**Overview: Sinai Akiba Academy New Horizon Day School Exchange**

**Rationale**

The beauty of a Jewish day school is that it allows students to develop a strong sense of identity and grow up among peers who share core values.  While Jewish day schools offer many important formative opportunities for students, they offer few opportunities for students to interact with other faith backgrounds.

For young Muslim and Jewish students in particular, their inability to get to know one another is especially problematic as their relationship is often imposed upon them by various external voices. So much of the relationship between Muslims and Jews in America has been defined by a projection of thoughts and assumptions of how the two respective faith communities should relate to one another.  That sentiment has been infused into mainstream culture, affecting not only the identities of the two communities but also hindering students’ curiosity to seek knowledge about the other faith. Students at Sinai Akiba hold some stereotypes about Muslims which they have voiced in class and have manifest in a handful of students being too afraid to attend their class field trip to the mosque.  The Sinai Akiba Academy New Horizon Day School Exchange emerged as a way to actively teach our students to embrace diversity rather than fear it.

Fundamentally, we want our students to leave Sinai Akiba Academy with open minds as they enter into future public arenas.  Middle School is when we lay the foundation for fostering an acceptance of others’ differences, not just tolerating them.  Our students also need the skills to be able to work in partnership with all kinds of people. The Day School Exchange furthers Sinai Akiba’s values of collaboration and application of classroom learning to the real world.

**Goals of the Exchange:**

* to learn about and present our own history and religious tradition to others
* to understand the ethnic and religious diversity in the Los Angeles community
* to strengthen ties between our local Muslim and Jewish communities
* to apply Muslim and Jewish values of justice to the real world

**Program Outline**

For the past five years, Sinai Akiba Academy, an ECC-8th day school in Los Angeles, has partnered with New Horizon School, a K-8th Muslim day school in Pasadena. Though our specific curriculum evolves from year to year (see “Day School Exchange Curriculum 2016”) here is an outline of what the partnership entails.

1. Classroom learning:

In preparation for the Day School Exchange, students learn about Islam across disciplines.

* Social Studies: Students explore the history of Islam and its core tenets.
* Jewish History: Students learn about the Golden Age of Spain and about historical relations between Muslims and Jews.
* 7th grade Seminar: Through discussing topics such as homelessness, disabilities, and the LGBTQ community, students explore essential questions such as “Why do we create an ‘us’ and a ‘them?’ and “How do I increase the sense of responsibility I have for others?”

By January, 7th grade students have learned about Islam in both their Social Studies and Jewish History classes. They have also discussed why it might be important to get to know people whom they might perceive as somehow different from themselves. Furthermore, when asked about what they think the rationale is for the Day School Exchange, students are able to articulate how this opportunity helps them put their theoretical learning into practice.

1. Email-Exchange

In January, teachers pair each 7th grade Sinai Akiba student with a 7th or 8th grade buddy student from New Horizon School. Students exchange a series of 3 to 4 teacher-moderated emails. Some email prompts include:

* Tell about the meaning of your name
* What are your favorite movies/books/TV shows/sports etc.?
* Whom do you admire and why?
* Tell about a time when you helped someone in need. What did you do? Why did you decide to help?

By the time students meet face-to-face in February, the anticipation has been building for a month; SAA-NH buddies already know a lot about each other and are incredibly excited to meet.

1. School visits: Meeting face-to-face

In February, 7th and 8th grade students from New Horizon School spend the full day at Sinai Akiba Academy and in March, Sinai Akiba Academy students spend a full day at New Horizon School. Students do not attend their regular classes on those days. Rather, each day is filled with games, art, text study, service opportunities, prayer, and reflection. For more information on what each day looks like, see “Day School Exchange curriculum 2016” and “Day School Exchange video.”

1. Reflection

Following the face-to-face visits at each school, students reflect on their experience. Some students choose to publish their reflections in a blog or on Sinai Akiba’s website. (See “Student Reflections” and the links to blog posts.)

**Impact**

Throughout the Day School Exchange students have many opportunities to reflect on their learning: aloud, in private, as a group and as individuals. In each of these moments, students share just how much this experience has impacted them.  For example, at the culmination of the Day School Exchange, we gave students a few minutes to respond in writing to the question “What are you taking away from today?” Here are a few students’ responses:

“This exchange made me change my views on Islam.”

“Today I learned that Islam and Judaism are actually quite similar. Today’s experience has also shown me that many people in LA are homeless.”

“I learned that my buddies were very exciting and welcoming and that they are respectful people. Today’s experience affected me positively because I made many new friends.”

“Today I learned more about Muslims on a personal level, not just what we learn about Islam in class. I learned that I have a lot of similarities with my buddy.”

“This experience has affected me because now I feel like giving more and making a difference in the world. I also feel like making friends with people outside of my community.”

“Today’s experience was amazing. We all connected together and got each other’s numbers. I can’t wait to meet again.”

“I learned that the rumors about Muslims are false and that they are really kind and nice people.  Also, I learned that their religion is very similar to Judaism. There are more similarities than differences.”

