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Readers respond to "Hillel Voters Resist 'Change'"

[While being interviewed for the article] "Hillel voters resist 'change,'" (June 14, 2007), I anticipated an impartial, accurate report from your newspaper about Hillel's election and future plans. Therefore, I was surprised to read an article that, I believe, misleads readers and compels me to clarify some of its out-of-context statements.

Hillel's 2007 Board of Governors election was 'meticulously prepared to ensure every voice was heard and every perspective was shared in a fair process designed in partnership with all candidates and Miami's Central Agency for Jewish Education. Procedures were mailed to every school member, posted on the school's Web site and made available at the election so every voter would be familiar with the process. Like the most successful organizations, we applied best practices and insight from those involved, and as with all Hillel initiatives, this year's Board nomination and election process was inclusive and thoughtful.

As a Jewish parent, a community member, a Florida Jewish News reader, and a Hillel volunteer, I thank you for showing a commitment to Jewish education when the Florida Jewish News covers related stories. However, I stand in the same roles when I express my disappointment in the apparent misuse of information and a focus on select opinion rather than solid fact. As a journalist I believe that it is incumbent upon you to deliver comprehensive, factual stories when you write about Jewish education. After reading this article, I am unclear and concerned about your intent.

An item in need of clarification is Hillel's new school-wide department,

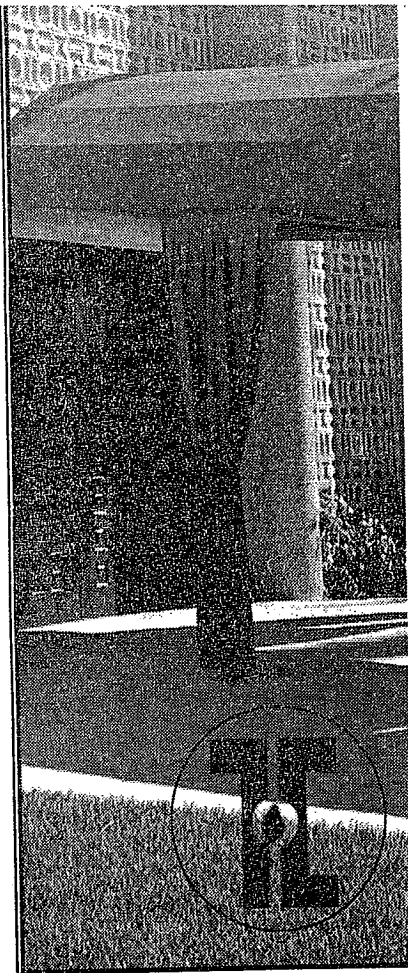
misleads readers.

I also am concerned about how the article presents a quote from me about our faculty. My comments were made to establish three points: faltering teacher and staff morale is not new to Hillel; such spirit unfortunately is all too common in schools across the nation; and, most of all, faculty morale and professional development are currently absolute priorities for Hillel, although long overlooked by past leadership. When we spoke, I referenced two studies commissioned by Hillel: one conducted by the ADL (1998) and one led by the The Lookstein Center for Jewish Education in the Diaspora (2002). The story disregards that I said these studies were specifically designed for and about Hillel, not "Jewish schools" in general. The article eliminates one source I quoted and misuses the other.

Unfortunately, I now find myself questioning how the Florida Jewish News chooses to highlight news. Innovative programs, extraordinary students and inspirational educators can be found in local Jewish schools today, and they make fantastic news stories. For example, tell readers about Hillel's strategic plan, a valuable tool not in place at most independent schools and finally being applied to one of South Florida's own. Explain how Hillel's Judaic curriculum is stronger than ever through a new schoolwide department. Share with readers that Hillel's valedictorian will attend Yale University in the fall.

I am proud and honored to be a member of Hillel as we continue to take this school to excellence. Over the years, [your paper has] told great stories about our accomplished students and teachers. Thank you for your continued partnership as we move forward on our path to provide the finest Jewish education for

1



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Hillel's new school-wide department, established to formally integrate Judaic studies, Jewish subjects and general studies as a clear way to fulfill the school's mission. For the first time at Hillel, an official division exists to join academics, religion and culture, preserving and enhancing methods some Hillel teachers have been offering effectively for years. Through this new department, Hillel instills every facet of our children's education with Torah ideals, taking Jewish education to the next level. The article implies that the initiatives Dr. Adam Holden shared in his Head of School report were falsely claimed; how sad that the individual, electing to hide behind a veil of anonymity, did so in reference to a curriculum that until now existed in only a few courses rather than as a school-wide initiative. I believe that these types of comments were taken completely out-of-context, as was the statement from me about implementation. Hillel's current focus is to provide a rich educational experience infused with Jewish values and Judaic studies. The fact is that never before have Jewish and general lessons been so intertwined in Hillel's program of studies, and, unfortunately, I find your reporting of this subject

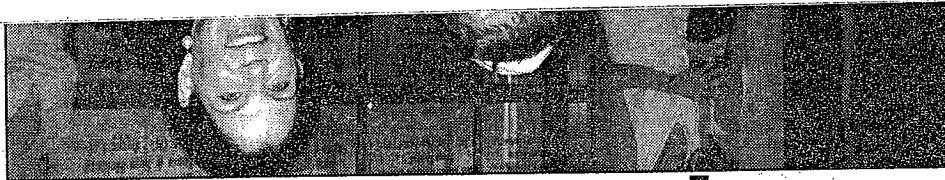
vide the finest Jewish education for our children. And thank you for your commitment to draw whole, clear pictures so we all may continue to rely on the Florida Jewish News as our community Jewish newspaper.

