

# CHARTING THE COURSE: HEBREW LANGUAGE IN PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS

by ANNE LANSKI

**“Did you really happen, or was it only a dream?”**  
(Rachel Bluwstein, “Perhaps,” reprinted in *Flowers of Perhaps: Selected Poems of Rahel*, Menard Press, 1994)

**It really happened.** I went to public high school. My favorite class was Hebrew. It was fun, not too difficult and most important, over the course of four years, it was the class in which I learned the most — about myself and the place I belonged.

Twelve years later, I was teaching Hebrew in New Trier high school, a public school in Winnetka, Illinois. Hebrew language and cultural immersion five days a week, imbedded into the everyday life of teens, was an alternate universe to afternoon Hebrew School. It was the class they looked forward to, and it was the learning that felt most personally relevant within their school day.

On the Monday morning after Yitzhak Rabin had been assassinated, students entered the classroom without their books and sat silently. Hour after hour and class after class, they entered the room, needing to be there together. At the end of the day, 200 students gathered for what ultimately became the school’s first Israel Club meeting.

## THE MAPPING

In 2009, the iCenter, an organization founded by the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation and the Jim Joseph Foundation and devoted to the advancement of Israel education in the elementary and secondary school years, conducted a national mapping of public high schools that offer Hebrew as a foreign language option in their language curricula.

The first point to note is that there is no systematic tracking of these programs. No one has compiled a list of schools, or created a framework for teachers, or developed a set of central standards as exists for other language instruction. The programs are a scattered, uncoordinated and unexamined resource.

Through our own research, we located Hebrew programs in 30 high schools (and one junior high school) in 20 cities in more than 12 states, including California, Minnesota, Illinois, Texas, Wisconsin, New York, Ohio, North Carolina, Massachusetts, Alabama, Arizona and Connecticut.

Approximately 1,500 teens studied Modern Hebrew in public high school Hebrew programs in 2010. Nearly one-third of these students are in the greater Chicago area, where nine suburban high schools offer Hebrew as a foreign-language option.

We estimate that there are approximately 35 teachers teaching Hebrew in public high schools nationwide.

In May 2010, the iCenter conducted a workshop for public high-school Hebrew teachers from diverse communities across the country. Findings of that meeting included:

1. There had not been any previous convening of a national gathering of Hebrew teachers in public high schools. Many teachers did not realize there was a community of colleagues across the country they could tap into (with the exception of Chicago).
2. There are no standardized criteria or curricula developed specifically for public high schools. Teachers adapt textbooks written for *ulpan* use in Israel, or textbooks written for college students in the U.S. There is a lack of educational resources that are useful, current and able to inspire students.

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3. There are divergent levels of competency in Hebrew, in teaching experience and in second-language acquisition training within the teacher population. There is a lack of professional development opportunities tailored to these teachers.
4. The teachers were extremely appreciative for the opportunity to come together. They expressed willingness to be part of a community of colleagues and are truly committed to making their programs the best they can be.
5. Most students have the same Hebrew teacher for all four years of high school. Over the course of four years, teachers develop relationships with students, with parents and often with students’ siblings, a phenomenon that is unique to the public high school teacher/family relationship. This reality imbues a certain influence in these faculty members that could be used to help direct students to continue their Hebrew studies and Israel engagement.

## TOWARDS A NEW HEBREW EDUCATION IN NORTH AMERICA

The framework we have described — Hebrew in the public high school — was a dream of some of the founding figures of contemporary American Jewish education in the early part of the last century. As we enter the second decade of the 21st Century, this dream has a chance of becoming a reality.

Teaching Hebrew in public high schools offers unique possibilities that equal or even exceed other frameworks. Most important, it offers the opportunity for young people to gather within a Hebraic and Israeli context on an almost daily basis, providing consistency and daily contact which is critical in education.

In addition, teaching Hebrew in public high schools:

- Makes Hebrew language and culture as legitimate and mainstream as all other subjects and changes its “supplementary” nature
- Creates a social group of teens within a Hebraic- and Israel-focused context, leading to positive social capital and valence
- Offers the possibility of sophisticated language teaching using 21st Century resources and assessment
- Increases the possibility of travel to a country where Hebrew is the spoken language
- Offers the opportunity for creating engaging, extra-curricular activities such as Israel clubs, and in some cases, school-wide Israel programming.

The framework for teaching Hebrew language and culture in public high schools offers the possibility of a form of teenage education that encompasses and transcends language. It might be regarded as an adaptation of the charter school principle to significant public school and suburban areas. This framework offers the potential for sophisticated language and culture teaching and learning, which would draw on the myriad of public education resources and standards of excellence, attracting populations heretofore distant from Jewish and Hebrew education.

In order to make this happen, it requires a major strategic plan and program. In addition to enhancing and expanding existing programs, there are new communities interested in having Hebrew offered in their public high schools. The strategic plan could also provide communities with consultation and useful materials for advocating to their school boards and for enhancing recruitment. What if we could turn 1,500 students into 15,000 students?

Ours is an era of looking differently inside the box to seek new solutions to perennial challenges. Hebrew language and culture in the public high school is an exciting frontier. ■