

# SDJA Sees Big Growth in Enrollment and Expands Campus

by Jacqueline Bull

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**Z**vi Weiss became the new Head of School for San Diego Jewish Academy (SDJA) in 2020. This eventful and challenging year put pressure on the students, the parents and the staff and how they rose to the occasion left Zvi impressed. It gave him a sense of the commitment everyone had to the school and showed the community’s character as a whole. Not only did the school manage to adapt and survive, but for the following school year they have grown by 100 new students.

One of the contributing factors in that growth is the continuation of their Open Door tuition program. This program reduces the cost of tuition for new kindergartners and ninth graders coming into the school and locks in that price for four years. The program was expanded to help middle-income families also take advantage of the program.

“It’s been a really wonderful thing for our families and families who felt that SDJA or any independent school



education was cost-prohibitive but are suddenly finding that they can make it work for them. And I've heard from so many families how grateful they are for our making their education accessible. It's been a G-dsend. It enlarged the demographic of middle-income families [at the school]," Zvi said.

### Looking through a wellness lens

SDJA acted quickly and was able to bring everyone back on campus within a month of the school year.

"One of the things that drove our decision to really apply for waivers and do everything we could was children's wellbeing because kids do need to interact with other children and their teachers in normal ways. And it's been really difficult for families who have been stuck on Zoom this whole time," Zvi said.

Well-being has been a big focus of the school's staff and something Zvi as a thought leader has put emphasis on.



"Years ago there was a healthy habits initiative that was started at SDJA that really started to frame the way we looked at the whole child as far as education is concerned. And really look at their wellness — whether it is their emotional wellness, learning skills for financial wellness, their physical wellness and even things like sustainability and wellness of the planet. Healthy habits has kind of evolved into our wellness initiative which we are really focusing on right now. We are really focused on everything we do at SDJA on the wellness of children — on their mental health, on their overall health," he said.

They have programming around being outside in the academy's garden, being physically active with things like yoga and are even starting a food program to teach healthy eating. And furthermore, they are being mindful of the workload of such an academically rigorous school.

"When we are giving homework, making sure that it is something  
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meaningful and really truly helps the students learn something or reinforce something in a way that is meaningful and not just giving homework because we want to give homework.”

“And we also realize as a top-tier academic institution there is a point where we over stress out kids, we start getting diminishing returns. We need to keep that wellness lens alive for everything that we do so that our students feel good about themselves, have a positive identity, have positive self worth... And as a Jewish school, obviously all of this comes from a place of Jewish values. We know the importance of learning from a Jewish perspective. We are investing a lot in the coming years in that notion of teaching students how to learn for the sake of learning and loving learning. We are using a lot of methodologies that are related to traditional Jewish ways of learning, to *Havruta* the pedagogy of partnership and other things to build on our incredibly successful academic program already.”

### New developments on campus

Set to open in early 2022, the campus is adding a missing piece they waited for over 20 years to have: a state-of-the art, 350-seat performing arts auditorium.

“We want those theater kids at our school to feel like they have a home and they are important too,” Zvi said. “There is the Jewish value of educating a child according to their way and kids are really interested in different kinds of things and arrive at education from different angles, so being able to provide those additional angles I think is going to make a big difference for our students and their experience.”

More than just the facility, the ability to have performing arts co-curriculars is helping give students the “years of exploration” where they can try many different things to find their spark while in the safety of the school environment.

Jason Edelstein, the school’s public relations consultant, echoed Zvi’s sentiments, “The academy has always prided itself on that any student can



really jump in and try anything and have any opportunity. We don’t only emphasize the small class sizes for the obvious reasons, but the bigger picture really means if a student wants to try out for a sport, try out for theater, whatever it might be, they can do it at this school. And I think the performing arts center, beyond being a beautiful building... it reflects the value that Zvi started to speak to that anyone in anyway that they express themselves and learn from themselves, at SDJA they can do it and I think that’s a big part of the school.”

The next new addition is making a permanent separate space for their Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurial Thinking (CIET). This new home for the CIET will provide spaces for tinkering, fleshing out concepts and even office spaces for the students to create pitches for their ideas.

All of these efforts to nurture the student’s interests that they will carry with them past graduation into adulthood speak to the level of trust and respect they built with their students.

“We take our students seriously from the time they are in preschool. Their voices matter. We listen to them. We don’t treat them like they are babies. We treat them like humans who are growing and evolving and we talk to them that way and we listen to them so that they feel valued,” Zvi said.

Zvi may only be heading into his second year as Head of School, but is totally enmeshed in the school’s values and holds all the responsibilities and all the pride that comes with it. He is proud to tell that they are adding an alumni board to nurture the life-long relationships many of the students have made at SDJA. And he cited that they are seeing about 20% of their current students have at least one parent that was a former student.

In our interview, I said I couldn’t imagine a better compliment than a former student coming back to school with their own children.

“That’s how I feel,” he said. ☆