



Surviving or Thriving

TEACHER ATTRITION AND RETENTION IN OUR BALTIMORE DAY SCHOOLS

by Hinda Cohen

Sarah had wanted to be a teacher since she was in elementary school when her favorite activity was to play school with her friends. Sarah loved teaching *alef-bais*, ABCs, addition, and subtraction; you name it and Sarah could teach it beautifully – to her friends, that is. Then came her first opportunity to teach in her alma mater. Sarah was hired to teach a high school secular subject to bright ninth graders. But Sarah only knew what she had been taught in high school – and she had not saved her notes. Sarah was in trouble.

Soon the girls began to misbehave. They scored poorly on her first test, which was too long, making the girls late to car-pool. No matter what help Sara received here and there, she always seemed to face a new battle of either poor curricular or pedagogic knowledge. One day, Sarah just returned her materials and quit, her dreams shattered.

This “story” has happened too many times to count. We live in a country that does not strongly value the teaching profession. (Finland does, by the way: read *The Smartest Kids in the World* by Amanda Ripley, for some fascinating insights.) Add to this two years of COVID disruptions and we are faced with deficits in our children’s academic progress as well as widespread teacher shortages. Certain public school districts are in such dire straits that they are taking parent volunteers as substitutes to oversee large groups watching films in the auditorium. Our day schools are suffering, too, with multiple job

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openings for teachers advertised in our local media last summer and even during the school year. In fact, a girls school in a major community was able to open this year for all but one grade; a letter was sent home to the parents of the grade lacking teachers stating that their daughters should simply not come to school!

With education in both *limudei kodesh* and secular studies a central pillar in our lives, the question is: How do we recruit and retain the Sarahs of the community?

A Hidden Prize

We are rightly proud of our local day schools, many of whose graduates have gone on to great success in life. Yet, like public and private schools all over the country, our schools are having trouble retaining and recruiting teachers. There are many reasons for this, of course, but instead of trying to simply intuit solutions, we can take advantage of educational research. And the major success factor that research has uncovered is the school's investment in professional development for its teachers and administrators.

Enter Prizmah, the Center for Jewish Day Schools and the premier organization for best practices in education, which supports all Jewish day schools in the U.S. and Canada. A highly professional, research-based organization, Prizmah offers many one- to two-year programs on Zoom, forming cohorts of teachers and administrators throughout the country who are striving for excellence in their roles. Outstanding leaders in

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education present sessions, and participants may even take part in the renowned Harvard University's Center for Education in the summer.

One Prizmah initiative that some of our local schools have attended is You Lead, a program for deepening and improving leadership capacity for administrators of day schools. In the past, Beth Tfiloh participated and, more recently, Ohr Chadash Academy (OCA). This nine-month leadership program personalizes its curriculum for the needs of each cohort, and provides one-to-one mentoring to each participant. It is based on the highest standards; that is, it is "research based" and follows "best practices." Although these terms may sound like empty educational jargon, they are actually quite meaningful. The term "best practices," for instance, means that large groups have been studied to determine what works educationally, which schools succeed or fail, and why.

To further understand the importance of programs like You Lead, consider the words of Ohr Chadash's head of school, Mrs. Deborah Rapoport, describing Prizmah as "extraordinary, unparalleled support," and Rabbi Mordechai Bennett, middle school principal, who believes You Lead enabled him to "discover myself as a leader." These research-based classes have enabled Mrs. Rapoport, herself a doctoral candidate in education, to build a school culture where both students and teachers strive to grow to their capacities. Through organizations like Prizmah, as well as through the guidance of their head of school and onsite training programs, Ohr Chadash provides leadership training on a rotation basis for all its administrators.

Such programs are based on adult learning theory, which stresses 1) building deep and satisfying relationships between administration and staff, 2) allowing for autonomy in the staff, and 3) having learners achieve mastery. At Ohr Chadash, administrators and teachers sense these values strongly. And although every school has its "holes" of uncovered classes, in general OCA has "excellent teachers applying who are excited for the future of this school," states Mrs. Rapoport.

Are Better Salaries the Answer?

Much is being written about increasing teachers' salaries as the way to retain and attract teachers to our day schools. It is so important a topic that rebbe and teacher salaries were a focus of both Torah U'Mesorah and Agudath Israel in recent years. But let's take a step back and reflect. Of course, work is intrinsically connected to salary, and an insufficient salary definitely plays a large role. However, the point cannot be made strongly enough: No amount of money will keep a teacher at her challenging job when she lacks the consistent, personal support of her administration in a tangible way. Candies and new books sent out en masse at Yom Tov season are lovely, but this will not retain teachers.

