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JOHN TERHUNE / THE FORECASTER

Siblings Lon and Elaine Povich, center, followed in the footsteps of their great grandfather Nathan Povich by carrying the Torah at the 100th anniversary celebration of Beth Israel in Bath last weekend.

## Bath synagogue celebrates 100 years

By John Terhune

On Jan. 29, 1922, 250 singing Bath residents and guests marched up Washington Street to celebrate the dedication of their new synagogue. The event, described in an account in the Bath Independent newspaper, marked the start

of a new era for the town's burgeoning Jewish population.

Last Sunday afternoon, members of the Beth Israel Congregation celebrated their centennial by retracing the same route their forefathers walked generations ago, ending the march at their

historic synagogue.

"This was not a wealthy group of people," event organizer Marilyn Weinberg said of the group's founders upon the procession's arrival at the temple shortly after 1 p.m. "This community

*Synagogue, Page 16*

## A wintry mix: School districts differ on future of snow days

By John Terhune

They track the weather forecast days in advance. They wake up early to follow the cancellation ticker on a local news station – or maybe they decide to gamble by skipping the alarm altogether and just hoping for a blizzard.



Penna

For generations, students have treasured the snow day. Yet the rise of remote learning has forced school districts to confront an uncomfortable question: Do we still need to cancel school just because the weather is bad?



Potenziano

According to Paul Penna, superintendent of Maine School Administrative District 6, the answer is no.

"We're in a new century," said Penna, whose district is now trading snow days for remote instruction days whenever possible. "What we used to do may not be

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## Synagogue

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was built on shared responsibilities and shared goals.”

That community was on display during Sunday’s event, which drew roughly 100 masked individuals despite below-freezing temperatures. Members of the congregation, as well as Jewish leaders and politicians from around the region, sang as they marched to the synagogue.

Siblings Lon and Elaine Povich carried the Torah along the route, as their great-grandfather Nathan Povich had 100 years prior.

“We’re the fifth generation,” said Lon Povich, a Boston attorney who traveled to Bath for the celebration. “Obviously it’s very special.”

Jewish immigrants began arriving in Bath from Germany and Lithuania in the 19th century, according to Fred Weinberg, who created a website detailing the congregation’s history. Though they were generally welcomed into the town, the group had no house of worship; instead, they practiced their faith in an assortment of temporary locations, including the local YMCA and the homes of individual members.

Despite limited means, the group decided in 1919 to build a synagogue, Marilyn Weinberg said. After over two years of saving pocket change and fundraising, Beth Israel Congregation opened its temple.

“None of them were rich, but they all



JOHN TERHUNE / THE FORECASTER

Rabbi Vinikoor and the members of Beth Israel’s Hebrew school led attendees in song to conclude the event.

decided to contribute,” Marilyn Weinberg said. “They committed themselves to doing it.”

The event was a rare in-person meeting for Beth Israel members after nearly two years of mostly remote services, said Rabbi Lisa Vinikoor. Yet the community has remained strong throughout.

“I’ve been so impressed with people’s continued dedication,” she said. “It’s

pretty amazing.”

That dedication has defined the congregation since long before COVID, according to congregation President Peggy Brown, who noted the group rarely employed a professional rabbi before Vinikoor’s arrival in 2017. Instead, it fell on individual members to lead services and teach the congregation’s children at Hebrew school.

## Snow days

from page 1

appropriate or applicable for the kids that we’re training for the next generation.”

SAD 6, which includes Bonny Eagle High School, is avoiding snow days in order to limit disruptions to the school calendar, Penna said. Even though remote instruction has its flaws, he added, the format’s emphasis on independent learning could benefit students.

Yet while the school board approved Penna’s plan, the community has been split on the decision to nix snow days.

“I’m not going to tell you that everyone loves it,” Penna said. “I’ve heard both sides of the coin.”

“It does bum me out in a way because I’ve always had great memories with snow days,” said Shayla Harriman, a senior at Bonny Eagle. “It’s a good time for younger kids to get outside and embrace the snow and learn to love it in an area that gets so much snow like we do.”

Many districts, like Brunswick, have elect-

ed to keep snow days, at least partly because they’re a cherished tradition.

“Even before I had made my decision,” said Brunswick Superintendent Phil Potenziano, “parents were saying, ‘You know, we’d like to have that snow day.’”

