

Creating Schools of Excellence: An H. R. Imperative

by Chaim Y. Botwinick

The identification and development of high-quality and effective human resources is an absolute imperative for creating schools of excellence in our community and the challenge of staffing Jewish schools must be moved to the top of the communal agenda. Key questions relating to recruiting and retaining staff for Jewish schools are included in this article.

The American Jewish community is currently confronted with a serious condition impacting the effectiveness of Jewish schooling – the lack of qualified human resources.

Not unlike public education, Jewish schools today – whether day schools, congregational religious schools or pre-schools – are experiencing a profound shortage of quality faculty, senior administrative leadership, and lay leadership. This is due in large measure to the inability of the Jewish education enterprise to attract and retain qualified teachers and senior educators in an educational environment and culture that provides minimal social status, career growth, and financial security. Moreover, the North American Jewish educational community continues to struggle in its ongoing efforts to successfully attract and engage committed laity who passionately seek institutional growth and development, innovation, accountability, and, above all, educational excellence.

If quality human resources are indeed the key to promoting, encouraging, and supporting excellence in Jewish education, then it behooves our communities and schools to collectively and individually direct more of their attention and resources to this challenge. To date, many of our schools and the organized Jewish educational community have not succeeded in attracting, recruiting, and retaining the most gifted and talented lay and instructional personnel or educational leadership. This reality is exacerbated by the lack of a comprehensive vision and culture that promotes, supports, and sustains professional and lay recruitment, professional development, retention, and placement in our schools. The absence of a coordinated and comprehensive communal approach greatly diminishes, if not eliminates, the potential for our schools to transform themselves into institutions of excellence.

Excellent Educators, Lay Leader Means Quality Education

All these realities combined call for an immediate institutional and communal response that places the human resources challenge of our educational communities front-and-center. Therefore, the first response must be heightening the awareness of the organized Jewish community about the critical importance of this problem. This can be accomplished by engaging central agencies, federations, lay leadership, parents, school administrators, and funders on the local and national level in a serious conversation and marketing effort regarding this crisis and its relation to school quality. It must clearly be understood that quality education – whether Judaic or secular – cannot and will not be realized in our schools, let alone the creation of “schools of excellence,” without a concerted successful effort to recruit, develop, and retain the best faculty and educational leaders possible, as well as the most dedicated lay leadership in our communities. “Schools of excellence” that successfully challenge the hearts, minds, and imagination of their students promote and support academic progress through a cadre of highly successful and effective professional and school board leaders.

In addition, the organized Jewish community must use every resource at its disposal to create and fund innovative, creative, effective, and sustained human resources training and development initiatives that respond to the pre-service and in-service educational needs of teachers in our schools. These initiatives must be complemented by meaningful teacher mentorship and coaching opportunities; leadership development modalities for principals; and a coordinated, community-wide effort to increase levels of compensation, benefits, and incentives, in addition to career ladder opportunities and resources for master teachers and teacher specialists. Concurrently, we must develop meaningful and effective venues for school lay leadership development at the local and national levels, focusing specifically upon enhancing lay roles in developing high-capacity school boards and governance, which is another essential ingredient for school progress and successful growth.

A further analysis of this critical need suggests that teacher recruitment be viewed as an essential part of a comprehensive plan to develop and maintain a cadre of instructional personnel capable of contributing maximally to the attainment of institutional goals. Having an effective instructional staff is not a matter of luck. Indeed, the competent administrator realizes the close association between planning and educational outcomes, and views his/her primary task as one of developing plans and devising means for their realization.

The quality of the response to today’s teacher recruitment challenges in the Jewish school depends to a large extent on the policy of the school’s board of directors or board of education.

Dr. Chaim Y. Botwinick is President/CEO of the Center for the Advancement of Jewish Education, in Miami, FL. Prior to assuming his current post, he served for 13 years as Executive Vice President of the Center for Jewish Education, Baltimore, MD. He has served as President of the Association of Directors of Central Agencies for Jewish Education and is currently on the boards of several national and international Jewish communal organizations and government agencies.
chaimbotwinick@caje-miami.org

The policy questions regarding recruitment that confront the professional and lay administration are:

- ♦ What should be the school's policy with respect to filling teacher vacancies above starting salary levels from internal sources?
- ♦ What should be the promotion policy regarding instructional staff?
- ♦ Should the school institute a career ladder program?
- ♦ What should the school's policy be with respect to in-service training?
- ♦ Should the school provide opportunities to help instructional personnel perform better and prepare for advancement?
- ♦ What should be the school's policy towards uncertified or uncredentialed applicants in light of the teacher shortage?

