

Blog Post: Making Schools Places where Teachers can Learn

By Susanne Shavelson
November 21, 2011

The best way to improve student learning is to invest in teacher development, but few schools are set up for it, according to Mandel Center Director Sharon Feiman-Nemser.

Over 60 Jewish day school heads, teachers, board members and other educational leaders gathered at Brandeis recently to learn how to make schools places that support career-long learning for teachers. The gathering, convened by the Mandel Center, presented the Center's latest research about what keeps teachers—from novices to the most experienced—learning, growing and improving.

Participants also learned about what drives teachers from the profession.

With the attrition rate at almost 50 percent in the first five years of teaching, this issue has some urgency. A recent **survey by the Mandel Center** of current Jewish day school teachers who graduated from Brandeis's **DeLeT program** found that only about half of the respondents agreed that their schools are paying sufficient attention. Among the findings:

1. Less than half agreed that their schools have regular time to meet and work on issues of teaching and learning.
2. Only 42 percent felt that their schools take the needs of beginning teachers seriously.
3. Just about half agreed that their schools share a vision of what good teaching looks like, or a common language for talking about teaching practice.

These findings are troubling in a profession that can require seven to 10 years for true mastery. Most teachers work alone, behind the closed doors of their classrooms. It is rare for a school to enable teachers' observation of one another, or for teachers to discuss challenges in their practice on a regular basis.

As Feiman-Nemser pointed out, even well-prepared teachers do most of their learning on the job. If the goal is excellent teaching—and the student learning that follows—schools must give teachers the time and tools to strengthen their teaching throughout their careers, she said.

The center's **Induction Partnership Project** was created to address that need. The project helps day schools create conditions that promote new teacher learning, and studies the factors that help or hinder that process. The focus on new teachers can serve as a lever to promote the ongoing development of all teachers in the school.

Changing a school's way of doing business can be a challenge; it requires setting aside time for teachers to plan curriculum together, observe one another's practice, and design and analyze assessments. It also requires buy-in from teachers and leadership from senior staff to insure that the collaboration is productive. This is hard work.

But as Rabbi Marc Baker, Head of School at Gann Academy in Waltham, Mass., said at the gathering, "We school leaders have the power and the responsibility to promote learning in everyone who has a stake in our schools. We have to make ourselves vulnerable and ask honest, hard questions of ourselves and those we lead. We need to be clear, passionate, and relentless about putting teaching and learning at the center."

This article was originally published at Brandeis NOW.

