

DAY SCHOOL LIBRARIES

The Library as Part of the Accreditation Review of a Yeshiva High School

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The Accreditation Process

"How'm I doing?" The folksy words of Ed Koch, Mayor of New York City, capture the essence of the evaluation procedure of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools which was carried out in the Ramaz Upper School (Grades 7-12) during the academic year 1982-83. In large academic organizations, there are usually procedures for evaluation of facilities, faculty and services. In the Yeshiva high school arena, however, evaluation has generally been haphazard when attempted from within, and even resented. The "reputation" of a Yeshiva is generally based upon its religious position and the competence and/or charismatic qualities of its principal.

Twenty years ago, Ramaz, a modern Orthodox day school committed to quality education in both religious and general studies, and to the integration of both to the extent possible, elected to undergo the rigorous procedure of evaluation by the Commission on Secondary Schools of the Middle States Association. According to the Commission's bulletin, "voluntary accreditation has been recognized through the years as the catalyst that helped colleges and secondary schools maintain at least minimum levels of quality in their performance."

Membership in the Association, first established for colleges, was extended to include secondary schools in 1920, and is attained as a result of accreditation. Considered a significant achievement, accreditation "certifies that a school has met prescribed qualitative standards in terms of its own stated philosophy."

Needless to say, the uniqueness of a Yeshiva may raise the question of how relevant or productive such an evaluation can be when the Association's experience is almost exclusively with public and non-denominational private schools. Utilizing elaborate evaluative criteria in

order to assess the quality of a school, the Association's representatives focus on its every aspect—including such topics as school and community, philosophy and objectives, curriculum, school facilities, LEARNING MEDIA SERVICES (a.k.a. Library . . .), student activities program, school staff, and administration.

"In order to be accredited . . . a secondary school must convince the commission that it has met approved standards." Since there are no standards for dual curricula, it is perfectly acceptable to the Commission for the statements in the Evaluative Criteria reports to be adapted for the individual school in terms of its own educational goals. Obviously, this is the only way the procedure could be applicable to a Yeshiva. Each institution is accredited on its own merits, and not in comparison with other institutions. "Inherent possibilities" in a school are the concern of the accreditation process. This phrase inspired the faculty and administration of Ramaz to study, appraise, criticize, and contemplate the goals of the school, and how and whether they are being met. These questions were addressed in a demanding series of meetings and conferences held in preparation for the on-site visit of the representatives of the Association. At the very beginning of the school year, planning meetings were held in which faculty, administration members and parent representatives were assigned to various committees. These, in turn, scheduled a minimum of six hour-long meetings to examine each of the criteria in detail. The meetings resulted in the assignment of rating values ranging from poor to excellent, and including the possibilities of "Not Applicable" and "Missing but Needed."

While elaboration of the criteria of all topics could no doubt be instructive, the discussion here will be limited to the evaluation of the LEARNING MEDIA SERVICES (a.k.a. Library . . .) and the administrative method set up to prepare

the reports in as unbiased a manner as possible.

The Library Evaluation Process

The library committee consisted of the Librarian, the Associate Librarian, and teachers of English and History, Bible and Computer. Thus the disciplines of the Humanities, Social Studies, Sciences, and Judaic Studies were all represented. (The librarian also served on two other committees.) Each committee member was given a 15 page booklet which included a statement of the Guiding Principles, and seven sections of Evaluative Criteria. An outline of the criteria follows:

- I. Organization and Management
 - A. Financial Provisions
 - B. Selection of Materials and Equipment for Acquisition
 - C. Classifying, Cataloging and Processing of Materials and Equipment
 - D. Accessibility of Educational Media
 - E. Maintenance of Collection
- II. Facilities
 - A. Environment
 - B. Furnishings
 - C. Equipment
- III. Resources
- IV. Media Personnel
 - V. Media Program
 - VI. Special Characteristics of the Learning Media Services
- VII. General Evaluation

There was a checklist of very specific statements for each broad area, followed by a series of questions which required a choice of ratings. Narrative comment was encouraged on the checklist and evaluation form. Questions designed to elicit supplementary data were also included.

Under "Selection of Materials," for example, we were asked to respond to questions on whether a written Materials Selection Policy had been developed with input from administrators, faculty, students, community members and the board. Had it been approved by appropriate authorities? We were also asked whether appropriate subject materials are considered for acquisition regardless of form. Were specific criteria applied to the selection of all materials? Questions on factors considered in the selection of media focused on: the educational goals of the curriculum, content of the curriculum, learning styles, personal interests, instructional methods, review of existing resources, and materials that contribute and support efforts toward multi-cultural, multiracial education.

