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Day schools step up push for students

Grants, tuition breaks target kindergarteners

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Jewish day school tuition is rising next year for every grade but one: kindergarten.

Building on efforts by Combined Jewish Philanthropies, a number of schools are offering incentives – through tuition breaks or financial aid – to lure new families.

Starting this fall, CJP will pay 25 percent – up to \$4,000 – toward kindergarten tuition at Greater Boston's 10 Jewish day schools with elementary grades. The Discover Day School Program is restricted to families with an income under \$250,000 who have not previously sent a child to Jewish day school. Families can reapply for similar aid as their children enter first and second grades. Applications are due March 1.

Maimonides, a Modern Orthodox school in Brookline, has slashed its kindergarten tuition over the last two years. This fall, it will charge \$9,900 for kindergarten, which is down from \$15,900 in fall 2009.

Continued on Page 21

Deadline nears for CJP school grant

Continued from Page 1

to encourage young families to enter the day school system," said Nathan Katz, executive director. "Since most families enter Maimonides at the kindergarten level, we have been searching for ways to make that transition easier."

The school is raising tuition by 5 percent for other grades to cover a modest pay raise for staff and increased health insurance costs, Katz said.

This year, the school has 24 students in its kindergarten class, which has three teachers. In the past, the number of students has fluctuated from the 20s to 30s, he said.

In Newton, Solomon Schechter Day School of Greater Boston is playing off the CJP program with what it calls Discover Schechter Checks. The \$2,000 grants are available to all families new to the school whose gross annual income is less than \$400,000. The grants cannot be used in addition to the CJP checks.

"I think when people look at the program, they find it very attractive, but when they look at the price tag, they get a little skittish," said Arnold Zar-Kessler, head of school. "We want any family to see that there are ways it can be made affordable to them."

To fund the additional financial aid, he said, the school is looking to trim its non-instructional staff, boost fundraising and increase tuition. Kindergarten tuition will be \$19,750 in fall, up from \$19,100 this year.

The school currently has 38 kindergarteners in three classes. In fall, the school hopes to have enough new kindergarteners for a fourth class, Zar-Kessler said.

In fall, Schechter will launch a preschool, which already has 30 applicants. That could mean more kindergarteners down the line.

South Area Solomon Schechter

Day School in Norwood hopes to see kindergarten enrollment increase from the current 35 in three classes to 45 in potentially four classes, said Sandi Morgan Dunn, director of admissions. The cost of kindergarten is increasing from \$18,600 to \$19,800. To market the school, she is publicizing the CJP grants and continuing to rely on word-of-mouth advertising.

"They [parents] are truly impressed with the education we provide," she said. "Really the only significant issue for young families that we see is the cost factor."

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NATHAN KATZ
Executive director

MetroWest Jewish Day School in Framingham is increasing tuition by about 5 percent for all grades except for kindergarten, which is \$15,550, said admissions director Risa Werblin.

The school has nine kindergarteners this year and hopes to have 16 in fall, Werblin said.

To play up the CJP initiative, she is sending out emails and flyers, and mentioning it to all parents who tour the school. Already, she said, the school has received twice as many applications for kindergarten as it had at this point last year.

Esther Ciment, an administrator at the New England Hebrew Academy in Brookline, said because her school is Orthodox,

most of the families never considered sending their kids anywhere but to a Jewish day school.

This year, 25 kindergarteners are enrolled in two classes. As it lacks extra space, the school is not making any concerted efforts to recruit students, Ciment said.

The academy, which charges \$10,100 for its full-day kindergarten, does not give out scholarships for preschool or kindergarten students in order to give out more aid to older students, she said.

Many of the Jewish day schools are using the CJP program in their marketing and posting links on their Web sites to DiscoverDaySchool.org. The federation does not yet have a count of the number of applicants, but the site has received about 3,000 unique visits, said Elisa Deener-Agus and Nancy Kriegel, assistant directors of CJP's Initiative for Day School Excellence. Links from the Web sites of the Rashi School in Dedham and the Schechter schools in Newton and Norwood have generated the most traffic to the CJP site.

The federation hopes to attract at least 80 new students through the program. There are currently 247 kindergarten students enrolled at 10 CJP-supported day schools, compared with 295 students the year before, according to CJP. Total enrollment at 13 schools in the Boston area was about 2,740 both this year and last.

Deener-Agus emphasized that the program is in its pilot stage.

"We have done our research, and we have talked to our stakeholders and partner schools," she said, "We really don't know, particularly with the economy, what the effect of the program is going to be, but we are thrilled that we are going to do the pilot next year."

For more on the CJP financial aid program, visit discoverdayschool.org.