

## INTRODUCTION BY THE EDITOR

Shaul Kelner advocates gathering data on a national basis to inform our conversations and policies regarding educator recruitment and retention. He suggests ways that research and national data could guide our deliberations and strategizing on recruitment and retention.

## A Bureau of Labor Statistics For Jewish Education

SHAUL KELNER

Most of this year's *b'nei mitzvah* were born in 1991, the same year that a blue-ribbon Commission on Jewish Education in North America declared that quality was threatened by problems in recruiting, retaining, training and supporting educators. The title of the report, *A Time to Act* trumpeted the committee's conclusion that the time for talk had passed (Commission on Jewish Education in North America, 1991).

The young North Americans called to the Torah to become a *bar* or *bat mitzvah* this year will have spent their entire Jewish schooling in educational settings that should have been the beneficiary of the community's response to the call to action 13 years ago. Yet, while progress on the personnel front undoubtedly has been made, a sense of crisis persists. What are we to make of this?

Sharing the continuing concern over these issues, several of the philanthropies that have emerged as leaders in supporting Jewish education have taken steps to form a new movement for enhancing recruitment, retention and support of educators and other professionals in the Jewish community (Aronson, 2003). Known as the Professional Leaders Program, the initiative — launched by the Eugene and Marcia Applebaum Foundation, William M. Davidson, Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, and Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation — will be designed to increase the number of people choosing careers in the Jewish community and to enhance the quality of the training they receive.

To inform this effort, the consortium of philanthropies has commissioned research from Brandeis University's Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies and Fisher-Bernstein Institute for Leadership Development in

Jewish Philanthropy. Our goal has been to examine the pushes, pulls and pathways into and out of careers in Jewish education and other forms of community work, and to understand what makes people feel empowered to succeed in their careers. As a first step in this effort, which will ultimately incorporate interviews, focus groups and surveys in six communities across the United States, my colleagues and I have been carefully reviewing existing research in order to assess the extent of the current knowledge base (Kelner *et al.*, 2003).

This effort made clear very quickly that there are critical gaps in systemwide data about the state of the Jewish educational workforce. As a result, the Jewish community has been forced to rely on other sources of information of varying quality, from instinct and anecdote to experience and inside expertise. These have been supplemented by sporadic efforts at data collection, some of which have proven to be enlightening sources of reliable information.

Our review of the research has also made clear that the Jewish community has used the information it has had available to amass significant knowledge about professional recruitment and retention in educational settings. Its framing of these issues has been remarkably consistent over the years. These are not new issues in American Jewish life. One might say that they constitute a chronic condition more than an acute crisis. Even in the 1950's, communal leaders were convening to address perceived shortages of educational professionals. At a 1956 conference devoted to the topic, the Eisenhower-era Jewish educators ascribed the problem to the now-familiar refrains of "inadequate social and economic status," "poor recruitment procedures," and "few chances for advancement," among other things (Shevitz, 1989, cited in Miller, 2000).

Over the years, the recommendations for advancing the profession of Jewish education (and the communal professions generally) have become well-known: coordinate recruitment efforts; subsidize training; provide continuing education; foster professional community; periodically rejuvenate commitment to the field; rein in unprofessional demands on time; adopt family-friendly policies; improve career ladders; eliminate gender bias; enhance the status of the profession; improve the relationship between professionals and lay people, between teachers and parents; mentor more; supervise better; and, for the love of heaven, pay a competitive salary.

Conventional wisdom? Perhaps. But the fact is that on the communal level the conventional wisdom remains a to-do list with no items scratched off. At best, some are annotated, “In progress.” Institutions that have adopted some of these recommendations have likely benefited. Important community-wide programs have also made progress in addressing other elements. But in spite of this progress, conferences are still convening and new initiatives are still being launched because the desired systemic change has not yet occurred.

The extent of the community’s success or failure in addressing these issues will remain a matter of debate for some time, due to a lack of benchmarks to serve as objective indicators of progress. Consider for example, the purely numerical question of a teacher shortage, setting aside for the moment the even more complex issues of teacher quality. Schools operate on a cyclical calendar. Every spring, the existing grouping of teachers and students is disbanded, and every summer a new grouping must be decided on before September’s first day of term. The cycle encourages a degree of turnover at the end of each school year, and makes teacher recruitment an annual activity. If exasperated administrators feel that they are always having to look for new teachers, this perception is based in reality, but it tells us more about the nature of the school calendar than about the size of the educational labor pool.