These policy questions help focus attention on the need for developing and maintaining policies to guide principals in carrying out a teacher recruitment plan. Organizational planning for teacher recruitment must precede individual planning by those who are responsible for the ongoing operation of the school. Individual planning relates to the wide gamut of day-to-day administration and supervision and guidance, school management, parent/school relations, etc. It also encompasses budget planning, community/public relations, resource development, and board development – all of which relate to a closely-involved school lay leadership.

Individual principals or administrators within the school cannot decide for themselves the answers to the questions posed regarding recruitment. An effective recruitment plan requires policy planning (read “organizational planning”) on the part of the school's lay leadership in partnership with the school academic head. If the school does not decide in advance what course of action will be pursued throughout all phases of recruitment, how can any individual involved in teacher recruitment act intelligently or, for that matter, provide ready answers to questions posed by prospective applicants or prospective students considering a career in Jewish education?

Determining Recruitment Policies

Obviously, the nature of recruitment policies will have a profound effect on planning. If greater emphasis is to be placed upon recruiting teachers who meet high standards, increases in budgets may have to be projected, different recruitment techniques may be needed, and the sources for locating such teachers may be quite different from those used if qualifications for instructional personnel are not high.

Experience in staffing Jewish schools has led to the realization that new assumptions and approaches are needed to cope with existing and emerging teacher manpower problems. Competition for the limited supply of Jewish teaching personnel, extension of educational opportunities, high turnover rates, and the growing number of varied types of personnel needed to teach in these schools have led to considerable interest in ways to develop systematic plans for dealing with major Jewish teacher shortages, such as the following:

- ♦ How many teachers does the school require to carry out its responsibilities effectively, both now and in the future?
- ♦ What types of teachers are needed now and in the future?
- ♦ What standards should be used for the employment of

instructional personnel?

- ♦ What kinds of plans are needed to ensure that the school attracts the variety of competent teachers needed to fulfill its mission?

These are the kinds of questions that need to be addressed regarding school-based human resources planning.

The general purpose of this type of planning in our Jewish schools should be to develop and maintain a highly motivated and competent teaching staff to achieve the aims of the system. There are certain characteristics of manpower planning common to planning of any kind. Organizational planning is meant to decide in advance what is to be done and clarify the institution's expectations of what it wants the total system and its parts to be and to do. By developing systematic plans for teacher recruitment, random “band-aid” solutions are minimized, while goal-oriented, coordinated, rational, and orderly organizational efforts become possible. However, if teacher personnel planning is neglected, a school can be plagued with the problems of attracting and retaining the instructional personnel essential to its purposes. The consequences that every school suffers when it does not have enough of the “right teachers” in the “right places” doing the “right things” are so serious that the crucial importance of a teacher manpower plan becomes readily apparent.

Re-ordering our Priorities

Although there are select successful initiatives that endeavor to respond to the “personnel condition,” they are sporadic, underfunded, and lack the capacity and resources for continued growth and expansion. Moreover, the Jewish community lacks a comprehensive vehicle and/or mechanism necessary to disseminate these programs and encourage local replication.

In light of the challenges presented, it is most appropriate to suggest that the evolving role of the central agency in partnership with schools and federation leadership must be anchored in effectuating a local coordinated human resources strategic planning initiative. This will require a reordering of priorities, as well as a rethinking on the part of local communities as to how communal dollars are raised and expended and how federation allocations are maximized to upgrade and improve the quality and quantity of Jewish educational personnel. But first and foremost, what is needed is a consensus and heightened awareness on the part of communal leadership with respect to the need for developing such an initiative.

It is obvious that the identification and development of quality and effective human resources are an absolute imperative for creating “schools of excellence” in our communities. However, the realization and actualization of this challenge requires significant communal and institutional introspection and reflection. If we are truly serious about creating “schools of excellence,” it is essential that we view this challenge and opportunity as critical to the future vitality and viability of our communities. We must be bold in our thinking and creative in our wisdom, but, above all, we must begin to move this challenge to the top of our communal agenda. 