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A Jewish or a non-Jewish school:
What lies behind parents' decisions about how to educate their children?

Dr Jonathan Boyd

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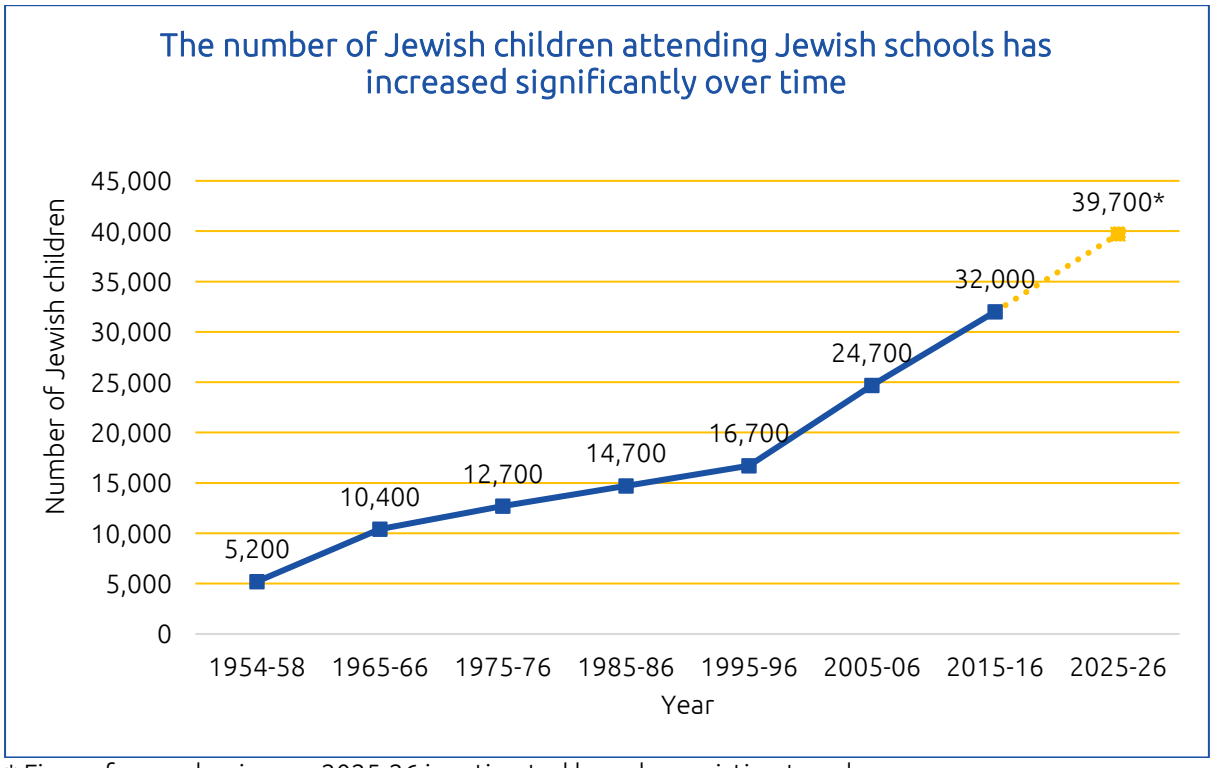
/ Introduction

British Jews have been choosing to send their children to Jewish schools in increasing numbers for several decades now. In the mid-1950s, 5,200 Jewish children were registered as pupils in Jewish schools, but that number increased steadily over the following few decades, rising to 16,700 by the mid-1990s. The 1990s saw a major shift in the priorities of Diaspora Jewish populations, particularly in the United States: external concerns such as the plight of Soviet Jews and the vulnerability of the State of Israel diminished following the collapse of communism and peace agreements between Israel and the Palestinians and Jordanians, whilst new data showing unprecedented levels of intermarriage in the US brought into sharp relief the need to focus on the more local issues of Jewish communal continuity and renewal. In the UK, the Chief Rabbi at the time, Lord Sacks *z"l*, similarly launched his chief rabbinate with a rallying cry for more investment in Jewish education,[1] and the community responded – new schools were built, more money was ploughed into youth movement programmes and Israel summer tours, and multiple cultural organisations were established or given a new lease of life.

