

Keeping Our Best And Brightest: Retention of Teachers in Jewish Supplementary Schools

By Shelley Rosenberg

For a number of years, a significant crisis has affected Jewish communities throughout the country: the lack of educated, trained, and committed individuals to staff synagogue and Jewish community schools. Nationally, approximately 73% of children in Jewish schools attend supplementary schools. Thus, the need for excellent and inspiring teachers is obvious to both the professional and lay leadership of the community. Yet despite repeated efforts, there has only been sporadic success in finding and retaining such people. Many schools open without sufficient staff, with staff who are weak in basic Hebrew and/or Judaica, or with those who have only minimal pedagogic training.

One significant response to this crisis has been the creation of programs whose goals are to recruit and train teachers. These are crucial, but not enough. In order to provide a truly meaningful and comprehensive experience for teachers, a third goal is critical. That goal is the retention of knowledgeable and experienced teachers in the system. This is of profound importance for a community that wishes to move to a higher level of educational sophistication and excellence. The value of the continuity provided by a staff that knows the students, curriculum, and mission of a school cannot be overstated.

Recruitment, training, and retention are comparable to the legs of a tripod; without any one of the three, the whole would collapse. This was clearly recognized in a resolution passed by the Jewish educators attending the 26th annual Conference on Alternatives in Jewish Education in August 2001. The Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education (CAJE) adopted a resolution that called upon the North American Jewish community and its leadership to make teacher recruitment, training, and retention a priority. Among several other recommendations, it was stated that, "a more steadfast retention program should be established to retain talented people in the field. The program should provide these individuals with a work environment that sustains reasonable expectations for time and task, with sufficient support systems, in place." It also noted that, "Veteran educators should be encouraged to mentor new personnel entering the field and offer other techniques proven to aid in retaining, nurturing, and treasuring valued personnel."

Retaining quality teachers must be a partnership between the schools and the community, as represented by its Central Agency or Board of Jewish Education. In the Greater Philadelphia area, the Auerbach Central Agency for Jewish Education is the hub of the Jewish educational community's recruitment efforts. Since 1998, the Agency's recruitment initiative, TeacherLink (previously called the Teacher Recruitment Initiative), has successfully recruited, trained, and helped retain teachers in the community's supplementary schools. We have found two areas in which efforts to retain good teachers should be concentrated: support for individual teachers and support for schools.

Support for Teachers

We have discovered, and the research agrees, that novice teachers leave the profession if they feel unsupported, untutored, or unappreciated in their work. In the public sector, continuing education and opportunities for mentoring have increasingly been recognized as a necessity. For example, New York State

opportunities for mentoring have increasingly been recognized as a necessity. For example, New York State, which now requires a year of mentoring only for uncertified teachers, will broaden the policy in 2004 to include all first-year teachers. It has been noted that "the districts that do not have enough mentors are generally those with the highest attrition rates, which forces them to hire many uncertified teachers each fall" (New York Times, February 13, 2000).

Consider, then, the added difficulty in retaining teachers in the ranks of synagogue and Jewish community school educators. Few teachers are certified or licensed; few have college degrees in Jewish education. For most, teaching is a part-time position. Thus, while many are concerned and dedicated, few have the ongoing and concentrated opportunity for professional growth. Yet novice teachers report that working with experienced mentor teachers, having opportunities to build and refine their teaching skills, and support from colleagues are crucial to keeping them in the ranks of Jewish supplementary school teachers.

To this end, ACAJE has developed both in-service training and mentoring programs for novice teachers. The Mentor Support Network and Novice Teacher Support Seminars provide the type of experience advocated by Paul Flexner, Director of the Department of Human Resources of JESNA. Flexner suggests that staff development programs "provide the teacher with a close, personal relationship with another individual or small group of individuals with whom to communicate in a trusting environment." When that is the case, he contends, "help and assistance can regularly be sought from a colleague who shares the same interests and concerns. Exposure to new ideas, whether through formal presentations or through private readings and/or experiences, can be shared and developed within the team" ("The Goals of Staff Development: An Overview," Pedagogic Reporter, March 1989).

