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P. S. Tikkun Olam: Veteran Jewish educator opens charter school driven by vision of a community

By [Rachel Heller](#)



Strolling through his new charter school's rented quarters on a recent morning, Matt Albert swings open a restroom door and smiles.

"Look," he said, gesturing toward the tiled space. "Clean bathrooms. Often, that's the scariest place in a public school."

The citrus-hued rooms of the Oasis Theatre on Wilshire Boulevard near Highland Avenue might not seem like a standard site for a new public school. But maybe, Albert believes, a little diversity is just what the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) needs.

After two years of fundraising and petitioning the district, Albert is opening the doors of New Los Angeles Charter School (New L.A.) on Sept. 3 to 75 sixth-grade students. The former Milken Community High School educator hopes the middle school's small class sizes and community-service-oriented curriculum will fill a need in a part of the city that has been underserved for years.

"We want to nurture a diverse body of students who are passionate about learning, engaged in their community and have respect for themselves and others," said Albert, founder and executive director of New L.A. "We want kids to work on solving problems in their own communities and grow up to become civic-minded adults."

To Albert, who also served as admissions director at the Los Angeles campus of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR), that means getting the children out of conventional classroom programming and into the world around them. Once a week, students will walk three blocks south to Wilshire Crest Elementary School on Olympic Boulevard to read to second- and third-grade kids, through the Jewish Federation's KOREH L.A. literacy program. They will aid cleanup efforts at the 200-acre Ballona Wetlands Ecosystem in Marina del Rey. Albert is also trying to partner with a local retirement community so the students can visit the elderly, soak up their oral histories and gain greater appreciation -- and empathy -- for senior citizens.

These community service activities, Albert said, will foster among New L.A. students a gut-level understanding of what makes up a neighborhood and the hard work, pride and leadership it takes to make one flourish.

"Teaching civic responsibility and the importance of knowing what's going on in the world is a big part of the mission," said educator Tanya Kennedy, who will teach Earth science at the school. "We want students to be connected -- as part of the school community, the city community and ultimately as a citizen of the world."

Such a mission would not be easy to carry out at a traditional public school, according to Albert.

"LAUSD is a huge, bureaucratic district with almost 800,000 students," he said. "There are a lot of obstacles to actually getting things done within the district."

With a charter school, Albert could create an outside-the-box educational program, while still keeping the school free and open to all L.A. students.

New L.A. is meant to serve students from both the Carthay area, which has not had a local middle school for decades, and the Mid-Wilshire area, which is served by John Burroughs, a large LAUSD middle school a few blocks away from New L.A.'s Wilshire Boulevard site.

"At some public middle schools, there are 2,000 kids," he said. "You have a 10-year-old walking through the halls, and nobody knows them. This is a critical time for them."

Private schools can provide a top-notch learning environment for students, Albert said, but soaring tuition fees keep many families out.

Yet charter schools -- which collectively serve about 41,000 students in the Los Angeles area -- come with their own set of assets and pitfalls. They are authorized and funded by LAUSD, but don't have to follow the district's standard classroom protocol. In exchange for greater freedom in terms of budget, curriculum and programming, they must find their own location and startup funds.

New L.A.'s initial enrollment is made up of 75 sixth-graders who will be divided into three classes, and the six classrooms at the Oasis Theatre, owned by the non-denominational Oasis Christian Center, provides ample space.

The school's faculty will set aside time at the end of the school day for an intervention program that will focus on enrichment and skill-building. Kids will also meet with a student adviser for 30 minutes each day to talk about social and emotional issues, tolerance and community building.

"Our teachers have taken a huge risk coming here," Albert said. "They're out of the union; they've had to resign their positions at LAUSD. But they are confident about our mission."

For Adina Ackerman, who will teach language arts and history, the chance to work at New L.A. was "something I couldn't pass up."

Ackerman has known Albert since her sophomore year at Milken Community High School, when he was her Jewish history teacher. They also worked together as counselors at Camp Ramah in Ojai.

The Los Angeles native got her start as a fourth-grade teacher at Temple Israel of Hollywood's day school and then taught third grade at Figueroa Street Elementary School in South Los Angeles.

"There is very little freedom within the curriculum and a huge emphasis on testing," she said of her experience with LAUSD. "You can't really be a great teacher because you're spending all your time preparing for tests."

South Africa native Tanya Kennedy said she was also drawn to New L.A.'s creative atmosphere after three years teaching second and third grade at an inner city San Diego school.

The other two teachers on Albert's five-member staff bring a range of personal talents to the mix. Math teacher Lena Liu, fresh from a five-year stint at an elementary school in Koreatown, is also a violinist who has played with hip-hop orchestra daKah, MC Mos Def and musician Rahzel. Humanities teacher Stephen De Sal has 20 years' teaching experience, including for gifted and talented students in the Pasadena Unified School District.

Much of New L.A.'s design is shaped by Albert's own background.

Growing up in Brentwood, he went to Jewish day school at Temple Emanuel until sixth grade and then attended public middle and high schools. He went to Camp Ramah and stayed on as a counselor while an undergraduate at UCSD. He continued to work for Camp Ramah in Israel after graduation.

When he returned from Israel, Albert enrolled in a political science doctorate program at Columbia University and worked as a Hebrew school teacher and tutor on the side. But he realized he enjoyed teaching more than his doctoral program, so he quit. Back in Los Angeles, he took a job teaching history at Milken, where he eventually moved up to positions as dean and assistant principal. He worked toward his doctorate in education at UCLA at night.

After 10 years at Milken, Albert took a job at HUC-JIR as admissions director, but dreamed of getting back into the classroom.

The concept for New L.A. was a notion Albert had been kicking around while still at Milken.

"I wanted to be in public education," he said. "I felt that the inequalities in society in general were so large that

opening another private school wasn't going to address that."

Founding the school as a nonprofit, he recruited a set of colleagues to the board who worked to get New L.A. up and running. The group petitioned LAUSD and drew up a comprehensive education plan. After the district authorized the school in April, they obtained startup funds through private grants (state funding doesn't kick in until the students arrive), including a \$250,000 donation from the Walton Family Foundation. Then they held interviews and hired the teachers, and negotiated a deal with Oasis.

"It's not ideal," Albert said. "If you walk into a private school and then you walk into a charter school, there are major differences. The parents who are sending their kids here understand that there is no huge soccer field and there's no swimming pool. But that's the tradeoff."

Craig Englander, a Marina del Rey-based lawyer, said he knew little about New L.A. when he sent in an application for his daughter, Samantha, 11. But he was impressed by Albert's vision.

"He had a concept I really liked, with a focus on social justice," Englander said. "I liked that it was a small school that would be able to devote energy to each individual student. It seemed like it would offer more than a run-of-the-mill public school."

Some of those offerings include an organic lunch program through Los Angeles-based Revolution Foods, yoga classes, a personal MacBook laptop for each student, after-school care and monthly field trips to LACMA.

New L.A. received more than 200 applications for its 75 spots. Next year the school will add a seventh grade, and the year after that they will begin working at full capacity, serving 225 students in sixth through eighth.

"This project comes out of a desire to do tikkun olam -- to repair the world," Albert said. "That's why our mission is based on social justice. It isn't a uniquely Jewish value, and the school is totally secular, but that's what made this happen."

For more information on the New Los Angeles Charter School, visit <http://www.newlosangeles.org>