized in our teachings and then we have Character Day on top – it is a perfect scaffolding system. The timing hits perfectly."
- ✔ **Character Day is an impetus for the Yavneh community to see the wider application of Jewish virtues.** Yavneh has taken the necessary initiative to customize the Let it Ripple materials and Character Day event to meet their school's unique needs. Not only have they created new activities, but they have seamlessly aligned the Let it Ripple materials with their Jewish faith. This mindset – that Jewish text and character education are part and parcel – and the relevance and flexibility of Let it Ripple materials is what continues to fuel Yavneh's efforts to maintain and refine their culture of character. They are relentless in cultivating student engagement through connecting Character Day programming and Let it Ripple materials to the Jewish text. Put simply, each year Character Day reminds the Yavneh community that making ancient and modern Jewish text accessible through a character development lens is both possible and incredibly impactful.

"What makes character particularly effective here is the belief that learning is effective when it is relevant. We have kids vote and buy in and connect character and Jewish text to their daily lives. Everything is centered around Jewish text. How can we make ancient and modern Jewish text relevant and see it through the lens of character? Where can we see character in the text? Character Day fits in beautifully because it connects to all of these things. And fundamentally, we are about community. And the community comes together to learn these values."

-Yavneh Day School Leadership