

Let's Re-engineer the Career of Jewish Learning by Cheryl Fikel

This article is based on Cheryl Finkel's presentation during a panel session held at a plenary session of the Jewish Funders Network conference in Atlanta, GA on March 21, 2001. The session was called "Jewish Education Requires Educators: Funding Personnel Initiatives."

We are in an era of new excitement about Jewish learning, which includes the growth and expansion of Jewish day schools not only at the elementary school level, but also at the middle school and high levels. These schools are striving for excellence in education and management and some are competing successfully for Jewish students with well-established public and independent schools in every sizable American community.

My question is a simple one. Who will teach in these schools?

Who will choose a career in Jewish teaching? Where will we find teachers with the Judaic knowledge, the pedagogic know-how, and the dedication to a classroom career necessary to staff each of these growing schools? Where will we find the teaching talent necessary to attract and retain families seeking the best possible education for their children?

If we want a bright Jewish future in America, we must approach the issue of personnel vigorously and persistently, as no one has ever done before. We must nurture the profession of Jewish teaching, not only for the classroom but also for other program settings. Since I have spent most of my career as head of a Jewish day school, I will concentrate on considering the profession as it is practiced in those settings. I will frame my remarks around my recommendations for funders who would like to make a significant difference in Jewish life by tackling our personnel challenge.

The most important thing we must do is make teaching attractive and competitive in the marketplace of respected professions for young men and women.

On September 9, 2000, as school opened last fall, Harold O. Levy, Chancellor of the New York City public schools, wrote a New York Times Op-Ed piece entitled "Why the Best Don't Teach." His article bemoaned the decline in quantity and quality of new teaching candidates and predicted that this problem would only get worse over time. Dr. Levy wrote, "To recruit a higher caliber of college student into teaching, we must make it both more lucrative and more revered... Teachers 22 - 28 years old earn an average of \$8,000 less a year than their college-educated counterparts in other professions. The gap increases threefold by the time they are 44. Inevitably, teaching is not going to be as financially lucrative as some other careers, but it shouldn't mean taking a vow of poverty."

Everyone knows that teaching is an undervalued field. Because status and pay overlap in our society, I believe that the biggest obstacle to teacher recruitment is low pay. Indeed, there are other complex challenges, but, at the bottom line, teachers in public or independent schools can barely support themselves as single persons, much less as heads of household. Independent schools – including Jewish day schools – generally pay even less than public schools and have less attractive benefits packages. Therefore, I offer the following recommendation as the first priority:

Start by bringing teachers' compensation and benefits packages in Jewish schools up to the best pay available in public schools. Then make teachers' pay competitive with other professions.

This single action will make it possible for Jewish schools to compete successfully for those already committed to teaching as a profession. It will not, however, address the issue of making the profession appealing to a broader population of candidates. To make the profession a healthy and attractive one is a much more complex task, involving a web of many disparate factors. To make significant change will require the coordination of efforts by schools, colleges granting degrees leading to Jewish teaching, and funders of all types. Furthermore, it will take some ten to fifteen years of sustained change to elevate the profession – enough time to attract and retain a new generation of young professionals.

As I understand the challenges, there are several key leverage points where improvement could bring systemic change:

- The Entry Level - Recruitment and Preparation of New Teachers
- Career Development for Teachers
- Compensation

The Entry Level

Several years ago, I began to wonder why so few graduates of my own day school were pursuing careers in Jewish education after college. Highly identified and active young Jews in high school and college, many of them were undertaking continued study in Israel. Some were pursuing Jewish studies courses at their often-prestigious universities. Then, off they would go to enter academia, journalism, law, medicine, photography, business, psychology, and other fields.

These students were prime candidates for choosing a career in Jewish education. They were terrific kids, fluent in Hebrew, strongly grounded in Judaism, personable, capable, and delightful. Why weren't they coming into the field?

Instead of letting my educational journals pile into their normal three-foot stacks, I began looking in them for answers, searching for studies on teacher recruitment. Several articles indicated that most people have decided by the time they are high school students whether or not they would ever consider a teaching career. Some researchers suggested that the decision to teach or not to teach comes as early as middle school.

I certainly have never mounted an active recruitment effort for Jewish teachers among my school's middle school students, nor have I heard of such efforts seriously undertaken in other Jewish day schools. What keeps us from initiating programs like that with a heart full of enthusiasm? Do we secretly feel ambivalent about encouraging our own graduates to join our own field? Surely we want our students to dedicate themselves to meaningful and worthwhile work, like education; yet, at the same time, we want them to enjoy a future bright with incentives and opportunities. This brings me to the second leverage point, the career itself.