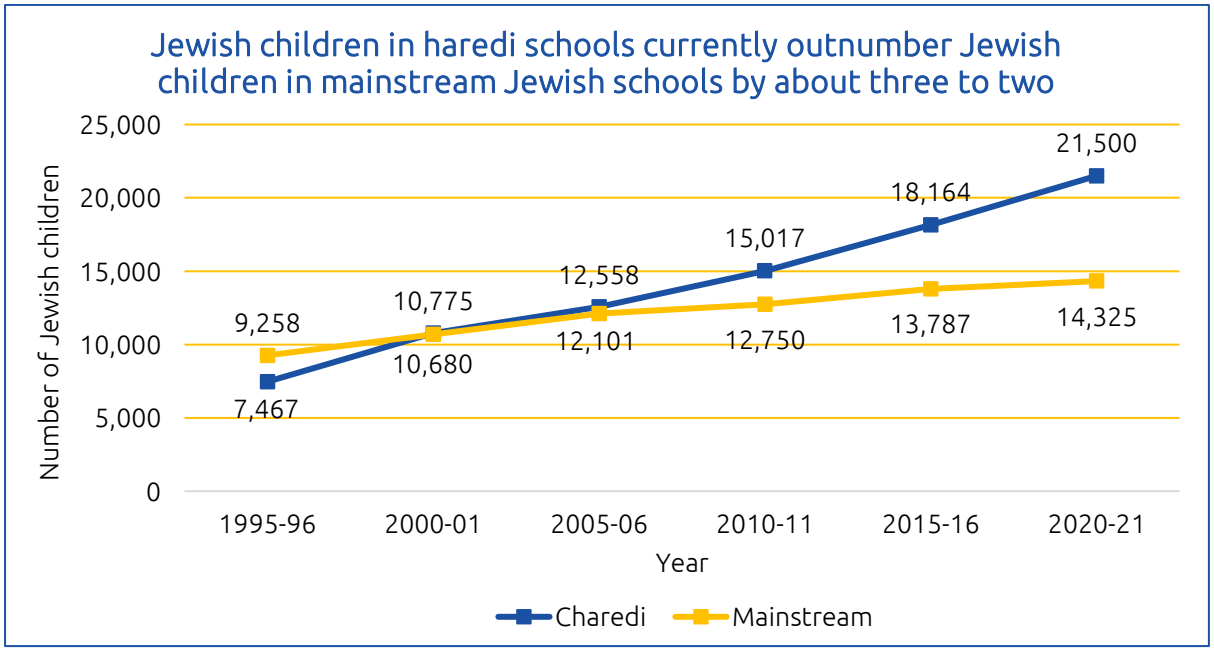


* Figure for academic year 2025-26 is estimated based on existing trends.

[1] See: Sacks, J. (1994). *Will we have Jewish grandchildren? Jewish continuity and how to achieve it.* (London: Valentine Mitchell).