This year, Brunswick has canceled school twice for weather, even as the district has demonstrated the ability to shift to remote learning to quell COVID-19 outbreaks. Multiple factors informed the policy decision, Potenziano said, including questions about the efficacy of remote instruction, logistical hurdles and the desire to provide students with a slice of normalcy after the pandemic flipped the academic world on its head.

Brunswick operated in a hybrid model last year and opted for remote days when the weather was poor. But even though students were used to working from home, missing out on days off was disappointing, according to junior Ellie Sullivan.

“Having to watch like all the snow outside – it wasn’t the best time,” Sullivan said. “You just look out your window, and it looks super

fun out. Not having to make up those days at the end of the year was also kind of nice, but it just wasn’t the same magic.”

Parents and teachers have generally supported the district’s decision to reinstitute snow days, Potenziano said. Yet he added that the policy may continue to evolve.

“I’m not here today to kind of say this is definitely what we’re going to keep doing,” he said. “We’ll want to get some more in-depth feedback.”

Portland Public Schools have adopted a hybrid approach to school closings this year, according to Melea Nalli, assistant superintendent of teaching and learning. The district’s new policy says that the first three bad weather days of the year will result in cancellations, while further storms will lead to remote days.

“We wanted to honor that tradition and acknowledge that there’s value in (snow days) for educators and students alike,” Nalli said. “But we also were trying to balance that with the fact that we now know how to do remote work, and so we don’t need to have as much cancellation as we might have in another context.”

Logistical concerns also factor into the district’s decision to call a remote day, as it did on Jan. 31 following a weekend white-out. In order to provide state-required lunches to students, Portland schools must announce the decision to hold classes remotely at least one day before a storm hits, Nalli said.

While the debate might seem to come down to nostalgia vs. learning, the prospects of both snow days and remote school can be very different for students in rural or poor districts, said Catharine Biddle, an associate professor of educational leadership at the University of Maine.

“Parents (in affluent districts) are like, ‘I

“There was usually someone in the community that was knowledgeable enough to lead the prayers,” Brown said. “Everybody helps out.”

The group is raising money to renovate a second building that it uses for gatherings, as well as to establish a fund that will ensure the group can continue to employ a professional religious leader, Brown said. So far, the group has raised \$670,000 toward its \$1 million goal.

Sunday’s celebration ended with Vinikoor and children of the Hebrew school leading attendees in song, a fitting end for a group committed to celebrating its past even while it looks toward the future.

“We’re obviously very different than we were a hundred years ago, and I think that’s a good thing,” Vinikoor said. “But nonetheless, we can pay tribute to our ancestors by doing the re-enactment, honoring them, and then also thinking about, with real hope and vision, the next hundred years of this congregation.”

Speakers at Sunday’s event included Brown, Bath City Manager Marc Meyers and City Council Chairperson Aaron Park, and Bowdoin College economics professor Rachel Connelly. State Reps. Denise Tepler and Allison Hepler and Sen. Eloise Vitelli presented the congregation with an official expression of sentiment on behalf of the Legislature.

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don’t want to deprive my kids of the joy that I had as a kid – going sledding and drinking hot chocolate and those kinds of things,” Biddle said. “That’s not the reality for so many kids.”

Children whose parents can’t take time off from work might not get a picturesque day of winter play when schools cancel, Biddle said. And in some Maine districts, technological limitations make remote learning a subpar option.

“The remote options (in some districts) consisted of packets that got sent home every week,” Biddle said. “That wasn’t even in the context of the (unexpected 2020) spring closure; that was all of last year.”

With no perfect option, Biddle said, each school must work with its stakeholders to craft a policy that works for the parents and students of the community.

For now, Brunswick’s policy seems to work for students like senior Margaret Chingos, who said the chance to decompress and play in the snow is more than a trivial interruption to real learning.

“It is the role of the Brunswick schools not only to educate us within the classroom but also to make us happy, healthy well-rounded students,” Chingos said. “Part of that is being able to take time for your mental health, to take time to connect with your environment, and snow days provide an opportunity to do that.”

Penna’s policy may also be the best thing for SAD 6, admitted Harriman. Still, she can’t help but miss the snow days she grew up with.

“I really do hope that they decide to bring it back at some point,” she said. “I think it is a really valuable time that kind of goes under the radar.”

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