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## Opinion

### Beth Steinberg: Sharing school space has immense rewards

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The halls are quiet now. The floors have been swept clean of dropped pencils, forgotten scraps of paper and abandoned lunch boxes. Another year of school ended. But a year unlike any other at the school where I teach.

I am an elementary teacher at Kadimah School, a private Jewish day school founded more than 50 years ago to provide a quality Jewish and secular education to students from all branches of Judaism. Our families include both the traditionally observant and the more moderate. They come together in an atmosphere of inclusion, acceptance and respect.

Through its history, the school has had many different houses. Almost 10 years ago, a school building on Eggert Road in Amherst was purchased and beautifully renovated. Unfortunately, "build it and they will come" did not happen. Eventually, the school building was put up for sale and purchased by the Center for Handicapped Children (CHC). A lease agreement was reached so that Kadimah could remain and use portions of the building.

And so, in September 2013, two schools opened in the same building. One dedicated to the care and education of a population that has profound disabilities, and another filled with able-bodied children whose education includes Hebrew, Jewish culture, history and religious observance, and the secular subjects taught in all other pre-K through eighth-grade schools.

In the weeks prior to the opening of our school year, CHC moved into what had for seven years been our offices, classrooms and meeting places. How would we adjust? How would our students, parents and faculty respond to this new student population?

From the start, the CHC director and our head of school jointly planned informational sessions to explain to our school community the nature of their students' disabilities and their assistive devices and equipment. And then school began. Many of their students looked and sounded very strange to us at first. Most cannot walk or talk without assistance, and many communicate using cries and grunts that sounded unfamiliar, if not a bit scary, to us.

But as both schools settled into their daily routines, our students not only become accustomed to the new kids in the building, they began to get to know them as individuals. They looked forward to seeing and chatting with their new friends as they would pass in the hallways. A Caring Club was established so that during the last hour of school on Friday afternoons, Kadimah kids could go into CHC classrooms and play with the children.

Has it been easy? No. We had to find alternate spaces for various programs, lunch, meetings and more. It wasn't without its frustrations. But overall the partnership worked. Most significantly, the affinity that our students developed for theirs (and I hope vice versa) was remarkable. It wasn't their difficulties that impressed our kids. It was their gifts and talents.

What is the Jewish attitude toward those with ailments or disabilities? "God saw ALL that God made, and behold, it was VERY GOOD." Our students learn this from Genesis, as well as the concept of B'tzelem Elohim – we are all created in the image of God.

Sharing space isn't easy, but the rewards? I guess they're immeasurable.

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