

OUTSTANDING RELIGIOUS MIDDLE SCHOOL

Molding Young Mensches

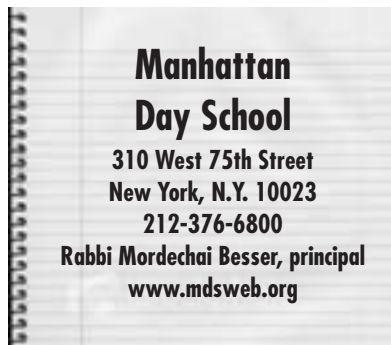
Judaism, academics and good citizenship at Manhattan Day School

By Susan M. Sippelle

Manhattan Day School's goal is to turn out young men and women who not only excel academically, but who are also "mensches"—good, reliable people. The school stresses the idea of "chesed," or doing good for friends, the sick and the elderly.

Founded in 1943 to provide an Orthodox education for young people on Manhattan's Upper West Side, the Jewish day school has grown and expanded its scope during the past six decades. Today, the school has 500 students, evenly divided by gender. They come from the entire New York metropolitan area, although most live in Manhattan.

Manhattan Day offers an early childhood program for 3- and 4-year-olds, and runs through 8th grade. Boys and girls learn in separate classes after 3rd grade. Students spend half their days in secular studies, taught in English, and half in Judaic studies, taught in Hebrew.



Rabbi Mordechai Besser, the principal for nine years, emphasized that Manhattan Day provides a warm and individualized environment that encourages students to learn. "If a child is motivated, he or she can do anything," Besser said.

"We're all here for the kids," said Daphne Herskowitz, a special education teacher at the school and a mother of four. Two of her children attend the school, and two recently graduated. "I never heard any of my kids say, 'I don't want to go to school today,'" she added, in her role as a Manhattan Day parent.

"We've been incredibly pleased," said Sharon Haberman, speaking about her family's experience at Manhattan Day. Her four children, who all entered the school when they were 3, now range in age from a 1st- to a 7th-grader. "If there's any issue, the school provides support to both the parents and the child," Haberman said.

She noted the school's proactive willingness to offer enrichment, special tutoring or extra help to meet every child's specific needs.

For its middle school students, the Judaic curriculum builds Torah study skills and addresses contemporary issues of Jewish interest. Although Hebrew language instruction begins in the school's early childhood classrooms, middle school pupils participate in the intensive NETA ("neta" is the Hebrew word for "sapling") language program developed by the Hebrew University in Jerusalem for students in 7th through 12th grades (at Manhattan Day, it is offered through 8th grade).



Rabbi Mordechai Besser, principal.

dual effort. On a wall opposite the entrance to the cafeteria, students created a large mural that remembers their relatives who died in the Holocaust. On another wall, students assembled their individual wishes for the future of the

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"We're out to prove that a young man or woman can be an Orthodox Jew in the 21st century, as well as a patriotic and civic-minded American," Besser said.

The school environment reflects this

United States into a red, white and blue collage of an American flag.

Middle school students also take a full curriculum of language arts, math, computer education, science, social studies and art. Gifted math students participate in the Johns Hopkins University Center for Talented Youth distance learning courses, and the school competes in the annual math Olympiad held by the Board of Jewish Education. Manhattan Day also takes advantage of its New York City environs.

"One of my favorite experiences in 6th grade was when we went on a trip to the Museum of Television & Radio," wrote Lauren Brickman, 11, in an e-mail (the museum was recently renamed The Paley Center for Media). "We each made our own movie, which involved filming segments and putting the parts together!" she added.

Within the school itself, competition is discouraged, to keep with the emphasis on fostering community. Students' artwork from all grade levels festoons the building. Interested students must audition to join the choir, but everyone is accepted. There is no dean's list or honor roll at Manhattan Day, "but we become barracudas in competition against other schools," Besser said.

"Everyone is invited to be on the bas-



Principal Mordechai Besser, center, surrounded by middle school students.

PHOTOS BY SUSAN M. SIPPELLE

ANDERSON

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chess teacher asking, "Obviously I thought he was smart. All parents do."

Without that teacher's prodding, though, Cirker and her husband might never have enrolled Marlon in Anderson. He is now starting his freshman year at The Beacon School.

His mother knows the state Regents board will never test one of the most valuable lessons Marlon learned at the Anderson School.

"He has learned how to work with people and how to appreciate other people's

strengths," Cirker said. Rather than being jealous of classmates who do better than he does, Cirker said Marlon has come home terribly excited, saying, "This person is brilliant. He knows everything about this."

Cirker said she believes that this encouragement likely has something to do with the school's small size. Culot agreed.

"It's like the 'Cheers' song. You want to go where everybody knows your name," he said, referring to the theme song of the 1980s sitcom. That smallness creates closeness both inside and outside the classrooms, Culot added. "For middle school, in my opinion, that is the most critical thing."



ANDREW SCHWARTZ

■ In one social studies class, students studied ancient Egypt using a mummified chicken.

BANK STREET

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schools do—and certainly presents them in a different order—the institution definitely succeeds in teaching students how to think.

Stressing deep thinking instead of memorization is not the only way the School for Children differs from most other schools. Students here receive written evaluations instead of grades. They take few tests, call teachers and administrators alike by their first names, and families actively voice topics they would like to see incorporated into the unabashedly progressive curriculum.

But don't make the mistake of thinking the school is lax—academically or socially.

Students specifically learn to respect



ANDREW SCHWARTZ

■ A teacher leads a class at The School for Children.

one another, as well as authority figures. Weinberger joked, "I can still silence a room of 160 with the evil eye."

In addition, the curriculum in every grade includes the crucial life lessons of organization and time management. And as students work their way through the upper school division, they learn increasingly thorough research techniques.

That said, students at the School for Children still seem to have fun in the classroom.

Millison, who works on Wall Street, said that's as it should be. He knows firsthand just how competitive life can be. But when he and his wife began looking for schools for their children, "The belief we had was that you didn't have to go crazy with the kids in kindergarten," he said. "Along the way, they should have a good time." ■

MANH. DAY

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ketball team," parent Sharon Haberman said, "and, miraculously, the kids win."

Last school year, Manhattan Day's team took second place in a math and science contest, competing against 15 teams from the United States and Israel. The contest is part of the Mitchell Excellence 2000, or E2K, initiative started in Israel to promote excellence in education.

In their final year at Manhattan Day, 8th-graders visit Washington, D.C., and produce a culminating multimedia project, "Through Our Years," about their journey through the school. Almost all of the school's graduates continue their education at religious high schools in the New York metropolitan region.

Manhattan Day is currently in the midst of an \$11 million renovation that began last summer and will be completed next summer. A new rooftop playground is being added, and the school's systems are being upgraded.



SUSAN M. SIPPERELLE

■ Students gather at Manhattan Day School.

Besser said that the greatest issue the school faces in the future is that young families can no longer afford to live on the Upper West Side. Although enrollment has grown to 500 from 350 since

Besser became principal, Manhattan Day experiences some attrition when the families move to Israel or to more affordable areas outside New York City.

Despite its challenges, Besser loves

his job as principal and the school's atmosphere that he has helped create. "I feel the kids in the school are happy," Besser said. "They smile a lot and that's very gratifying to me." ■