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Perspective on Jewish Education

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Advancing Online / Blended Learning in Jewish Day Schools

The AVI CHAI Foundation

The AVI CHAI Foundation has been at the forefront of support for Jewish education. In this article the authors describe AVI CHAI’s initiatives in the realm of 21st century learning.

Introduction and background

In today’s Jewish day schools, as in many schools – private and public – around the country, teachers are faced with the challenge of providing effective instruction to collections of students, each bringing his or her individual strengths and challenges to the classroom. As a result, instruction is often insufficiently differentiated or personalized, and learning is not usually frequently and efficiently assessed. The traditional model also may not adequately address the growing necessity for students to develop skills and ways of thinking needed in the 21st century – including critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration, adaptability, and imagination. At the same time, in an era of changing technologies, new educational needs, and growing tuition fees, there is a need to bring down the cost of day school education.

New educational models in online and blended learning are emerging as promising answers to some of the challenges facing the field. Online learning entails any form of course or activity that is conducted entirely online. It may or may not be incorporated into other aspects of a school’s educational instruction. When it is incorporated, it is known as blended learning – defined by the Sloan Consortium (http://sloanconsortium.org) as a formal learning environment that integrates online with traditional face-to-face class activities in a planned, pedagogically valuable manner. By joining the best aspects of both face-to-face and online instruction, blended learning strives to create a learning environment that is more productive, by allowing teachers to align their instructional approaches to the particular academic needs of each student based on individualized feedback obtained from the computerized system. In addition to improved educational outcomes for students, online and blended learning educational models often result in cost savings through reducing schools’ personnel, facility, and textbook costs.

AVI CHAI and Blended Learning

As part of our mission to foster high levels of Jewish literacy, deepen religious purposefulness, and promote connection to Jewish peoplehood and Israel, AVI CHAI’s work impacts approximately 300 Jewish day schools throughout North America. The average tuition in these schools is between $15,000 and $18,000 – with most schools seeing tuition increases exceeding salary increases. Because day schools have a mission to provide a Jewish education to all Jewish families who want to send their...
children, schools provide considerable scholarship support, with nearly half of families in Jewish day schools receiving a tuition reduction which averages 50% (Bloom, 2011).

Recognizing that the implementation of online and blended learning has the potential to help Jewish day schools reduce their costs while maintaining or even improving their high quality, in October 2010 AVI CHAI began work to support such models in Jewish day schools throughout North America. To date, AVI CHAI has committed about $6 million in this area and expects to spend much more as new initiatives are developed. To the extent these initiatives involve direct funding to schools, AVI CHAI and its funding partners will circulate requests for proposals directly to day schools.

In addition to improving education outcomes and reducing costs, the introduction of blended and online learning models might enable Jewish day schools to attract children who are not currently attending these schools because their special needs could not be adequately addressed or because the course catalog offered by the school was not broad enough.

AVI CHAI’s work to promote the adoption of online and blended learning has three distinct components:

- **Existing schools**: Supporting the adoption of online courses and blended learning programs – primarily general studies courses – at established elementary, middle, or high schools;
- **New schools**: Supporting entrepreneurs experimenting with the model of a day school in service of both educational and cost-saving goals via the incorporation of online and blended learning and other 21st century learning ideas; and
- **Online Judaic studies**: Stimulating the development of Judaic studies offerings online at both the middle and high school level. We have also supported the Center for Educational Technology (CET)/NETA and TaL AM to develop digital-age curricula in Hebrew language, which include blended learning elements.

In supporting these new schools, we hope to establish proof points for the lower-cost, excellent education model that blended learning promises.

**Existing schools**

In 2011, through a partnership with the Jewish Education Project, AVI CHAI provided funding to help 18 Jewish day schools in North America to begin offering general studies online courses to a total of more than 600 students through participation in the DigitalJLearning Network.

Professional development opportunities were offered to teachers and administrators using a web-based platform, and participants were encouraged to share their experiences with one another on a private social network. The Jewish Education Project collected feedback on the schools’ experiences with the program, and based on its success, a second group of 18 schools joined the network in the 2012-13 school year. Now in the third year of the program, DigitalJLearning has begun to serve as a guide for other Jewish day schools that might wish to add online learning to their offerings.

