

The Transformative Value

of Fieldwide Teacher Collaboration



Last summer, four day schools in the Midwest came together to explore a common challenge: how to differentiate instruction in a Hebrew classroom to meet the needs of students with varying levels of knowledge and experience. Teams of educators and administrators from each school—Saul Mirowitz Jewish Community School in St. Louis, Akiva School in Nashville, The Hebrew Day School of Ann Arbor and Hyman Brand Academy of Kansas City—met at Mirowitz to learn about differentiation from a master general-education instructor, and to discuss among themselves how to apply this learning to a Hebrew classroom.

The educators' energy and enthusiasm, both in bonding as teams and in meeting and networking with one another, was overwhelming. With multiple teams sporting school shirts, morale was very high; despite the fact that some of these schools resumed sessions the following week, they were nevertheless investing this time in their professional development and forging relationships with other educators. The instructor remarked early in the day how he couldn't tell which educators had existing relationships and which had become instant best friends with "complete strangers."

The professional development day is one example of collaborations that are taking place within the JDS Collaborative, with funding from The AVI CHAI Foundation. Where can we find the leverage to strengthen the Jewish mission of schools throughout the day school field? The Collaborative aims to provide one answer: Collaboration by teachers and leaders within schools and between schools can allow school change to take place in the most efficient and effective manner through the creation, prototyping and spread of new ideas, forging of new relationships, and sharing of resources. The Collaborative's unique process connects day school leaders and teachers over long distances; focuses them on challenging aspects of their Jewish mission at their school; and ignites collaborations on projects that they believe will address the challenge, largely through online networking strategies. Additionally, there is some funding to support professional development and travel opportunities.

The Hebrew differentiation project is one of 21 such projects currently underway in the Collaborative. These projects range from designing curricula using game-based learning, to developing Hebrew language activities built around real-life opportunities and experiences, to using educational simulations to explore scenarios school leaders face regarding Judaic teachers and curriculum content and tradition vs. innovation. Below are the implications we have seen from this work so far regarding the features that are most important for achieving impact and success.

First, while school participation depends on the school leaders' buy-in and investment in the concept and its potential for application at the school, we have found that in many cases it is most effective for the majority of the work to be done by the teachers themselves. School leaders are simply too busy to be as invested in the daily process, and in the end it is the teachers in whose classrooms the resulting projects will be implemented.

Moreover, we have learned that Jewish day school teachers are indeed hungry for opportunities to form relationships with other teachers and to be exposed to resources, ideas and connections outside the four walls of their classrooms. When Cheryl Maayan, head of school at Mirowitz, opened the Hebrew differentiation day by asking the group to share about challenges in Hebrew instruction in a Jewish day school environment, the room exploded with everyone wanting to contribute.

"This is an area of growth for Jewish day schools. There are lots of opportunities in the field for leaders to connect, but we don't always provide these opportunities for faculty," said Maayan. She serves on the Collaborative's Leadership Team along with Rabbi Dr. Gil Perl, head of Kohelet Yeshiva High School in Philadelphia; Dr. Michael Kay, head of Solomon Schechter of Westchester; Larry Kligman, head of the Abraham Joshua Heschel Day School in Los Angeles; and Jill Kessler, head of Pardes Jewish Day School in Phoenix.

Suzanne Mishkin of the Sager Solomon Schechter Day School in Northbrook, Illinois, which is participating this year in a project about STEAM and the chagim, emphasized the benefits of sharing expertise. "We are interested in the Collaborative because we believe it is important to be able to pool resources. I worked for public school for many years, where there are many schools in a district, so you have access to educators with varied experiences and new ideas. There are great ideas in our building, but to be able to go outside and collaborate is always a positive experience."

Second, we are finding the Collaborative's support in project management is an essential resource in order to make sure projects come to fruition. Jonathan Cannon, director of the Collaborative, employs the following steps in the process of forming new projects:

- recruiting potential participants
- eliciting their priorities for improvement of their school's Jewish vision and practice

- connecting participants who face similar challenges and/or opportunities
- helping them formalize this commonality into projects around which they can collaborate.

While school leaders and faculty alike are enthusiastic about participating, they have very busy schedules, and the friendly guidance of Alanna Kotler, Collaborative project manager, can make the difference between a successfully implemented project and one that falls by the wayside. Kotler ensures that projects stay on track through managing the team roles and responsibilities and breaking down deliverables, milestones and deadlines.

The Hebrew differentiation project reveals how participants develop their work through collaboration and resource-sharing. In the time since the day of learning, the schools narrowed down their focus to differentiation strategies for second grade Hebrew reading fluency, and together determined the standards they wanted to work on. The Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School of Rockville, Maryland, subsequently joined the project, and its Hebrew reading specialist created a webinar that was given to 15 teachers and administrators at Mirowitz and Akiva. After the webinar, teachers worked in their schools to create new benchmarks for reading fluency and share lesson ideas of how to differentiate instruction in light of student assessment. The schools are currently working on furthering the work in their schools to better define assessment and fluency criteria.

The process represents a shift in the way many day schools approach challenges that can seem beyond the ability of the school to address. "The Collaborative is the first opportunity we've had to think about a problem from within our school rather than joining an external program that's been created for us. The impact has been subtle but profound. There hasn't been any one 'aha moment' or one stand out experience but every few weeks gained more information and pushed forward. Now, a year later, we have come a long way," said Daniella Pressner, Principal at Akiva.

Third, we are unearthing at what stages of this process collaboration is most helpful, and to what end. What is the best model for structuring collaboration among multiple day schools such that it is a value added rather than an obstruction to a successful outcome? What unexpected benefits of collaboration may not have been anticipated?

We are finding that collaboration among different schools is most valued for the learning (professional development) and evaluation phases, whereas collaboration within a school is prioritized during the implementation phase.

One ancillary reported benefit of the Collaborative is that collaboration between teachers teaching the same topic and administrators within each school itself has increased enormously and has been sustained, leading to a culture of cooperation that has the potential to transform relationships between colleagues and positively impact student learning as a result. "Our experience is showing that the sustainability of projects that had collaboration in the schools is greater because of the joint conversation and accountability," Cannon said.

In conclusion, day school collaboration is critical because it allows schools to share resources, which is not only more efficient, but also leads to the spread of new ideas. "As a Jewish day school field, we need to figure out more effective ways to share resources. I don't just mean financial resources but that sense of support, the idea that someone has your back," Pressner said.

If you are interested in learning more about the Collaborative, please contact Jonathan Cannon at jonathan@educannonconsulting.com.