

Blog Post: How to Attract, Prepare and Keep Good Day School Teachers

By Sharon Feiman-Nemser
October 7, 2014

Teacher retention and effectiveness stem from a clear vision of good teaching, strong alignment between coursework and field experiences, a focus on subject matter preparation, and a year-long internship. That view is supported by [a new report from the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education](#) and funded by the [Jim Joseph Foundation](#), which finds that graduates of the DeLeT (Day School Leadership Through Teaching) Program at [Brandeis University](#) and [Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion](#) feel well prepared for their responsibilities as day school teachers.

The report comes from the [Longitudinal Survey of Day School Teachers](#), which has been tracking the careers of DeLeT alumni since 2007. Previous reports described [graduates' backgrounds and views of day school teaching](#), the [factors influencing their decisions over time to stay in teaching or leave the classroom](#), and the [opportunities and challenges they face in their schools](#).

Researchers analyzed responses of over 100 DeLeT graduates from the past six years to a survey administered at the end of the program and conducted interviews with program faculty to help explain those responses. In addition to their overall sense of preparedness, a large majority (81%) of DeLeT graduates, mainly elementary teachers of general and/or Jewish studies, felt well or very well prepared to plan lessons, manage classrooms and integrate Jewish values into their teaching.

The features of DeLeT—vision, coursework-fieldwork alignment, subject matter preparation and an internship—are widely reported in the teacher education literature as [characteristics of high quality teacher preparation](#) and correlates with teacher retention and effectiveness. While other programs for aspiring Jewish day school teachers have some of these features, only DeLeT offers this combination.

What is the value of such a study and who can benefit from it?

Beyond the specific feedback to DeLeT leaders and funders, the study opens up a discussion about what the preparation of teachers for Jewish day schools should be like. In the past two decades, the question of how to attract, prepare and keep good teachers has prompted fierce debate in public and professional circles. Some believe that the solution lies in recruiting smart college graduates who know their subjects and can figure out how to teach on their

own. Others counter that teaching is a complex professional practice which requires rigorous preparation and ongoing support and development. In fact, it's the combination which seems to make the most difference.

In a [recent large study](#) of how various aspects of teacher preparation affect the retention of new teachers, researchers found that pedagogical training (e.g. practice teaching, methods courses, child development) matters most. In fact even Teach for America (TFA), the poster child for recruiting candidates from elite colleges and sending them into classrooms after just five weeks of summer training, is [seriously reconsidering its quick preparation/short commitment model](#). One [pilot TFA program offers a year of pre-service training](#) and requires a five-year teaching commitment.

DeLeT attracts talented candidates and provides strong pedagogical training, including a set of general and content-specific methods courses, a course on child development and learning, and a year-long mentored internship. This may well account for the sense of preparedness which graduates across the board feel and for their long-term retention and commitment to day school teaching.

A final contribution of the study turns on its unique combination of program evaluation and applied research. Supported by the Jim Joseph Foundation, the Longitudinal Survey of Day School Teachers combines formative assessment with the generation of usable knowledge for the field. Too often, programs in Jewish education are subjected to brief evaluations whose instruments and findings are rarely made public. This practice [works against the building of shared knowledge](#).

Three additional programs which prepare or support beginning day school teachers—an undergraduate program at Stern College, a graduate program at JTS's Davidson School and the Jewish New Teacher Project—have administered the DeLeT survey to their graduates. Researchers can now consider how different pathways to day school teaching affect teachers' perspectives, practice and career commitments while also giving individualized feedback to each program. We address these issues in greater depth, and in multiple settings, in the new volume [Inspiring Teaching: Preparing Teachers to Succeed in Mission-Driven Schools](#).

We encourage others to consider using the surveys and research design to study their programs and graduates. Only through such coordinated inquiries can we get smarter about recruiting, preparing, supporting and retaining good teachers for Jewish day schools.