

**Book Review: Denise Clark Pope (2001). *"Doing School": How We Are Creating a Generation of Stressed Out, Materialistic, and Miseducated Students.* New Haven, Yale University Press.**

Liberal Jewish high schools provide an alternative to public and secular private schooling, one that envisions a unique educational setting rooted in Jewish values and a love of learning. The basic idea is that Jewish students can learn in a place that is separate and special, without sacrificing the college preparatory academics needed to move into higher education and to ultimately function in society. Jewish high school leaders are committed to a Jewish vision; however, they are also keenly aware of what, in the minds of many students and parents, really counts - getting into a "good" college.<sup>1</sup> In her book, *Doing School: How We Are Creating a Generation of Stressed Out, Materialistic, and Miseducated Students* (Pope, 2001), Denise Clark Pope explores life for five high-achieving public high school students. She discovers how getting good grades has precious little to do with learning for them. In fact, the kids in *Doing School* see genuine engagement, passion, curiosity, and even personal integrity as distractions from their drive for grades. We should not make the mistake of thinking that such issues do not apply in Jewish high schools as well. For Jewish educators and researchers interested in day school, this book raises some hard questions that should not be avoided.

American high school students have always faced a certain amount of pressure. It is just a fact of life. But in the past few years, that pressure has intensified beyond its past levels into something unrecognizable to anyone who has been out of school for some time. Adolescents are growing up in a world where it is more difficult than ever before to get into college. They live in a world where cheating is rampant in business, society, and especially in schools.<sup>2</sup> They are presented with a model of success that includes good grades, well-roundedness, and a perfect reputation - all leading to acceptance at a good college. This, they believe, will lead them to happiness, success, and a good life. And they have parents who are equally attuned to these pressures, if not more so.<sup>3</sup> The larger American secular culture is dominated by such messages, pressures, and realities.

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<sup>1</sup> The definition of a "good" college is subject for debate. There are universities that have the general imprint of being good - the Ivy Leagues, for example. Without knowing anything about those schools, the general public would most likely agree that they are "good" schools. But my years spent working as a high school administrator have taught me that as is beauty, a "good" college is in the eye of the beholder. While there are some advantages to getting a degree from a well-known school or one with a positive reputation (Jencks, 1991), the best college for a particular student is one that meets the variety of needs belonging to that student. This topic warrants a much longer discussion.

<sup>2</sup> In *The Cheating Culture* (Callahan, 2004), David Callahan explores the larger American culture and finds cheating everywhere, especially in schools, often encouraged by parents.

<sup>3</sup> Hara Estroff Marano writes about what parents are doing to help secure the futures of their kids in "A Nation of Wimps" (Marano, 2004), and concludes that these efforts are making adolescents more fragile and less independent.

In *Doing School*, Pope documents time spent with students at Faircrest High School in California.<sup>4</sup> The school has an excellent reputation – small class sizes, great teachers, high SAT scores, fantastic college acceptance rates, many students commended for National Merit distinction, and one-third of the student body enrolled in honors or advanced placement classes. The school is comprehensive with a diverse population. Ninety-five percent of graduates go on to college (p.xiv). It is an impressive picture. But Pope finds a different story when she spends time with the students. She shadowed five top students for one full year, watching their movements, observing their actions, and listening to what they had to say. Pope closely observed the students in class, as well as accompanying them to all school-related events. She interviewed them each week, and spoke with them frequently during the school day. In addition, she used student journals and class notes to understand the students' views on the curriculum. These assiduous students - from a variety of tracks and social groups, but all defined by their school administrators and teachers as among the most successful - show Pope how they have figured out strategies to use the system to get good grades.

The students report that achievement is not really about learning and engaging with the material. Rather, success comes when students go through the proper motions, when they manage workloads and create systems for 'doing' school (p.150). They know how to create the appearance of engagement, they feel compelled to cheat, and they spend time contesting grades so that they get the scores they feel they need in order to have a successful future. And this comes from the students identified by the school as the best and brightest.

Through the students' own words and drawing on their day to day experiences, *Doing School* makes clear the real conflict of values faced by today's high school students. In the book, "Kevin" describes himself as being obsessed with grades. He calculates his GPA several times a day. He meets with the college counselor to discuss which courses will be viewed most favorably by colleges and chooses to enroll in classes that seem easy rather than classes in which he has genuine interest (p.11).

When asked about his goals, Kevin replies:

'...grades are the focus. I tell you, people don't go to school to learn. They go to school to get good grades which brings them to college, which brings them the high-paying job, which brings them happiness, so they think. But basically, grades is where it's at. They're the focus of every student in every high school in every place in America and otherwise. Period.' (pp.11-12)

Another student, "Eve," is described by Pope as a "High School Machine." She is willing to sacrifice her happiness and her sleep in exchange for acceptance to an Ivy League college. However, beneath the crammed resume, Pope sees a tired and worried teenager. Eve describes herself as "just a machine with no life at this place...This school turns students into robots...I am a robot just going page by page, doing the work, doing

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<sup>4</sup> The name of the school and all names of students are pseudonyms.

the routine.” (p. 37) *Doing School* is packed with such heartbreaking stories. While it may not be pleasant to think about, such students are not the minority at Jewish high schools. That is not a condemnation of day schools, it is simply an admission that Kevin is right: for students, grades are the focus at every school, even Jewish day schools.

