W e are on the cusp of a possible reshaping of Jewish day school education in the 21st Century. Online and blended learning holds the potential for a more personalized form of education and a reduction in costs. What are the opportunities and challenges this burgeoning new way of teaching and learning offers to the day school community?

In America generally, early experimentation in online and blended learning has taken place primarily in the public school sector, in two categories: 1. widespread individual online courses (which drew 4 million students in 2010), and 2. fully virtual schools as well as bricks-and-mortar schools in which blended learning is integrated throughout the day. This second category is newer and thus far less common. Jewish day schools, like other private schools, have been slower to embrace online/blended learning, but seem to be warming to its possibilities. As in the public school world, more schools offer the opportunity to enroll in an individual online (and outsourced) class than a fully online or blended program. One notable exception, not explored here, is Chabad, which offers a full online Judaic-studies program for the children of its shlichim spread across the globe.

According to an AVI CHAI commissioned survey that drew responses from 241 Jewish day schools, 25 percent currently offer online courses, and thus far these courses educate a smattering of students in each school. Because of their ready availability, the overwhelming majority of the online courses are in general studies, primarily math. Over time, as schools experiment with different providers and share information about the highest quality vendors in various subject areas, I expect more schools will offer online/blended classes to a greater percentage of their students.

As we move into new forms of teaching, we see an interesting interplay between existing schools and newly formed schools. Indeed, the pressure for more dramatic adoption of online/blended learning will likely come, in part, from a series of new Jewish day schools that integrate it across the school day. Most of these schools are still in their planning phases, although one opened in 2011-12: the Pre-Collegiate Learning Center (PCLC) in East Brunswick, NJ (pclcnj.com). PCLC describes itself as a Jewish high school offering “an academic program of educational excellence in both secular and Jewish studies with a complete rethinking of educational organization.” The school, whose tuition is $5,000, began with eighteen students in its first year and will not likely grow substantially in 2012-13. However, as the educators fine-tune and prove the success of their model, they expect the combination of personalized learning and low tuition to generate increasing interest.

Science and math are the most blended of PCLC’s subjects, combining online classes, some asynchronous instruction (video based, with no live teacher on the computer) and onsite classes and labs. Students also take Hebrew and foreign languages, such as Japanese, via Rosetta Stone. The list of possible online electives is enormous, since PCLC contracts with different online course providers as needed. The humanities remain the most traditionally taught of PCLC’s subjects. The Director of the PCLC, Lauren Ariev Gellman, told me that while the humanities do not lend themselves to asynchronous instruction, these subjects could be enhanced by blended learning offerings that have not yet been developed.

For Jewish studies, PCLC has few online offerings. Given the school’s belief that the best teaching is student-centered and student-driven, it integrates far more Beit Midrash/chavruta time into Jewish studies than do most schools. These Beit Midrash settings take place within the school and are facilitated by Israeli graduates of Yeshivat Mekor Chaim.

As PCLC grows, comes to require a larger space and hires full-time faculty, I am not sure whether it will be able to sustain a $5,000 tuition. The range of student educational needs and motivation levels that can be effectively served by PCLC is also not yet clear. However, if the school does succeed in offering a high-quality education for a cost below that of other Jewish day schools, the beneficiaries will extend beyond PCLC’s own families. Existing day schools will be compelled to lower their costs by changing their own student-teacher ratios through more online and blended learning.

Events in Bergen County, NJ demonstrate the way in which even the announcement of a new school can generate change in existing day schools. In September 2012, Yeshivat He’atid (The Yeshiva of the Future — yeshivatheatid.org) opened with 116 students in pre-K through First Grade. It will add one grade per year until it has reached Eighth Grade. The school plans to integrate technology from the earliest grades, with increasing online/blended learning as the students get older. Tuition at Yeshivat He’atid caps at a bit under $10,000, one-third less than the local Jewish day school charge for elementary and middle school. Because online/blended learning will not be fully integrated until the higher elementary- and middle-school grades, it will be a few years before Yeshivat He’atid fully implements its educational model. However, even before the school opened, its ability to attract more than 100 students sent a message to the other local day schools.

While the other schools had already begun to experiment with online and blended learning, there is some anecdotal evidence that the announcement of Yeshivat He’atid, among other factors, accelerated the experimentation. For now, none of the other day schools has used it as a means of increasing student-teacher ratios to reduce the educational cost per student, but conversations within the community indicate that the schools’ leadership understand the potential financial benefit.

Another school that integrates blended learning has opened in Baltimore, and schools in Los Angeles and Boston are opening this Fall. The day-school community benefits from the interplay between the cautious experimentation of existing schools and the bold visions represented by newer schools. The potential of online and blended learning is great, but the educational models are new and mostly untested. Parents and educators who embrace the current day school system should be grateful for the careful testing undertaken by their schools, knowing that the school leaders are moving as quickly as they believe is responsible, given the pressure from the new schools. Parents and educators comfortable with greater risk can avail themselves of the new schools and benefit from the lower tuition and personalization inherent in blended learning.

The future of these experiments cannot be foretold, but it is virtually certain that day school education will change dramatically in the next ten years. ■