

Offering Benefits for Teachers: Does It Make a Difference?

by Bini W. Silver

Three years ago, when I became the new Director of Education at Temple Kol Ami in Plantation, Florida, I was surprised by the high turnover rate among the Elementary Division teachers in our day school. After conducting an investigation into this situation, and speaking to some teachers who had left, as well as others involved in the administration of the school, it quickly became clear to me that, perhaps, one of the single most important factors related to this phenomenon was the absence of substantive benefits offered to the teachers.

Today's literature in the field counsels to the importance of private schools offering at least 85%-90% of the compensation rate of the local public school systems (in order to be competitive in terms of both recruitment and retention of teachers). Since Temple Kol Ami Day School already was offering close to this salary level, this did not seem to be a critical factor. Rather, many of the teachers spoke of the fact that they could not consider making a long-term commitment to the school because of the lack of a benefits package. (At the time, all that was offered was an HMO health plan in which the school paid 50% and tuition reduction for any teacher's children enrolled in the day school.) This seemed to be especially true of younger teachers who were either single or could not necessarily count on the benefits package of a spouse/significant other. In these cases, the lack of a competitive benefits package was most damaging to retention as well as to potential recruitment.

We know that less than 50% of Jewish day school and early childhood educators receive health benefits (see: [Roberta Louis Goodman, Recruitment: What We Can Learn From Studies of Jewish Educational Personnel](#)). Further, other research also shows a paucity in benefits offered beyond this very minimum level.

We initiated a campaign to educate our own Education Committee as to what other Jewish day schools who were members of PARDeS (Progressive Association of Reform Day Schools), as well as other Jewish day schools around the country, did offer. Further, we obtained compensation and benefits package information from local private schools and the county public schools in our area. Gathering these facts was a vital step in having the necessary information to provide to our lay leaders. As we all know, most lay leaders are prepared to make responsible decisions when they have reliable information that shows that their institutions are not "keeping up with the Goldbergs."

The Education Committee members were astounded to discover that teachers actually received benefits beyond salary and health benefits in other private schools and Jewish day schools. Although our school had a total of 360 students, with 45 teachers in the Early Childhood Division and 20 in the Elementary Division, the Committee was still reluctant to spend the money necessary to provide additional benefits. It took more than six months of committee deliberations to finally convince them of the necessity of doing this. Extensive time was spent collecting the financial data to estimate the costs of the differing benefits that we wanted to offer. We worked with several lay leaders who had expertise in the human resources field to supplement the information we were able to gather. Clearly, what was essential to our case was showing that precedents existed, both nationally and locally, to offer such benefits to teachers in Jewish schools. Further, the anecdotal information gained about how important a benefits package was to teachers played an important role in convincing the Committee of its necessity.

In the end, the Committee endorsed a new benefits package that was offered to all full-time teachers (defined as 30 hours or more per week), administrative staff, support staff, and custodians in the school. Part-time teachers received some of the benefits on a pro-rated basis, although not all.

The school paid for the following entitlements, which were part of the package:

1. HMO (the school paid 50%).
2. Tuition reduction in the day school for any child attending (50%).
3. Long-term disability policy (90-day waiting period).
4. Insurance policy (value of 1x the person's annual salary).
5. Matching pension plan after one year's employment (increasing per centage each year).
6. Cafeteria Plan that allows teachers to bank salary in pre-tax dollars for child care and health care.
7. An extended sick-pool that could be used for catastrophic illnesses or injuries.
8. Buy-back of unused sick days at 60% of worth at the end of the year.
9. A 50% reduction in Temple membership fees.

It was very surprising to see that the additional costs of items 3-9, which the staff had not previously received, was not as great as many had thought. Some on the Committee argued that the new benefits package should only be offered to the Elementary Division teachers (Grades K-5) and not the Early Childhood teachers (18 months - Pre-K). They argued that very few Early Childhood teachers around the country received such benefits. However, after a continued campaign focused on educating the Committee about the significance of being "one" school with two divisions, we were able to convince them that this was the right thing to do. Also, we did a great deal of educating about the fact that offering Early Childhood teachers a living wage and decent benefits package was the "Jewish thing," as well as the "right thing," to do. It is important not to overlook the persuasive power of such moral arguments with lay committees.

In our Elementary Division, more than 35% of the teachers also teach in the supplementary religious school at our Temple for additional income. We now are beginning a campaign to increase the benefits offered to our religious school teachers. It is clear that this will be a much more difficult task, since the precedents for religious school teachers receiving benefits are not as numerous.

Since we instituted our new benefits/entitlements package two years ago, both our retention rate and our capability to recruit new teachers has been greatly enhanced. We no longer are faced with teachers choosing to leave because we cannot compete directly with other private schools in the area. We still do not offer a salary that is on par with the local public school system, but we are close enough to the 85-90% figure to be competitive, due to smaller class sizes and other more favorable teaching conditions. Clearly, offering a complete benefits package as part of the overall compensation package makes a difference. It allows us both to retain our best teachers and to recruit new teachers when necessary.

Bini Silver has been involved in Jewish education for over 25 years. He currently serves as the Director of Education at Temple Kol Ami in Plantation, FL, where he oversees the 900 children involved in its day school, religious school, and Early Childhood programs. He is also a past-president of the National Association of Temple Educators, the Reform movement's professional educational organization.

Questions for Discussion

1. Do you believe there is a connection between teacher retention and benefits packages? Why or why not?
2. What benefits are part of your compensation package? What benefits would you like?
3. Why do you think the Education Committee was "astounded" that teachers received benefits? Why were they "reluctant" to spend the money to provide benefits?
4. Do you believe that part-time teachers deserve benefits on a pro-rated basis?
5. Were any of the benefits listed by Bini new to you? Would you like to learn more about them?
6. Bini mentioned that he was beginning a campaign to increase benefits offered to religious school teachers. He suggests that this will be a more difficult task. Do you believe that supplementary school teachers deserve benefits? What if, as many do, they work in more than one setting? How could such benefits be provided?
7. Bini mentioned the importance of comparative data as a persuasive tool. Hanukat CAJE--the advocacy arm of the Coalition-- would like to know about the benefits that you

and your teachers receive. If we had such data, we would post comparative statistics on the CAJE website--confidentiality respected, of course. Please consider sharing this information with us and sending it to hanukatcaje@caje.org

The Hanukat CAJE Committee, Cherie Koller-Fox and Michelle Rapkin-Levin, Co-Chairs

Please send your comments and suggestions to Hanukatcaje@caje.org.