Under the rubric "Supplementary Data," the committee was asked to describe the process for selection of materials and equipment, to list the criteria employed in evaluation, to list and describe the evaluative tools, to describe the cooperative activities engaged in by the school and community agencies, and to attach a copy of the Materials Selection Policy.

Evaluation questions concentrated on the adequacy and effectiveness of these policies and procedures.

The above are sample questions from only one of the sub-sections of the outline on which the committee worked. There was a certain repetitiousness to the questions, but somehow this assured that no question would be glossed over; that each question would be discussed, considered, and evaluated conscientiously and deliberately. The library personnel were particularly gratified by the opportunity to meet with other faculty for such a concentrated effort. The self-examination required of the staff, which consisted of a head librarian, an associate librarian, and a clerk, was tedious and time-consuming. Inventories were described and categorized, utilization of resources analyzed, circulation and budget figures meticulously presented—all in preparation for the final report.

The Final Report

A document was prepared and presented to the entire faculty in one of the four-hour sessions that were scheduled at regular intervals preliminary to the arrival of Middle States. The entire faculty was thus given an opportunity to question or comment on the report, and to raise other relevant issues. It should be noted that the librarians were usually more critical of the

library's performance level than their non-library colleagues, and that they tended to rate each operation lower on the given scale than faculty did. . . (At a preliminary session the administration had advised against being unduly harsh; while our standards represented the ideal, the reality of Ramaz was closer to this ideal than we believed.)

The Middle States Association stressed the significance of the school's response to its earlier recommendations. Indeed, in reviewing the accreditation report on the library of ten years before, it was immediately apparent that the school had acted to correct the deficiencies which the accreditation committee had identified. At that time the physical facilities had been noted to be overcrowded, and the resources lacked any non-print materials. In the ten intervening years, a new building was built with a bright, well-furnished library; the library had also become a multi-media center. Filmstrips, audio-cassettes, recordings, and the necessary hardware were part of the library resources. 16mm film projectors are a mainstay of the library's equipment, as the librarians are responsible for all audio-visual programming. These were concrete evidence of the school's response to the recommendations.

The Accreditation Visit

The on-site visit which brought nineteen people to our school for four days of intense scrutiny and interviews proved an interesting experience. Evaluators of Judaic Studies were recruited by the Association from schools in Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and New York. Evaluators of secular studies were professionals from private and public institutions, some with administrative experience and others with classroom experience only. The library evaluators were, for better or for worse, not librarians, but supervisors responsible for the library in their schools. The Committee member who was charged with evaluating the Judaic collection had no library experience, and, while familiar with much of the Religious Studies collection, had little expertise when it came to Hebrew Literature. Furthermore, since he was from a school with a much smaller—and more recently established—library, he was perhaps overimpressed with the library's Judaic collection.

After several unscheduled visits during which the library was observed in operation, the librarian met with two members of the Committee to discuss the library report. Some elucidation of responses was sought by the Committee but almost no point was contested.

The Accreditation Report

A laudatory oral assessment was delivered by the Committee chairperson, Daniel A. Rothermil, at the closing session of the visit. A written final report was received by the school a little more than a month later.

The section on LEARNING MEDIA SERVICES described our facilities as "attractive, functional, well-utilized," and our staff as "dedicated, . . . contributing . . . many hours in maintaining the great variety of resources offered to students and faculty." The committee seemed undisturbed by the sometimes lively atmosphere in the library. The visitors emphasized in their report how impressed they were by the "vitality" of the student body. They are our greatest asset, we were told.

The committee made several recommendations for the improvement of the library which were derived in the main directly from our own committee report. The Middle States report recommended that a detailed budget be prepared annually, that greater effort be made to involve the students and faculty in media selection, and that a maintenance schedule be established for the replacement of obsolete equipment and material. In addition, they recommended conducting a study to plan for the use of paraprofessional help in the library and to consider the creation of a media production laboratory—something that our staff had considered inapplicable to our library, given space and staff problems. A stronger in-service orientation for students and faculty was also proposed—a program which we had already begun to implement.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we feel that self-evaluation is a rigorous discipline with its own rewards. While it was gratifying to receive the commendations, we could not help but feel that the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools is not an agency that can adequately evaluate our dual curriculum—or the library collection supporting it. It remains for a Jewish educational agency to prepare guidelines for the evaluation of Jewish Studies programs and to establish a network of qualified Jewish educators who can be called upon to participate in the accreditation of secondary Jewish day schools and their unique libraries.

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