The shortage of qualified teachers is a major problem in Jewish education. Directors of congregational schools, day schools, and early childhood and high school programs in communities large and small scramble to find enough teachers. All too often, they find themselves hiring people without sufficient background and preparation, keeping teachers on staff because they cannot find suitable replacements, or replacing teachers year after year because the incentives to stay are not in place.

The conventional wisdom in matters of teacher recruitment and retention says that the best way to attract strong candidates into teaching and keep them there is to provide attractive financial incentives. I agree that all teachers, including Jewish educators, should earn a decent salary commensurate with their background and the social importance of their work. At the same time, I know that other incentives, such as opportunities for collaboration and serious, sustained learning, can be powerful magnets as well. My own work with teachers in public schools and current research on professional development support this claim. More important for this discussion are my experiences in a congregation-based project designed to recruit and support a corps of volunteer teachers for the congregational school.

In 1992, the Covenant Foundation awarded a three-year grant to Kehillat Israel (KI) in Lansing, Michigan, to design, implement, and disseminate an avocational teacher program. The purpose of the program was to develop a group of volunteer teachers for the religious school and to create a structure for ongoing teacher recruitment and support. Over the three years of the grant, the school became a more serious place where students and teachers grappled with texts and gained access to some of the big ideas that Judaism espouses. The presence on Sunday mornings of ten or more avocational teachers was transformative.
teachers sent a message to parents and students alike that Jewish education is not just for kids. Five years after the grant ended, eight avocational teachers were still teaching, mostly Torah, in third through seventh grades. Ten years later, one veteran avocational teacher is directing a restructured school based on a different model, and one former teacher is working in the field of adult Jewish education. In fact, my own move into Jewish education was strongly influenced by my work in this project.

The KI project was partly inspired by Isa Aron’s early writing and question, “Where will the next generation of Jewish teachers come from?” While the project illustrates one of the five models identified by Ms. Aron and her colleagues – transforming parents into teachers – its lessons go beyond the strategy of turning congregants into teachers. It also provides critical implications for the recruitment, retention, and development of teachers for congregational schools, day schools, and other education settings. Below I briefly describe the features that came to characterize the KI approach to avocational teaching to show the links between teacher recruitment, teacher retention, and teacher development.

Reliance on good curricular materials. To support teachers’ work with children, the project supplied teachers with good curricular materials. We depended on teachers to learn content and get ideas about how to teach that content from studying these materials. At the same time, we knew that teachers would adapt the materials to their classroom, creating a living curriculum with their students.

Grade-level teams as a primary source of study, preparation, and support. We formed two- to four- person teams at each grade level, pairing people with complementary strengths. Having co-teachers offered built-in opportunities for joint planning, problem solving, and support. Teachers felt less isolated and more accountable because their practice was public.

An integrated approach to content and pedagogy. Unlike conventional teacher education that separates the learning of content from the learning of teaching strategies, we adopted an integrated approach. We provided opportunities for teachers to work with consultants, to study their subject matter with master teachers, and to see master teachers teaching that subject matter to students. Afterwards, we analyzed the teaching and learning that teachers had experienced or observed and the conceptual and pedagogical issues that arose.

Engagement with authentic texts. Avocational teachers engaged in serious study, including text study. People reported spending three to four hours preparing for class and cited their own personal learning as the most powerful part of the experience. The avocational teacher project was truly adult learning in the service of children’s Jewish education.
Experienced teachers mentor new teachers. A major goal of the project was to create an ongoing system of teacher recruitment and support. In the third year, we recruited new teachers to join existing teams so that they could learn to teach alongside more experienced teachers. When the project ended, we had a pool of experienced teachers who could coach and co-teach new volunteers as well as a bank of lesson plans to share.

Placing teacher learning at the center of efforts to transform congregational schools represents a powerful strategy for linking recruitment, retention, and development. While this will take imagination, time, and resources, it is a necessary condition for teaching and learning to flourish in any school – religious or secular – and for teachers whether they are full-time or part-time, paid or volunteer, professionally trained or avocational.

**Share:**

Related Topics:

Congregational Schools

*Sharon Feiman-Nemser holds the Mandel Chair in Jewish Education at Brandeis University.*