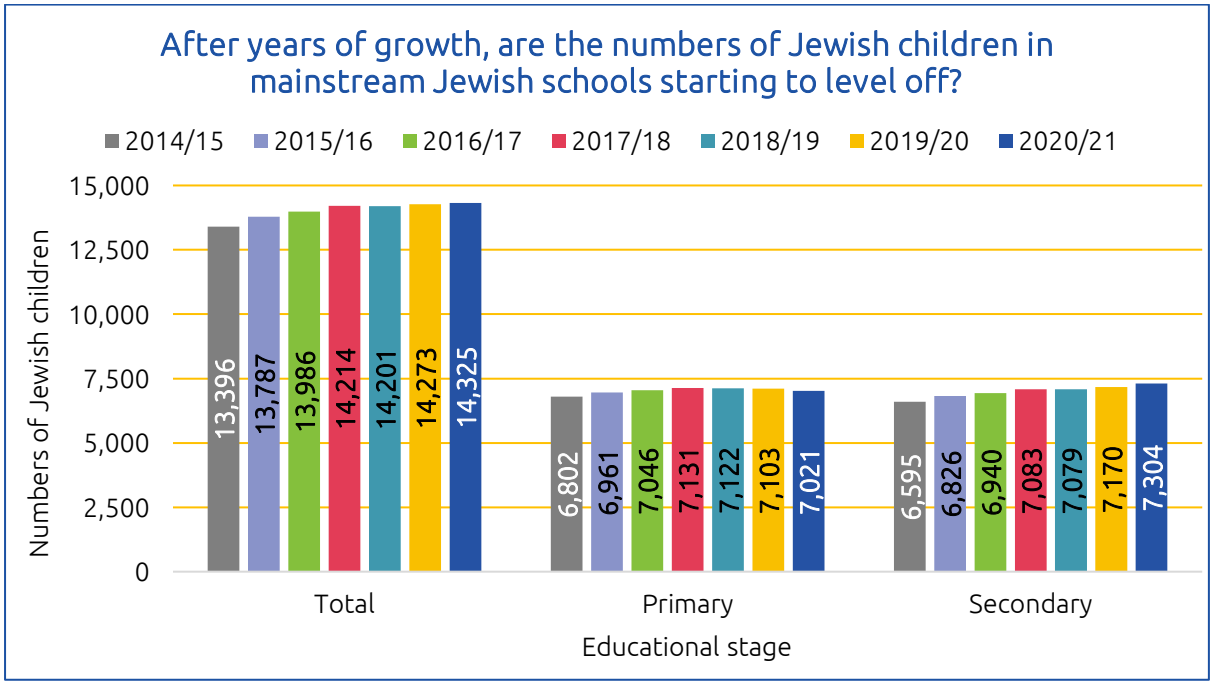
The establishment of new Jewish schools was significantly aided by the Blair government's (1997-2007) active policy to increase the number of faith schools in the country, based both on his assessment that faith schools achieved better outcomes, and his belief in the importance of children developing an understanding of the communities in which they live. At the same time, the UK was also becoming increasingly diverse and multicultural – the number of people from ethnic and religious minorities was growing, attitudes to homosexuality were softening, and previously marginalised groups began to feel more confident about expressing and celebrating their identities openly. In many respects, Jews across the UK benefited from this – in this new context the enlightenment idea that tended to see Jewishness as belonging to the private sphere, and fears of antisemitism that prompted many to keep their heads down, started to give way to growing feelings of self-assurance. In turn, the idea that Jews might send their children to a Jewish school became more palatable, and the numbers started to increase at a more rapid rate than previously, doubling in just twenty years, and continuing to climb since. The most recent data available (for academic year 2020-21) show 35,800 Jewish children registered, and assuming existing trends continue, that figure could reach about 40,000 by the mid-2020s.

However, in trying to understand the changes that have occurred since the 1990s, it is important to bear in mind some of the demographic features of the UK Jewish population. First, the Jewish population as a whole decreased significantly in size over the course of the second half of the twentieth century, falling from about 420,000 in the 1950s to under 300,000 by the year 2000. The increase in Jewish school enrolment numbers over that period needs to be seen in this context – the rise that occurred over that period happened despite that larger story of overall Jewish population decline, indicating an even greater change in parental preference than first appears. Second, the size of the UK Jewish population remained reasonably stable in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and is now showing signs of growth, due particularly to demographic dynamics in the most religiously Orthodox parts of the population – the haredi community. High fertility rates – haredi women in the UK have, on average, six to seven children each – combined with normal mortality rates, have helped the haredi population to grow at a rate of almost 4% per annum. Given that all haredi parents choose to send their children to Jewish schools, much of the rapid growth in recent years can be accounted for by this factor. Indeed, whereas there were more Jewish children in mainstream (i.e. non-haredi) Jewish schools than haredi ones in the mid- 1990s, today the numbers in haredi schools outnumber the numbers in mainstream schools by about three to two.