Career Development for Teachers

Teaching is an extremely complex undertaking, one that requires several types of preparation and years of

practice to master. Yet, most beginning teachers get the bare minimum of apprenticeship before being assigned the same teaching load as twenty-year veterans. Their job assignments and professional development programs are usually exactly the same, whether they are in their first, third, eighth, or fifteenth year in the classroom. All experience similar processes of supervision and evaluation, the outstanding master teachers along with the marginally competent.

When I talk to people in other professions and in the business world, I learn that other models of career preparation, induction, and progression abound. A career in teaching could look very different and much more exciting than it does for most teachers today. Here are a few of my own opinions on the subject.

Preparation – Before Becoming a Teacher

I must declare what some might consider an elitist preference toward hiring teachers with undergraduate study in the liberal arts or sciences over those who have taken an undergraduate degree in education. You need to know something well and deeply in order to teach it. In my view, that means gaining solid subject matter expertise, studying a discipline – or more than one — in depth, and continuing to add to knowledge of your field throughout your life. I like to find teachers who have read, written, and thought deeply about a subject area they love before they start adding the professional theory and practice of education, preferably in graduate school. (Some universities are now offering five-year programs that allow students to earn two degrees, one in their major field and one in education. This also seems a promising approach.)

Next comes the opportunity for excellent and demanding graduate study in educational theory and practice. Education, Judaic and general, is both a science and an art, so there must be opportunities to prepare for both types of expertise.

The science of education includes expertise in the pedagogy of a particular subject area. For example, teaching tanakh requires skills that are different than those needed for teaching mathematics. At the same time, one also needs to acquire a beginning expertise in general pedagogy, an evolving body of research that supports current ideas of good teaching practice. Educational theory is the sub-field of psychology that deals with the ways human beings think and learn, and explores notions of intelligence, memory, creativity, learning styles, motivation, and human development. Good teacher preparation delves into these subjects in depth.

Teaching is also an art that consists of the practical ways teachers work with individuals and groups to facilitate their learning. Beginners have to learn how to gain and hold attention, how to use time and space, how to keep momentum, how to motivate, how to build learning relationships, and how to communicate with children and their parents.

A Chance to Practice

Most teachers take charge of a full class of children after some six to twelve weeks of student teaching, a totally insufficient induction to practice. I would suggest a practicum or internship with a reduced teaching load and an active mentoring program before the first year, followed by continued mentoring and support as the successful beginner undertakes a full assignment as an apprentice in year one. Mentors would be talented master teachers trained to support the growth of new practitioners and released from some of their teaching load in order to do so. Apprentices who master the basic skills of teaching could progress to a novice status

that could last from two to four years, depending on performance. After the fifth year (or as early as the third for outstanding performers), demonstrating proficiency in all significant skill areas could yield recognition as a full-fledged teacher. That brings me to a second recommendation for funding:

Fund internship/mentorship programs for all Jewish schools. Pay for initial and ongoing training for the mentors and reduced teaching loads for interns and mentors. Continue mentor support through the first three to five years in the field.

A Life-long Chance to Progress Professionally

As their careers move on, mid-career and veteran teachers need to be able to look forward to meaningful professional development. After the internship and novice periods, teachers should earn the right to be recognized as life-long learners with growing expertise. They must continue to grow:

- In content area knowledge and its pedagogy.
- In generic skills of pedagogy - that is, the knowledge of learning theory, child/human development, and motivational psychology.
- In "people skills" - collegiality, teamwork, and self-reflection.
- In the ability to observe and describe students and their work.
- In communication skills - written and oral skills as well as effective listening skills for communicating with parents, students, and colleagues.

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards provides one exciting model of career development for classroom teachers. It allows master practitioners the opportunity to demonstrate the highest standards of professional achievement through examinations, portfolios of student work, and video presentations of their teaching. NBPTS certification is rigorous. Only excellent teachers attempt it and few achieve it on the first try. Many public school districts are now offering significant salary differentials for teachers who hold this renewable credential. I believe this might be a useful model to consider for Jewish teachers.

Here are my suggestions for funding in connection with professional development:

- Fund programs of individual professional development. Provide scholarships for teachers – partial or full – to achieve master's, doctoral, and rabbinic degrees. Also provide support for teachers to undertake non-degree professional development programs that will benefit their students.
- Fund the development of standards and certification (similar to or in cooperation with the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards) for Judaic studies and Hebrew teachers and provide the means for teachers to achieve those standards and certification.
- Fund the cost of the salary supplements the schools will pay teachers after they achieve higher educational levels and more advanced certification.

A Chance for Classroom Teachers to Lead

We must develop leadership opportunities for outstanding teachers that don't require them to stop teaching. In our current practice, the only career ladder for teachers is to move out of the classroom and into administration.

