

The Jewish Chronicle

September 8, 2005 – 4 Elul, 5765

Special ed grant goes to MetroWest school

Total of six schools received grants: MWJDS, Rashi (Newton), Striar Hebrew Academy (Sharon), Maimonides (Brookline), South Area Solomon Schechter Day School (Stoughton) and Jewish Community Day School (Watertown)

By Ellen L. Weingart

FRAMINGHAM — The MetroWest Jewish Day School (MWJDS), 29 Upper Joclyn Ave., has received a grant that will allow it to better serve children with special needs.

“Our board of directors has expressed its commitment to being a school for the entire Jewish community,” said Carolyn Keller, MWJDS head of school. “We serve students from a variety of religious and socioeconomic backgrounds and are committed to a philosophy of inclusion.”

MWJDS is one of six greater Boston Jewish day schools to share a \$2.2 million special education grant from the Peerless Excellence Project. The Peerless Excellence Project, funded by anonymous gifts totaling \$45 million, is intended to strengthen Jewish day school education in Greater Boston.

Combined Jewish Philanthropies (CJP) announced the project in June, saying it “will create the infrastructure and programs to support children with a full range of special education needs and will help ensure access to a Jewish day school education for this student population.”

MWJDS was awarded \$30,000 in the first year of what is expected to be a multi-year grant. The school plans to use the money to hire a half-time special education coordinator and provide a classroom assistant for children with learning issues.

“Excellence must mean excellence for all,” Gil Preuss, director of the Peerless Excellence Project for CJP, said at the time the initiative was announced. “Students with special needs deserve the same right to a quality Jewish day school education as any other member of the community.”

“Eight schools had applied for grants, said Preuss in a recent interview with *The Jewish Chronicle*.

Enough money was available this year to fund four full-time positions. In addition to MWJDS, Rashi in Newton, Striar Hebrew Academy in Sharon, Maimonides in Brookline, the South Area Solomon Schechter Day School in Stoughton and the Jewish Community Day School in Watertown received grants.

“We looked for different situations in making our funding decisions,” said Preuss. “MWJDS is relatively new (it is now in its third year of operation) and here was an opportunity to help meet the full range of student needs almost from the beginning.

“That’s not always done. Frequently it takes a school a few years before it addresses special needs. At MWJDS, it’s almost from day one. That’s exciting.”

Preuss said the expectation is that each of the schools will receive funds for the next four years, but in decreasing amounts. “It’s not guaranteed, the grants will have to be reviewed, but that’s what we anticipate,” he said, adding that schools currently receiving funds will not have to compete with future applicants.

Nationally, 15-20 percent of students can be classified as having special needs, including developmental delays, chronic mental illness, physical limitations and learning disabilities. MWJDS fits that statistic with about 15 percent of its 30 students on individualized education plans (IEPs).

Keller said the school’s small size provides an intimate learning environment with a small student to teacher ratio. Still, she said the grant will help the school “expand its capacity to meet a variety of needs

and accept a broader range of learners. We now feel more confident in our ability to respond to a variety of children.” She said the school’s curriculum coordinator has worked with staff on the needs of students with learning difficulties “but her expertise is in curriculum, not special needs.”

Drawing children from throughout the MetroWest area, the school currently serves children in kindergarten to Grade 3 and plans to add one grade annually through Grade 8. Keller said as children go up in grades, their learning styles become clearer.

Not many schools in Massachusetts have the financial capacity to deliver special needs services. The state does not fund special needs services in private schools, requiring students in need of services to travel to their local public school for such help as speech or occupational therapy. The Jewish Community Relations Council, among others, is trying to change that and bring services into day schools.

Keller there is a misconception that day schools aren’t able to accommodate children with learning issues. As a result, many parents of students with special needs have opted out of day school entirely. “Parents sometimes pre-select schools on that basis,” Keller said. “The challenge is day schools haven’t dealt with the broad spectrum of learning.”

She doesn’t believe the dual curriculum of Jewish day schools is a special problem for children with learning issues. “We want an integrated approach, where, for example, all children learn Hebrew,” she said. “We want all children to be learners.”

Preuss, however, said the dual curriculum of a Jewish day school may mean there is less time for review. “Day schools have high expectations and the question is, are teachers able to make adjustments for differently abled learners,” he said.

Day school special education teachers may be a specialty with a specialty, since such teachers need to know Hebrew, for example. But by and large, special education teachers need the same skill set no matter where they teach, Preuss said.

Overall, the Peerless initiative will focus on expanding and creating new capacity in the day schools and community to develop and deliver high-quality programming for special needs students. Over time, special educators for Judaic and general studies will be added across the day school community. These educators will become an integral part of the school community, providing direct instruction to children, developing individual education plans together with the students’ families and working with teachers on modifying curriculum. Schools also will receive increased training and professional development for classroom teachers and school personnel and classroom supports and equipment to address a variety of special needs.

Preuss said the Jewish Special Education Collaborative (JSEC) is working to train teachers to adjust to students’ particular needs as well as providing direct support for children. The Peerless Excellence Project will also help build the collaborative.

The project will help fund the geographic expansion of the JSEC, currently based in Sharon, to create a community-wide system of specialized services for individuals and schools, bringing personnel and expertise to the schools in a cost-efficient manner that would not be possible for an individual school to accomplish.

However, due to the absence of state funding for special services within the day schools, the schools and the families of children being served still need to help pay for these services.

The initiative also is focusing on the needs of children with more serious needs who may not be able to participate in an inclusive educational program by working with Etgar L’Noar (Hebrew for challenged youth), which currently runs a supplemental Jewish education program for children with disabilities.

Founded in 1999 by a group of parents, community members and religious leaders, Etgar L’Noar works

with families, synagogues and partner organizations to provide a Jewish education for children who otherwise might not receive one. The group receives funding from CJP.

“The point of the whole Peerless Excellence Project is to fully meet the needs of the full range of students, from gifted to special education,” said Preuss. “Any time a teacher gets the training to enable him or her to reach a particular level of student, you improve teaching for all children.”

For more information on the MetroWest Jewish Day School, contact Joyce Bohnen at 508-620-5554 or by e-mail at jce.bohnen@mwjds.org; or check on the school's website at www.mwjds.org.