Nevertheless, total numbers have been increasing in the mainstream sector too, rising by 55% over the past quarter century. However, data for the most recent years suggest that growth may be showing signs of slowing down, and that the numbers may even be beginning to fall. It is too early to know for sure – enrolment numbers are affected not only by parental choice but also by demography, so a decline in births may also be a factor – but for planning purposes, it is important to understand what is going on, and work is being done by JPR in that regard.

Moreover, as can be seen in the chart below, there are slightly different patterns in the mainstream primary and secondary sectors. The numbers of Jewish children in Jewish secondary schools have continued to rise year-on-year in recent times, from 6,595 in 2014/15 to 7,304 in 2020/21. However, in the primary sector, numbers peaked in 2017/18, and fell subsequently. The overall picture in the primary sector for the seven years shown remains one of growth (by just over 3% from 6,802 at the beginning of the time series to 7,021 at the end,) but given the prevailing pattern of continual growth over the past decades, the more recent indicators of decline are noteworthy.



/ Why do parents choose to send their children to Jewish – or non-Jewish – schools?

Further information about demographic change should become available over the coming year, aided particularly by analysis of the 2021 Census data, but research has been conducted recently about the other key element affecting the counts – parental choice. The issue was initially investigated in a 2018 pan-European study sponsored by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) and conducted by a joint JPR-Ipsos team. Its cross-national nature is particularly valuable as it allows us to see similarities and differences in motivation among Jewish parents living in different European countries, thereby lending greater meaning to the findings in any particular place. In the charts below, the results for the UK and France are shown (the largest two Jewish populations in Europe), alongside the combined results for ten other countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and Sweden[2]).

[2] Small sample sizes in these countries prevents us from analysing them individually.

The study offered parents of Jewish children in Jewish schools six possible reasons why they might have chosen that path:

1. It was convenient to do so (e.g. close to home, easy to get there, etc.);
2. It was affordable/a good option economically;
3. The particular school in question had high academic standards;
4. The parents wanted their child/ren to have friends with similar values;
5. The parents were concerned that their child/ren might encounter antisemitism in a non-Jewish school;
6. The parents wanted their child/ren to have a strong Jewish identity.

A seventh catch-all 'other' option was also offered, and respondents could select up to three reasons they found most compelling.

In all three geographical contexts shown, these parents were most likely to point to a desire for their child to develop a strong Jewish identity as a motivator – four in five Jewish parents in the UK and across Europe highlighted this factor, and two in three did so in France. This was followed in most places by a desire for their children to have friends with similar values, which also scored highly. The exception was in France, where concern about antisemitism in non-Jewish schools was a more common motive – indeed, there, it appeared in parents' responses almost as frequently as the desire to strengthen Jewish identity. By contrast, this concern about antisemitism in non-Jewish schools only featured for one in five Jewish parents in the UK – a notable proportion, but a very different result from France, and indeed, other parts of Europe.

Jewish parents send their children to Jewish schools to strengthen their Jewish identities and to have friends with similar values; concern about antisemitism in non-Jewish schools is a major factor in France, but less so elsewhere

Rank	UK	%	France	%	Other Europe	%
1.	Jewish identity	82	Jewish identity	66	Jewish identity	81
2.	Shared values	59	Antisemitism	63	Shared values	53
3.	Academic standards	45	Shared values	47	Academic standards	45
4.	Convenience	22	Academic standards	40	Antisemitism	31
5.	Antisemitism	19	Convenience	10	Convenience	8
6.	Cost	3	Cost	1	Cost	0
	Other	*9*	*Other*	*8*	*Other*	*10*

Note: UK: n=834; France: n=372; Other: n=921.

'Academic standards' was the third most common motive for parents in the UK and elsewhere in Europe, except for France, where it still featured strongly in fourth place. Convenience was two to three times more likely to be highlighted by UK parents than those living elsewhere, testifying perhaps to the plethora of Jewish schools that have been built in recent decades in neighbourhoods with large Jewish populations. Vanishingly few parents anywhere cited the cost of Jewish schooling as a motive, despite the fact that large numbers of Jewish schools in both the UK and France are state funded, and compete with private schools for children.

