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Reform Jewish day school has new home in Dedham



Teacher's aide Jean Ricker (left) and first-grade teacher Karen Abraham prepared their classroom at the new \$30 million Rashi School in Dedham, the only Reform Jewish day school in New England. (Suzanne Kreiter/ Globe Staff)

By [Lisa Wangsness](#)

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DEDHAM — When Julie and Michael Bailit settled in Needham, the town where they both grew up, they imagined their children would have childhoods much like their own.

“We thought, ‘Well, we live in this great town — which we love — and to be fully integrated into the community, one, as Jews, we join the temple, and two, the kids go to the neighborhood school,’ ” Julie Bailit said.

But in kindergarten, they said, their bright older son was not being challenged in reading or math, and the Bailits sensed his teacher didn't know him well. So when he entered first grade, they enrolled him in the Rashi School.

The success of the Rashi School, which today will open its first permanent home in Dedham — a \$30 million building that shares a 162-acre campus with Hebrew SeniorLife's NewBridge on the Charles continuing care community — represents a gradual change in outlook toward religious education among Reform Jews. Over the last generation, Reform Jewish day schools have gained a small but devoted following.



Suzanne Kreiter/ Globe Staff

Rashi, which has rented space since its founding in the mid-1980s, has about 300 students in kindergarten through eighth grade and now has room to grow by about 10 percent. Tuition is \$19,400 for elementary school and \$23,200 for middle school; about one-third of students receive financial aid. The new campus was funded by private donations, including \$5 million from Sheldon Adelson, a Dorchester native and self-made billionaire, and his wife, Miriam.

Reform Judaism, the largest Jewish movement in America, has long prized public education, and the Rashi School is the only Reform Jewish day school in New England.

Earlier generations of Reform Jews saw the public schools as vital to the “melting pot” American society in which they wanted to participate fully, and the Jewish day schools favored by Orthodox parents seemed to some separatist and antithetical to the assimilationist values Reform Jews had espoused.

Jonathan Sarna, a professor of American Jewish history at Brandeis University, said a perceived decline in quality of public schools led some Jewish parents to turn to private schools. Some interfaith couples and converts to Judaism also saw in Jewish day schools an opportunity to give their children a better religious education than they could provide at home.

Reform Jewish day schools have also convinced parents that the schools could provide students a solid grounding in Judaism without walling them off from the larger community, in part by community projects and athletic competitions against other schools.

“The Reform movement today has made the notion of freedom and choice very much a centerpiece of what the movement stands for,” Sarna said. “You can wear a yarmulke or not wear a yarmulke in the same way you can decide to send your child to a Jewish day school or you can be very proud to send your child to public school” or a secular private school.

Today’s Reform movement, like US society in general, talks more about multiculturalism than assimilation, said Rabbi Andrew Vogel of Temple Sinai in Brookline.

“This generation of Jews — the current parents and students of the Rashi School — I think are very comfortable [with the notion] that it enriches our lives to embrace our difference as Jews,” he said.



Linda Silverstein / Rashi School

Rashi's new 82,000-square-foot school is LEED-certified as a green building, embracing the school's environmentalist ethic. Its new chapel features a stone wall meant to be reminiscent of the Western Wall in Jerusalem and a historic ark rescued from a former temple in Gardner. Bright classrooms are equipped with computerized "smart boards"; there is a 6,000-volume library and a large auditorium with state-of-the-art production equipment; a gym; a pair of playgrounds; and playing fields.

"My husband loves the fields," said Geraldine Sunshine, a parent from the Back Bay whose son Teddy will be in first grade. "He says, 'We have boys, they need to run around.' "

When second-graders study the Charles River — learning about the water cycle, the Colonial and Native American societies that once lived nearby, and their responsibility as Jews to be good stewards of the earth — the river is now just steps away.

Next door are NewBridge's 700 residents, including many grandparents of Rashi students. Elders and youngsters will celebrate holidays and cultivate a community garden together, and perhaps even participate in theatrical and musical productions. Middle school pupils will have the opportunity to work with seniors with memory problems.

"One of our real goals is to have our students leave here understanding that in whatever way works for them . . . they have to do something to make this world a better place to live, and we really believe a better way to do that is not to do some splashy thing, but to make it a part of your regular life," said Rabbi Ellen Pildis, the school rabbi and director of Jewish studies.

Rabbi Jonah Pesner, founding director of Just Congregations, a Reform Jewish social justice organization, is sending his four daughters to Rashi.

He said the Rashi's new campus is a milestone for the Reform Jewish community in Boston, "a moment in history where it's clear that Jewish independent schools are not something at the margins of Jewish life, but at the center of Jewish life and the Reform movement."

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