The Mentor Support Network allows the Director of Teacher Recruitment to match each newly recruited and hired teacher who has completed the initiative's core training program (called Giborim/Heroes) with an experienced mentor teacher who can offer ongoing support throughout the novice's first year of teaching. New teachers, as well as educational directors, have indicated the benefit of such ongoing mentoring. Gloria Becker, principal of Congregation Or Ami's religious school, in Lafayette Hill, Pennsylvania, states that, "mentoring offers a way for teachers to learn from each other, which is less threatening than being supervised by the principal. Mentoring fosters nurturing relationships between teachers in what can be a lonely profession." Moreover, research demonstrates that without such support, a large percentage of new teachers will leave the profession. Debbie Chong, a novice teacher who works in two Philadelphia area schools, explains that, although she had completed the pre-service training, teaching with no supervision, as she had had to do in her first position, was extremely difficult. "I needed help with creative teaching ideas and classroom management, and felt that I'd benefit from constructive observations and criticisms," she explains.

ACAJE has long had a successful two-year Mentor Teacher Training Program, which provides training and support to a small number of experienced teachers who have been nominated by their educational directors to become mentor teachers. These mentors guide novice teachers within their own school. But, with the increased number of newly recruited and trained teachers being hired, the necessity of expanding this program became clear. We look to retired day school principals, professors of education, and educational directors with at least five years of successful experience as potential mentors. In recognition of their past supervisory experience, they participate in a brief introductory program at the outset of their mentoring experience, rather than the full two-year program. They mentor teachers who are not teaching in their own schools, so that there is no conflict

between the mentoring and supervisory aspects of their jobs.

Each mentor is requested to observe his/her mentee at least one time during each semester and to be in contact with him/her at least once each week by telephone, e-mail, or in person. In addition, mentors are asked to stay in contact with the ACAJE coordinator of the Mentor Teacher Training Program at least once a month in order to receive support and discuss any problems that may arise.

A supportive community of colleagues allows teachers to share concerns and strategies. ACAJE's past experience with its Novice Teachers Support Seminars emphasized the value of such a program in a community's ability to retain its best teachers. Support Seminars provide an opportunity for novice teachers to discuss their concerns about teaching with a trained facilitator, as well as with their peers in a sympathetic and non-threatening atmosphere. In addition, participants hear guest speakers on topics of interest to them. Such topics have included classroom management, special needs children in the classroom, communicating with parents, multiple intelligences, and enriching the classroom with drama and storytelling. Novice teachers who participated in this program in the past requested additional sessions. The program was expanded to eight seminars per year and all newly hired teachers are encouraged to attend. Each receives a stipend for his/her participation, an acknowledgement of the professional nature of this program.

Support for Schools

We believe that individual schools must make on-going efforts to retain successful teachers. Good teachers should not be taken for granted, but should be appreciated and supported in their professional growth and development. The Recruitment Director makes recommendations to schools that can assist in these efforts.

These recommendations include:

- **Present the positive attributes of the school as an employer.**

Offering a professional environment that is collegial and pleasant may be one of the most important attributes a school can offer. Although teaching in a synagogue or community school is a part-time job, teachers consider themselves to be professionals (according to ACAJE's research of 2000), and must be treated as such. An environment of trust and mutual respect between lay and professional leadership and staff is also crucial. Salary and benefits must be competitive. In Philadelphia, the Community Board of License recommends a salary scale and, whenever possible, schools follow the scale. In some communities, teacher salaries are determined by the central agency, while in other communities, there is no recommended salary scale. Lay leadership, which usually determines the finances of a school, must be aware of the scale when it exists, and understand its importance, both psychologically and financially, to teachers. ACAJE staff makes itself available to speak to synagogue and school boards about salary scales. In any case, appropriate compensation is crucial to the long-term retention of, and professionalization of, supplementary school staffs. Regular opportunities should be provided by the school for the staff to acquire significant in-service training both in pedagogy and content. This is the hallmark of a school that truly cares about education and the professionalization of its staff. Individually, teachers should be encouraged to continue their own personal Jewish and professional development. Not only does this result in better teaching, it helps teachers feel fulfilled and satisfied as people and as Jews. Hopefully, within the school budget is an allowance for each staff member to attend a class or seminar each year. And, those who do should be asked to report to their peers on their experience.

seminar each year. And, those who do should be asked to report to their peers on their experience. Last, but certainly not least, guest speakers can be invited to staff meetings, making them opportunities for learning together, not simply for "business." Since teachers enter the field because they care deeply about Judaism, it is important to create an adult learning community for them.

