

INTRODUCTION BY THE EDITOR

In this thought-provoking article, Isa Aron proposes changes in thinking and planning that could transform Jewish education in congregational settings. By re-conceptualizing a staffing model in the form of a pyramid, Aron introduces innovative strategies to address educator recruitment and retention.

There is no personnel *crisis* in Jewish education; rather, there are a *series* of personnel *crises*, each of which needs to be addressed differently. Understanding this point is fundamental to our ability to address the personnel needs of the many different settings in which Jewish education takes place. One “size” does *not* fit all, and the sooner we appreciate the special circumstances and needs of different settings, the sooner we will be able to devise an appropriate and effective plan for each.

This article deals with the shortage of personnel in one such setting — the congregational school. I contend that rather than harboring a vague ideal of the “perfect” teacher and educator, schools should begin with a realistic assessment of the kind of personnel they will be able to attract. Being realistic does not mean settling for less; to the contrary, it enables the school to strengthen its staff through a series of targeted interventions.

Even within the sub-group of congregational schools there is enormous variation — in size, location and ideology. Most of the article will focus on these variations, and their implications for staff recruitment, training, and support.

Realism as the Key to Excellence in Congregational Education

ISA ARON¹

The Predominance of Non-Professional Teachers

A professional Jewish teacher is a teacher who has a degree or credential in Jewish education, and who thinks of teaching as his or her career. Though professional teachers do not earn very large salaries (especially compared to other professionals, such as doctors, lawyers and accountants), they can and should expect to earn salaries that are commensurate with the training and commitment they bring to the job. For their part, schools that hire professionals can assume that they already have considerable skill and expertise upon arrival.

Student attendance in congregational schools ranges from two to six hours a week. Even a very large school that operates several shifts is unlikely to hire its teachers for more than 12 hours per week. In fact, a 1998 study of Jewish teachers conducted by the Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education (CIJE) found that 64% of supplementary school teachers taught 1–4 hours a week, and 32% taught 5–12 hours; only 4% taught 13 hours or more.²

With so few teaching hours to offer their staff, congregational schools are not able to attract professional teachers. The CIJE census found that only 19% of teachers in supplementary schools were trained in both Jewish and general education; 12% were trained in Jewish studies only; 35% in general education only; and 34% were trained in neither.³ Similarly, an earlier study of Los Angeles teachers found that 47% of Reform supplementary school teachers had taken no college-level courses in Judaica, and 32% had taken no college-level courses in education; in Conservative schools 37% had taken no Judaica courses and 29% no education courses.⁴

As with any rule, there are some interesting and instructive exceptions. For example, congregations that have day schools in addition to religious schools can offer combined positions in both settings, with salaries high enough to attract professional teachers. In Los Angeles, a city blessed with many liberal day schools, 27% of teachers in Reform supplementary schools and 35% of teachers in Conservative schools taught in more than one setting.⁵ Likewise, a central agency might create a number of hybrid positions, which combine afternoon or weekend teaching

in one or more religious schools with daytime work in a JCC or another communal agency. An exception of a different type occurs when professionally trained teachers who have young children at home choose to teach part-time in a religious school until their children are older, and they can return to a position that offers more hours.

But though it is rare to find professional teachers in congregational schools, it does not follow that the quality of instruction in these schools will necessarily be poor. The best congregational schools recruit non-professional teachers, such as college students, members of the congregation, or young adults who are under-employed, with a full awareness of both their strengths and their limitations. They then offer these teachers some or all of the following: pre-service training that lasts anywhere from six months to two years; apprenticeships as assistant teachers, under the guidance of accomplished teachers; frequent observation and feedback from mentors or supervisors; a detailed curriculum, with scripted lesson plans; and/or ongoing in-service training. They tailor their structure and curriculum to capitalize on the strengths of their teachers, and compensate for their weaknesses. They also create a range of incentives, both monetary and non-monetary, that increase the likelihood that their teachers will return, year after year. These may include free membership in the congregation; reduced tuition in the pre-school or religious school; dinners and retreats; honors and awards; mentoring from the professional staff; and – the least tangible but most important incentive – a sense of belonging to the community. This multi-pronged strategy enables these schools to offer excellent instruction in an environment that takes full advantage of their teachers' talents.