Given that the question allowed respondents to select up to three responses, it is noteworthy that in all three contexts, Jewish identity, shared values and academic standards appear among the most common motives identified. However, strikingly, concern about antisemitism in non-Jewish schools featured very strongly in France and, to a lesser extent, elsewhere in Europe, whereas it appears very much as a minority concern in the UK.

Parents who had chosen to send their child or children to *non-Jewish* schools were also invited to share their reasons for that decision. In this instance they were also offered six response options, from which they could select up to three:

1. There was no suitable Jewish school available;
2. Convenience (i.e. a non-Jewish school was close to home, easy to get to, etc.);
3. Cost (i.e. it was cheaper than other alternatives);
4. Academic standards;
5. The parents preferred a school environment that was not exclusively Jewish;
6. The parents were concerned that children in *Jewish* schools might be particularly vulnerable to antisemitism.

Again, an additional 'Other reason' option was offered too.

The most common motive in both the UK and France was what we have termed 'Integration' – i.e. that parents actively preferred a non-Jewish school environment for their children to give them a broader cultural experience. This was cited by about two-thirds of all such parents in both countries; slightly more so in France where the value of *laïcité* (secularism) is a constitutional principle. This preference provides both countries with a hint about the optimal penetration level Jewish schools might be able to achieve – there is a sizeable proportion of Jewish parents who maintain that they do not want Jewish schooling for their children because they want them to be educated within a broader social and educational context. That is not to suggest that these parents are disinterested in their children's Jewish educational development – on the contrary, one landmark study on the topic in France found that 60% of parents who sent their children to a non-Jewish school said that giving their children a Jewish education remained 'very important.'[3]

Parents choosing non-Jewish schools want their children to mix in wider social and educational circles, but some would choose Jewish schools if a local option was available.

Rank	UK	%	France	%	Other Europe	%
1.	Integration	62	Integration	66	Convenience	41
2.	Convenience	34	Convenience	29	Integration	38
3.	Academic standards	32	Availability	19	Availability	31
4.	Availability	25	Cost	13	Academic standards	18
5.	Antisemitism	6	Academic standards	13	Antisemitism	12
6.	Cost	5	Antisemitism	11	Cost	10
	Other	*22*	*Other*	*16*	*Other*	*25*

Note: UK: n=518; France: n=964; Other: n=1,323.

[3] See: Cohen, E. H. 'Attitudes, behaviours, values, and school choice: a comparison of French Jewish families,' in: Pomson, A. and Deitcher, H. (eds). *Jewish Day Schools, Jewish Communities* (Oxford: Littman, 2009).

Convenience also featured commonly in all three contexts – it came second on the list in both the UK and France, and actually topped it elsewhere. The suggestion is that pragmatism is important – if it is logistically easier to send their child/ren to a local non-Jewish school than to a Jewish one which may be further away, these parents will do so. Of course, decisions taken about where to live often reflect people's priorities – finances allowing, parents who strongly wish to educate their children in a particular school often choose to live close to it. So whilst there are exceptions of course, many of those choosing to live out of reach of Jewish schools are likely to have little or no interest in sending their children to one.

Academic standards appears as the third most common option selected by parents in the UK, unlike in France and elsewhere where it comes fifth and fourth on the list respectively. Interestingly, in all three contexts, parents sending their children to Jewish schools were more likely to select academic standards as a motive for their decision than parents sending their children to non-Jewish schools, which suggests that improvements in Jewish schools in this regard would be somewhat unlikely to significantly increase the number of parents choosing Jewish schooling. Factors such as convenience and, as discussed next, availability, appear to be more important, particularly on mainland Europe.

Availability is identified as one of the top three reasons in both France and elsewhere in Europe, but comes fourth on the list in the UK. In truth, the issue here is not simply availability; it is also suitability – while parents selecting this option are certainly saying that a Jewish option was not available to them, they may well also be pointing to the lack of a *suitable* Jewish school for their child/ren. This could be a reflection of the particular school or the particular child; for example, non-Orthodox parents may feel the local Jewish school is too Orthodox for them, or parents may believe that their child would fare better in another school for their own particular social, educational or developmental reasons. Further research is required to understand this, but given the rather high likelihood of parents selecting it, this would seem to be an issue for anyone concerned about Jewish schooling.

