

Hermelin/Davidson Center for Congregational Excellence: A Model for Community Excellence¹

by Judah Isaacs

The Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit has developed an intensive training program, including a trip to Israel, for Jewish educators working in congregational school settings.

Imagine for a moment that scouts were sent to every school of education, and the best teachers were drafted on national television for multi-million dollar, multi-year contracts at local schools. Imagine that each recruit would go through basic training, learning pedagogic techniques every summer from academic coaches. Imagine that the best classrooms were televised and each week millions of households would be tuned in to see children learning through innovative and exciting techniques. Imagine that principals who were fired from their multi-million dollar jobs for lagging academic performance could find another job in another school the next day at an even higher salary. Imagine if our society valued education as much as it values sports....

For this we may have to wait a little longer for it to come to fruition...

Imagine for a moment a 10-day trip to Israel for 85 educators of grades K-5, from 13 local community and congregation-based schools, and ten local artists. Imagine that their trip consisted of learning, volunteering, sightseeing, and, most importantly, becoming a "community" of educators. Imagine that these educators stayed at luxurious hotels, and that they were wined and dined at Tzippori and the Davidson Archeological Park at the Southern Wall in Jerusalem, among other places. Imagine that these educators traveled to Israel only after completing a two-year intensive course, for which they were paid \$1,000 a year for their participation. Imagine that their trip to Israel only cost \$500 a person. Imagine if all our teachers were taken to Israel and treated like royalty....

This has already become a reality in Metropolitan Detroit....

The Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit received an endowment gift from the Davidson and Hermelin families to create the Hermelin/Davidson Center for Congregational Excellence. The Center for Congregational Excellence funded the Synagogue 2000 program in our community. The Center also recognized that excellence in congregations has to be focused on improving the educational system within the congregation. The Federation's Alliance for Jewish Education was given the responsibility of developing a mechanism to improve the congregation's educational landscape.

The Alliance and the Center's board developed a systematic plan that would focus on a small cohort of educators and create an intensive training program based on the needs of that cohort. The first cohort consisted of early childhood educators. The JEEEP (Jewish Early Educator Enhancement Program), a two-year program focusing on improving the Judaic knowledge of preschool educators, was supposed to culminate in a trip to Israel, but, due to the Intifada, the trip to Israel took place two years after completion of the program.

After completion of JEEEP, the TEAM (Teacher Educator Advancement Model) program was begun for teachers of grades K-2 in congregational schools. The one-year program, focused on using multiple intelligences to enhance the classroom, began in the summer with an intensive overview of the theory of multiple intelligences and how it can be applied in the classroom. During the year, national experts on using art, music, drama, and storytelling in the classroom taught our teachers once a month on Sunday afternoon. Teachers were paid \$1,000 for their participation in the program.

Once this program was completed, we initiated a two-year program for TEAM 3-5 grade teachers. These teachers also were paid \$1,000 a year for their participation. Guiding this program was the PISGAH model of Synagogue 2000. PISGAH is an acronym where P stands for prayer, I for institutional explorations, S for study, G for good deeds, A for ambience, and H for healing. In the first year, teachers were asked to choose an area of exploration and to learn about ways they could improve their classrooms using one of the pillars of PISGAH. National experts helped teachers explore ways in which classroom ambience was being changed or the way prayer was being taught in creative and dynamic ways or how to create a healing classroom.

In the summer between the two year-long pieces of the program, teachers participated in a four-week intensive course that met for three hours once a week and focused on one of these pillars. The class on good deeds visited local Jewish agencies and learned first-hand

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about the good deeds being performed in our community. Together, they studied texts focusing on *Gemilut Hasadim* and learned how to bring the work of the agencies into their classroom. At *Shalom Street: the Address for Jewish Discovery*, our hands-on Jewish children's museum, the ambience track learned how to make the classroom come alive with innovative techniques. The prayer class focused on using the outdoors to make prayer come alive for students. Poetry and music were integrated into the study of prayer. The study group learned the same text from rabbis of different movements and compared and contrasted their interpretations.

In the second year, the TEAM 3-5 Program focused first on innovative ways to enhance the classroom through art, drama, and storytelling. The second half of the year was devoted to Israel, its culture, and its history in preparation for a trip to Israel. The trip was offered at the cost of \$500 per participant.