The Differentiated Staffing Pyramid

It is helpful to think of the staffing pattern of a congregational school (or any educational institution for that matter) as a pyramid. At the bottom of the pyramid are the “front-line” educators – the teachers. At the top of the pyramid is the senior educator, who used to be called the principal, but is now more commonly referred to as the congregational educator (more on this later). If the teachers who form the base of the pyramid were well-trained professionals who had long-term commitments to the school, and if the number of teachers was small enough, a single senior educator might be able to provide all the leadership the school needed. But when there are a large number of teachers, or when these

teachers are not professionally trained, the senior educator requires assistance from a variety of people who comprise the middle section of the pyramid – teacher trainers, mentor teachers, curriculum writers, and many others.

The base of the pyramid shows the different pools from which teachers for congregational schools might be drawn, including college and graduate students, under-employed young adults, congregants, day school and public school teachers. The availability of some of these pools often depends on the congregation's location. A school located in Boston or San Francisco, for example, is more likely to find college and graduate students than one located in a small rural community; under-employed actors are more likely to be found in New York or Los Angeles, retirees in retirement communities, and so on. Other choices will be dictated by the school's curriculum; a school whose curriculum integrates Hebrew and Judaica needs a different kind of teaching staff than one in which these subjects are taught separately.

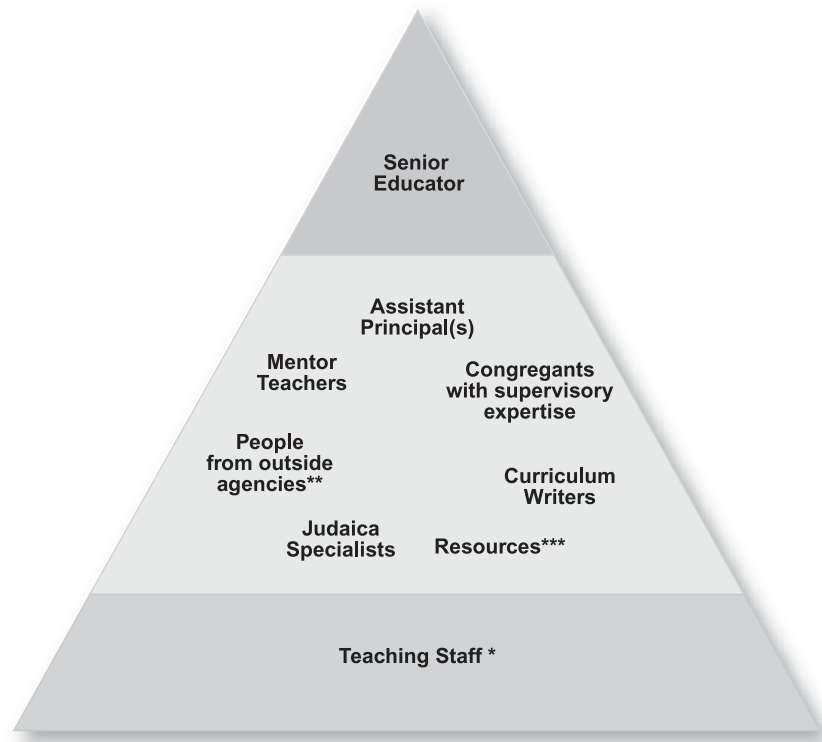
Over and above these factors, the decision to recruit a particular kind of teacher might reflect an ideological commitment. Some congregations might attempt to professionalize a significant portion of their teaching staff by recruiting day school teachers, and creating hybrid positions for people who work in JCC's and other communal institutions. Others might be committed to “growing their own” avocational teachers from the membership. Still others might value the informality, enthusiasm and approachability of younger, untrained, teachers over both professionalism and long-term stability. While a school might recruit teachers from a number of these different pools, the more targeted its approach, the more efficient and effective it will be in its training and mentoring.

