

THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Last Sunday, almost two hundred Jews from San Francisco, Marin and the Peninsula gathered all day to re-dedicate themselves to the public school system.

That may seem to be a shocking piece of news. After all, aren't the public schools decadent and dying? Isn't the Jewish population abandoning the public schools? Apparently both reports are highly exaggerated.

Those assembled heard the results of a recent survey among parents of school-age Jewish children in this area. About 4 out of 5 of those children are attending public schools; the proportion is somewhat lower in San Francisco, higher in Marin and the Peninsula. That does not seem to be an abandonment of the public schools.

They were asked why they were sending their children to public schools. About a third of the reasons had to do with the desire for their children to have an integrated experience. About a third of the reasons had to do simply with a desire to support the public school system. *That* does not seem to be an abandonment of the public schools.

There were several reasons proposed for the special relationship that exists between the Jews and the public schools. One, of course, is a kind of historic debt which the Jewish community owes the public schools. It was through the public schools that the American Jews went from immigrant poverty to economic middle class, often in one generation. For the Jewish immigrant, the public schools were a massive affirmative action program.

However, the public schools, it was pointed out, served as more than an instrument of economic mobility for the Jews. One East European Jewish immigrant reported that when she came to Boston as a child, at the turn of the century, she was overwhelmed

by the fact that she entered the public school with "no questions asked, no rulings, no exclusions, no machinations." The schools provided a way for people to slip easily into the life of the nation.

The Jews may no longer need affirmative action for economic mobility, but someone asked whether we might still not need the common schools for social integration: "Don't we have to consider whether there is today a counter-process of group-by-group fragmentation taking place in the country which would change the status of our grandchildren in the American society?"

There was heavy emphasis on the fact that the common public schools, and the common values which they embody, would be critical for the maintenance of a democratic America, even if there were hypothetically no Jews in the schools. It was pointed out, as a symptom, that those who don't get past the eighth grade tend to be almost twice as anti-semitic as those who graduate from high school; and those who graduate from high school tend to be twice as anti-semitic as those who graduate from college.

However, there was raised the question as to whether the public schools were still doing that kind of a job, or whether they were breaking down. No one at the conference was starry-eyed about the public schools today, or the problems they are having.

However, some facts were brought to bear which upset the conventional wisdom about the performance of the schools. These facts indicate that the current crop of public school students are, as a group, testing at least as well on standard subjects as public school students did forty years ago. That is remarkable, because the student body, forty years ago, was a much more "elite" group; many more young people of high school age did not go to school at all.

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In short, the schools have to be better in order to be as good; and apparently they are. It seems true that in coping with their new problems, the *standards* in the public schools began to slip in recent years. However, the pendulum is swinging back. Academic permissiveness is being reined in ; competency requirements are being reinsti-
tuted in the public schools of California.

If only as a matter of self-interest, the Jewish community is not about to turn its back on the public schools and its problems. The Jews in this area, for example, are opposed to a private school voucher system to replace the public schools, by a ratio of about four to one.

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