

## THE OTHER DAY SCHOOL CRISIS

by Adam Tilove

While everyone is talking about the Middle Class affordability crisis in day schools, there is one essential stakeholder in the community that seems to be forgotten: The Jewish Studies teacher. Jewish day school teachers have a shockingly high rate of leaving the field early in their careers. (Note: I am not a researcher. This conclusion is based on my observations and anecdotal information from many friends and colleagues in the field.) This is a deeply troubling trend because Jewish day schools depend on these teachers to put the *Jewish* in "Jewish day school."

Consider the skills of a Jewish Studies teacher: they know modern and ancient Hebrew, and often Aramaic; they are able to read and explain ancient texts, exciting students who may be indifferent or even hostile; they must have skills in classroom management, planning assemblies and events, and leading *Tefillah* (Jewish Prayer). They must love kids, live passionate Jewish lives, and be dedicated to their craft. And to be truly effective, they need experience.

Conventional wisdom says that one becomes a 'master teacher' after at least five years in the field. It is well known that most people's first year teaching is a nightmare, the second becomes easier, and, by the fifth, most teachers finally begin feeling confident and in control. Only then can these new teachers begin to see the fruits of their labors, building on their successes and strengthening their areas of weakness.

So the equation is really quite simple. Jewish days schools exist for the "*Jewish*." Jewish Studies teachers make that culture exist in schools. These teachers begin being really effective only after five years. The crisis is that most teachers seem to be leaving the field between year three and year five.

Why? Day school teachers sign one-year contracts and can be fired at any time. They don't belong to a union and they don't receive a pension. There is no tenure. They have an extremely specialized skill set, which is vitally important in Jewish day schools, but is useless in the secular world. If they taught English, History, Spanish, Math, Science or Physical Education, they could look around their city and find dozens, if not hundreds, of schools to work in. Jewish Studies teachers may have two or three options. If they want to change schools, it will probably necessitate uprooting their children and spouses to find work in a different city. And teaching in private schools still pays a modest salary.

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Many teachers feel powerless and hopeless about their futures. These pressures cause many teachers consider other more lucrative, rewarding or stable careers. One teacher I know left to pursue a career in real estate. Another is moving to a Jewish farm to pursue informal Jewish education. Another had his hours cut to part-time, lost his medical insurance, and tutors in the evenings and weekends to make ends meet. Others have left the classroom and moved on to administration both in and out of day schools. One young couple explained that they were living paycheck to paycheck, knowing all the time that they won't be able to afford to send their *one* child to day schools they work in, even with tuition assistance offered. Despite the hardship of moving, they have decided to move to Israel, where they said, "Health Insurance and Jewish education are free."

The day school world as a whole needs to adapt quickly. We are past the era when day schools were popping up everywhere. Meanwhile, our community resources are going towards creating more teachers to replace burnt-out and frustrated third-year teachers.

The Jewish community as a whole owes it to themselves to make sure Jewish Studies and Hebrew teachers can stay in the classroom for their whole career. Here are a few ideas:

- Federation or independent donors could create a fund to match all retirement contributions made by teachers and their schools.
- After proving their performance for two years, Jewish Studies teachers could be offered three to five year contracts, giving them a feeling of comfort and stability for at least their short-term future.
- Full tuition scholarships could be offered to the children of day school teachers.
- Fully paid sabbaticals could be offered to Jewish Studies teachers after every seven years in the field, giving them the opportunity to learn new material and deepen their own understandings.

To truly create excellence in Jewish education, Jewish communities need to fully respect, embrace, and support the vital role Jewish educators play in creating a vibrant Jewish future.

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