

A JILV Parents' Guide

How to talk to your Jewish Day School about Diversity



Dr. Brandy Shufutinsky

What could be wrong with diversity?

As multiple institutions adopt antiracist ideology, Jewish American parents have to be vigilant, ensuring Jewish institutions do not get overtaken by ideological trends that are fundamentally illiberal and fuel anti-Semitism. Unfortunately, we are witnessing some Jewish day schools and even synagogues become captivated by racial ideology that is harmful to Jews and society at large. This often plays out through diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives.

Making sure that diversity programs are done right is important to me as the mother to Jewish children and a Black Jewish woman because I know what kids face during their time on college campuses. Increasingly, institutions of higher learning are becoming unfriendly, unsupportive, and dismissive of Jewish students. One of my sons was a leading pro-Israel activist on campus who pushed back against the increasingly hostile environment. He was given all the tools he needed during his years in day school. Indeed, it is the job of Jewish day schools and other institutions to produce young Jews ready for these challenges. During their time at Jewish day school, my oldest two children were fortunate enough not to have been introduced to an ideology that would have disarmed them when facing escalating Jew-hatred on campus.

They were taught to think critically and given a strong measure of Jewish pride. Today, I fear, these qualities of Jewish education my kids received are being replaced by an ideology that imparts neither and tells Jewish kids that they are “complicit” in a system of white supremacy.

What to look out for in your school's DEI program

Resources used in DEI programming should be vetted to make sure they are inclusive of ALL Jews*.

Parents can request their school provide guidance on how they vetted (or will vet) materials that inform the DEI program. If materials are exclusionary and utilize a highly ideological approach to DEI, parents may need to step in. DEI programming that only presents one aspect of diversity, like racial/ethnic diversity, and fails to discuss diversity of thought, should be challenged by parents and educators

Parents should also be on the lookout for resource material that insists Jews are complicit in white supremacy and that otherwise links identity to privilege in an uncritical manner. Older teens can be exposed to such ideas, but not without also hearing another side of the issue. Students and parents should question the goals of the program and work with their school on diversifying program materials.

The following key phrases and resources may indicate a DEI program that uses an illiberal victim-oppressor binary. This list is not meant to be exhaustive and these phrases are not inherently bad. However, if you see them the program may require further exploration. JILV can help.

- Anti-racist
- Deconstruct
- Abolitionist teaching
- Racialized communities
- Impact, not intent
- Counternarratives
- Co-conspirator
- White allies
- BIPOC/BAME
- Dismantle
- Anti-capitalist
- Land acknowledgement
- Racial justice
- Liberation
- Whiteness

If your children attend a Jewish day school that is contemplating or has embraced a problematic DEI curriculum or program, I encourage you to take heed. What follows are suggestions getting involved in the program development and taking a constructive approach with the administration.

Speak to the school administration

You should schedule a time to speak with your head of school or the school official in charge of the DEI initiative. Open communication between home and school about concerns and questions is always in the best interest of students. There is shared responsibility between home and school, and in order to ensure those responsibilities are being taken seriously, communication is necessary. In the best case scenario, school administrators and educators include parents in the process of developing new educational initiatives, using parents as a resource.

As is the case in any profession, it is easy to cultivate groupthink if outside voices are not a part of program design and implementation. Schools can avoid such an echo chamber by including parents and guardians as much as possible—and this is best done when parents and guardians are actively and positively involved in their child's school life. Of course, some schools skip this and ignore the feedback, and concerned parents may need to consider other steps.

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Encourage school administrators and teachers to consider how DEI programs can fuel antisemitism

Parents should encourage their schools to be mindful of how DEI initiatives can foment anti-Semitism and to work towards addressing this concern. Although programs that acknowledge, honor, and celebrate diversity are a part of learning, there are many instances where the opposite occurs. Some DEI programs center a power/oppression binary that insists individuals commit themselves to an identity box where they can be judged by themselves and others. Such an approach is often used to treat Jews and/or Israel as oppressors.

Work together

Schools, parents and students should work together to ensure DEI programming is living up to the school's mission and values and is not harmful to Jewish identity. Too many times parents or students are afraid of speaking up, asking questions, and voicing concerns because of the perception that doing so will label them as racists or "meddlers" in the school's affairs. This fear can silence diversity of thought and opinion, the opposite outcome of what DEI should intend.

*There are specific DEI programs that are being implemented in Jewish schools where students are directed to acknowledge (and apologize) for their "privilege." In these cases students are told that Jews have "White" or

"White adjacent" privilege, and therefore beneficiaries of White supremacy. There are numerous reasons why this is problematic, but I'll just state a few:

The idea that Jews benefit from "White" identity marginalizes and erases Jews who are not part of the European diaspora (non-Ashkenazim).

It ignores how White supremacy targets Jews, regardless of their skin color, religious practice, or diaspora experience (Ashkenazi, Sephardic, Mizrahi, Ethiopian, etc.).

It forces Jewish students to view their Jewish identity through an American-centric racial lens that ignores the complexity of Jewish people as an ethno-religious group.

It insists that this Whiteness framework is the only acceptable way to diagnose racial disparities and undercuts critical thinking.

It undercuts Jewish pride by insinuating collective guilt.

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