



Religious Schools Beckon Parents

Education: Seeking moral guidance for their children, adults of all denominations are turning away from secular classes.

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Richard Weston was one parent who never thought he would enroll his daughters in a religious school. He didn't trust them. What's more, they scared him.

Raised in a nonobservant Jewish household, he worried that his three daughters would be indoctrinated in a strict religious ideology and culture that would drive a wedge between him and his children.

"I had nothing of that in my background," he said. "Deep down, I think I was somewhat mistrustful of religion but also afraid that my kids would . . . embrace something that was foreign to me and that it would separate us."

But by the time his oldest daughter, Ariela, graduated from the sixth grade, he had become equally uncomfortable with the conspicuous affluence and peer group pressures at her nonreligious private school.

Concerned as well about unhealthy influences on children in the larger society and the need for "spiritual values," Weston and his wife, Helen, enrolled their children at Sinai Akiba Academy, a Westside Jewish day school affiliated with the Conservative movement.

With that decision, the Westons became part of a growing trend.

From Los Angeles to Boston, parents of many backgrounds--Jewish, Islamic and Christians of all denominations--as well as those with no religious upbringing of their own, are clamoring at the doors of religiously affiliated schools.

The increase has had varying effects on different denominations. Some have embarked on major classroom expansions, and virtually all report that their admission waiting lists are growing by the year.

The Los Angeles Catholic Archdiocese already runs one of the largest private school systems in the country, with 100,000 students in 280 elementary and high schools.

Based on informal reports from elementary school principals, archdiocesan officials believe that the number of children competing for space in Catholic kindergartens today is at least twice as large as a decade ago, said Jerome R. Porath, superintendent of schools for the archdiocese.

The archdiocese, however, has not increased the number of its schools to match the demand, primarily because it heavily subsidizes the tuition for families from the area's largely Catholic poor neighborhoods. Adding more schools would not only saddle the church with construction costs, but would greatly expand the need for subsidies.

Many new Protestant-oriented schools have also sprung up in recent years, particularly those aimed at evangelicals and other conservative Christians.

But some of the fastest growth is taking place in the ranks of Jewish schools, particularly those aimed at non-Orthodox Jews--many of whom used to shy away from full-time religiously oriented schools.

Since 1978, the number of Jewish day schools has more than doubled in Southern California, from 15 to 35, with a total enrollment of 9,400 students. Nationally, about 200,000 students are enrolled in Jewish day schools, an increase of 50,000 in the last 10 years, said Marvin Schick of the New York-based Avi Chai Foundation, which assists the development of Jewish day schools.

And as the overall enrollments have increased, so has the share of students from non-Orthodox homes. In the Los Angeles area, the division of students enrolled in non-Orthodox and Orthodox schools is now roughly 50-50, according to Gil Graf, executive director of the Board of Jewish Education of Greater Los Angeles. Twenty years ago, he said, Orthodox schools had a 60% share.

There is no single explanation for what appears to be a growing demand for entrance into religiously affiliated schools. Private schools have long attracted parents who are concerned about the quality of education in public schools or worried about discipline and safety on campus and who can afford to pay tuition fees running \$10,000 a year or more.

But growing numbers of parents and school administrators report that many parents today are looking for something in addition to academic quality.

Across the country, the reports are much the same. Families of all faiths and political persuasions are telling religious educators they want a value-based education.

In a secular and materialist society where the line between right and wrong can blur, they want their children to be morally grounded.

Most of the parents enrolling children at St. Margaret of Scotland Episcopal School in San Juan Capistrano, for example, are not Episcopalians, said headmaster Markham B. Campaigne. Without what he calls the school's "strong character development program," many of those families would have sent their children elsewhere, he said.

Weekly chapel services are mandatory for the growing 1,100-member student body. All high school sophomores are required to take a course in Hebrew Scriptures, a New Testament course as juniors, and a course in philosophy and ethics as seniors.

Bernard Gero, a physician who joined several other parents five years ago and started a new Jewish day school in Agoura, made a similar point. "Parents are scared that either themselves or their children can get caught up in what they see around them, which is not necessarily everything that they like."

Moral grounding is not the only reason parents are sending their children off to religious schools. While some Jews and Muslims worry that a religious education will isolate their children from secular society, many others fear that in a society where traditions and customs of minorities can all but vanish, children will forget who they are, where they came from, and how they fit into the mosaic that is secular America.

Muslim parents worry that their children will be swept up in a mainstream culture, aspects of which they find abhorrent.

"They realize they might lose their children to the materialistic values [in a society] where religion does not play a very significant role in their lives," said Aslam Abdullah, editor of the Los Angeles-based Minaret magazine and an Islamic scholar.

Today there are an estimated 400 Islamic schools in the United States, Abdullah said, including schools operated in Los Angeles and Orange counties by New Horizons and the Orange Crescent.

Parents at Jewish schools often make similar remarks. "It gives you a sense of where you came from," Weston said. "It gives you not only a sense of history, but why you are who you are."

"The old Jewish neighborhoods don't exist," said Rabbi Robert Abramson, director of the education department of United Synagogues of Conservative Judaism in New York.

"So you have to make a choice about what your kids are going to be, where they're going to be and where they're going to get Jewishness. It no longer comes from the neighborhood."

Among non-Orthodox Jews, the increase in religious schools marks a turnabout.

Many of the parents sending children to religious schools grew up in nonobservant households. Their parents or grandparents saw public schools as the gateway into the American mainstream.

Now, later generations who have succeeded feel comfortable in returning to their roots. They want their children to have what many of them missed--a sense of their Jewishness, says Schick.

Filling that need was a major reason that Wilshire Boulevard Temple, the region's oldest Reform congregation, recently dedicated a fledgling Westside campus that eventually will include a full-time school.

A similar urge led Gero and his colleagues to open a Jewish day school in suburban Agoura. The surrounding Conejo Valley has the region's fastest-growing Jewish population, but until the new Abraham Joshua Heschel West school was opened, there was no Jewish day school in the vicinity. The school opened with 14 pupils the first year. Now there are 130 enrolled from kindergarten through fifth grade.

Implicit in the growth of religious schools in general and Jewish schools in particular, says Rabbi Harvey J. Fields of Wilshire Boulevard Temple, is a deep spiritual longing unmet by success and material possessions.

"The sources of real meaning," said Fields, "are to be found within one's religious heritage and one's traditions."

Cheryl Aronson of the Combined Jewish Philanthropic Center in Boston sees much the same thing. Many families, she says, are experiencing a thirst for something that public schools, even good ones, cannot provide.

The driving force "is not that public schools are bad," she says. "This quest is spiritual."