
A Community-Based Supplementary High School Program: The Peninsula Havurah High

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In this article, we reflect on our experiences over the past few years with the Peninsula Havurah High (PHH), a community-based supplementary high school serving approximately 190 teens in grades 9–12 in the heart of the Silicon Valley. While we cannot possibly be comprehensive, we offer some observations on the tensions inherent in creating and maintaining a school serving teens from diverse synagogues.

The PHH began four years ago as a collaborative project of two synagogues in the Palo Alto area of California (a 2000 family Reform congregation and a 600 family Conservative congregation) and the Bureau of Jewish Education, which provides direct educational programs as well as support services and resources for educators.

Today, we are no longer a start-up but moving into a period of stabilization. The first few years were tumultuous. We had three directors in four years, we saw the complete turnover of rabbinic personnel in the largest of our synagogue partners, and two additional synagogues came on board. We also professionalized our governance structure, established a core faculty, and underwent a thorough outside evaluation by JESNA. While there remain issues to be resolved, we have learned some important lessons from our experiences.

COLLABORATION

Partners understand that in the interest of bringing together a critical mass of teens for weekly learning and socializing, they must be willing to trade off some benefits of running their own programs. Nevertheless, within the organizational processes of planning and policy-making, tensions invariably arise. The collaborating partners experience the contradiction of simultaneously wearing their *institutional hats* (whereby they represent their institution in the partnership) and their *community hats* (whereby the school's community-building goals are primary).

Confirmation is one example of this dilemma. How can

the school protect the confirmation program of the Reform synagogue, providing the rabbis of that congregation the time they need with their students, without hindering the rest of the program? Beyond time allocation, the issue is complicated by the concern that a strong confirmation program may adversely affect retention in the 11th grade (since confirmed teens feel they're "done"). Should the confirmation program of one partner, already compromised by time given to school-wide programming, be diluted further?

Another problem is the perception that when the community high school meets at a synagogue with better facilities, partners are sacrificing their member loyalty and connection to their own synagogue. It seems that they are "losing" the parents in order to better serve the teens.

In the community model, each partner will occasionally ask the tough questions: Are we still doing right by our own denomination, our synagogue's needs, and our goals for our teens? On the other hand, would shifting the balance compromise our shared goal of imbuing our teens with the comfort they will need in a trans-denominational setting to take on leadership roles in the college Hillel and beyond?

These tensions may well be irresolvable. They cannot, however, be ignored. We have learned that time must be set aside for listening to each others' needs and concerns in order to turn self-interest into enlightened self-interest.

Before opening our fourth school year, PHH held a Vision Retreat, using an outside facilitator, to focus on areas of success and tension and to revisit our original founding principles. The good will generated at the retreat renewed support for the shared vision of the PHH and engendered a feeling of cooperation and willingness to work with subcommittees addressing specific issues.

The Vision Retreat, along with a thorough formative evaluation conducted by JESNA, helped us formalize some of

the implicit understandings that partner institutions had developed during the initial “experimental” phase of the collaboration. It proved to be particularly important for each partner to articulate, for themselves and for the partnering synagogues, the gains and losses their institutions associated with the collaboration.

Our next step will be to add “at-large” members to our Partners Council. These members will represent the community, rather than individual partners. Such independent voices may free the partners to represent their own institutional issues more often. They will ensure that the Council continues to consider the integrity and long-term health of the program as a whole.

PROGRAMMING

Just as tensions arise when balancing partner and communal needs the great challenge of programming a community school is the tension of *variety versus vision*. We knew our mission was general enough to accommodate a wide spectrum of student needs and backgrounds, as well as the denominational differences. We also knew better, however, than to succumb to the “being-all-things-to-all-people” syndrome.

Synagogue education directors are used to requests for additions to their programs, such as Israel-advocacy programming, advanced Hebrew classes, community service options, traditional text study, arts and music options, and so on. They are used to explaining that their schools cannot do everything. We have seen, however, that in a community school, if one institutional partner feels that it has given up its own program, it wants to be compensated by offering classes that may not fit the evolving vision of this new program.

The principal’s job is to protect the “character” of the school. For community high schools to attract and retain teens, they must maintain authenticity; they must stand for something and thus have a *vision* even if this means not offering everything that every partnering congregation requests. Teens who continue to attend a Hebrew high school often do so because they perceive it as representing authenticity in contrast to the larger consumer culture, which fawningly caters to their wishes without standing for anything.