AVI CHAI is working with Torah Umesorah to create a cohort of 12 schools alongside that of DigitalJLearning. This program will be a two-year pilot designed to explore whether online and blended learning has the potential to meet both the educational and financial needs of Torah Umesorah day schools.

In addition, AVI CHAI, the Affordable Jewish Education Project (AJE), and the Kohelet Foundation have jointly developed BOLD, a new funding program that is intended to stimulate a deeper and faster transformation in a small number of established day schools. The schools are: Denver
Academy of Torah in Denver, CO; Magen David Yeshivah High School in Brooklyn, NY; The Moriah School in Englewood, NJ; The Rosenbaum Yeshiva of North Jersey in River Edge, NJ; and Tarbut Va’Torah Community Day School in Irvine, CA.

New schools
Groups of parents around the United States are eager to open new day schools with personalized learning at their core. The Foundation has decided to support these efforts – first by providing consulting help and then with grants toward their general operating expenses. Currently, AVI CHAI is committing a maximum of $350,000 over three years to each new school that passes our internal vetting. This consists of an initial $50,000 grant to pay for consultants to help the school develop and refine their blended learning model and then operating grants of $150,000 per year for two years, a small but meaningful portion of the schools’ overall budgets. Three schools have been supported to date, each approaching blended learning differently but with the concept of personalized learning at the core.

In supporting these new schools, we hope to establish proof points for the lower-cost, excellent education model that blended learning promises. All the schools are priced at least one-third below the average day school in their community. They all project to reach financial sustainability by year four or five when they reach the enrollment they need to break even. AVI CHAI’s philanthropic support will assist them toward reaching that point.

In order to assist other new schools designed around the blended learning model, the successes and challenges faced by these schools are carefully being documented. Already, additional groups have contacted AVI CHAI to discuss their plans to launch new schools utilizing the blended learning model, and AVI CHAI may launch a formal request for proposals process in the near future.

Online Judaic studies
The third approach in AVI CHAI’s online and blended learning strategy is to stimulate the development of online Judaic studies courses. While thousands of courses are currently available to schools for online/blended learning in general studies, very little exists for Judaic studies. We continue to believe that supporting the development of online Judaic studies courses is crucial to advancing AVI CHAI’s mission. In addition, in order for day schools to reach a significant amount of instructional time spent online, some of those hours must be in Judaics.

In the next four years, we expect to fund the development of at least 50 new online Judaic studies courses through intermediary organizations. In addition, we are exploring funding the development of a consortium model, in which teachers from different schools would join together to offer courses online. We imagine that these courses will serve a diverse student population, including both middle and high school students from different denominations and backgrounds, and be used in different ways by different schools.

Since 2012, AVI CHAI has funded The Lookstein Center for Jewish Education to develop three online courses: Themes in Megillat Ruth, The Quest for Eliyahu, and The American Jewish Immigrant Experience. A total of 161 students from both Community and Orthodox schools have completed these courses and have had positive feedback about their experiences. The courses were also evaluated for their course design by two leading experts in online learning, Rena Palloff and Keith Pratt, who complemented the courses in their evaluation report. AVI CHAI, in partnership with the Kohelet Foundation, is now funding the Center to develop the Lookstein Virtual Jewish Academy, which we hope will launch in September, 2014, and which will develop 40 courses during its first four years of operation.

In addition to these initiatives, a number of entrepreneurs are developing online Judaic courses. Although at the present time AVI CHAI does not fund the development of these courses, we plan to promote the standards for online courses and teaching developed by The International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) to all institutions and vendors developing online Judaic studies courses.

Research and evaluation
In addition to our ongoing efforts to collect and analyze baseline data about online and blended learning from participating day schools (Deeter, 2012), AVI CHAI has partnered with New York University to develop and implement an overall learning and documentation plan for our work in this area. This partnership will enable the day school field to identify the most effective strategies for increasing the impact of online/blended learning work.

References