Concern that their children might be vulnerable to antisemitism by attending a *Jewish* school (perhaps because they would be seen as identifiably Jewish on the way to and from school, or because the school might be targeted for attack) came relatively low on the list in all three places – this is largely not a reason why parents choose a non-Jewish school. This finding is particularly striking in France, which experienced a deadly terrorist attack on a Jewish school in Toulouse in 2012: but even there, the anxiety appears to be much more concentrated among Jewish school parents fearing antisemitism in non-Jewish schools, than it is among non-Jewish school parents fearing antisemitism in Jewish ones.

The cost of Jewish schooling also features low down on the list – it is most likely to be identified as a factor among parents of non-Jewish schools in France, but only about one in seven or eight did so there, and certainly in the UK and elsewhere, it is not found to be a notable motive. However, those selecting 'Other reasons' are quite high in all three places, pointing possibly to more personal reasons for their choice, but again, more work is required to understand this.

Focusing on the most common motives, it is clear than in all three contexts, simple convenience alongside a clear desire for their child/ren to be educated in a non-exclusively Jewish environment are the most common reasons stated. The lack of availability of a place in a suitable Jewish school features too, particularly in France and elsewhere across continental Europe; in the UK, the academic standards available in a chosen non-Jewish school is among the top three reasons cited.

/ Have motives changed in the UK over the past five years?

Given that these data all capture a moment in time – in 2018 – to what extent might attitudes have shifted since then? It is not possible to know for most countries in Europe, but we are able to make an assessment for the UK as the identical questions were posed to a sample of Jews there in spring 2023, using the JPR research panel.

In posing the questions again, it was conceivable to think that attitudes might have shifted somewhat in that time. The five years between 2018 and 2023 were quite a disruptive period, marked by the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated effects, not least on schools and young people, as well as rising inflation and a major increase in the cost of living. At the same time, other major issues may also have prompted people to re-think their more general priorities in a variety of ways, not least the withdrawal of the UK from the European Union, political turmoil around the 2019 General Election followed by two changes of Prime Minister, increased concerns about climate change and the rapid development of artificial intelligence. Jews were as likely as anyone else to be affected by these forces, but have had other issues to contend with too – ongoing concern about antisemitism has rarely, if ever, been out of the news for long, conflict in Gaza in May 2021 spilled over onto the streets of the UK generating considerable fear and anxiety, and recent political turmoil in Israel has forced many to grapple with their relationship with a changing Jewish State. Such disruptions could conceivably have prompted people to rethink their priorities in different ways, including in the area of their children's education.

However, attitudes seem to have barely shifted at all. Whilst slight methodological differences mean that the comparisons between the 2018 and 2023 data should be made with caution, the results are remarkably similar. Both the proportions of parents selecting each of the options and the ranking of the options remain essentially the same. The only response that may have shifted slightly – and even in this instance, we would urge caution due to methodological differences – is the cost factor for parents choosing Jewish schools: the possible inference is that the high cost of private non-Jewish schooling has prompted more parents to opt for a Jewish state school in the currently challenging economic climate.

The motivations of UK Jewish parents for educating their children either in a Jewish or a non-Jewish school have not changed in any notable way over the past five years.

Jewish school		
	2018	2023
Jewish identity	82%	80%
Shared values	59%	60%
Academic standards	45%	41%
Convenience	22%	23%
Antisemitism	19%	16%
Cost	3%	8%
Other	*9%*	*10%*

Non-Jewish school		
	2018	2023
Integration	62%	59%
Convenience	34%	36%
Academic standards	32%	29%
Availability	25%	26%
Antisemitism	6%	6%
Cost	5%	3%
Other	*22%*	*16%*

Note. Jewish school ns = 834 (2018) and 279 (2023); non-Jewish school ns = 518 (2018) and 324 (2023).

/ Summary and conclusion

Increasing numbers of Jewish parents in the UK have opted to send their children to Jewish schools consistently since at least the 1950s. But there is some evidence to suggest that trend may now be reaching its peak in the mainstream, non-haredi sector; by contrast, in the haredi sector, population growth continues to drive enrolment numbers up.

