

Benchmarking Their Way to Better Finances

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Eliminating Inefficiencies, YU School Partnership Helps Day Schools Improve Bottom Line

As the new school year approaches, many day schools are sharing news of increased enrollment, improved finances and new cost-saving measures they have successfully instituted, thanks in large part to the Yeshiva University [Institute for University-School Partnership's](#) Benchmarking and Financial Reengineering project.

After a 2010 pilot program was implemented in Bergen County, the project expanded in 2011 to include day schools in Baltimore, Chicago, Cleveland and Philadelphia. Participating schools have been able to document tangible improvements and project hundreds of thousands of dollars in financial savings. In May, seven schools in Los Angeles signed on to participate as well.

The program, funded jointly by a grant from The AVI CHAI Foundation and by local federations and foundations, asks participating schools to provide the YU School Partnership with detailed enrollment and financial data, which is then used as the basis for a comparative financial analysis with peer day schools. YU School Partnership consultants offer tools to help schools evaluate their own performance and enable them to be more proactive about managing their finances, and pinpoint areas for potential improvement and develop long- and short-term plans to enhance efficiency and effectiveness.

After analyzing the finances, the YU School Partnership identifies key ratios, such as the amount of tuition and fundraising revenue generated per student, how much money is spent per student by category of expenditure and the level of empty seats as a percentage of total available seats, or capacity utilization. The program then provides schools with experts in financial planning, educational economics, fundraising, recruiting, branding and retention to help them achieve desired improvements.

“Each school picks an area of focus and sets a goal for 10 percent financial improvement, and the consultants help them achieve those goals,” said Dr. Harry Bloom, who was recently appointed as the strategy manager for financial sustainability at the Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education, where he focuses on increasing annual fundraising and growing enrollment in Jewish day schools. Until early July, Bloom served as the director of planning and performance improvement at the YU School Partnership, and he looks forward to collaboration between the two organizations to broaden their sustainability offerings for Jewish day schools in North America.

“The benchmarking project is like a diagnostic test that tells schools where they can improve and be more efficient,” Bloom said. “We want to make schools more sustainable and we help them generate more funds so they can provide a good education.”

At Bnos Yisroel of Baltimore, the main objective was to improve the school's marketing and fundraising efforts, and, thanks to the benchmarking project, the school met and exceeded its goal, with a 70 percent increase in fundraising. By following a three-year plan designed by the YU School Partnership, Bnos Yisroel was able to set clear goals and learned to be more organized and consistent in their solicitation efforts.

"This was the first time we had an organized annual campaign with a monetary goal," said Rabbi Chaim Amster, director of development at Bnos Yisroel. "Our initial goal was to increase our annual fundraising to \$370,000 for fiscal year 2013, \$420,000 for fiscal year 2014 and \$470,000 by the end of fiscal year 2015. We surpassed that goal pretty significantly, with \$400,000 raised this year and at least \$500,000 anticipated by the end of fiscal year 2014. In two years, we accomplished more than we hoped to accomplish in three years!"

Working with the YU School Partnership "helped us create a system of accountability and mobilize our volunteers to cultivate relationships with the donors and to make sure gifts were solicited in a timely fashion," said Amster. "Last year, we had about 550 donors and this year we had close to 650, with more donors giving larger amounts."

For the Fuchs Mizrahi School in Cleveland, the benchmarking program helped support enrollment growth and guided the school in developing a three-year financial improvement roadmap. "We were already in a good place when the YU School Partnership approached us," said Rabbi Barry Kislowicz, head of school at Fuchs Mizrahi. "The benchmarking happened at a time when our school was engaged in these areas of growth. YU's subject matter experts helped leverage what we were already doing and helped us advance by leaps and bounds."

A branding initiative that was introduced by the YU School Partnership "was very instrumental in helping us talk to families about our strengths and weaknesses to determine whether those measures were actual or perceived," said Kislowicz. "It was an important mechanism to get more of a sense of what people value, which led more specifically into admissions and recruitment efforts and to making sure we were more effective in developing a significant endowment campaign."

The program also showed that Fuchs Mizrahi's tuition was 20 to 30 percent lower than similar schools, "so we made a strategic decision to stay lower," said Kislowicz. "But if we want to stay at that level and maintain our excellent academics, our endowment needs to grow to ensure our future sustainability, and the YU School Partnership helped us realize that goal."

Yavneh Academy in Bergen County also reported significant improvements to the school as a result of the Benchmarking and Financial Reengineering project. "Our goal was to capture 10 percent benefits in the overall school budget, and we were able to achieve that, through increased revenues and decreased expenditures," said Rabbi Jonathan Knapp, principal at Yavneh. "It was most helpful for us to analyze how we spent our money compared to like-minded schools and to learn if we were outliers in particular areas. We recognize that data informs best practices and having access to data allows us to answer questions such as... is that where we want to be allocating our precious resources and is the allocation consistent with how we view ourselves and our own educational value system?"

A direct benefit for Yavneh, according to Knapp, was that the school was able to “professionalize and enhance how we do recruitment and retention, which led to a dramatic increase in enrollment,” he said. “We were even able to offer a modest tuition decrease for two years and maintain the current level for the third year.”

Knapp added, “This was the first time our school embarked on a systematic process such as the benchmarking process and we found it to be exceptionally rewarding.”