- **Teachers should be encouraged to earn licensure from the local Community Board of License.** Licensure acknowledges teachers' increased amount of training and experience, and in Philadelphia, places them higher on the recommended pay scale. Where there is no local Community Board of License, teachers can and should apply to the National Board of License. In some cases, teachers are unaware of the benefits of licensure and do not pursue it. Encouragement from the educational director might move a teacher to attain it. Teachers who attain licensure at any level should be acknowledged publicly at the school and in the local Jewish press.
- **Honor teachers on a regular basis.** Programs, awards, newsletter articles, etc., can celebrate the excellence and achievement of a school's teachers. A Shabbat service, an article in the synagogue/school community newsletter, and a letter of commendation demonstrate a great deal of respect. The entire community can participate in such events, which elevate the profession of teaching in a Jewish school in everyone's eyes.
- **Provide a ladder for professional development.** In communities where they exist, mentoring programs provide advanced training and a step on the career ladder for excellent teachers. If such a program does not exist, a community may wish to start one. Recommending teachers for such programs honors teachers who attain that status and can create a cadre of professionals who are trained to work with novice teachers.
- **Provide meaningful opportunities for high school students to train in education and to work with master teachers.** A program for high school students to study Jewish education and observe an experienced master teacher and help in the classroom is a win-win-win situation; it benefits the school, the students, and the teachers. It is an expression of the long-range goal of showing Jewish children that teaching in a Jewish school is an honorable professional or avocational choice. It is also an excellent means of keeping post Bar/Bat Mitzvah youth interested in attending school. And, it is an honor for those teachers who are selected as master teachers to be observed by the students.
- **Plan an effective recruitment program.** Schools should examine their internal recruitment and hiring practices to determine their effectiveness. Schools that are part of a synagogue must be integrated into the larger picture of the synagogue structure. Decisions that affect the school impact the entire community, and vice versa. Participation by the lay leadership of the synagogue is crucial, and programs should be planned in concert with the larger community in order to maximize economic and personal resources.

A Checklist for Planning

As schools examine their hiring, training, and retention programs, discussion of the following statements may help plan for the future. They can be rated: "In Place," "Don't Have," "Forming," "Future Goal," or "Not Working, Needs Redirection." The Director of Teacher Recruitment can discuss any of these, or other concerns, with the educational director and school committee.

- Does the school have a clear mission statement?

- Are hiring needs based on the mission statement?
- Is staffing envisioned as a team approach?
- Do teachers receive clear contracts and complete job descriptions?
- Is an appropriate hiring practice in place?
- Are available positions identified early in the spring (March/April)?
- Is a person(s) identified to review and interview candidates?
- Is a structure in place to maintain and reward current teachers?
- Is the budget sufficient to provide fair wages for teachers, for example, salaries that correspond to the Community Board of License (CBL) scale, if applicable in the community?
- Does the school budget provide for a sufficient number of staff?
- Is the school seeking teachers who have or are committed to pursuing advanced training and licensure?
- Does the budget provide funding for significant professional development?
- Has the school created a culture where teachers feel part of an exciting staff that is constantly learning (Judaically and pedagogically) and celebrating together?

In Summary

Through an effective initiative to recruit, train, and retain its best and brightest teachers, a community makes an investment in the future of its children. This effort must enlist the efforts of concerned professional and lay leaders alike. It must continually refine and retool, constantly initiating new ways to reach out, upgrade, and improve its efforts. It must find sufficient funding, and spend those funds wisely. It must implicitly and explicitly honor those who teach in our synagogue and community schools. When a community does all that, it insures its own Jewish future.

Note: The Auerbach Central Agency for Jewish Education is publishing a manual describing TeacherLink, its teacher recruitment, training, and retention initiative, in detail. For information please call Dr. Shelley K. Rosenberg at 215-635-8940, ext. 1224.