

Blended Learning Math Instruction at Bnos Yisroel and Torah Institute

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This fall, Bnos Yisroel and Torah Institute switched their pre-algebra curriculum to a state-of-the-art, “blended learning” course that has students newly motivated to learn and achieve in math. What is even more impressive is that the course is homegrown; it was developed in its entirety by three administrators at the schools.

A year ago, Bnos Yisroel and Torah Institute were chosen to receive a grant from The AVI CHAI Foundation to develop a blended learning math course for their schools. This grant was a result of the initiative of Dr. Harry Bloom, strategy manager of Yeshiva University’s Partnership for Excellence in Jewish

Education, and Rabbi Larry Ziffer, Executive Vice President of the Center for Jewish Education, Baltimore.

Blended learning is exactly what it sounds like – a blend of different methods, including face-to-face classroom learning, collaborative activities, and computer learning. The blended learning model is at the cutting edge of education today, and both schools felt it was consistent with their goal of providing an engaging and high-quality math education.

The team selected from Bnos Yisroel and Torah Institute to under-

take this exciting project included Mrs. Sara Arno, Bnos Yisroel’s language arts department chair; Mrs. Delia Benn, Bnos Yisroel’s mathematics department chair; and Rabbi Mordechai Nissel, the general studies principal of Torah Institute.

The grant involved enrolling in a year-long, online certificate program at YU in Online/Blended Instruction and Design. One of the requirements of the certificate program was to create an online or blended curriculum; the Bnos Yisroel-Torah Institute team produced a year-long, pre-algebra course, which was implemented at both schools’ seventh grades at the beginning of this school year.

For both schools, a primary concern when considering blended learning was internet safety. When designing and implementing the course, they made certain that none of the workstations used by the students in school could access any areas of the internet other than those specifically included in the curriculum. Moreover, the course curriculum does not require students to access the online materials outside of the classroom. The schools relied on the expertise of Baltimore’s TFSA (Technology Family Safety Alliance), whose members provided invaluable guidance and assistance in various technological areas, including ensuring student safety.

The advantage of the blended learning approach is that the course designers have been able to include some of the best and most engaging material available today – from the acclaimed

Khan Academy to the unique Math Playground websites – and also allow each student to work through this material at his or her own pace. Since students receive instant feedback, they stay motivated to try their best.

“I think the program is great,” says Issar Berkowitz, a TI student, “because you get to go at your own pace. If you understand what the teacher is saying, you can skip the rest of the video, and if you don’t understand it, you can watch the video again.”

Even students who previously felt disengaged in a math classroom have felt renewed motivation with this new method. “I really enjoy the online learning experience,” says one seventh grader. “I have always disliked math and have been disappointed with my results, but with this program, I am able to go at my own pace, and am given credit for my time and effort. The videos are thorough and clear, and when I don’t understand something, I can get hints or individualized help from my teacher. This year I feel very secure, and I’m sure I won’t fall behind.”

The teachers seem to enjoy it as much as the students. “It’s a joy,” says Dr. Shoshana Singman, Bnos Yisroel’s math teacher. “I can attend to each student’s needs more frequently and fruitfully.” Rabbi Moshe Dresdner, the math instructor at TI, is gratified to see a classroom of students who are so motivated that “they are at their desks, headphones on, even before the bell rings.”

As the schools pursue this new path, they have been able to seamlessly integrate the new Common Core standards, which also emphasize critical thinking and collaboration. Mrs. Arno, Mrs. Benn, and Rabbi Nissel are gratified to see the enrichment their course is allowing and the excitement it is creating. “We hope that this new approach provides our students with a much richer experience of math,” said Mrs. Benn, “and give them the tools for greater success in the future.” ♦

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