

News

Solomon Schechter introduces sliding-scale tuition

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Solomon Schechter Academy, the city's largest Jewish elementary school, is promising accessibility to "all members of the Montreal Jewish community" with a new sliding-scale tuition system.

The "Flex-Able Tuition Program," as it's called, takes into account not only family income, but also the number of children in the day school system, whether at Solomon Schechter or elsewhere.

The intention is not so much to benefit the lowest income families, who already may qualify for tuition assistance or even those of middle income, but the rest who fall between the cracks.

Both current and new families are eligible for Flex-Able.

Head of school Steven Erdelyi said Flex-Able will have its most impact on those who "fall between where tuition assistance ends and CAPS begins," as well as those whose income are too high to be eligible for this Federation CJA program, but still find it difficult to keep several children in the day school system.

CAPS (Creating Access: Promoting Success), introduced a few years ago by the federation through its Generations Fund, offers middle-income families a tuition "freeze" at eligible schools that remains in effect over the child's school career.

The schools are compensated for the full difference and aren't prevented from increasing fees. Additional one-time incentive grants are offered for children entering an eligible kindergarten or for Secondary I students.



Solomon Schechter Academy students display their Tu b'Shvat projects for this year's Tree of Life exhibit. The school is introducing the 'Flex-Able Tuition Program.'

More than 650 students now benefit from CAPS.

Another benefit of Flex-Able is that parents will know exactly what they will be paying when they register, said Erdelyi. In the past, when they enrolled their kids in the fall or winter for the next school year, they usually didn't know until the spring or summer what they would be paying, he said.

Solomon Schechter does not expect Flex-Able to increase its costs, he said. In fact, the administration thinks it will help the bottom line because those few classes that are not full now may reach capacity, and therefore help cover fixed costs – primarily, teachers' salaries.

"I can't talk about other schools, but, for

us, we are trying to make it possible for any Jewish family to access an excellent Jewish education. We have taken what existed with the tuition assistance and CAPS programs and filled in the gaps so no child falls through the cracks," he said.

The possible reduction in tuition for individual families is "but one piece of the puzzle," said Erdelyi, in making a Jewish day school education feasible. "We did not re-invent the wheel, but taken a lot of pieces to meet the needs of our families and, we hope, future families."

A detailed grid of the tuition structure for 2015-2016 is now available on Solomon Schechter's website for junior pre-kindergarten (JPK) for 3-year-olds through to

grade 6 (www.solomonschechter.ca/flexable).

Fees for JPK and pre-kindergarten (PK) are at set rates, regardless of number of children. For example, families with a total income under \$95,000 will pay \$3,995 per child; those earning between \$95,000 and \$200,000 will pay \$4,495; and those earning over \$200,000 will pay \$4,995.

The number of children in the day school system is taken into account from kindergarten through Grade 6, with a maximum allowance made for four children.

For instance, a family with an income of \$150,000 and one child in the system will pay \$8,535 for kindergarten. If they have two children, the cost is \$7,495 per child. With four in Jewish schools, that drops to \$5,665 per child.

By Grade 6, the comparable figures for a family with a \$150,000 income are \$9,535 if they have only one child in the system; \$8,440 per child if they have two, and \$7,465 each if they have four.

At the highest income level graphed (\$250,000-plus), the fees will be \$4,995 for JPK and PK, \$8,535 for kindergarten, and \$9,535 for grades 1-6 with no allowance made for the number of kids in the day school system.

To determining the exact fees, families are being asked each parent's gross income, as declared on line 150 of the federal tax return or line 199 of the provincial tax return. They must also disclose if either is a shareholder in a privately held company and if other members of the family contribute to the children's fees.

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Solutions have to be systemic and ongoing

One in four women experiences domestic abuse in their lifetime, and it occurs among Jews at the same rate as in the community at large

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For more than 25 years, Penny Krowitz has been heading Toronto's shelter for abused Jewish women and working tirelessly to advocate for victims of domestic abuse.

But she wishes she didn't have to.

"In 1989, we opened the first kosher shelter in Toronto for abused Jewish women. It is open to this day. We'd like to close it, but unfortunately, we can't," said Krowitz, executive director of the non-profit organization Act To End Violence Against Women (ATEVAW).

Krowitz and other service providers across the country who work on behalf of Jewish domestic abuse victims said raising awareness and working toward lasting solutions is the only way to eradicate domestic abuse.

"We are very committed to education and awareness. It is an important point because, for most people in our community, they don't believe it happens to us," Krowitz said.

According to the Jewish Coalition Against Domestic Abuse, one in four women experience domestic abuse during their lifetime, and abuse occurs in the Jewish community at the same rate as in the community at large.

