



Honoring the memory of Belda K. Lindenbaum z"l

Between School & Home: What COVID-19 Taught Us About Policy

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The 2020–2021 school year was unusual in so many respects. Zoom teaching, mask-wearing, Ruvna apps, and quarantines emerged overnight into our landscape. Remarkably, teachers, students, and parents embraced them all as we continued our work of teaching, learning and supporting education. Many of us were surprised by our radical adaptability, and we rightfully celebrated our successes throughout the year. From our home Zoom screens, we honored the doctors, nurses and generous volunteers who devoted themselves in heroic ways to ensuring our school community's safety.

However, we did not shine quite enough attention on the exceptionally coordinated, collective efforts of all members of our community. School opened in person and remained so because our families, teachers, and administration united around the clear and absolute goal of protecting the health of our community members. We all committed ourselves to upholding this goal and worked everything else around it. Clear, detailed, regular communications articulated and reinforced this goal, reminding us of our *achrayut*, our collective responsibility, to ensure our community's health and sublimate personal inconveniences in service of the bigger picture. Countless decisions about programming, scheduling and arranging the physical space accommodated this goal. Parents completed the Ruvna app daily, kept their children home during quarantines, and planned family events around the school's protocols. Students, too, rose to the challenge of prioritizing communal health beyond their individual wants and needs. The goal was clear; its import was consistently reinforced; all members of the community were aligned. Remarkable success!

In response to the disruption caused by COVID-19, we formed a Makom B'Siach focus group to think deeply about the intersections among our school, its families, and the wider community. **With the backdrop of our radical alignment around COVID, we investigated other areas of school life that rely on family participation or "buy-in."** We wondered what we could learn from this unusual moment: where else do we align around values? Should we work to cultivate greater alignment? Why or why not? More broadly, our group of eight parents, teachers, and SAR High

School alumni delved deeply into conversations about the core values, goals, and mission of our community. Each of us was interested to hear both the incredible convergence on certain issues (respect for others, intellectual curiosity, love of Israel) and how differently we ranked other values as being central to SAR's mission.

Early on, we asked ourselves, with particular interest from our two alumni members, where in school life, literature, or programming do students and parents learn about SAR's values? We come to the school with our own values, priorities and expectations, but where do we discover what the *school* projects? And when we learn what matters to the school, how do we manage the gap between our values and the school's expectations? Our mission-driven school certainly accommodates diversity of family practice and values, but what demands does it place on families to be a part of the school with this kind of mission? In particular, we wondered about the home-school partnership in cultivating and deepening religious values. Even our small group varied regarding which domain should address certain values and practices and which domain should reinforce them. Put differently, families rely on themselves and on the school in diverse ways. To take a few examples, who is responsible for teaching kids how to daven, or to instill a love of Torah: the home or the school? Who teaches modesty and who regulates behavior? Though we have so much that binds us together, the SAR community encompasses many different kinds of approaches to religious values and practice. Contrary to popular belief, there is no such thing as a typical SAR family!

We know that values infuse the school and that the administration works hard to respond to shifts in the community. But receptivity to values and messages differs for each individual student and family. So we posed some questions to ourselves: can we identify the programs, moments, or materials that best communicated to us what SAR cares about most deeply? In the area of religious values and mission, where did we learn what SAR aims to create? We wondered about which medium "sticks" most effectively: public communications, experiences, or curriculum? Recalling their time at SAR, the alumni singled out Rabbi Harcsztark's addresses on shabbatons and in grade-wide chats as significant for sharpening values and aspirations. There, they heard clearly what the school stands for and where they should set their targets for growth. In addition, they mentioned individual teachers' classrooms as sites for learning about religious values and behavior. Parents, too, pointed to teacher role modeling as a critical aspect of their children's religious growth at SAR.

Deep into our conversations, stories about experiences with school policies began to dominate. Davening attendance, tefillin requirements, family parsha learning, and disciplinary action: memories and associations with these policies are deeply felt, in both positive and negative ways. Initially, we were surprised by the outsize role of policy in eliciting strong feelings about religious

values. In fact, we don't generally notice or discuss policies unless they deeply resonate with us, upset us or challenge us. And yet, school policy may actually be the most important marker of school values. Because of their role in regulating behavior, policies require buy-in from parents, students and faculty in a way that curriculum, for example, does not.