It is easy to imagine some of these roles. As recommended in the earlier section in this article called “A Chance to Practice,” master teachers could be trained to serve as mentors who introduce interns and novice teachers to successful practice. They could continue their own classroom practice part-time, while spending the remainder of their time as mentors; as specialists in curriculum development and assessment; as educational researchers; as family educators; and as specialists in student support of various types such as guidance, remediation, and enrichment.

Rewarding Outstanding Performance with Good Pay

The subject of “merit pay” is an extremely controversial one. There is a substantial body of literature from the 1980s about various efforts to give higher pay to teachers deemed “outstanding” according to some set of objective criteria. Most of these projects failed because teachers felt they could not be administered fairly. Additionally, something in the culture of teachers seems to bridle at the concept of merit pay. At the same time, everyone associated with schools has at some time felt the unfairness of not recognizing the outstanding performance of certain exceptional teachers and the tremendous boost these professionals give to the learning of their lucky students. So, schools and school systems continue to look for ways to pay high performers more. Some current methods being used to offer bonuses or merit pay include:

- Offering outstanding teachers at some independent schools additional work, in the summer or during the school year, and paying them a large sum for these add-ons.
- Offering a bonus for all teachers when their public school meets or exceeds a standard or goal; the bonus may double when the goal is exceeded.
- Creating career ladders in some public districts or states so that advanced teachers are released three hours a day to help others, to chair curriculum initiatives, or to take on other part-time leadership roles - all at increased pay.
- Giving NBPTS certified teachers a bonus, plus 10-35% more pay annually.

The Individual Teacher as a Member of A Community of Learners

All my previous comments have been directed toward career development for the individual teacher. At the same time, I want to emphasize the importance of nurturing collegial study within a school community. Each school will develop its own strategies for improving the educational program it offers students and these will require that the whole faculty, no matter what career path individual teachers are pursuing, study certain subjects together. These might include the study of Torah, Jewish values, Eretz Yisrael, instructional technology, reading and writing across the curriculum, or current issues in brain research. To engage in these important school-wide study programs, Jewish schools need funding to bring expertise to the faculty and time for teachers to work with the experts.

Schools sometimes release teachers from the classroom for this work. How wonderful it would be if schools could also pay teachers attractive wages to spend time in the summer to continue this type of beneficial study. In fact, how bad would it be if some teachers worked and were paid for an extra four weeks a year so that they could study new developments in their subject areas and in the field of education or develop and assess new curriculum projects? Therefore, I ask that funders not leave out one further recommendation:

Fund the annual professional development programs for a whole school.

Conclusion – A Personal Note

When I finished college in 1968, my father urged me to get a teacher's certificate "to fall back on" in case I might need a job before I got married. That sounds funny, doesn't it? As it turned out, I did become a teacher, not because it was a career to fall back on, but because it seemed a good way to save the world. I married a man who was also a teacher and we have both worked our whole lives not only to save the world, but also to support our children and ourselves.

Neither my husband nor I have saved the world yet. On the other hand, we have enjoyed the satisfaction of knowing that every day we have spent working in education – he in secular independent and public schools and myself primarily in Jewish day schools - has been time well-invested on behalf of society's most important cause, children. These satisfactions did not pay us well enough to have a parent home full-time when our children were very young and many times my husband considered and rejected the idea of leaving teaching for the good pay his intellectual gifts and strong science background could have commanded in industry. When I was invited to consider a move into administration over 20 years ago, I pursued the opportunity at least partly because administration offered better salary advancement than teaching. We both managed to stay in education, but not both in the classroom.

Most of today's ambitious, bright young Jewish women and men are not interested in "fall-back" or secondary careers. While North American Jewish communities are building an impressive system of day schools where parents and children expect and deserve outstanding teaching, we are letting fine candidates slip through our fingers. To re-engineer the profession and make teaching attractive enough for our sons as well as our daughters is a huge challenge for the American Jewish community. Let's get to work!

Let me repeat my recommendations for change:

1. Start by bringing teachers' compensation and benefits packages in Jewish schools up to the best pay available in public schools. Then make teachers' pay competitive with other professions.
2. Fund internship/mentorship programs for all Jewish schools. Pay for initial and ongoing training for the mentors and reduced teaching loads for interns and mentors. Continue mentor support through the first three to five years in the field.
3. Fund programs of individual professional development. Provide scholarships for teachers – partial or full – to achieve master's, doctoral, and rabbinic degrees. Also provide support for teachers to undertake non-degree professional development programs that will benefit their students.
4. Fund the development of standards and certification (similar to or in cooperation with the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards) for Judaic studies and Hebrew teachers and provide the means for teachers to achieve those standards and certification.
5. Fund the cost of the salary supplements the schools will pay teachers after they achieve higher educational levels and more advanced certification.
6. Fund the annual professional development programs for a whole school.

The most important thing we must do is make teaching attractive and competitive in the marketplace of respected professions for young men and women.

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