

ADAPTING TO THE CULTURE OF THE COMMUNITY

by Liz Singer

Last fall, something extremely unexpected happened. I was approached to lead a small religious school. As a new Director with a social work background, I was advised to sit back and learn the culture. Often times, this was difficult, and often I was criticized for taking this “hands off” approach. I assumed my post after school already was in session. During the search prior to my being hired, the school was kept afloat by lay leaders. There had been no evidence of a clear and consistent education model being utilized. The curriculum had been used as a resource by the educators, if used at all.

Programs existed without an underlying structure of what the vision of the future of the religious school looked like. Not having a formal background in education, I initially did not know how to begin creating a vision. I learned in a local young professional development leadership program that, when in doubt, look at what is working and build a support structure to complement it. This was the perfect approach for this community, who had a vocal contingent that had a hard and fast preference for what had been done and how it had been done. After all, my predecessor had been in the position for twenty years. The families in the religious school were hungry for change.

I decided to focus on three programs that seemed to be receiving a positive response from the religious school families, seemed to be working, and could be built on. Establishing these programs would avoid recreating the wheel and help to create cornerstones for our religious school. Doing so also would aid me in honing in on what the congregation values. The three programs that were identified were the *tefillah* service on Sunday mornings, the elective Hebrew class, and a quarterly program that included the parents as partners in learning with the students. What did these already operating programs have in common? What insight did it give me into the psyche of this congregation? What I saw immediately is that everyone, parents included, had a thirst for knowledge.

In the Sunday morning *tefillah* service, families attended together. It was amazing to me that in a lot of these families, where Judaism was not really practiced outside of the Temple's walls, were not merely dropping off their kids, but everyone in the family – from parents to infants -- was attending services. Families loved being involved in learning and worshipping together. The students witnessing their parents' involvement has been crucial in the prayer service and the partners program, because “doing Jewish” is not evident anywhere else in the lives of these families. The students loved to be able to be teacher to their parents.

The Hebrew class offered a slightly different insight. Students seem to prefer the non-traditional atmosphere of class. They learned at their own pace with assistance from teachers.

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The ratio of teachers to students was high, so a lot of individual attention was received. Parent told us that their children found the Hebrew class fun. The student experience also has given them a more personal relationship with the Hebrew teachers. In the coming year, we plan to further embrace what the students love and utilize technology more often, with remote learning on YouTube.

This approach of backwards-planning has been very useful in identifying outcomes that now will be retrofitted into an outcomes-based model. The outcomes are used to identify what the needs of the religious school are now. These will be constantly assessed, based on where the families' priorities seem to be gravitating. Educators need to be creative and flexible in recognizing and addressing the culture of the community that we serve. As a new director of a religious school that is part of an environment that has not experienced consistent change, one needs to be sensitive when introducing new ideas. Working with old models utilizing what is already effective would be received by the congregation as less threatening and invasive. Ideally, the culture will recognize the need to reevaluate the goals and the models used. The models need to be determined in relation to what the needs are. Therefore, the same model won't be as affective in the same environment 5 years later

The trend in Jewish education of recognizing the need for change is very positive. But this need for changes must encompass more than just the education. Educators also must recognize the need for themselves to evolve. Professionals constantly need to look for ways that they need to change in order to help maintain and promote a positive learning environment. No matter how long somebody has been in this field, he or she needs to constantly search for new professional development opportunities, and to foster the importance of professional development in their staff. Condoleezza Rice said, "Life is full of small victories along the way. If you ever start feeling, 'I've achieved everything I'm going to achieve. I've mastered this. I've mastered my life,' I think you cease to live. You stop caring. You stop striving."¹

Educators must continue to strive and change, just as we expect our schools to strive and change. To build the standard that we want in Jewish education, educators must never be complacent.

ENDNOTES:

1. *Oprah Presents Master Class* with Condoleezza Rice.

Liz Singer is the Religious School Director at Temple Emanuel in St. Louis. Liz utilized her community-organizing education in this past year when her school exploded, growing by 60%. Though there is no promise of similar results, she will offer a unique perspective from a new administrator that was faced with some extraordinary circumstances.

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