

HOT TOPIC: What can we learn from secular education about teacher training in Jewish education?

THE ISSUES AND QUESTIONS DRIVING MY WORK IN JEWISH EDUCATION

by Hana Bor

I have been involved in Jewish education for over 25 years, serving as a teacher, advisor, mentor, principal, and director to students ranging from elementary to graduate school, and working in both religious and secular environments. Throughout, I have repeatedly struggled with how to merge religious and secular educational techniques. I have discovered that there is a shortage of opportunities for Jewish educators to come together in an academic environment and acquire the tools to become exceptional Jewish educators. In an effort to address this need, I have founded the Instructional Leadership Institute for Jewish Educators in collaboration with a team of Towson University (TU) professors from the Center for Leadership in Education.

The Jewish experience is unique and requires a customized approach and set of rules. This is particularly true in the field of Jewish education. The guidelines and procedures that work so well for teachers and administrators in public schools may not easily translate to a Jewish day school, *yeshiva* or Hebrew school. Nevertheless, there are many innovations and developments in secular education that would greatly benefit the Jewish community.

To complicate matters, Jewish educators today bring to the table a vast array of pre-service experiences, courses, degrees, and skill sets. Some Orthodox schools still hire post-seminary graduates as nursery and early childhood educators, or to teach *limudei kodesh* classes. Other schools actively recruit teachers who have at least a Bachelor's degree in any discipline, and an emerging group of Jewish educators hold Master's degrees, some in education. Just as an academically diverse class can confound even an experienced teacher, this disparate population of educators poses a challenge for school administrators when they are creating a professional development program. Administrators who are committed to creating academically excellent Jewish institutions must offer professional development classes and create professional learning communities in order to motivate, educate and inspire their entire faculty. Research data indicated that "educators who engaged in professional development activities lasting more than one day felt more hopeful about their ability to develop an emotionally satisfying professional career."¹

Outstanding, state-of-the-art Jewish education training is essential to ensure the future of a strong Jewish community, and research data confirm that committed educational professionals need better training, support, and expertise. These are some of the issues and questions driving my work in Jewish education today.

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Prior to Baltimore Hebrew University's merger with Towson University in 2009, I was cognizant of the many differences between Jewish and secular education. Since the merger, however, I have become more aware of the parallels that exist. The collaborative relationship between TU and the Baltimore Hebrew Institute (BHI) offers a dynamic platform that synthesizes academic invention with Jewish tradition.

From all of these ideas, the Summer Instructional Leadership Institute (ILI) was born. Towson University has offered its own, secular version of the ILI in the past, to much critical acclaim. In collaboration with my Towson colleagues, we have created a groundbreaking professional development program. Jewish educators representing 14 schools will join together to improve their knowledge and skills in key aspects of instructional leadership, and enhance their continued development as professionals by learning from superior educators from both public schools and day schools. The ILI offers a platform of critical reflection and meaningful collaboration between Jewish educators from the Baltimore Jewish community's wide array of Jewish schools. The Associated: Jewish Federation of Baltimore has enthusiastically backed the ILI, by supporting and subsidizing the cost of the program to encourage participation by Baltimore area teachers and principals. So, too, Baltimore's Center for Jewish Education and the greater Jewish educational community have responded positively.

Armed with newly acquired knowledge and skills, each participant will develop an action plan for personal and organizational growth. The dominant theme of the ILI is the "Seven C's" of instructional leadership: continuous improvement, culture, collaboration, coaching, caring, change, and community. These concepts will be conveyed through tools to inform practice, including group activities, breakout sessions, coaching teams, networking, in-depth discussions, notebook resources and panel discussions. Teacher-participants will be encouraged to engage in active daily reflection and cultivate their reflective practices.² One of the breakout sessions will focus on developing or rewriting a school's vision and mission statement. Another will feature talking skills, which are the backbone of professional collaboration. As David Perkins said, in a professional learning community, "People strive together toward the same outcome in ways that they directly share the work, the thinking and the responsibility."³

One of the goals of the Institute is to begin the dialogue among participants about goals and standards that could shape the future of Jewish education by addressing the questions of what students completing programs should know and be able to do. The Institute will expose Jewish educators to some of the cutting edge standards that currently define best practices in American public schools (for example, the Maryland Core Curriculum Framework, 2011⁴). The Institute will offer Jewish educators a framework in which to explore the relevant concepts, share ideas, grapple with questions, and work towards implementing changes that will bring Jewish education into the 21st century.

Principals and administrators will find certain aspects of the ILI particularly beneficial. A core belief underlying the Institute is that instructional leadership does not — and cannot — reside

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solely in the role of the Principal or Head of School. Every teacher must see herself or himself as an instructional leader who bears full responsibility for the learning of each and every child taught. The institute builds the capacity of all participants to be highly effective in this instructional leadership role. They will have the opportunity to concentrate on their vital roles as leaders, gain new insights from sharing with colleagues and their subordinates, do a performance analysis of their own organizational culture, and look for ways to implement change.⁵ Additionally, participants will develop and implement a realistic institutional vision and mission.⁶ Other benefits that ILI participants will enjoy include effective analysis of student performance data to improve pedagogy and accountability, as well as engagement and interaction around key topics and current issues. ILI participants have the opportunity to learn from a guest panel of instructional leaders, including headmasters from the two largest Jewish day schools in Baltimore, a director of an Early Childhood Education Center, and two principals from Maryland public schools.

Following the completion of the five-day Institute, an online community will provide ILI participants with a forum where they will be encouraged to share information, find support, and receive mentoring by the ILI presenters. The online forum is scheduled to remain active for four months, during which the faculty will continue teaching and interacting with the ILI participants.

All participants will develop a deeper understanding of foundational elements of instructional leadership, addressing the perspectives of education and schools in general along with the unique characteristics of Jewish education. This ILI is a prototype for future academic professional development programs, because the curriculum draws on contemporary approaches to professional development that are highly adaptable to the specific needs of any school community.⁷ Jewish educators strive to provide quality schooling for all of their students. Carefully crafted professional development like the Summer Instructional Leadership Institute equips teachers for this challenge.

As we move forward, we will continue to develop an evaluation model that measures the impact of the Institute's work on community involvement, school improvement, teacher performance, and, ultimately, student achievement.⁸

ENDNOTES:

1. Jewish Education Service for North America (JESNA, 2008). "Educators in Jewish Schools Study (EJSS)" found online at Berman Jewish Policy Archive at www.bjpa.org/Publications/details.cfm?PublicationID=356.
2. Schon, Donald.A. *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. New York: Basic Books, 1983 and Schon, D.A. *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987.
3. Perkins, David. *Smart Schools*. New York: Free Press, 1992.

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4. Maryland Common Core Curriculum Framework, 2011. Retrieved July 9, 2012, from <http://mdk12.org/instruction/commoncore/index.html>.
5. Bredeson, Paul. *Designs for Learning*. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press, 2003.
6. Senge, Peter et al. *Schools that Learn*. New York: Doubleday, 2000.
7. Bredeson, Paul. Op. Cit. and Sparks, D. & Hirsh, S. *A New Direction for Staff Development*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1997.
8. Nevo, David. *School-based Evaluation*. Tarrytown, New York: Pergamon, 1995.

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