*Rafael Russ, Chairman
Hillel Community Day School*

Avi Frier's June 14th article "Hillel Voters Resist Change" discussed the election proceedings that took place at Hillel Community Day School in North Miami Beach on June 6th when hundreds of Hillel parents gathered to vote in the Board of Governors for the coming school year. Frier's article explained that a new slate of candidates ran against slate of officers originally proposed by the school's Nominating Committee. The new slate was formed in response to hearing public outcry about longstanding issues "such as low teacher morale, poor communication between the board and the parent body, and...disapproval of the recently hired Head of School Dr. Adam Holden." The new slate was hoping to put channels of communication in place that would enable all stakeholders to address these issues together.

continued on page 10

2



Tauber Academy Hosts Open House 'Smart & Healthy'

Staff Report

school children that will be in place at the start of the new school year

Local News: Miami-Dade

(3)

#30 Miguel Olivo

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LETTERS

continued from page 4

In the article, Rafa Russ, President, conceded that the high school and teacher morale are two areas in need of the board's attention. He went on to say that although "teacher morale is a top priority, ...it wouldn't be fair to present it as something that is new this year. The ADL did a study ten years ago that showed that teacher morale in Jewish schools was faltering."

Mr. Russ is correct in asserting that the problem of low teacher morale at Hillel is not new and has indeed been a problem for at least ten years. However, Russ incorrectly states that the ADL did a study showing that this problem is common to most Jewish schools, when in fact, the ADL did no such study, nor do most Jewish schools face this devastating problem.

The ADL Report from 1998 that I furnished to the Current Board of Directors was not a study that showed that morale in Jewish schools was faltering; rather, it was a report that specifically discussed the problems being faced at Hillel alone.

The report was initiated at the request of teachers and a few parents who still sit on the board today. All high school teachers were present when that study was conducted. No administrators were present to ensure that all teachers could speak candidly without fear of repercussions. The problems were detailed and solutions were offered. The administration at that time made sure that every single teacher received a copy of the report

and overseen by the Center for the Advancement of Jewish Education (CAJE), the school's Bylaw Chair and the Parliamentarian for the election.

One correction that must be called to the attention of your readers: In order to have the most neutral and fair election it was determined that all speeches as to the "state of the school" would take place after the vote. When I went over the directions to vote, I explained that Dr. Holden and Rafa Russ would speak after the vote so that no one would "misconstrue" their speeches as campaigning. That is why I was surprised to read the opposite in your article.

I am confident that the school is in a better place today because it did have a fair election process. The new board members are a diverse and talented group. They are parents, Rabbis, bankers, and past parents. I am very honored to have served the school this year.

*Hedy Whitebook
Chair, Committee on Governance
Hillel Community Day School*

[Contrary to what appeared in Avi Frier's article on the Hillel vote], the alternate slate did not come together because of the blog and was not connected to the blog. That was what the administration wanted everyone to think and that is how they tried (and apparently succeeded) to discredit the alternate slate. Most of us were not reading the blog. (One of [the members of the slate] doesn't even know how to use a computer and does not do internet at all)

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The faculty is still waiting for those solutions to be implemented.

Rafa Russ was not the President at the time and has only learned recently of this problem. Mr. Russ has stated that it's time that this problem of low teacher morale be solved "once and for all" and indeed he is right. Research has shown that in schools where teacher morale is high, students show an increase in achievement. For the sake of the teachers and the students at Hillel, it is in the board's best interest to make the sure the issue is indeed resolved once and for all.

Jessica Fishbein
Former Hillel Teacher,
"Hillel4Change" Slate Candidate

As the Chair, for the Committee on Governance at the Hillel Community Day School. I worked very closely with representatives for the slate and for the petition. All election procedures were agreed to by both parties

The bloggers are anonymous because they fear financial or social reprisal. The alternate slate members were anything but anonymous and put their names on everything they did despite the threats of reprisal and social vilification some went through personally.

The alternate slate came forward because of the continued communications missteps of the administration with no input or restraint from the Board. Most of the alternate slate members were parents through this year and, therefore, active enough in the school to know what was happening first hand without reading the blog. Though each member of the slate stepped up for their own reasons, most of us were inspired by our own kids' conduct after the initial firings and motivated by the lack of Kavod-respect-shown to many teachers in the wake of that event.

Denise Tamir
"Hillel4Change" Slate Candidate

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