

It's Not That Easy Being Gifted
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Alexa Gelb has learned to pace herself in Hebrew class. If she completes her work too quickly, the academically gifted fifth-grader will only receive additional assignments.

"I'm pleased with the general studies program at Sinai Akiba Academy, but in the area [of Judaic] studies, instead of giving [the gifted children] more challenging work, they just give them more work," explained Alexa's mother, Jenny Gelb.

In order to keep Alexa in a day school environment, Gelb has had to make concessions for what she believes is a lacking Hebrew program. However, Joseph Hakimi, Sinai Akiba's Judaic studies director, said that while there is no formal gifted track, the school monitors accelerated students and provides additional resources for them. But Gelb said the monitoring is not sufficient.

The Beverlywood resident is one of many parents in the community faced with the challenge of finding a Jewish day school to accommodate the needs of her accelerated child.

Just as most day schools are not equipped to cater to the needs of special education children, most do not have resources for academically advanced students. While there is a legal mandate enabling special education students to get services through public schools, there is no such mandate for gifted children in California.

Often, parents must choose between a Jewish education or an accelerated program in non-Jewish schools. Gelb's priority was to educate Alexa in a Jewish environment.

Gifted specialist Dr. Elizabeth Glass believes that gifted children in Jewish schools are underserved. "There's so much you can do with gifted children by broadening the material covered in class, and I don't think it's being done," said Glass, the Bureau of Jewish Education (BJE) coordinator for Lomed L.A., a corps of volunteer tutor/mentors who are trained to work with children on a one-to-one basis.

While many of the community's day schools lightly address the needs of gifted students, very few have structured programs, according to Loren Grossman, an educational advocate and consultant on special education and gifted students.

Glass noted that children can be gifted in many areas, including those outside academics. "If we don't educate the community as to what it means to be gifted, certain areas [of giftedness] can be overlooked," she said.

One school that refuses to overlook a child's talents is Stephen S. Wise Temple Elementary School in Los Angeles. This year, the school is offering a new program called PACE (Programs for

Academic and Creative Enrichment). While most public schools rely on test scores to identify accelerated students, Wise prides itself on its broad definition of the term "gifted."

"Very often, gifted programs are focused on language arts and math," principal Rochelle Ginsberg said. "We wanted to acknowledge all of the talents and affinities a child might have."

Besides embracing those with high academic achievements, the program, which involves special mentors, individual projects and enrichment groups, also includes children who are exceptional in other areas such as music, art, science and various technologies.

Most of the other day schools address the needs of gifted students on a case-by-case basis. For example, Abraham Joshua Heschel Day School started a gifted program that quickly developed into a new schoolwide teaching tool.

Last year, the Northridge school received a grant from the BJE to provide Socratic seminars for its gifted students. Facilitated by a specialist, the seminars involved special discussions in which children answered open-ended questions.

The accelerated students were so enthusiastic about the program, that soon other students wanted to participate, too. As a result, the program was expanded to several grades.

Outside the Socratic program, Heschel provides for academically gifted students with a system of differentiated classes. Both English and math specialists teach the highest-achieving students.

Joyce Black, director of general studies at Valley Beth Shalom Harold M. Schulweis Day School in Encino, is looking for a gifted coordinator to increase the school's program. Black said the new specialist will solidify the structure of the program, which she expects will include all grades.

"Currently, we enrich and modify our curriculum per the needs of the children," Black said. "We feel like we can have greater support, because we want to individualize and meet the needs of the children on all fronts."

While the Judaic studies program does not meet her expectations, Gelb said she is content with the education Alexa is getting at Sinai Akiba. "She's been very fortunate in that most of the teachers she's had have different expectations for different kids," Gelb said. "She knows she has to work hard, because the teacher expects more from her than the other kids."