

# The Case for a Day School Giving Circle

Day school giving circles are a unique fundraising and engagement tool offering a variety of benefits to any day school. A giving circle can educate current and potential donors about the school's strategic plan, develop authentic and meaningful connections with key stakeholders, and inspire stronger lay leadership within the school. Day school giving circles can be designed for day school parents, alumni parents, student alumni, grandparents, current students, and many other groups.

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## What are giving circles?

Giving circles—groups of people who come together to pool their charitable donations and decide how to allocate them—are versatile communities that can enable members to explore their passions, impact their communities, and explore Jewish values.

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### Giving Circles Giving Within Day Schools

This resource is primarily focused on internally-focused giving circles, where funds are allocated to the day school itself. In this model, a group of community members come together for the purpose of learning more about the school community, and having a hands-on experience with decision making. Often, these giving circles are run in partnership with a school's development department. However, with giving circles, the possibilities are endless. Giving circles can be used as an educational tool in the classroom, as a community-building event with local neighbors or in any number of ways. If you'd like to have a coaching call to think through how a giving circle would work for you, email us at [hello@amplifiergiving.org](mailto:hello@amplifiergiving.org).

### Recruitment + Membership

Giving circle recruitment should be incorporated into the school's overall development strategy and communications plan. During solicitation, development staff and volunteers should share details about the giving circle with relevant community members. A giving circle's pot of shared funds typically consists of donations that are in addition to family or individual's annual gift. This way, the giving circle can effectively and meaningfully allocate a gift together.

Day school giving circles usually require that members donate a minimum gift to the school to participate. This expectation creates a sense of commitment and ownership over the decision making process. Some giving circle leaders prefer that everyone give the same amount; other leaders have found that allowing participants to give at different levels facilitates a more diverse and inclusive group.

Many giving circle leaders find that the day school giving circle is particularly valuable for families that are new to the school or who are not already large donors or board members. By engaging people who are not part of the school's "inner circle," the giving circle provides these individuals and families with a unique chance to weigh in on school spending.

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# Process + Techniques

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The majority of day school giving circles meet three times. Here's a sample giving circle process that is a helpful guideline.

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## Meeting #1:

### Exploring Jewish Philanthropic Values

The first meeting is based in self-reflective and group-building exercises, focusing on collective values and why group members support Jewish education. Often giving circle leaders use interactive tools to facilitate discussions, including Amplifier's Giving Panorama and the [Rose Community Foundation Jewish Philanthropy cards](#). The giving circle leaders facilitates a conversation around individual values and together, they create a giving circle mission and/or vision statement. Depending on the religious observance of the school community, the giving circle leader may integrate some Jewish text or learning related to giving into the first session, which can be led by a guest facilitator such as the head of school or rabbi.

## Meeting #2:

### Understanding the School Financial Landscape

The goal for the second meeting is to allow the giving circle members to more intentionally understand the school's operating budget and strategic plan. Often, a guest facilitator will present such as the head of the school, board chair or head of the finance committee. After this meeting, giving circle members will better appreciate why fundraising plays such a pivotal role in helping the school achieve its goals. In addition, participants in the giving circle are often presented with areas or projects to consider for their collective gift.

## Between Meeting #2 & Meeting #3

Often, school faculty and staff are invited to submit proposals to the giving circle for consideration. Among the active day school giving circles, there are two main avenues for this endeavor: 1) share proposals with giving circle members via email to read in advance of the "voting" session or 2) invite teachers and staff to pitch their proposals in person. While live pitching is more time-consuming for school staff, it offers the giving circle members a chance to hear the authentic passion, commitment, and voice of the teachers and serves as an invaluable way to include the school staff in the fundraising process.

## Meeting #3:

### Making a Decision

The third meeting is focused on decision-making. The group participates in a discussion about the project proposals, based on the values and mission statement determined during the first session. With the guidance of the group facilitator, the members of the giving circle vote or come to consensus around which project(s) the giving circle will fund.

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# Case Studies of Day School Giving Circles

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Here are three examples of how day schools have implemented internally-focused giving circles into their overall strategy. From these case studies, you can see that giving circles are customizable and have a unique ability to reach new and diverse members of the school community. Feel free to use these examples as a jumping off point as you come up with your own ideas.

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## The Silver Academy—Harrisburg, PA

### School Description:

Community day school in Central Pennsylvania serving students from preschool through 8th grade.

Number of Members: 12

Minimum Required Gift: \$18

Giving Circle Membership:  
Silver Academy Student Alumni

### Leadership Structure:

The giving circle was jointly facilitated by the parent Chair of the Development Committee and the school's Development Director.

### The Giving Circle's Objective

Founded in 1950, Silver Academy values its alumni as important stakeholders. The power of the school's giving circle is that it successfully engages alumni to feel empowered as partners in ensuring the school's growth.

### Logistics

The school launched its first giving circle in 2018 as a virtual giving circle for student alumni through Amplifier's Giving Circle Incubator. This initiative is a chance for alumni to give back and make a difference at a place they love. The circle's momentum is driven largely by a current parent who is also an alumni of the school and who co-leads the giving circle as its chair. The Silver Academy Alumni Giving Circle requires an \$18 minimum contribution, and with 12 participants, collects \$700 in total. The group meets four times for 45 minutes to an hour using Zoom. Some members of the group know each other, but many don't, having graduated in different years.