Rather, creating a school culture where every teacher is

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given opportunities for growth, where every teacher counts, where the administration is in regular contact with every teacher – listening, encouraging, appreciating, and offering direction in a non-intimidating way – this will keep teachers. And these teachers will be happy. This is the key to professional development in both large and small schools. This is what Prizmah and other organizations provide to our schools. As Rabbi Bennett reflects, “If you are taught about 10 new ideas, you resonate with five, and you put three into practice in your school – that’s a win!”

Jewish New Teacher Project

Prizmah is not the only program concerned with day school teachers. In speaking with Nina Bruder, executive director of the Jewish New Teachers Project, I gained a greater understanding of all that is being done to empower day schools to retain their teachers. JNTP is a program under the auspices of the New Teacher Center (NTC). Its founding program for new teachers is almost 20 years old. Over 200 day schools have participated. In it, schools send experienced teachers to learn how to mentor new teachers. Schools pay for their mentor-teachers to attend, but the program is often underwritten, making it affordable. Over two years, mentor-teachers attend half-day workshops, four-to-five evening classes per year, read, and do homework. To date, teachers from Bnos Yisroel and Ohr Chadash Academy have completed the program, and teachers from Bais Yaakov High School are currently participating.

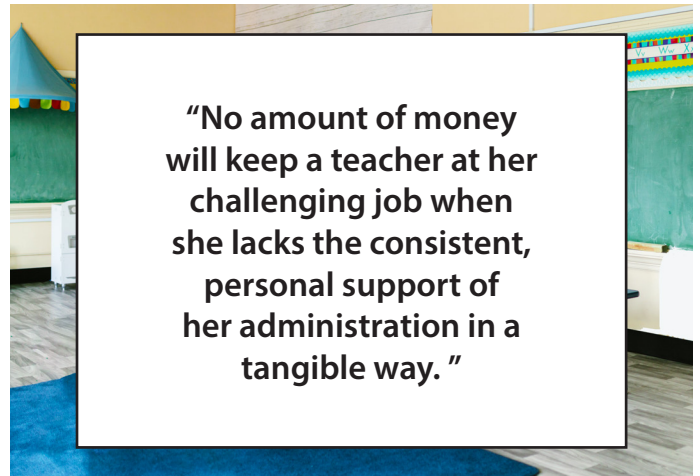
Once the new teachers to be mentored are selected, the mentor-teacher meets with her once a week and observes her class twice a month. She guides the new teacher to find her own solutions that suit her personality and mind. With her trusted go-to person, the new teacher gains confidence in the classroom and learns to think for herself. The typical weekly 45-minute mentoring session is driven by what the new teacher wants to discuss, whether how to write a lesson plan or how to decrease the chatter in the back of the room. Any topic in pedagogy is within bounds, but, interestingly, curriculum is off bounds. JNTP’s approach is that a math teacher might be a mentor for a Chumash teacher or vice-a-versa. An English teacher may mentor a new science teacher.

Some participants question this approach, feeling that the program works best when the mentor and mentee are from the same department. The major question is, if the mentor is mentoring only for pedagogy, then how will Sarah learn the methodology of classroom instruction for her subject field? (In educational lingo, pedagogy refers to the general principles and practices of teaching, while methodology refers to a system of methods used in a particular discipline or area of study.) How will Sarah learn the curriculum and its components, timing, and goals, etc.? How will she learn the subject content she may be lacking? Nina Bruder explains that mentoring in pedagogy is most successful when a department or curriculum

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supervisor who is trained in content and methods is in place to regularly supervise the new teacher in curriculum and methodology.

Unfortunately, however, supervisors are spread very thin. Add to this that an untrained supervisor seems like the “boss” to the new teacher, and you have a recipe for a large dose of “fear of the supervisor.” To remedy this situation, JNTP opened a program 10 years ago for new administrators to gain skills and study best practices. Nearly 100 schools have participated in this program. So far this year, there have been three all-day professional development seminars, two-to-three night sessions, and five mentoring sessions. Each participant has a mentor to turn to for help as he or she applies the learning to her work.



“I Hear You”

All too often, day schools are stressful places to work, where overburdened administrators are dedicated to making school a place where students thrive. But somehow, such a school culture is failing as the lack of teachers – not to mention trained teachers – demonstrates. Yet in a school culture in any city or community that is based on the research-based principles of educational success, teachers count. Administrators have time for their teachers. Teachers’ voices are needed; teachers’ voices are heard.