As we discussed the importance of conveying values through policy, we realized that the opportunities may correlate with the underlying challenges. Successful policy implementation requires buy-in from multiple constituents and is strengthened by universal buy-in, as in the case of the COVID regulations. And yet, policy is understood differently by different constituents. Policy that reflects the school's religious values is particularly complicated in a school like SAR, that draws from different communities and strives to address students' and families' individual religious journeys. Some students and families have negative associations with the authoritative regulation of their behavior. Also, while policy reflects an attempt to balance competing values, the nuances can get lost in the details of each individual protocol.

One oft-mentioned example of school policy is the dress code. The rules of dress code are clearly outlined in the student/family handbook; however, unlike the COVID policies, they do not engender universal compliance or enforcement. The driving force behind the dress code policy is to set a schoolwide standard in consonance with mainstream Orthodox halakha, but given the diversity of our school community, the policy does not always reflect the practice within families' homes, creating dissonance between school and home. Students also may respond viscerally to the policy as it impacts their relationship with halakha, individuality, and body image. Even faculty members find themselves conflicted about enforcing this policy for a variety of reasons, including their concern with fostering a positive relationship with students. SAR parents, too, hold divergent views about dress-code enforcement; while some would prefer the school allow clothing decisions to be made at home, other parents welcome the school's stricter and more uniform dress code policy and are disappointed by lapses in enforcement.

Schools across the religious spectrum have dealt with the natural misgivings that accompany dress code policy in a variety of ways. One approach is to frame dress code policy as a school rule that should not be connected to values. While it is enforced with consequences, no value judgement is attached. On the other end of the spectrum are schools and communities that embrace and consistently reinforce the religious value of modesty embedded in the dress code policy. In this view, communal enforcement infringes on certain individuals, but the overall value of compliance with halakhic standards overrides individual concerns. From our conversations, we discovered that both approaches were unsatisfying at SAR. We all felt strongly that policy should be rooted explicitly in values. However, we also recognized that the rigidity of the communal dress code

policy alienated certain students and families and could exaggerate the importance of this particular value.

The COVID moment, with its nearly universal coordination around policy, was certainly unique, and the life and death stakes are not comparable to more routine challenges. However, we can still draw useful lessons in constructing and enforcing policies. One critical conclusion was the pivotal role of communication about the values underlying our policy. This was simpler with COVID since the majority of our constituents agreed with the primacy of protecting individual and communal health. But even in cases of competing values, ongoing discussion of underlying values is both helpful and necessary. A notable example is in our Tefillah, where students are mandated to join tefillot but may choose from a menu of minyan options.

We also learned that policy is strengthened when all constituents can engage with it. School policy is often formulated after extensive conversations with students, parents and faculty, and yet the messages absorbed by each group can be varied and unclear. Especially when the message is nuanced, we must explain (and keep explaining) the policy's underlying values. Even when they disagreed with a policy, all members of our group reported that the explanation often revealed a sensitivity and thoughtfulness of which they were not always aware. Finally, we learned that policy success cannot only be defined in terms of observable behaviors. The degree to which values are surfaced through policy ought to be an additional focus.

Exploring policy with this varied group of individuals, representing students, parents and faculty, was challenging. We come from different backgrounds and play different roles at SAR. While we share a commitment to the school's religious mission, we react differently to specific policies and have varied expectations of the roles different constituents should play in policy creation. **We disagreed often and challenged each other's assumptions. However, we all emerged from the year of conversation with a renewed appreciation for the value of such focused, layered, probing dialogue.** Talking about policy in a school that values communal religious norms while also recognizing the importance of each individual's agency is a messy process. The more we shared, the more we accepted and even embraced this messiness. Doing so widened our perspectives on the many implicit messages each policy presents and increased our sensitivity in thinking about its impact on the various communities and individuals we represent. As Pirkei Avot teaches:

 Rabbi Tarfon used to say: It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it.

We feel blessed to be part of a school community that is committed to setting high standards, embracing complexity and working consistently to close gaps between our ideals and our practice.