In our school, we have chosen to model adult-level interaction with the Jewish tradition by holding programming up to the model of “the step before college” instead of the “the step after 8th grade.” Teens judge everything, including Jewish programming, not by what it says, but by what it does. We make sure our classes and retreats do not meet in settings obviously meant for children. Our 9th grade curriculum includes the study of classical texts, from commentary on *Genesis*, to the sources of Milton Steinberg’s *As a Driven Leaf*, to *Kabbalistic* texts. Our electives include a number of comparative religion courses that prepare students for late-night discussions in a typically diverse college dormitory. We are developing a drama elective, not just to have the kids put on a show, but rather to model an adult actors’ workshop, appropriate for students who are often starring in complex high school productions. And in general, we encourage teachers to model a genuine adult enthusiasm and interaction with Jewish sources. They thereby *show* rather than *tell* their love of learning; they are mentors and role models, rather than merely conveyers of information.

Our focus does limit our ability to respond to the programmatic suggestions of the synagogue partners. It also forces us to discount some options for attracting kids to school on a short-term basis with programs that do not fit into our model. If the school attracts teens by claiming to be focused on “adult Jewish life,” but then contradicts itself in its community service class by having the teens make clay *hanukiot* to give to the Jewish Home for Elders, teens will quickly notice the disconnect. If the program assures 11th and 12th graders, “If you come back, we won’t waste your time,” it cannot then offer them a class in Jewish cooking. In that case, the teacher ought not be surprised that teens prioritize working on an A.P. History paper or reading *Siddhartha* than on program attendance, even when the teens themselves had begged for the “fun cooking class.” We work hard to avoid mixed messages.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND RELATIONSHIPS

During its first few years, the PHH did not create a visible community presence; the weekly successes of the school did not travel beyond the school site. There were members of the local regional Federation Council who were unaware of our school, and even those who were aware of it did not know precisely what it was. Although our princi-

pal made it a priority to visit with each rabbi and educator at the four partnering congregations, the PHH did not permeate the consciousness of those synagogues, remaining more or less invisible except to the families with teens attending the program.

One might wonder why the PHH remained such a well-kept secret for so many years.

When the school opened, it received a grant from a Supporting Foundation of the Jewish Community Endowment Fund through the BJE, but the local Federation Council was not asked for its input or financial support. Garnering local federation support was not on the list of priorities, since the school had a generous grant, and there were plenty of other things that needed to happen to ensure a successful program. Thus, the local Federation Council and Allocations Committee were not involved in the initial planning phases of the PHH, nor were they instrumental in securing funding from the Federation's Endowment Fund due to the internal structure by which the federation handles endowment matters. The local council therefore had no ownership of the program's success.

The synagogues also were not responsible for general and financial support; they were responsible for providing the site and rabbis to teach. They were not responsible for any community outreach to unaffiliated teens, or to help find potential funders.

Complicating matters, the PHH mostly serves teens whose parents are members of synagogues. In this federation community, there is a tension between funding non-syna-

gogue programs and providing material supports to synagogues to serve their own members. This causes reluctance to support programs perceived as exclusively serving synagogue memberships.

A final factor was turnover: The head rabbi at the largest synagogue and his colleagues (educator rabbi and associate rabbi), who were key players at the inception of the school, had all moved on. Their replacements were asked to embrace a vision they had not helped to create.

For all of these reasons, we have extensive work ahead of us as we deepen our relationships with the Federation Council and the synagogues in order to build broader support for the Peninsula Hebrew High. This year we began by inviting members of the Council to come to school one night for an interactive text learning session. After a lively evening of *chevruta* learning and *beit-midrash* buzz, the adults understood that they had participated in something the teens experience weekly – that is, engaging in stimulating and intellectually challenging Jewish conversations.

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Kesher Community Hebrew School/After School

LINDA ECHT AND AVIVA RICHMAN

Kesher Community Hebrew School/After School was founded in 1992 with the idea of combining quality after-school care with the finest Hebrew and Jewish education. It began as a means to address both the needs of working parents and their desire for strong Jewish education and community. Ten years later, Kesher's reputation for strong curriculum and

child care is well established, and it now has a waiting list as long as its list of current families.

Kesher, Hebrew for "connection," is a program that combines K-8 after-school child care with Jewish learning. In a joy-filled, nurturing environment, the program provides the Jewish knowledge, sense of community, and