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Jewish Day Schools Look For Online Savings

Computer-based secular studies seen as educationally sound and economical.

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No one standing outside Yeshivas Ohev Shalom would peg it as an educational technology trendsetter.

This tiny, fervently Orthodox high school is housed in a rundown synagogue in Los Angeles' Fairfax District, a neighborhood that, like New York's Lower East Side, has largely transitioned from old-world Jewish to hipster. Even inside — where boys,

headphones over their yarmulkes, sit on mismatched chairs at long, battered wooden tables facing a velvet-curtained aron kodesh (ark) and tap away on black laptop computers — the scene seems more Borough Park than Silicon Valley.

Nonetheless, this modest 15-student yeshiva is the first Jewish school in the United States to offer all of its secular studies via a fully accredited (and state-funded) virtual charter school — enabling it to keep tuition at \$7,500, less than half the cost of most American Jewish high schools.

Judaic studies at Ohev Shalom take place the traditional way — face-to-face, often in chavruta (paired learning) with students and teachers poring over bound volumes of Talmud.

But at 2 p.m. each day the laptops come out and the boys are virtually transported to the online high school, Kaplan Academy of California. Then, while an Ohev Shalom teacher and administrator circulate about the room to make sure everyone stays on task, the boys watch live-streamed lectures, Power Point presentations and videos; chat with their Kaplan teachers via instant-messaging and e-mail; take online quizzes (and learn their grades instantly); research and write essays — and even read the occasional print-and-paper book.

“I like it a lot more” than typical classes, says Elisha, a 12th grader, giving a reporter a demonstration of the various features of the online school during a visit this spring. “We have a

lot more resources and are able to go straight to work instead of wasting time listening to teachers disciplining kids.”

As rapidly advancing technology transforms virtually every sector of society, a diverse group of Jewish educational institutions — not generally thought of as early adapters — are increasingly turning their attention to digital tools and resources.

Whether distance learning or online gaming, Skype or Twitter, Google Earth (and a plethora of other free educational apps available at the click of a mouse) or iPads, SMART boards or Smartphones, QR codes or robotics, Jewish day schools and supplementary schools — and their funders — are struggling to sort the useful, cost-effective and engaging from the gimmicky, expensive and simply overwhelming.

Technology Is Hot Topic

Technology has headlined almost every major Jewish education gathering this year, from the North American Jewish Day School Conference (“The High Performance, High-Tech Jewish Day School of the Very Near Future”) to the Conservative movement’s Jewish Educators Assembly (“From Sinai to Cyberspace”) and Reform movement’s North American Association of Temple Educators (“Imagining Jewish Education for the 21st Century”).

In June, both the Avi Chai Foundation, a major supporter of day schools, and PELIE, a group seeking to improve “complementary” Jewish education (better known as Hebrew school), for the first time sent delegations of teachers to the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) Conference. Avi Chai also sent 10 educators to Games For Change, a conference promoting the use of computer games in education.

Caren Levine, director of the Learning Network at Darim Online, a group that works to help Jewish organizations use technology effectively, notes that the Jewish education world is approaching a tech tipping point of sorts.

A frequent speaker and consultant on Jewish education and technology, and former associate vice president of media and technology at the Jewish Education Service of North America, Levine has been hosting networking events for Jewish educators at the ISTE conference for 11 years. This year’s turnout of more than 65 was the highest on record, helped partially by the Philadelphia location, with its proximity to many major Jewish communities — but also buttressed by Avi Chai and PELIE’s recruitment and funding.

Rachel Mohl Abrahams, a program officer at Avi Chai, told The Jewish Week that the foundation’s sponsorship of participants, mostly Jewish day school teachers, at ISTE and Games for Change, is part of a larger stepped-up focus on technology. That includes helping to fund an East Brunswick, N.J. startup Jewish high school that uses a mix of online and in-person learning, training day school leaders in the use of social media tools, and working with Tel Aviv University to develop online Judaic studies classes for North American day schools.

Technology, Abrahams said, holds the promise of “strong cost-cutting elements” for day schools. In addition, “from an educational perspective, day schools need to think about what it means to

be a 21st-century school and to focus more on skills, on project-based work, all the things people are taking about in the secular education world. And technology is certainly one of the main ways of implementing that kind of learning in schools.”