Paralleling the development of this *Doing School* phenomenon has been the growth of liberal – or as they are also termed, non-Orthodox - Jewish high schools in America. Since 1992, the number of students in liberal Jewish high schools has grown steadily.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the main reason for this growth is the increasing willingness of less affiliated Jewish parents to send their children to Jewish high schools. Traditionally, these families would send their children to Jewish elementary schools, but the departure point into public or secular private education would be in fifth, sixth, or at the latest, eighth grade. Students were pulled from day school before their grades and academic records started to “count.”<sup>6</sup> One can reasonably assume that these non-Orthodox Jewish families were more interested in placing their children in an educational setting that would be most advantageous for their secular futures, i.e. getting accepted into a reputable college. The rise of liberal Jewish high schools with full complements of advanced placement and honors courses and fully staffed college counseling departments has signaled to this group of parents that the liberal Jewish high schools are, in a sense, college preparatory schools that are also Jewish, and that sending their kids to a Jewish high school would not hurt their chances of getting into good colleges. And this is what makes Jewish schools so similar to Faircrest high.

Situations like the ones described in *Doing School* unquestionably take place in Jewish high schools. Concurrent with their Jewish Studies classes, students in Jewish high schools are also forced to learn life lessons that are anathema to the values of Jewish education. In some ways, it is the manifestation of the contrast between the American individual spirit and the Jewish community consciousness. In the name of grades and college acceptance, students today are rewarded for sacrificing their inquisitiveness and their veracity, and success comes when they learn how to cope and when they put themselves first, rather than when they learn to love learning.

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<sup>5</sup> In “A Census of Jewish Day Schools in the United States,” (Schick 2005), there were a reported 1,500 students in non-Orthodox Jewish day schools in 1992. The number rose to 2,200 in 1998-99 and rose again to 4,100 students in 2003-04. The growth trend is expected to continue, at least in part because some of the schools have yet to fill their full complement of grade levels.

<sup>6</sup> There is a great deal of chatter in high schools about what really “counts.” In this context, what counts is what will boost a transcript and help a student get into a good college. In Jewish high schools, that question brings with it further complications. I have witnessed multiple families lobbying for their students to be put in low-level Hebrew or Jewish Studies classes in order for them to concentrate more on the subjects that “count” – science, math, English, and history. This, of course, is anecdotal information, and requires more systematic data. It should not be taken as findings in any way. Rather, it calls for future exploration.

So where does this leave liberal Jewish high schools? The students and families clearly have an interest in Jewish education. It would be a mistake to make assumptions about the depth of that interest, as it varies widely and would be both difficult and very interesting to measure. But it seems fairly certain that these families are no different than non-Jewish families in their desires for their children to have the tools to be successful in life. In the case of a high school education, that definitely includes getting into a good college. It would be interesting to know the extent to which Jewish families compare to non-Jewish families in their attitudes towards grades and learning. Researchers would contribute to the field by examining why liberal Jewish families choose – or do not choose – to send their children to Jewish high schools. In addition, it would be instructive to explore the depths to which the students themselves understand the tension between the Jewish learning goals and the *Doing School* pressure. There's quite a bit of work to be done by educators and academics alike to help understand and address these problems.

*Doing School* is well-written, smart, and troubling. But its real use to Jewish educators and academics is found in the questions it raises about high school education. These are the same questions that Jewish educators running Jewish high schools need to grapple with themselves, and they can also be used as the formulation of an agenda for researchers to explore and name these phenomena in Jewish high schools. Pope asks:

What kind of behavior is fostered by the expectations of the school community and by those outside of the school? ...Are we fostering an environment that promotes intellectual curiosity, cooperation, and integrity, or are our schools breeding anxiety, deception, and frustration? Are they impeding the very values they claim to embrace? (p.6)

When students in Jewish schools are finding ways of 'doing' school, these questions must be addressed. As a general contribution to the field of education, *Doing School* sheds light on a significant societal problem. It also illuminates an area of discord in Jewish education. Jewish educators are certainly grappling with these issues on a daily basis in a variety of situations. It would therefore be worthwhile for academics to examine what day school educators know about the phenomena, and what, if anything, they have put in place to address it. Just as *Doing School* deals with the predicament of pursuing school success at Faircrest High, so too must researchers and educators explore the conditions and consequences and the persistent dilemmas of today's high school experience. And in the end, they, like Pope, must ask themselves "what exactly is being learned in high schools like Faircrest? And at what costs?" (p.150)

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