

'A Jewish school for every Jewish child'

It is with sadness that we read, in last week's *AJN*, of the "Jewish education crisis at non-Jewish schools" following yet another non-Jewish school's decision to withdraw from the special religious instruction (SRI) program providing Jewish education to Jewish children.

While each school's curricular and inclusive provision is a matter for that school's principal, it was with especial sadness that I read of one member of our community noting that the Jewish education provision at non-Jewish schools is necessary as a result of Jewish schools being "unaffordable" and the assertion that "parents are forced to leave Jewish schools".

As a Jewish school principal, I am puzzled by this statement.

The Jewish schools in our community ensure that every Jewish child can access a quality Jewish education at a quality Jewish school. The word that I challenge is the word "unaffordable".

There is no debate about the cost of schooling: sending a child to a Jewish school is a huge financial commitment and involves a holistic view of a family's lifestyle. Indeed, a premium product comes at a premium price.

But for every family who feels that they are forced to leave (or not access) Jewish schooling, I will be able to find another family in similar circumstances with similar financial means who have reached an agreement with

Viewpoint

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a Jewish school involving fees and lifestyle, enabling their children to attend.

At the school at which I have the privilege of being principal, Bialik College, nearly a quarter of our children receive fee reductions as a result of a means-testing process. The reality is that all Jewish schools are already providing exceptional levels of assistance, and the results are that many Jewish children are enrolled who otherwise could not receive a Jewish education.

Parents approaching our schools who have difficulty paying the fees are given the opportunity to meet with our fee assistance officers/volunteers and following a financial disclosure, which may be reviewed periodically, agree to an affordable fee.

The sticking point comes when a family's lifestyle needs to adjust accordingly. Sending children to Jewish schools (or indeed any independent school) has the resultant communal, values, skills and academic results that make our Australian Jewish schools the envy of the Jewish world. However, such a commitment



Caulfield Junior College (CJC) students enjoying Chanukah last year courtesy of UJEB. CJC this month cancelled its special religious instruction classes.

is a significant burden for families that we cannot underestimate.

Families who pay full fees as well as families on assistance have to make choices about size and location of their houses, the regularity and nature of holidays and the year and model of cars that they purchase.

Naturally every family will come to a different conclusion regarding an acceptable lifestyle. For the older generation and for much of the current generation of parents, sending children to a Jewish school is a commitment which takes precedence over some lifestyle accoutrements. For other families the decision to send

children to a non-Jewish school is not a forced one, but an informed decision (which I fully respect) balancing lifestyle with Jewish education.

There may be, as per *The AJN's* headline, a "Jewish education crisis at non-Jewish schools", but let me be clear: there is no education crisis for Jewish children.

Any Jewish child who wants a Jewish education will find one in an Australian Jewish school.

The challenge will always be the grey area regarding a family's adapted lifestyle to make such a choice.

There is no issue, of course, with Jewish children receiving supplement-

ary Jewish activities in a non-Jewish school (and indeed there may be factors other than affordability influencing this decision) – but there can be no comparison to the impact on the Jewish soul, or psyche, between this and the provision experienced in a Jewish school.

While the decision to attend a Jewish school comes at a financial and lifestyle cost, the decision to attend a non-Jewish school comes at a very different cost.

No number of Israel trips, Friday night dinners or add-on Jewish activities in non-Jewish schools will compensate for the Jewish rhythm of a Jewish school, the Jewish education and Zionist ethos, the communal activism and involvement, the Jewish skills and culture that is an hour-by-hour part of the fabric in schools which also make an especial effort to engage with the wider community.

To be clear, while there may be a headline in the Jewish press saying that there is a crisis of Jewish education at non-Jewish schools (and it is not for me to say whether there is or not), there is one thing that I can be confident of: there is no crisis of Jewish education since there is a Jewish schooling option for every Jewish child.

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