Bringing Israel Back to the Classroom

Eight weeks prior to the trip, educators began receiving bi-weekly e-mails with links to websites containing information about Israeli geography, history, and culture.

As a result of a grant the Federation received from the DeRoy Testamentary Foundation for the Artist in the School Program, which allows working artists to do a collaborative art project with children in congregational and communal education, ten artists joined us on the trip to Israel, where a separate track was created so they could meet with local Israeli artists.

The two-week June trip to Israel was structured with a very concrete goal: Teachers from K-5 were to think about how to bring Israel back into the classroom. When they arrived in Tel Aviv, each was given a journal containing a daily summary of places visited and guided questions to enable reflection on his or her experiences. During the trip, they visited schools in our Partnership 2000 region in the central Galilee and TALI schools in Jerusalem. They engaged in programs at experiential learning centers at Pinat Shorashim on Kibbutz Gezer, Beit HaMikra in Ramat Gan, and Neot Kedumim. They attended workshops on prayer, Israel folk dancing, and the dilemmas of living in a Roman and Jewish culture. On their final day in Israel, they volunteered at an Israeli nonprofit. The trip was designed to use all of their senses in experiencing Israel. For over 40% of our participants, it was their first trip to Israel.

Following their return, three sessions were devoted to the development of an Israel curriculum that could be used in classrooms. On a monthly basis, the teachers now share new things they are doing in the classroom as a direct result of the trip. A small group of teachers has been hired to complete the curriculum and create a series called "Israel out of the Box." These lessons are designed to be used as "stand alone" material or ancillary to existing curriculum, with the goal of showing how Israel is an integral



The purpose of the TEAM trip was to use all of the senses in experiencing Israel, so participants could bring that experience back to their classrooms. Taking part in an archeological dig at Beit Guvrin allowed teachers to learn that beneath the ground of Israel is Jewish history. Teachers took home broken pieces of pottery that they have been sharing in their classroom.

part of lessons on Jewish holidays, history, *Shabbat*, etc.

Several special participants, including Doreen Hermelin, one of the philanthropists sponsoring the program, accompanied the educators on their trip to Israel. Her presence on the trip made the teachers feel valued and appreciated. In addition, an evaluator from the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education at the Jewish Theological Seminary participated in the trip and conducted evaluations throughout the trip. A formal evaluation of the program will be completed shortly.

Ninety-nine teachers have signed up for this year's professional development program, a significant increase over previous years. We now have anecdotal

information about many ways that Israel has been brought into the classroom. Educators continue to talk about how much this trip meant to them, personally and professionally.

Lessons to be Learned

It is still early to evaluate the full impact of this program, but I believe that there are many lessons other communities can learn from the Hermelin/Davidson Center for Congregation Excellence. The first fact is simple: Money has to be invested in congregational excellence for change to occur. Secondly, we have to compensate our teachers for serious professional development. This shows the teachers that the extra time spent is valued and important. We also have to make sure that our educators are taken on "first class" trips, which rightfully recognizes their important role in our community. Thirdly, we need to think systematically about how to effect change within the congregational school system. By focusing on specific grades, we have been able to offer a stronger pedagogic model for our teachers. Lastly, Israel is a very powerful place that impacts all who visit there. Teachers who had never visited Israel had been teaching the Israel curriculum in their schools. We must ensure that every Jewish educator has an affordable way to visit Israel, and that they go. I believe that there is inherent value in taking a large number of teachers together; it helps to build and strengthen our educational community.

The Alliance for Jewish Education is about to embark on the final phase of the TEAM program for teachers of grades 6-12. Upon completion of this program, over 400 educators will have engaged in a serious professional development exercise. The Hermelin/Davidson Center for Congregation Excellence has begun an important journey to elevate and improve our educational landscape. As John F. Kennedy said, "Our progress as a nation can be no swifter than our progress in education." ❁

ENDNOTES:

1. This article is dedicated to Harlene Appelman, the former Chief Jewish Education Officer of the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit and the current Executive Director of the Covenant Foundation for her inspiration and vision, which brought these programs to life.