Janice Shaw, Jewish Family & Child's York Region direct service manager, said we can't hope to solve a problem without acknowledging it first.

"At any given time, we have approximately 300 and some odd cases open... for every one that closes, three open sometimes... In spite of it all, there is still a myth that Jewish men are not



Diane Sasson

abusive. And clearly our services and other services indicate that this is not that case," Shaw said.

"It is very important that there is lots of outreach and communication amongst Jewish leaders in different capacities in schools, in shuls, etc."

JF&CS runs a synagogue outreach program to encourage rabbis to speak to their congregants about the issue, and Krowitz also sees the value in using Jewish community leaders as a resource.

"I want to set up meetings with several rabbis in the Conservative movement, in the Orthodox movement, the Reform movement and go talk to them one on one about the issue and what they can do if they have a woman in their congregation who comes to them," Krowitz said.

"We would encourage... rabbis to do a sermon about it because the minute the rabbi does a sermon about it, he gives credibility to the issue."

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We really need to start educating not only our daughters, but our sons, much, much earlier on about acceptable behaviour.

Diane Sasson, executive director of Auberge Shalom Pour Femmes, Montreal's kosher women's shelter, also thinks having community leaders speaking out on the issue is part of the solution.

She said that over the past 15 years, she has noticed that Jewish leaders are more receptive to the goals of her organization.

Sasson referred to an article in *La Voix Sépharade*, a Quebec-based Jewish magazine, which highlighted religious sources to show how Judaism is meant to protect women from violence and abuse.

"We need to use the sources we have in our community, and we need to use those positive sources and really try to protect women and honour what we're supposed to honour," she said.

"We have the tools to work with, Jewishly, and I think our leaders and our rabbis need to speak about it, need to know it exists, need to talk about it, need to make internal policies in the synagogues."

Shaw agrees that for real, measurable

progress to be made, the solutions have to be "more systemic than clinical."

"Overall, we really need to start educating, not only our daughters, but our sons, much, much earlier on about acceptable behaviour. And that's the systemic piece, and that's across the board. The same message needs to be given across the board."

Sasson said there should be better laws in place to protect women.

"We know that even if a woman has a restraining order... it doesn't mean that he's not going to hurt her. I think there are a lot of areas that need continuous lobbying, and we also have to be vigilant because things fall through the cracks very quickly. And so we have to make sure that the government is keeping up with their promises and changes that are required. It's not only about getting better, it's protecting what we've already accomplished," Sasson said.

"We go backwards a lot, government-wise. Women's issues aren't in the portfolio for the government any more. We've been filtered into general services. I think we lose a lot and we have to keep fighting to keep it."

Krowitz said that in the 25 years she's been at the helm of ATEVAW, there has been some progress, but not enough.

"We live in a world that celebrates violence," she said, referring to the highest grossing films, television shows and video games.

"I think what has happened to society is that it has become desensitized to violence. We live in a disrespectful society in many ways.

"We need a seismic shift in our culture in order for an issue like this to go away." ■

Fee scale to look at family circumstances

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The deadline for Flex-Able application is March 30 for the next school year.

Overall, fees are not being lowered, Erdelyi said, but being rationalized to take more fully into account specific family circumstances. Solomon Schechter continues to be eligible under CAPS.

Price-wise, Solomon Schechter remains about in the middle among Jewish schools, he said, "not the most expensive and not the least expensive."

Solomon Schechter has a current enrolment of about 600 students, said Erdelyi, making it not only the largest elementary

school but the largest individual Jewish school, elementary or high school in Montreal. There are three to four classes per grade, but in recent years they have not all been full, he added.

Keeping fees affordable is also a way of ensuring the future of Solomon Schechter, a challenge given Montreal Jewish demographics. "Both of the schools I attended – United Talmud Torahs in Chomedey and Herzliah High School in St. Laurent – are now closed," he noted.

Solomon Schechter has both English and French streams, the latter eligible to

accept francophones and immigrants according to Bill 101. Both streams receive 10 hours of Hebrew instruction per week.

In the English section, 14-1/2 hours of French and 9-1/2 hours of English are taught; while on the French side, that language accounts for 20-1/2 hours and English 3-1/2 hours.

Solomon Schechter is affiliated with the North American movement of that name, historically associated with Conservative Judaism.

In response to parent demand, Solomon Schechter has also introduced an after-school program, which runs until

5 p.m. this year and will go to 5:30 next year, Erdelyi said. The children are kept busy with homework and other scheduled activities while they wait for their parents to pick them up. In addition, Solomon Schechter has started offering programming on half and pedagogical days (non-holidays), which is also intended to make things easier for working parents.

In curriculum innovation, SMART Floor activities have been added including music, Judaic arts, robotics and animation. Math, science and conversational French are also being enriched. ■