

Everything you wanted to know but were afraid to ask

This is the first in a two-part question-and-answer series with Bialik College principal **Jeremy Stowe-Lindner**.

Bialik is a 'cross communal' school. What does that mean?

Jeremy Stowe-Lindner: Cross-communal, or pluralistic, schools are schools that see Judaism as a mosaic. They teach the beliefs and practices of mainstream Jewish denominations with equivalence (whether orthodox, progressive, conservative or secular). At Bialik, it means that we don't default to a type of Judaism. We see religious dilemmas as educational opportunities. So for example, when there is a Shabbaton in the Secondary School and we are discussing prayer, we view this as an opportunity to discuss with the students whether we have a mechitza, or even a 'tri-chitza' (sections for men, women and also a mixed section). We discuss the different siddurim used in different Melbourne communities and decide what would be appropriate for our group. Our primary school however, is more 'traditional at base'. At the Primary School level, we expose students to a range of Jewish practices (they all learn birchat hamazon, Shema, Modeh Ani, brachot and so on) so that we give them a solid grounding in traditional Jewish practice and they can then explore the nuances of different paths when they're in the secondary school.

What's the point of attending an open day at Bialik, we cannot afford private school fees?

Stowe-Lindner: At Bialik, no one is denied a Jewish education on financial grounds. 24 per cent of our community are fee-assisted which means they go through a dignified process of means-testing. But everyone must know that there are sacrifices to make. Sending our children to Bialik, a private school that ranks as one of the highest achieving non-selective school in Victoria, set in a beautiful family environment with outstanding pastoral care and focussed attention on each child – that does cost. So families who are fee assisted, as do families who are not, recognise that they must make some sacrifices as well. If everyone comes with this in mind, an arrangement will be agreed.

Bialik College has been in the top five schools in Victoria for 18 out of 19 years but my child is not especially academically inclined. How will he cope?

Stowe-Lindner: It's true that the 'average' student at Bialik graduates in the top 7 per cent in the country, but I don't think that our students are any

more intelligent than their peers at other schools. What we, and our community, excel at, is supporting all students ("average" and "above average") to achieve spectacular academic outcomes. At the same time, we offer huge support to those whose literacy and numeracy requires it. Our curriculum is diversified too. We have students doing VET as well as VCE. And we celebrate ATARs of 75 as much as we do the 99.9. Our motto at Bialik is for every student to be their best – their own, personal best, whatever that might be.

A lot of parents talk about coding. Why is this such a popular topic and do you teach children how to do it?

Stowe-Lindner: We don't want our students to be consumers of technology. They need to own it, design it, and create it. Coding at Bialik starts in Kinder – our pre-schoolers code. Just last week I was talking to some Year 1 students who had devised code to program Bee-Bots and develop their literacy. Kids today want to be able to program their own Apps, technology is second-nature to them. We have coding electives in the curriculum and coding clubs during lunch time for children who love to do it. We even have a girls robotics elective in the middle school.

Australian Chief Scientist Alan Finkel recently addressed the Bialik Community. He was asked a question about what should be in today's school curriculum. What would your answer be?

Stowe-Lindner: It was a great question. Clearly literacy, numeracy, the sciences, the arts, sport, languages, the humanities and so on are all important. A curriculum needs to reflect the jobs of the future as well as the standards of the day. But more importantly, the successful employees and employers of the future will be the people who can collaborate with each other and who can challenge, dissect and question what appears before them. They will need to be flexible and able to move nimbly between tasks, groups and technologies. And they will enjoy seeing differences as healthy and obstacles as opportunities. These are the dispositions we nurture at Bialik and is the essence of our approach to education.

Next month: Get the Jewish Report for the second part of this story.