Parents are choosing Jewish schools for a variety of reasons, but the main ones appear to be that they want them to have strong Jewish identities and to mix with other Jewish children; beyond pragmatic reasons (convenience, availability of places) they are most likely to be opting for non-Jewish schools for the opposite reason – they want their children to be educated in a broader ethno-cultural context and to mix with a more diverse student body. Concerns about antisemitism in non-Jewish schools is a much greater consideration for Jewish parents in France and, to a lesser extent, the rest of Europe, than it is for Jewish parents in the UK. The fundamental motivations behind parental choices of school do not appear to have changed at all over the past five years, despite the global pandemic, the challenging economic environment, and quite widespread concern about antisemitism.

The decisions Jewish parents take about where to educate their children is a microcosm of a much larger perennial issue – where does one draw the line between immersion and engagement in Jewish communal life versus immersion and engagement in wider society? The particular and the universal rub up against each other in this most practical and personal of choices, and ultimately, all Jews need to determine for themselves which option best reflects their values and wishes. But an important policy question emerging for the UK Jewish community is whether to work towards continued increased numbers in Jewish schools, or to prepare for stability or decline in the mainstream sector. Decisions in this regard should be driven by careful monitoring of two fundamental types of data: demographic realities (how many Jewish children exist in each year group?) and parental preference (what do parents want?). In considering the first of these, monitoring patterns of migration may be more important in the coming years than it has been in the past, perhaps particularly from Israel, as political tensions there may drive an increase in emigration. However, even without that factor, the number of Israel-born individuals living in the UK more than doubled between 2001 and 2021, and there is no reason to suggest that this trend will not continue. Of course, we cannot assume that all Israeli migrants will necessarily choose Jewish schools for their children, but it is reasonable to hypothesise that at least some will.

In France, the dominant policy issue appears to be one for the state more than the community. In a country ideologically committed to secularism and integration, close to two-thirds of parents who select Jewish schooling for the children say they do so in part out of concern that their children will encounter antisemitism in general schools. Indeed, they are as likely to describe this as a motive as they are to point to reasons associated with Jewish identification. The issue for the French authorities appears to be how non-Jewish schools can become more hospitable to Jews, and sensitive to their anxieties and concerns? The monitoring of Jewish attitudes and experiences there, alongside careful demographic work, would shed light on changing realities.

More generally, in other parts of Europe, sample size limitations prevent us from analysing Jewish parent populations within individual countries. This is largely due to European Jewish populations being small to begin with – with the exception of the UK, France and Germany, no country in Europe has more than 100,000 Jews living in it, and the vast majority have fewer than 30,000. Investing in quantitative and/or qualitative research on the preferences of Jews in different European countries would help to shed light on parents' educational needs and priorities, thereby helping both communal and governmental authorities to provide services at levels that are aligned with requirements.

/ Key findings

- The number of Jewish children enrolled in Jewish schools is expected to reach about 40,000 by the mid-2020s.
- Jewish children in haredi schools currently outnumber Jewish children in mainstream Jewish schools by at least three to two in the UK.
- There is empirical evidence suggesting that Jewish enrolment levels in mainstream Jewish primary schools may have peaked in the UK.
- UK parents choose Jewish schools for their children primarily because they want them to have strong Jewish identities and to mix with children with similar values; this is also the case in France, but there, concern about levels of antisemitism in non-Jewish schools plays a role in prompting a sizeable proportion of parents to opt for Jewish schooling.
- Across all of Europe, parents choosing non-Jewish schools do so primarily because they want their children to be educated in a wider, non-specifically Jewish cultural environment.
- Over the past five years, there has been no discernible change in the motivations of Jewish parents to select a Jewish or general school for their children in the UK.

/ About the Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR)

The Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR) is a London-based research organisation, consultancy and think-tank. It aims to advance the prospects of Jewish communities in the United Kingdom and across Europe by conducting research and informing policy development in dialogue with those best placed to influence Jewish life positively. Web: www.jpr.org.uk.

/ Author

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