

# 'An Exciting Journey in Education'

Dean of Jewish Academy leads school with innovation and confidence

Shimon Waronker, Dean of The Jewish Academy of Suffolk County, recently spoke with the editorial staff of the Long Island Jewish World group of newspapers.

**T**ell us a little about your background.

I was born in Santiago, Chile. My dad was a labor union organizer in Central and Latin America. During this time, the Soviet Union was trying to organize labor unions under communist direction. My dad fought them tooth and nail because he believed in free enterprise and that workers should not destroy the rich but become rich themselves. My mom was a homemaker who after 12 years of marriage became a widow and brought my two younger sisters and me to Rockville, Md. I grew up in Maryland and enrolled in ROTC and I served in the U.S. Army and achieved the rank of Captain. Then I became an observant Jew, married a lovely South African woman and have six wonderful children. We reside now in Crown Heights, New York.

I became an educator about 16 years ago. I was selected to be in the first cohort of the NYC Leadership Academy, whose purpose was to develop principals and send them to some of the toughest schools in the city. I was given a real fixer upper, Middle School 22 in the South Bronx. It was one of the 12 most violent schools in New York City, and I was the seventh principal in two years. In one year, we got the school off the most violent list by reducing major crime by 100 percent and all other crime by 90 percent. The school became an A-school on the Progress Report Card by the end



Shimon Waronker, Dean of The Jewish Academy of Suffolk County.

a year in Cambridge and began the work establishing schools with a vision developed at Harvard.

**What is your vision of education and how has your Harvard education influenced you?**

Oftentimes, people think a brand is valuable because of the name brand. What I found at

had the opportunity to learn with a fine cohort of doctoral students. We set out to envision a new type of school.

After reading the best educational practices in the world, we developed a schooling model that has a team-based approach to teaching that loops with students from kindergarten through fifth grade, has a career ladder with high-paying salaries for teachers, 90 minutes of collaborative time daily and reflective practice for the school.

Children are not widgets to be moved along the assembly line of education; they are rather works of art that need to be nurtured through loving relationships.

I believe that education is about instilling confidence in our children. This is not about self-esteem. It's rather a tangible self-awareness about one's own ability. It is about taking risks and meeting challenges with grit and determination. This type of education is what all our children need, whether they are on

Harvard, where I have a Master's and am finishing up a doctorate, is that it is not just a name brand. It's real substance!

I learned from some of the finest minds in education (i.e., Richard Elmore, Eileen McGowan, Karen Mapp, Robert Peterkin, etc.). I also



Students at The Jewish Academy.

the lowest or the highest economic strata in society.

**What attracted you to come to the Jewish Academy in Suffolk?**

When the opportunity arose to do this in a private school in Suffolk, especially a Jewish school, I jumped! I was so excited to roll up my sleeves and bring this cutting-edge model outside of the public sector.

We are embarking on an exciting journey in education where children are taking ownership, "self-governing" over their own learning. If you are interested in this type of education, come for a visit to the JA.

**Can you comment a bit on the advantages of a private school education versus public school?**

We have the freedom that public schools don't have. This is a complaint that every public school teacher has. They have to "teach to the test," which stifles creativity and limits schools' ability to engage in dynamic and creative projects. We have the ability to take students on real learning journeys without restrictions. Our student-centered classes should be hands-on and experiential. This is difficult to accomplish in the public school setting. Just imagine when you learned algebra. Do you know why you learn algebra? Do you know what the purpose of algebra is? In our setting, the children will be learning that algebra was used to determine where we are on a map. That is why we have an X and Y axis. Therefore, our children will be able to determine their location on a map without a GPS, but rather by using a sextant and measuring angles.

This is akin to children who are spoon-fed as toddlers but are no

longer spoon-fed since they grew up. In the field of education, especially public education, children are being spoon-fed all the way through eighth grade. We want our children to feed themselves with their own knowledge and their own questions.



Jewish Academy Board President Arthur Katz accepting the Canyon of Heroes Award from Jewish Academy Board Chair Rabbi Tuvia Teldon at the school's dinner in January 2015.

**Why should parents choose to send their children to the JA?**

I do not want to knock the hard work the public schools are doing to help children succeed. However, they do not have the freedom we have to create an experiential and engaging environment where the test is not the focus, but rather the child is the focus. Our children need to be independent thinkers.

An independent thinker will be able to innovate, stand up with courage and grit to accomplish whatever they wish to do. This is the dream of every parent. This is the dream we are making a reality. Come and join us.

For more information about The Jewish Academy, call 631.368.2600 or visit [www.thejewishacademy.com](http://www.thejewishacademy.com).

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of my third year there.

After being a principal for four years in the NYC Department of Education, I was sent by the chancellor to Harvard to learn how to expand my work at MS 22 to apply it to many other school venues.

I returned to New York City after