In both Prizmah’s and JNTP’s programs for administrators, the key principle is professional development via research and best practices. Far too often, lower-level administrators – and certainly teachers – feel like cogs in the wheel, like worker bees in the hive. JNTP believes that a school’s success will skyrocket when all its staff feels heard, when all its staff can take pride in improving the school at their level and with their talents, and where growth and excellence are the buzzwords of everyone working there.

In the words of Mrs. Tzippy Levin, a veteran early childhood educator and recent assistant director of Ohr Chadash

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Academy's Early Childhood Learning Center, "We are all life-time learners, growing in educational practices. JNTP is a 'win-win' situation. The program empowers us to do the best job possible, to strive for excellence as a school." Mrs. Levin explained that, too often, administrators function on "survival mode" because they are stretched too thin. JNTP teaches how to administrate in an optimal way. Mrs. Levin adds, "You do not know that you do not know until you learn this."

Mrs. Levin is grateful for having learned so far how to effectively give a "quick classroom visit," have open-ended conversations and collaborate more effectively with teachers, be more receptive to her staff, have that difficult conversation, and provide specific feedback responses. Rabbi Bennett says his cohort training taught him how to support teachers on a practical level during a weekly meeting with each teacher, how to run meetings with a complex group of personalities, how to observe classrooms effectively, and how to analyze assessments together with teachers. Because of benefits such as these, Ohr Chadash Academy sends its administrators on a rotating basis to this JNTP program, participates in JNTP for new teachers, and has formed its own mentoring program as well.

Know What You Teach

We have discussed the contributions of Prizmah and JNTP to pedagogy and administration. We are now left with subject matter knowledge and teaching methodology. For example, consider the common directive of "read the chapter in the textbook and do the questions after it." Is this how students learn to read independently and critically? Do they learn algebra and mathematical thinking by practicing problems and watching the teacher do the problem correctly on the board? And finally, can a department chairman fill in this gap even by meeting frequently after or before teaching hours?

Somehow, some or all of this has become an accepted norm for a new teacher in many Jewish day schools. Yet, if the teacher does not have specific classroom tools and subject matter knowledge, she will not engage her students and bedlam must and will appear. Remember Sarah?

Enter Beth Tfiloh's new program, Moreinu, developed by Rabbi Mordechai Soskil. This initiative addresses the need for teachers to be mentored by a master teacher in methodology for the same *kodesh* area as the new teacher. While the teacher shortage is not strong at BT, this program is meant to nurture new stars on the horizon for the school's future. One to two candidates will be chosen this year. They will have some education-related experience such as camp counselor, etc., as well as strong subject matter knowledge from excellent performance in yeshiva or seminary. Most importantly, they will have the drive and excitement to succeed in education.

The new teacher candidate will observe the mentor-teacher. He or she will slowly be guided to give lessons, always under the supervision and training of the mentor. After some time,

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the candidate will teach one period a day, continuing to meet daily with the mentor. The candidate will be paid for this training through funds raised in memory of three outstanding Beth Tfiloh teachers. This is creative thinking with powerful potential; perhaps it can even be adapted to secular studies.

Educating Men to Educate Boys

Baltimore is also home to a national educational organization called Machon Menoras Hachochmah: The Institute for Torah-Based Curricula, a sister organization to Yeshivas Kesser Torah of Baltimore. The Machon creates general studies educational curricula for yeshiva high school students that combine standards-based excellence with content deeply rooted in the values of our *mesorah*. It produces innovative educational techniques and cutting-edge technology to deliver an experientially engaging education as it prepares students for success in the 21st century. Currently, the Machon's content is utilized in close to 20 yeshivos around the country.

Rabbi Mordechai Weissmann, director of the Machon, explains that his organization is working hard to alter the typical “teacher profile” for general studies teachers in *mesivtas*. A typical public school teacher is not necessarily the best fit for *bachurim*. Part of the Machon's push to create Language Arts, History, and Science courses with a Torah lens is to create opportunities for administrators to consider different models for hiring teachers. There is no reason why *mesivtas* cannot look to elementary school rebbeim, *kollel yungeleit* who want *chinuch*/teacher experience, and other Jewish professionals to teach general studies classes. Obviously, Rabbi Weissmann admits that such candidates need previous exposure to writing, communication, and the subject matter they are teaching. However, there are ways to solve this problem on the job via professional development – the Machon has created a series of videos and documents for this purpose – and options for remote graders to complement in-person teachers in a blended learning environment.

