

OASIS IN THE SOUTH

Morasha helps students develop a passion for learning and Judaism.

By Ilene Schneider

Morasha Jewish Day School's literature describes it as "the best of both worlds." Nestled in the south county community of Rancho Santa Margarita, Morasha strives to provide students, preschool through grade 6, with the very best educational experience in both general and Jewish studies. Founded in 1987, Morasha positions itself as a true community school, welcoming students and families from all movements of Judaism.

"At Morasha Jewish Day School we recognize the importance of critical thinking and analytical skills," says Eve Fein, head of school. "As such, we structure our teaching to challenge and motivate each individual student to work hard and set goals, and then reach beyond them. The students leave our school confident and independent."

Fein adds that Morasha pays close attention to the foundations of the elementary school years on a social, emotional, and organizational level. "This focus leads to successful learners and contributors in the future," she adds. "If you miss these foundations, you can't go back."

According to Fein, Morasha wants its students to develop both skills and commitment. Students are encouraged to try their hardest, are given positive reinforcement, and are given an atmosphere of "high standards and moderate anxiety." Morasha wants kids to "find out how to find out," Fein adds.

In addition to Morasha's general studies program, students are afforded enriching experiences in Judaica, Hebrew, art, technology, music, and physical education, each taught by a qualified and experienced educator. There are after-school sports, cheerleading, and a variety of other activities. Children are challenged in developmentally appropriate ways to do as much as they can, whether in academic studies or by leading services, doing a Dvar Torah, taking pride in what they contribute to the environment of Morasha, or taking part in student council activities. With an average of 10 students per classroom, each child has the opportunity for individual instruction.

"Ultimately, our goal is for our students to develop a passion for learning, a love of their Jewish heritage, and a level of confidence that comes from working hard and accomplishing goals," Fein says. From its early days at Temple Eilat, then Temple Beth El, to its present 4-acre site with portable buildings, Morasha's aim has remained true: to graduate students with strong Jewish identities who meet with success as community leaders, creative thinkers, and compassionate members of society.

Morasha's curriculum, which is based on the California State standards, goes beyond that framework by including

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Values-Based Education at Morasha



Preschool at Morasha can be as much of a learning experience for parents as it can for children. Preschool can be the first entry point into the Jewish community for many families, according to Fein. "Some people don't affiliate until they need services for their kids," she says. "We expose parents to programs about synagogues, the Jewish community as a whole, and Israel. Then they become actively involved, and parent involvement is important. We serve as a stepping stone for adult Jewish involvement, and parents want to learn more Jewishly."

opportunities for real life application, problem solving, critical thinking, and self-reflection. The school attempts to ensure that it keeps providing a sophisticated, cutting-edge educational program. Using a variety of teaching methods enables Morasha educators to address a variety of learning styles. Children learn in groups, in centers, in cross age groups, as well as in whole group instruction.

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Over the past several years, Morasha parents, faculty, and administration joined together in the deliberative process of selecting ten Jewish values that would most clearly reflect the philosophy of our school. Through extensive text study and lively discussion, the group selected the ten guiding Jewish values that are part of the fabric of Morasha. They are: kehilla (community) ; kavod (respect) ; chinuch (education); t'fillah (prayer); Halachot v'minhagim (traditions), menschlichit (being a good person); emunah (faith); Eretz Yisrael (the land of Israel); tikkun olam (repairing the world); and Klal Yisrael (the people of Israel).

Since that time, Morasha values have been integrated into everything that the school does. By designing several visual representations of these values, Morasha students and teachers keep them in the forefront of their minds and hearts as they continue to fulfill the school's educational mission. Morasha's grade 5 students took on the task of creating icons symbolizing each value, which now hang on the walls of every classroom.

The objective, according to Fein, is to tell the students, "Don't just do something. Do it with meaning. Get the most out of the experience. The result is that the kids love school, feel valued, and respond enthusiastically. Then they stand out when they move on to their next environment."

Taking Care of the Earth

Believing that the effects of global warming will impact the quality of life for all humankind, Morasha has taken deliberate steps to create an academic curriculum that will help the community to build an understanding of the current climate crisis and take action. The global warming initiative will involve students in the process of "greening" the school to make it environmentally friendly.

The school is planning an awareness festival next spring to inspire and energize the Orange County Jewish community into action. Morasha plans to raise environmental consciousness through guest speakers, student presentations, and opportunities for political participation. In addition to raising awareness of the current climate crisis and inspiring positive changes within the local community, the objective is to celebrate the vitality of our planet and the possibilities for repairing our world.

Travel Buddies

Second grade teacher Natalie Stein launched an innovative program in which a partnership with Federal Express and the kindness of strangers gives the students an interesting learning experience. In January Stein asks her students to bring in a stuffed animal. The animals have a bon voyage party, get put in Federal Express boxes with a logbook, and get shipped off to meet people. The people who receive the boxes write about their favorite foods, holidays, animals, and places to visit, and then send them to other people. By the end of May, the Travel Buddies return to Stein's classroom for a welcome back party.

Community Ambassadors

Morasha students take their love of learning and Judaism on the road too. They have traveled to St. John's Episcopal School to conduct a Seder for the students there. Another special tradition is building a sukkah with members of Temple Judea. Recently, Morasha students

visited Heritage Pointe where they played games with the residents.

For feedback, contact editor@ocjewishlife.com.