The Middle and Top of the Pyramid

The special needs of these cohorts of teachers, the size of the school, and the availability of resource-people will determine the composition of the middle section of the pyramid, which is often overlooked, but which is critical to a school's success. The following people might be included in the middle level:

- One or more paid assistant principals, who hold degrees in Jewish education;
- Exemplary veteran teachers who receive special training to be mentors;

Differentiated Staffing Pyramid for Congregational Schools



** Includes: college and graduate students, under-employed young adults, avocational teachers, retirees, day school teachers, and public school teachers*

*** Can include: central agencies, regional offices of the movements, or university faculty who can provide outside expertise and consultation*

**** Includes: workshops at conferences; or courses at local universities, the FMAMS, and online*

- Congregants with supervisory expertise in secular education, who can observe, give feedback, and offer advice on classroom management;
- Curriculum writers who create scripted lesson plans for novice teachers;
- Clergy and Judaica specialists who can offer instruction in Judaica and Hebrew;
- Consultants from outside institutions, such as central agencies, regional offices of the movements, or local universities.

The likelihood that the teachers at the base of the pyramid will need training and support, and that, in all but the largest schools, those who form the middle level of the pyramid will work very part-time, means that the senior educator must be a well-trained professional Jewish educator, skilled at both management and lead-

ership. Though there is a shortage of personnel at this level too, there are a number of things a congregation can do to increase its chances of finding an outstanding senior educator. If the congregation can recruit nationally at a competitive salary, it should configure the position as that of congregational educator, on par with the other senior professionals, with broad responsibilities for congregation-wide learning; both veteran educators and new graduates of masters programs are looking for collegial working environments and congregations that think broadly about learning as a life-long endeavor. If the congregation cannot afford a competitive salary, it must think about the potential candidates for senior educator in the same way it thinks about teachers – as people who come with strengths and weaknesses. The position can then be configured to capitalize on the person's strengths, while providing additional support to overcome their limitations. For example, an edu-

cator with little administrative experience might be assigned a part-time assistant principal in charge of administration; an educator inexperienced in symbolic leadership would benefit from some coaching by an executive coach. In addition, the job can be offered with the expectation that the educator will take steps to fill in the gaps – whether in Judaica, education, administration or supervision – by enrolling in courses, being tutored, or working under the guidance of a mentor. The educator's tutors and advisers might be thought of as yet another addition to the middle level of the pyramid. The congregation's willingness to subsidize this kind of professional development will assure that it takes place, and sends a symbolic message about its importance.

Conclusion

The shortage of personnel in the congregational school need not assume crisis proportions. In fact, a crisis mentality can

exacerbate the situation, when it leads to indiscriminate recruitment, overlooking gaps in knowledge or skill, and a hesitancy to require continuing professional development. If congregational leaders think realistically about the pools of teachers from which they will recruit, set high standards for the senior educator, and think creatively about potential resource people for the middle level, they will, over time, create a highly qualified and stable educational staff.

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² Adam Gamoran, et. al. *The Teachers Report* (New York: CIJE, 1998), p.12. Teachers from three communities were surveyed, Atlanta, Baltimore and Milwaukee.

³ Ibid., p.6.

⁴ Isa Aron and Bruce Phillips, "Findings of the LABJE teacher census." Unpublished report, 1988, Tables 33 and 34.

⁵ Ibid., Table 27. The way in which the data were collected did not enable us to discern whether the second (and, in rare cases, third) setting was a day or congregational school. In contrast, a study of Miami teachers found that only 17% of teachers in supplementary schools taught in more than one school. See Ira Sheskin, *The Miami Jewish Educator Study* (Miami: Central Agency for Jewish Education, 1988), p.66.

Editor's Suggested Discussion Guide:

- Isa Aron posits that there is a predominance of non-professional Jewish teachers in congregational schools. To what extent is this the case in your educational setting(s)?
- Aron proposes the pyramid staffing model as a strategy for offering excellent instruction with limited resources. Do you agree with this proposition? How might your community attempt to implement the pyramid model for its Jewish educational staffing?
- Do you feel her proposal of a staffing pyramid could be adapted to your venue as a way of thinking creatively about educator recruitment and retention? What are the obstacles and facilitators? What supports and resources would be needed to implement such a model?
- The pyramid model depends on a strong, well-trained middle level of resource people for educational venues. How persuasive are Aron's arguments that educator recruitment and retention would benefit from developing this middle level of resource people?