One example of a Machon course that allows for altering the “teacher profile” is an 11th grade Language Arts class that asks students to delve into topics related to *parshas hashavua* and *moadim*. Students are presented with a question and then research an English-Hebrew source packet. They then fine-tune their reading comprehension and critical thinking skills. A series of assignments are presented that ask students to take this material, further their research, and work on various writing assignments. While the content for the course is entirely Torah, it satisfies all state-mandated requirements and is aligned with national Common Core standards. In Kesser Torah, specifically, this course is taught by a veteran rebbe. He receives assistance in grading from a remote grader, who provides students with feedback on their writing, grammar, and mechanics.

A Modest Proposal

In contrast to Beth Tfiloh, many other schools do experience teacher shortages in secular subjects. Perhaps we can learn from an initiative proposed by TNTP, The New Teachers Project, a secular organization that supports public schools. TNTP recently published a booklet on new ways to attract and retain teachers, called “Pipeline Model: Grow-Your-Own Certification Programs for High School Students.”

TNTP’s guide focuses on recruiting students into teacher certification programs while they are still in high school. They are trained through a combination of internship/apprenticeship experiences, scholarships, or grants, and are placed in jobs after they graduate. Some programs even offer college credit for coursework and field experience in high school. TNTP hopes it can attract, in-

vest, train, and retain young talent, thus creating a pipeline of local teacher candidates.

Could this idea be implemented in our day schools? With sufficient support in 12th grade and a continuing personal connection after high school, our community could benefit from such a program, especially combined with the recent outstanding financial support of our national institutions in raising teachers’ salaries, an obviously necessary component.

Summing It Up

Teacher attrition and retention is a grave topic and a complex problem. Do we only need higher salaries? Highly doubtful. Will a pedagogy mentor who does not teach the same subject matter as her mentee and a department chairman on “survival mode” be sufficient to

prevent the Sarahs of our communities from quitting? No.

Our teachers today need ongoing training in all three areas: curriculum content, methodology, and pedagogy. Moreover, teachers need to feel valued for their specific strengths. A teacher will stay at her job when her school applies the research-based best practices of adult learning to create a school culture of growth for students and staff at all levels.

The task is daunting, but if we as a community turn towards this research with the knowledge that “wisdom is found among the nations,” we can begin to retain and acquire excellent teachers. As a community, we all need to do our share to address this issue. Don’t our children deserve this? ♦

Interview with Mrs. Yaffa (Luchansky) Hill

Mrs. Hill is a graduate of Yeshiva High of Silver Spring, where she took several AP courses with certified AP-trained teachers. Following seminary in Israel, Mrs. Hill completed a BA in Secondary English Education at Towson State University. Mrs. Hill presently teaches ninth-grade Humanities and tenth-grade English at Yeshivat Mevor Chaim.

Q: What would you say were the most valuable aspects of your education at Towson State University?

A: Our program was based on a trifecta: a three-pronged approach blending one’s content area, philosophy of education, and child psychology, with an emphasis on the latter. I took at least nine psychology of education courses and wrote around 18 papers for these classes. Every assignment was related to education. For example, if we stud-

ied the research about the need for relevance in a child’s learning, our psychology of education professor would assign us to choose a work of literature from one of our literature courses and write a lesson plan that stressed this principle, which we handed in to our psychology professors!

Q: That certainly is a well-integrated program! What about techniques of teaching secondary English? When did you study those?

A: We had several technique classes, where we learned and practiced dozens of techniques for teaching all aspects of English. I also learned even more techniques on the job. Once, my mentor-teacher shared with me that she found the use of sentence strips helpful in teaching adjective clauses. She took out these oak tag strips and showed me how to post them on the blackboard to teach the need for a relative pronoun and its adjective clause to appear next to the noun or pronoun it describes. Then I developed a lesson plan using these sentence strips and taught the

lesson plan. The plan was reviewed, the lesson was reviewed, and I learned to use the sentence strips.

Q: Can you tell me more about your student teaching? It sounds like an intensive program!

A: It definitely was! I student taught for four months in a middle school and another four months in a high school. At first, I would observe, but by the end of the second month, I was teaching a full load of six classes, meeting with my mentor-teacher three times a day, and often staying in school until 9:00 p.m. grading papers and preparing lessons. But I loved it. I was learning the skill of teaching secondary school English; I was learning to craft techniques according to the psychological development of the children before me.

Thank you for sharing your thoughts with us. You have certainly opened our eyes to the benefits of a bachelor’s in a specific field of education. ♦