

Attitudes Toward Women as Jewish Day School Administrators

by Rita Lance

Jewish religious women today are taking more public roles in the general workplace. They are lawyers, doctors, physical therapists, corporate officials, and mental health professionals, and it is only natural and desirable that their professional achievement spills over into Jewish communal life, including becoming leaders in Jewish education.

“The only special problem or limitation that women face in their new roles as leaders in Jewish education [heading co-ed and single-gender Jewish day schools, developing curricula, and supervising male and female teachers] is the attitude of a community which views them as secondary figures,” notes Rabbi David Silber, founder and Director of Drisha Institute for Jewish Education in New York City. “As women assume leadership roles and positions of real authority in the field of education, and in the Jewish community generally, these attitudes will change.”

As a student at the Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration of Yeshiva University for the last ten years, I researched many aspects of the field of Jewish education in the United States. An important fact that emerged from my studies indicated that men have traditionally filled the role of the Jewish school administrator, while most of the teachers at both the elementary and high school level have been women. I wondered what opportunities to obtain administrative positions in Jewish day schools existed for the many female students who shared my classes and courses and were trained as administrators. This question was the basis for the topic of my doctoral dissertation: “Attitudes Toward Women as Jewish Day School Administrators.”

The purpose of my study was to ascertain present attitudes of professional and lay leaders of Jewish day schools in the metropolitan New York City area toward women as administrators in Jewish day schools and toward opportunities for women who aspire to careers in educational administration in Jewish day schools.

A written survey questionnaire was used to gather the data. The survey consisted of several instruments, including the Attitude Research Instrument, Supplemental Questions, the Background Data Questionnaire, and the “Your Opinion” section. The questionnaires were sent to professional and lay leaders of Jewish day schools which are members of the Yeshiva Elementary Principals’ Council of Metropolitan New York (1996-97) and the Yeshiva High School Principals’ Council of Metropolitan New York (1996-97). Professional leaders included the principals and assistant principals, and lay leaders included the president and chairperson of the board from each of the schools.

CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS

The participants included 80 professional leaders and 44 lay leaders. Of the 124 respondents, male respondents accounted for the majority (65 percent). The professional group consisted of

almost equal numbers of male and female respondents, while the majority (84 percent) of the lay leaders group were male respondents, with only 16 percent female respondents. Most of the total group of respondents (89 percent) were age 40 and older, while only 11 percent were under the age of 40. The secular education of both the professional leaders and the lay leaders was high; that is, they held a bachelor's degree or beyond. Both groups had similar percentages (79 percent of the professional group and 82 percent of the lay group) of respondents who had a degree higher than a bachelor's degree.

The highest level of Jewish education for the professional leaders was much greater than that of the lay leaders. The majority (65 percent) of the professional leaders had Jewish education on a college level, while only 26 percent of the lay leader respondents had Jewish education on that level. More than a third (36 percent) of the total respondents had rabbinical ordination.

More than half (56 percent) of the total respondents had experience working under the supervision of a woman.

Most of the leaders (73 percent) were from co-ed schools. Only 15 percent were from all-girls schools, and 12 percent were from all-boys schools. It is important to note that, according to the Board of Jewish Education directories of the Yeshiva Elementary Principals' Council and the Yeshiva High School Principals' Council of Metropolitan New York (1996-97), which were used in this study, the majority (65 percent) of the schools were co-ed, while only 35 percent were single-sex schools. The majority (77 percent) of the total respondents were from elementary schools, while only 23 percent were from high schools

Almost half (47 percent) of the leaders of the schools in the study were from schools of medium-size student population, while representation from schools of small size (29 percent) and schools of large size (24 percent) was much smaller.

IMPORTANT FINDINGS

Statistical analysis of the data from the Attitude Research Instrument indicated the following factors related to attitudinal differences toward women as administrators in Jewish day schools:

The school's leader: In general, female leaders surveyed held a favorable attitude toward the employment of women as administrators in Jewish day schools, whereas male leaders surveyed held an attitude that fell between neutral to favorable.

The level of Jewish education: Leaders with rabbinical ordination held the least favorable attitudes toward women as administrators in Jewish day schools.

The type of school: Leaders from all-girls and co-ed schools held an attitude close to favorable, while leaders from all-boys schools held only a neutral attitude toward women as administrators in Jewish day schools.

Statistical analysis of the data from the Supplemental Questions, which investigated attitudes toward opportunities for women to pursue careers in administration in the respondents' own schools (co-ed, all-girls, all boys), indicated the following factors as related to differences in the

attitudes:

The gender of the schools' leaders: Female leaders hold a more favorable attitudes than male leaders toward encouraging women to prepare themselves professionally and to apply for administrative positions in Jewish day schools.

Age: Older leaders hold a more favorable attitude than younger leaders toward encouraging women to prepare themselves for administrative positions in Jewish day schools and to apply for these positions.

The level of formal Jewish education: Leaders with rabbinical ordination hold attitudes close to favorable toward encouraging women to apply for administrative positions in their schools, while leaders with Jewish education of afternoon school, day school, or college level hold favorable attitudes.

FAVORABLE ATTRIBUTES OF FEMALE ADMINISTRATORS

One of the most important findings of my study indicated that women administrators in Jewish day schools were perceived as possessing more attributes considered necessary in effective administration than men administrators possess.

The following attributes were perceived by the respondents to be strong points for female administrators: They are more flexible; they have a better verbal ability in interpersonal relations; they communicate more clearly with adults; they tend to possess better foresight; they are better in providing supervisory help to other persons; they pursue knowledge and information more willingly; they tend to criticize more constructively; they are more desirous of being helpful to other persons; they are able to utilize teaching experience more constructively; they better inform themselves with regard to professional problems; they are more tactful; they are more democratic in dealing with others; they communicate better with children; and they have more patience for their work

On the other hand, three attributes were found by the respondents to be strong points for male administrators: They are able to exercise better control over subordinates; they tend to stand job stresses more adequately; and they tend to feel more secure in their work.

CONCLUSIONS

Women currently involved in Jewish education who aspire to become administrators in Jewish day schools should become professionally trained for such positions. With appropriate qualifications, women administrators may make significant contributions to the field of Jewish education, and their presence should lead to an increase in the number of qualified personnel in Jewish day schools.

This study provides evidence that there are more opportunities for qualified women to become administrators in co-ed and all-girls schools than in all-boys schools in the metropolitan New York City area. In addition, there is a more positive perception toward women administrators than toward men administrators, in the areas of the attributes considered favorable to success

in school administration. The data gathered in this study can be used by Jewish day school administrative personnel recruiters and search committees, as well as by women applicants for administrative positions. The recruiters can use the data to help widen their pool of potential educational leaders to include more women candidates, while women candidates can use the data to help clarify their career plans and/or extend their career horizons. The data provided by this research study can lead to opening Jewish day school educational leadership opportunities to more women candidates and therefore to a greater number of qualified personnel.

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