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**LEARNING FROM
THE CUTTING EDGE
IN EDUCATION**



WHAT WE CAN LEARN: Jewish Schools and Today's Best Educational Approaches

by ELI SCHAAP

“Create schools! Improve the schools you already have! This is the call we would pass from city to city; it is an appeal to the hearts, the minds and the conscience of our Jewish brethren, pleading with them to champion that most sacred of causes — the cause of thousands of unhappy Jewish souls who are in need of schools, of better Jewish schools, for their rebirth as Jews.” (Samson Raphael Hirsch, October 1854)

While we have made some progress since Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's writing, his cry still needs to be heeded. There are many areas in which Jewish education can be significantly improved, especially by looking towards the cutting edge of innovation in the field of general education. For example, several approaches, such as mentoring and induction and the new focus on assessment, can be extremely valuable to the effort of achieving excellence. However, all these approaches make sense only if they are part of an overall, school-wide vision and plan. Unless the key stakeholders in a school jointly agree on their goals, all improvements will be temporary and not transformative. Without such a plan we will never know whether we are succeeding or failing.

I am not talking about expensive investments. Once a plan is agreed upon and goals are set for the short- and long-term, the next steps are coordination and communication. With the new technologies available, it is possible, at a reasonable cost, to transform a school's website into a tool for ongoing communication and cooperation, including bulletin boards, a shared calendar, shared documents, analyses of students' performance, and an unlimited number of sub-websites for teachers, parents and administrators. All this can be accomplished in a secure environment that protects sensitive student records and parent information.

While mentoring and induction programs come at a cost, the investment in these programs is less than the annual

costs of hiring novice teachers who, without the proper support, don't just leave the school but often leave the field, creating significant teacher shortages. It is shocking that roughly 25 percent of teachers are new to their schools in both day school and supplementary schools. It is extremely hard to create an organization of excellence when 25 percent of the staff is new to the organization each year.

The best for-profit and non-profit organizations are data driven. They constantly measure their performances against their goals and take steps to improve their programs. One advantage to this is that teachers and administrators can monitor student progress on an ongoing basis. Too many schools have no idea what happens with each student over time, so they cannot design differentiated instruction plans. If one of the goals of our schools is to have every child succeed, it would necessitate using the best of differentiated instruction so that we don't lose students because the teaching is too advanced or too boring. In many schools, the teachers spend much of their time teaching frontally rather than using differentiated teaching methods.

Being data-driven not only improves teaching; it also helps monitor short- and long-term goals, allowing the leadership to make necessary small adjustments to the plan on an ongoing basis. It can even help produce income if the students and their parents are tracked after the students graduate. Too many schools have lost all contact with their graduates, which prevents assessment of the long-term effect of students' education. If schools were to keep track of their alumni, they might facilitate significant fundraising. Universities raise most of their donations from alumni, but few Jewish schools have succeeded in raising significant funds from their graduates.

“New” is not necessarily good. Efforts towards improving schools, such as experimenting with merit pay or establishing an intensive professional development plan, only make sense if they properly fit into a

school's overall plans. The goal of a school should not be to use these methods and tools because they are the newest trends, but because they will contribute significantly towards achieving clearly defined goals. Too often, new approaches to teaching are used simply because a “competitive” school led the way. For example, there has been a trend in Orthodox day schools to start the teaching of Talmud at earlier and earlier ages. This ignores brain research studies showing that children don't have the capacity to grasp complicated texts such as the Talmud at too young an age. Actually, *Pirkei Avot* could have reminded these schools that starting Talmud at too early an age doesn't make sense (“Yehudah ben Tema used to say ... a fifteen-year old begins the study of Gemara.” — *Pirkei Avot*, 5:25).

This leads me to a final thought: in the search for excellence, we should not ignore the many great pedagogic ideas that come from millennia of Jewish tradition. Mixing formal learning with experiential education is not new. The Pesach Seder is probably the most successful form of Jewish education, attracting far more Jews than any other form of Jewish education over the last few thousand years. Learning by doing and by imitating role models is stressed throughout the Talmud and can be easily found in the thoughts of the sages of the Middle Ages such as Maimonides and the author of the *Sefer HaChinuch* (the book of education that discusses the 613 mitzvot). Service learning, as well, can be an excellent tool in teaching students about community and instilling them with values. However, this is not necessarily a new approach. Rather, it is an essential part of Jewish education — something too many Jews have forgotten.

All teaching of children is a partnership between educators, students and parents. Even with the best methodologies and tools, if we leave out even one of these partners we will not succeed in reaching our ultimate goal of excellence in Jewish education. ■

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