### Balancing School Needs with the Group's Goals

The giving circle is jointly facilitated by the parent chair and the school's Development Director. Sessions consisted of values-driven exercises, determination of a collective mission, review and discussion of teacher proposals, as well as Jewish text study. The selected goal of the group was to have a measurable impact on the school's growth. As such, the Development Director sought to offer partial-funding options and scenarios based on the teachers' proposals that would allow the giving circle to make small, much needed contributions. During the first giving circle cycle, the giving circle funded the purchase of a microscope to pay for several copies of the school play script for students who couldn't afford to purchase it. As a result, the giving circle members were able to be part of both science and arts enrichment, even though their ability to give was modest.

### Key Lessons Learned

The giving circle has offered new opportunities for giving on top of the contribution of members. For example, the science department had requested two microscopes, and while the giving circle selected to fund the purchase of only one, a member of the giving circle offered to pay for the second microscope on her own. Though it is impossible to plan for such an occurrence, it is a common outcome of the internally-focused day school giving circle model. The alumni giving circle will seek to capitalize on the school's reunion and engage new members. The group's chair will continue to serve this role and take on more responsibility for recruitment.

# Case Studies of Day School Giving Circles

## Portland Jewish Academy—Portland, OR

School Description: Independent Jewish day school serving students from early childhood through 8th grade founded in 1961.

Number of Members: 9 families

Minimum Required Gift: \$360, in addition a donor from the school matched all gifts to the giving circle

Giving Circle Membership: School Families

Leadership Structure: The giving circle was facilitated by the school's Development Director.

### The Giving Circle's Objective

The Portland Jewish Academy (PJA) hosted its Family Giving Circle with tremendous success. The giving circle is a community engagement tool and a method for funding new initiatives that are not otherwise included in the school's annual operating budget. In past years, babysitting was provided during giving circle meetings to make it possible for parents to participate. This group hasn't met regularly since 2020 due to covid but continued making grants through donations from the families in the giving circle.

### Logistics

9 families joined the giving circle and gave a \$360 minimum gift to the school's annual fund. All of the gifts were matched by a donor of the school, an arrangement organized by the Director of Development. The school raises a substantial amount of its annual campaign through its gala auction, and auction gifts are double-matched. This enabled the giving circle to allocate its funds for special projects. The giving circle model came to PJA by way of the Chair of the Development Committee who had attended an Amplifier Convening and who shared information and resources with the PJA staff.

### Balancing School Needs with the Group's Goals

The PJA Family Giving Circle has ensured teachers can easily submit proposals to the giving circle by using a Google form. They're encouraged to spend no more than 20 minutes on their proposal. If a project is selected, it is funded in the following year. Grant applicants that are not selected are shared in the school newsletter with the broader school community. This has allowed multiple projects to be resourced by a broader community of donors.

The families that are part of the giving circle also get a lot out of the process. The goals for the giving circle are building community, leadership, and positive connections within the school. Many of the members take on leadership roles at the school. One of the participants is now the head of the PTA. In addition, the giving circle members feel a sense of ownership over the projects they fund.

### Key Lesson Learned

The greatest challenge that PJA has encountered with the giving circle is that momentum can take time and people are sometimes resistant to commit to the circle. This coming year, the Director of Development is aiming to develop earlier buy-in and begin to build interest in the giving circle prior to official recruitment.

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# Case Studies of Day School Giving Circles

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## Salanter Akiba Riverdale (SAR) Acamedy & High School— Riverdale, New York

School Description: Modern Orthodox Jewish private yeshiva located in the Bronx, New York.

Number of Members: 60

Minimum Required Gift: \$180

Giving Circle Membership:  
Grandparents of current students

Leadership Structure:  
The giving circle is facilitated by the school's Director of Development and Associate Director of Development.

### The Giving Circle's Objective

SAR has a very strong and committed base of families who contribute towards the annual campaign each year, effectively funding the budget and scholarships. The focus of the giving circle is on engaging grandparents so that they can have greater insight into the day-to-day reality of the school and increase their commitment to the school community.

### Logistics

The Director of Development participated in Amplifier's Giving Circle Incubator at the request of one of SAR's donors. Based on the population and giving habits of the school's parents, she did not feel the giving circle was the right fit for them and wanted to explore using the model with grandparents. The giving circle requires a minimum contribution of \$180.

### Balancing School Needs with the Group's Goals

The giving circle meets three times. At the first meeting, the group of participants meets with the Academy Principal to explore values. During the second meeting, teachers and staff from the school present proposals to the group. One of the valuable elements of this dynamic is the opportunity for the grandparents to meet face to face with the teachers and administrative team and witness their intelligence, professionalism, and care for the students. The proposal session is recorded. Along with the proposals, the recording is sent to all participants to review prior to the third session. At the final meeting, the participants debate and vote on which proposals to fund with the giving circle collective fund. At its conclusion, the circle opted to fund about 60% of the proposed projects. One grandparent offered to fully underwrite one of the proposals that was not selected. In addition to the funds raised, there were unexpected benefits, including connections made between grandparents and the school staff and positive stories shared by word of mouth that spread through the school community. A number of grandparents have become significant donors since.

### Key Lesson Learned

The initial plan for the first session was to have a values-based self-reflective discussion. However, this approach did not work well for this group of grandparents. Instead, the giving circle facilitator has decided that the first session will now be an opportunity for the participants to bond and talk about their grandchildren! As an added bonus, this topic will lead into a discussion of the grandchildren's experiences at the school and ultimately, the school's values and culture.

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If you are interested in starting a giving circle at your day school, email us at [hello@amplifergiving.org](mailto:hello@amplifergiving.org). We can help you get started with a free coaching call, online resources, training opportunities and more.

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