While a handful of Jewish schools are clearly tech pioneers, many more, particularly in the part-time world of Hebrew schools, are only in the very beginning stages of integrating technology into their operations. Start-up costs, professional development, and the sheer difficulty of navigating the ever-evolving tech landscape, can be daunting.

Not to mention the problem of tech phobia among many teachers and administrators.

“When people say they’re scared of technology, it’s not about technology, it’s about change,” said Levine.

Rabbi Saul Zucker, director of the Orthodox Union’s department of day schools and educational services, has been trying for the past two years to encourage more Jewish day schools and yeshivas to take advantage of the growing market for online education. In particular, he’s been a champion of the company K12, a leader in on-line education, and he led a group of principals on a tour of its headquarters last year.

However, he said, there’s a lot of resistance.

“The problem with this is that no one wants his or her child to be the guinea pig,” he said. “And there are disadvantages: some kids need more face-to-face contact, and parents don’t like the idea of kids sitting four to six hours a day at a computer screen.”

With any change, he said, “everyone wants to see what everyone else is doing first.”

While some remain resistant, others are nervous about falling behind. At ISTE’s Jewish “Birds of a Feather” session, participant after participant spoke about not only wanting to make better use of their school’s existing tech resources, but to stay up to date on the rapidly shifting field — “to make sense of it all,” as one participant put it.

Like many in the field, Levine emphasizes that technology is “a means and not a goal — the goal is Jewish learning and Jewish community, and tapping into resources that foster and enhance them.”

For Orthodox institutions, especially in the haredi world where the Internet and popular culture are viewed with suspicion and where many people are without home computers, bringing in technology is especially challenging and complicated.

At the ISTE conference, one teacher from an Orthodox girls’ school in Baltimore complained that her school does not allow any Internet use in the classrooms. And at a recent social-media training session for day schools, several Orthodox participants discussed their ambivalence about using sites like Twitter and Facebook — fearing that a school presence on these sites would encourage students to go on them and then engage in inappropriate conduct.

‘It’s Easy To Monitor’

Yeshivas Ohev Shalom, founded in 2009, has had to counter rumors in the local haredi community that its students are given carte blanche to play around on the Internet.

Rabbi Chaim Tropper, the yeshiva's principal and founder, emphasized that Internet use is carefully controlled and that students have only limited contact with their virtual classmates, mostly kids who are being home-schooled.

"We have a lot of rules," he said.

While the students have access to the Internet, Rabbi Tropper monitors their activity through an online program called LogMeIn, which allows him to see all the screens at one time and ensure the kids aren't doing anything but schoolwork. Even when students log in from home, Rabbi Tropper can still view their online activity and says he checks most nights until about midnight.

"We're a small group, so it's easy to monitor," he said.

Going through Kaplan not only makes the school affordable but also enables it to serve a wide range of students. Each pupil selects his own courses, and they range in level from honors, AP and special education to remedial. Plus, Rabbi Tropper said, he encounters "much fewer discipline issues" when the students are working on the computers than in a traditional classroom setting.

He emphasized that the boys "aren't sitting by computers all day" — the Judaic curriculum is with "regular classes" and "the school is a full well rounded program with sports and extra-curricular activities" like Shabbat retreats and school trips.

That said, the technology does pose some challenges. The school's Internet connection frequently goes down, and students occasionally have to miss live-streamed classes held during the morning (when they're in Judaic studies classes) or on Jewish holidays.

Nonetheless, the students interviewed during a visit this spring seemed very pleased with the online learning.

"The full syllabus and lessons are all posted, and the teachers are very easy to get along with," said 12th grader Elisha, who is Rabbi Tropper's son. "And one of the main things I like is that every single lesson you know you're going to have a quiz to make sure you understand — so you don't have to cram at the end."

While the online school was "a little hard getting used to at first," mostly because he'd had minimal computer experience, Elisha said he was pleased to be getting computer skills, noting proudly that he recently designed Yeshivas Ohev Shalom's website.

Shimon, also a 12th grader, said he likes that "you can go at your own pace" and that "you don't have to take notes" because all lectures are archived on the course website.

He also likes having a wide choice of courses and electives.

But is it lonely sitting at a computer for four hours?

"Sometimes, but not really," he said. And there's an added benefit to doing so much work at the computer, rather than in a classroom.

"If I stay on pace during the day, I don't usually have to bring work home," he said.