

Building A Sukkah And Jewish Life At Boys' Latin

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David Doherty

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Families make all sorts of compromises in order to send their children to private schools. One thing they don't have to compromise, however, is their children's exposure to meaningful Jewish experiences.

I have been uniquely fortunate to be part of the development of sustained, engaging Jewish programming at the Boys' Latin School of Maryland, where I serve as K-12 Academic Dean. In partnership with The Curriculum Initiative (TCI), an organization that supports Jewish culture at independent schools, we at BL have created a vibrant Jewish Awareness Club with an active membership. The group meets frequently to explore issues of Jewish identity and to plan school-wide events around a variety of Jewish holidays and themes.

Late last month, members of the Jewish Awareness Club decided to construct a sukkah on the Boys' Latin campus. One day after school, the students and I—along with the TCI staff and several supportive parents—did exactly that. It was, by all accounts, the first sukkah at a non-Jewish independent school in the Baltimore area.

While the building of a sukkah at our school would have been noteworthy in itself, the construction was only the beginning. The students of the Jewish Awareness Club subsequently facilitated an upper school assembly, explaining to their classmates the new addition to campus and introducing the themes of the Sukkot festival. They asked their classmates to consider who they would wish to invite into the sukkah, evoking the traditional ushpizin (guests) of the holiday, and used a Chasidic story to illustrate how dwelling in the sukkah can so dramatically alter one's perception.

The BL student body didn't just hear about Sukkot: in the days that followed, they experienced it. They ate and hung out in the sukkah, taking advantage of the break that it offered from their normal routine. A number of lower, middle and upper school classes visited the structure, as did groups from St. Paul's School for Girls and Friends School. In total, more than 300 young people from a variety of backgrounds spent time in the sukkah and enjoyed a rich Jewish cultural experience.



Why has Boys' Latin made the development of campus Jewish life an important part of our program? And why have I, a non-Jewish school administrator, been so actively involved?

We at BL recognize the myriad ways in which multicultural programming can strengthen and enrich our diverse school community. As an educator, I have seen the powerful experiences that students have when given meaningful opportunities to explore their own cultural heritage and those of their classmates. Indeed, the personal growth and self-discovery that my colleagues and I have witnessed among the members of the Jewish Awareness Club is a source of great pride for our school.

So yes, we built a sukkah at Boys' Latin. But more importantly, we're building a sustained, vibrant Jewish experience and a school community where all of our students can explore who they are and how they relate to the world.

David Doherty is Academic Dean at The Boy's Latin School of Maryland