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# THE Australian Jewish News

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## 'JEWISH EDUCATION IS AT A CRISIS POINT'

CARLY DOUGLAS

IN 2011, the soaring fees at Jewish day schools prompted community member and father of five Jonathan Schauer to seek an alternative way to give his children a Jewish education.

His solution was to arrange for Hebrew lessons and Jewish cultural activities to be provided at local public secondary school, Glen Eira College.

Other families, he told *The AJN* this week, had different ways of addressing the problem. "I discovered that many parents were deliberately stopping at two children, purely in order to afford private school fees."

"When did we get so lost?" he lamented. "That idea is too tragic for me. Having less children in the community is not the answer for Jewish continuity."

Ten years on, the crippling costs associated with sending children to Jewish schools still impact far too many families, according to a major report released on Tuesday.

The discussion paper *Re-thinking the future of our Jewish schools*, produced by a working group of communal leaders and educators under the banner of the Victorian Jewish Schools Project over the past two years, warns that soaring fees will push thousands of students into the public school system in coming decades, while demographic changes also lead to a decline in enrolments.

During a time of rising housing costs, "some families must choose between a Jewish education and buying a home," states the report.

It is projected that in the next 20 years, "the population of Jewish school age children in Victoria will fall by nearly 25 per cent - 2000 students," with school fees set to reach as high as \$45,000 by 2025 and up to a staggering \$52,000 by 2030, for year 12.



Photo: Ian Nelder/Dreamstime.com

This shift was already evident in the Gen17 community survey of 2017, in which almost half of participants reported that school fees were too expensive, while roughly a third who considered Jewish education, indicated that cost had prevented them from enrolling at least one child in a Jewish school.

The predicted decline has also taken into account falling birth rates in the community, partly due to a steady shrinkage of women at reproductive age over the next 20 years.

If the community is to allow this trend to continue, the study found that 51 per cent of Jewish school-aged students could be enrolled in government primary schools and 31 per cent in secondary schools in the next decade.

"It could also mean losses to schools of fee and grant income reaching \$10 million a year in 2031,

and about \$18.5 million a year in 2041," states the report.

Convener of the working group Alan Schwartz told *The AJN* that after 50 years of "building an exceptional Jewish school system," this "existential challenge" which has been building for two decades, is only increasing, due to cultural, financial and demographic forces.

With attempts to create a community fund to provide vouchers to families who can't afford full fees deemed unsuccessful, the discussion paper offers four options: maintaining the status quo; merging schools; creating a new, independent Jewish co-educational VCE school; and establishing greater collaboration among schools.

Noting that the purpose of the report, however, is not to find an immediate solution but to start a conversation with public forums

held regularly, until a consensus is reached about the path forward, Schwartz said, "I and all members of the Victorian Jewish Schools Project believe that working together as a community, we can find the right solution for our children and our grandchildren."

"If ever there was a time for us to pursue this conversation with open minds, leaving personal feelings and loyalties to one side, that time is now."

"We cannot put our heads in the sand - we must think, plan and act."

Reflecting on the report, Mount Scopus Memorial College principal James Kennard told *The AJN*, "At Scopus, we are very concerned about the financial burden on parents, and that is why we strive to keep down costs and to provide fee assistance to 20 per cent of our families. Most significantly, we are pursuing

our long-term goal of moving our entire school to Caulfield, which, according to our projections, will be a game-changer for fees and for the whole community."

"In terms of the proposals suggested in this report, we are always happy to talk to other schools about merging resources," he added. "We are interested in the concept of a VCE centre, but have questions about how it would work, and how it would impact on the remaining schools."

"We look forward to philanthropy being a significant support to Jewish education, as has been the case in every thriving community throughout our history."

Bialik College principal Jeremy Stowe-Lindner and Leiller Yarnish College co-chairs Gerard Max and Ari Schachna all noted that in recognition of the challenges presented by high fees, their respective schools offer fee assistance programs.

Stowe-Lindner added, "We welcome this opportunity to have discussions with other schools and other changemakers to ensure that through both existing structures and creative new ones, inclusion is broad and genuine."

Max and Schachna concurred, stating, "We look forward to engaging with the report's working group, our colleagues in Jewish education and the community more broadly as we address the challenges related to sustainable and diverse provision of Jewish educational choices."

Some schools noted that their experience backed the trend observed in the report. A Yeshiva-Beth Rivkah Colleges (YBR) spokesperson said, "YBR has over 1200 students, making it one of the largest schools in Victoria and Australia. Enrolments have increased by over 15 per cent in the last decade."

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Information Evening  
Wednesday 11 August 7.30pm - 9.00pm

ONLINE EVENT

RSVP essential  
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