Even if the number of qualified teachers were to increase dramatically, Ron Wolfson’s observation – “There is not an educational director in a Jewish school in North America who isn’t scrambling every fall to find teachers” (2001, p. 6) – might still hold, due to the cyclical nature of the enterprise and inefficient recruiting practices. The community would be left feeling that its efforts were failing even though the actual size of the labor pool was

increasing. Is this already the case? Have past efforts begun to make a difference? It is hard to know, because the Jewish community does not monitor employment data that would enable it to track trends. Until it begins doing so, it will remain unable to objectively assess its progress in improving the Jewish educational workforce.

There are imperfect proxies that offer snapshots in time for selected communities and institutions. These include survey research that measures tenure in office. In 1998, a three-community survey of 983 Judaica teachers in Jewish day schools, supplementary schools and pre-schools found data consistent with anecdotal tales of a September scramble. Approximately one-quarter (27%) of supplementary school teachers in Atlanta, Baltimore and Milwaukee were new hires. This statistic probably overstates the actual degree of employee turnover, because some of it may reflect new positions created by organizational expansion. The comparable figures in day schools and preschools were lower, with 12% and 13%, respectively, being new to the school. Overall, 59% had been working in their schools for five years or less. In spite of the turnover at individual schools, the teachers tended to remain in the field of Jewish education for considerable amounts of time. Two-thirds (67%) had six or more years experience as Jewish educators (Gamoran, et al., 1998, pp. 17-18).

To assess whether these numbers are high or low, we can compare the proxy turnover rates with public and private school benchmarks collected by the U.S. Census Bureau. In 2001, the highest rate of annual teacher turnover, 22.1%, occurred in non-Catholic parochial schools – a category that could include Jewish day schools. The bulk of this turnover was composed of people who left teaching entirely, rather than moved to another school. The lowest rate, 12.9% was for public school teachers in areas with few poor students. The average for all teachers was 15.7% (Ingersoll, 2001; NCTAF, 2003). *Comparison of the national benchmarks with the proxy rates for Jewish teachers suggests that the rate of turnover in the supplementary schools is exceedingly high, whereas the rate in the Jewish day schools is much lower than would be expected based upon the norms for American parochial or non-sectarian private schools.* The day school rates more closely approximate the annual rate of employee turnover for the U.S. economy as a whole, which in the 1990s averaged 11% (cited in Ingersoll, 2001).

It would be helpful to know if the low teacher turnover

of Judaica teachers in the Atlanta, Baltimore and Milwaukee day schools is a one-year anomaly, a reflection of particular characteristics of these communities, or the fruit of earlier investments in teacher recruitment and support. If the proxy data are indeed capturing a real phenomenon, the finding that day schools are succeeding at retention is significant, especially because it runs counter to expectations. This highlights the need for actual labor force data to inform policy decisions and gauge the success of communal interventions. Sometimes these data will confirm perceptions, other times they will refute them. Either way, they will be helpful. Currently, however, the Jewish community does not have its own Bureau of Labor Statistics that regularly compiles and

monitors system-wide data on employment in Jewish education and the other communal professions. Perhaps it is time to change this.

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### Editor's Suggested Discussion Guide:

- Kelner argues for national research data on educator recruitment and retention. Does your community systematically gather information about its Jewish educators? How might such data inform policies and strategies related to Jewish educator recruitment and retention?
- Were you surprised to read that, "the rate of turnover in the supplementary schools is exceedingly high, whereas the rate in the Jewish day schools is much lower than would be expected...?" Does this run counter to your anecdotal knowledge of educator recruitment and retention? What might these conclusions teach us about our need for

research to accompany our local and national initiatives?

- What are some of the other assumptions or conventional wisdom about Jewish educator recruitment and retention that would benefit from the availability of empirical data?
- If there is to be a system-wide data base, who should/could be expected to fund it? Who should/could be expected to conduct the research?
- If you were to create a research agenda on the issues of educator recruitment and retention what might be some of the areas of research that you think are important to address?