



Akiba-Schechter Jewish Day School Philosophy

SMALL CLASS SIZE

Akiba-Schechter has the advantage of being a small school. Its average student-teacher ratio is about 10:1 in all grades K-8. Teachers know all the students and students have a personal relationship with many of the teachers outside of school. With fewer students, everyone can be heard. A few minutes of *one-on-one* time with a student can lead to great gains in academic achievement. There are less discipline problems because students are more actively engaged. There is more mutual-respect, as there is more exchange of thoughts, opinions and philosophies. Small class size enables teachers to worry less about managing learners and more about managing learning.

A small classroom offers more opportunity for in-depth peer collaboration. Students know each other better, are more interdependent and therefore are more successful at group work. There are fewer and smaller groups and more time for students to share their own discoveries. Children have more opportunity to come to their own conclusions after "hands-on" experiences. Students learn best by doing.

MULTI-AGE CLASSROOM

Other factors unique to Akiba are its multi-aged classes, individualized instruction and flexible ability grouping. Each child is in various multi-aged groups during the school day, usually grouped in two-year spans. Each group of children is learning what it needs to know, according to the level it has mastered. Because children are periodically advanced in ability level during the year and certainly from year to year, children are very motivated.

The multi-age classroom at Akiba has many advantages. Each child may progress at his own rate. Indeed, he or she often progresses at different rates in various subject areas anyway. Self-esteem is fostered because each child is succeeding. He does not progress to more difficult work until he has mastered simpler concepts. Thus he experiences continuous progress. Because of greater opportunity for success, all children have a better attitude toward school, teachers and learning. In a traditional graded classroom, only the brightest or academically successful students *love* school. And even *they* don't always *love* it, because they are bored!

Children learn at various rates. In a traditional "graded" situation, any child who isn't synchronized with the school's curriculum schedule will forever feel *behind* and begin a spiral of failure. In a non-graded situation, he always has the opportunity to excel at a later time and *catch-up*. In the non-graded classroom, children are not *failed* - repeating material - or *skipped* - thereby missing material. Each child makes continuous progress at his own rate. There is no expectation that every child be ready to learn a certain skill simultaneously; consequently children do not feel like failures.

A non-graded classroom is important socially, as well as academically. Multi-age settings foster cooperative learning skills that are necessary in a democratic society. They learn to work with older and younger peers. Few adults work with only same-aged colleagues. Cooperative

learning in a multi-age classroom builds a sense of community. Children are not competing against one uniform standard, and hence, they are less competitive. Instead, they are competing with *themselves* for individual progress. There is less emphasis on a grade and instead, a celebration of accomplishments. Competition is minimized because there are always many levels being mastered.

Amazingly, this type of learning promotes the most effective form of motivation: *self*-motivation. Children know that they are the sole determiners of their progress, and so they may fly to the stars and beyond. Consequently, many do. Children in a multi-age classroom become more self-reliant. Since students are learning at different rates, the teacher instructs only part of a class much of the time. Children learn to help one another or to be independent. Children **own** their learning when they are not totally dependent on the teacher to direct it.

In addition to this, remaining in the same classroom for multiple years provides every child with the opportunity to be both a learner and a teacher. As a new student in a multi-aged classroom, he learns from older/brighter role models. As he ages in the group, he will have the opportunity to teach others, build in redundancy to master concepts and become a leader to younger/slower students. Most people will agree that there is no better way to learn a topic than to teach it. In addition, no student should feel he is always at the top or bottom of a class. Because the classroom is a fluid learning community, he will be each at some point in time.

In this supportive, encouraging environment, children who have not succeeded at other schools find that they, too, are capable of progress. This system works for the gifted child too. Every student has a right to learn something in school in every class, yet often the gifted learn the least. Much of what they are asked to learn in a mixed ability class, they have already mastered. Teachers often make them classroom helpers or let them read books on their own. Consequently the gifted child is not given the opportunity to learn through "real struggle." If gifted students are not exposed to challenging material, they will not learn *how* to learn and will certainly not develop the study skills they need for future serious academic pursuits. Students who are not forced to struggle with their work will be utterly unprepared for the post high-school world, where universities and employers make demands of independent learning. The goal of an appropriate education must be to create optimal learning experiences for all.

FLEXIBLE ABILITY GROUPING

Flexible Ability Grouping is the process of grouping students on a subject-by-subject basis, according to their current performance. Often students are in the most advanced group in one subject area but not in another. Flexible grouping dictates that groups change in response to changes in students' needs, achievement levels, development, and motivation. Scheduling can be a nightmare and more human and material resources are needed than in traditional heterogeneous classrooms. However, if our goal is to educate all children to the best of their capabilities, then the time and effort is an investment in our future. In order to genuinely not leave any child behind, schools need to modify curriculum and instruction to insure student success.

Akiba's small and multi-aged classes, individualized instruction and flexible ability grouping are excellent and proven ways to educate and prepare lifelong learners and admirable human beings.