Blog Post: A Little Research in Support of School Change

By Shari Weinberger
February 9, 2012

Today's guest post is by Shari Weinberger, curriculum coordinator at Jewish Community Day School of Rhode Island. After attending the Mandel Center’s “community conversation” last fall on preparing and retaining excellent teachers for Jewish day schools, she was inspired to try some research in her own school. Here is her account of how that inquiry is helping make the school even more supportive of professional growth.

Could such an inquiry strengthen similar efforts in the school you know best?

As the new Curriculum Coordinator at the Jewish Community Day School of Rhode Island (JCDSRI), I facilitate many teacher meetings, coach new teachers, and provide support and guidance to our entire teaching staff. I have a very clear vision of the school culture we are trying to create, but after attending the Mandel Center event last November and learning about the DeLeT Longitudinal Survey, I decided that administering a similar survey to our staff would provide important information to help me move forward.

I designed a 10-question survey, using Survey Monkey. Five of the questions were taken directly from the DeLeT survey, which was shared at the November event. It has been a wonderful exercise and has opened up excellent discussion avenues for us. Here are our results:

• Eighty-eight percent of teachers agree or mostly agree that we share a vision of good teaching and a language for talking about it.

• Seventy percent agree or mostly agree that we have adequate curricular resources.

• Eighty-two percent agree or mostly agree that they receive strong administrative support.

• Eighty-eight percent agree or mostly agree that our school takes the needs of beginning teachers seriously.

• Only twenty-four percent, however, agree or mostly agree that we have regular times to meet and work on teaching and learning.

In all instances except for the last question, we scored higher than the responses from DeLeT alumni in the Mandel Center survey. The response to the last question shocked me because it is as though the teachers subconsciously added the word “enough” to the question. Our teachers attend a grade meeting each week, a general or Judaic studies meeting each week, and a general staff meeting every other week. Additionally, they all meet with
their team teachers regularly. We walk a fine balance between too many and not enough meetings, yet clearly our teaching staff is asking for more. I wonder if the teachers value the opportunity to meet so highly that they feel there is NEVER enough time to work on teaching and learning.

We are beginning to create a cohesive professional culture that I hear has been missing from our school for some time. I already feel a gentle shift in attitude. The process is slow, and proves that it is harder to change culture than to build culture from scratch.

I am now working with the teachers toward “observation for growth.” We began by writing shared, schoolwide standards of excellence in teaching. We are all speaking the same language and have clear and shared goals for education in our school. We’ve built a culture of confidentiality and trust. Teachers, who function in relative isolation, are now open to coming forward and asking for help. We are considering the process of observation for growth; pre-meeting, recording of data, post-meeting to discuss results and brainstorm new techniques. We recently reflected on a time when each teacher received helpful professional feedback and we listed what they felt made effective feedback.

My goal is to create a culture where observation is a welcomed part of professional growth. In the future I would love to move in the direction of “instructional rounds” like I heard about at the Mandel Center event. That sounds very exciting, but at the moment is not realistic in terms of funding. While the survey presented us with overall positive numbers, our teacher still complain about being overworked and underpaid. Instructional rounds might stretch them to the snapping point right now. Part of being a good supervisor is knowing when to back off. The idea of instructional rounds will need support and buy-in from the teaching staff to be successful. So before I make a move, I have to make sure that I line all my ducks up in a row. I look forward to working with the Mandel Center on this important step in our professional development agenda when our time is right.

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