“The experience gave me a broader perspective about the world and made me more open-minded.”

“Going into this experience, I felt like the Muslims would say mean things to me.  After meeting my buddy, I know for sure that all of the stereotypes about them were false and that they are really nice people.”

“The purpose of the exchange was to create tolerance and understanding of other cultures/religions.  I learned to be tolerant and non-judgmental.”

Though students do often remain connected in the long term through social media, the short term impact of the Day School Exchange is just as powerful. Each year, students relate how the Day School Exchange changes them as people, making them more open-minded, more civic-oriented and more curious about people outside of their immediate communities. To read about two students’ in-depth reflections on the Day School Exchange, see “Student Reflections.” To read about how the Day School Exchange has affected alumni five years later, see “Alumni Reflections.”

Furthermore, parents often comment that the Day School Exchange was one of the highlights of their children’s experiences at Sinai Akiba Academy. See “Parents’ Perspectives” to read about how parents perceive the Day School Exchange as having impacted their children.

Additionally, leaders from community organizations including NewGround:A Muslim-Jewish Partnership for Change, Facing History and Ourselves, and PATH all attest to the profound impact the Day School Exchange has on Muslim and Jewish students in Los Angeles (See “Community Partners’ Reflections”).

**Areas of Growth**

*Student Participation*

While most students and parents are very supportive of the Day School Exchange, every year we have a few families who are wary of the program and who choose to not let their children participate. Now that we are in our sixth year of the Day School Exchange, we now know to expect that this will be the case. We continue to communicate with parents about the Day School Exchange by talking about the Exchange at Back to School Night and sending home a parent letter detailing the goals for the Day School Exchange as well as how the Day School Exchange fits into our 7th grade curriculum. We are also continuing to explore how we can best present the Day School Exchange to the parent body and larger community to garner the greatest possible support. To that end, last year, I wrote and received a grant to create a video (See “Day School Exchange Video”) which has received over 22,000 views on Sinai Temple’s Facebook page.

*Curriculum Development*

During our first year of the Day School Exchange in 2010-2011, we started small; each school visited the other school for only 2.5 hours. After the initial success, everyone (teachers, students) wanted more and so we expanded our program to include lunch and last the whole day.

Each year, we ask students and faculty to give critical feedback on every component of the two Exchange days (one day at Sinai Akiba and one day at New Horizon School) so that we can constantly improve the curriculum and logistics of the day. We strive to balance the goal of students having fun together with the goal of in-depth learning about Islam, Judaism and justice.  In our second year of the Day School Exchange, we brought the organization Facing History and Ourselves on board to help us deepen the content relating to identity and civic participation. Our curriculum is not yet “perfected” but it definitely gets better and better each year.

*Team-Teaching*

Though lead teachers from both schools (Rebecca Berger from Sinai Akiba Academy and Aysha Mehdi from New Horizon School) co-plan the curriculum for the Day School Exchange, when New Horizon students visit Sinai Akiba Academy, Sinai Akiba Academy teachers facilitate the day and when Sinai Akiba students visit New Horizon School, New Horizon teachers facilitate the day. Although this method of facilitation works logistically, ideally I would like to have teachers from both schools co-facilitating, so that a Muslim and Jewish teacher are team teaching. This method of teaching would be great modeling for the students, as students would see their teachers learning and working together. Furthermore, teachers would have the chance to develop real relationships which would strengthen the partnership between our two schools.

In order for Muslim/Jewish team-teaching to happen, I would need to initiate a teacher-exchange in which teachers from both schools could get to know each other on a personal level and learn/create the Day School Exchange curriculum together so that they would feel comfortable team-teaching.  Two years ago, I wrote a grant to pay for teachers to meet on a Sunday for this type of teacher-exchange, but did not receive the grant. I still hope to see team-teaching come to fruition.

*Long-term Vision*

Now that Sinai Akiba has celebrated our fifth year of the Day School Exchange, I am actively working to publicize what we are doing at Sinai Akiba with the hope that other schools/institutions will follow suit. To that end, last year we invited the Jewish Journal to write a story (See link to Jewish Journal Article on Day School Exchange), as well as invited KPCC to do a radio story (See link to KPCC news story).  I also hired a professional videographer to create a mini-documentary that we could put on our school’s website and Facebook page (“See Day School Exchange video.”)  Additionally, I wrote an article for Prizmah’s *HaYidion* (See link to *HaYidion* p.48). Furthermore, I’m excited to be contributing to the Kohelet Database.

Fundamentally, I believe in the power of relationships and in the power of education to transform our world.  So far, the Day School Exchange at my school has reached about five hundred students. These students’ experiences have a ripple effect as students share their learning with their parents, communities and beyond. I want the ripples to spread further. I know there are already many day schools around our nation doing similar work to actively teach students that all people are created *betzelem elohim*, in the image of God. If all day schools can work toward putting this value into practice, then together, we can create a better world.