

Teachers Teaching Teachers — With A Lot On The Line

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Jewish day school teachers attend three-day training seminar in New York to learn how to mentor beginning teachers. Nina Bruder.

New teachers can be apprehensive about many things, but one fear unites them all: the dreaded parent-teacher conference.

“It doesn’t matter how many years you’ve been teaching — parents are scary!” said Sally Olson, first-grade teacher at Bi-cultural Day School in Stamford, Conn., who has been teaching for more than 30 years.

Olson, along with 27 other teachers, attended a three-day seminar hosted by the [Jewish New Teacher Project \(JNTP\)](#), an initiative run

through the New Teacher Center, a national nonprofit known for teacher-training programs in public schools. JNTP, which trains “veteran” teachers at Jewish day schools to mentor teachers in their first two years, received a \$1.8 million combined grant in June from the Jim Joseph Foundation and the [Avi Chai Foundation](#) to fund the current program and its expansion. Since launching in 2003, JNTP has worked with 664 new teachers, 232 mentors and 96 schools, ranging from multi-denominational to Orthodox.

The training seminar, which took place Aug. 18-20, brought together Jewish educators from across the United States. Together, the soon-to-be mentors exchanged questions, techniques and experiences.

Parent-teacher conferences aside, strengthening teacher retention has become an urgent problem in Jewish day schools. With low pay, little stability (contracts rarely span more than one year), and few benefits, the burnout rate among Jewish educators is high. In such a climate, programs that provide teachers with support and mentorship are critical.

Donna Demarco, coordinator of general studies at Westchester Hebrew High School, recalled the difficulties of transitioning into an Orthodox Jewish environment as a new teacher. Demarco, who comes from a Catholic background, will be mentoring two new teachers this year.

“When I started teaching, I had no official mentor — I had to figure out many things about the Orthodox world for myself,” she said. Beginning her tenure as an English teacher, she explained how she became increasingly sensitive to the use of profanity in literature.

“When I was teaching [John Steinbeck’s] ‘Of Mice and Men,’ which uses a lot of rough language, I realized I had to give an explanation to the students before reading those words out loud,” she said. “That never would have crossed my mind in a public school.”

Of the two new teachers Demarco will be mentoring, one is Jewish and one is not. When working with the Judaic studies teacher, the conversation will be purely focused on strategy.

“With the Jewish teacher, we’ll discuss classroom management, how to speak with parents and methods of assessment. With the teacher who isn’t Jewish, I’ll also lend a helping hand in terms of understanding the school’s unique culture — everything from the Mincha break [the afternoon prayer service], to scheduling around the Jewish holidays in September,” she said.

“I still can’t pronounce most of the Jewish holidays, but at least I can spell them!” chipped in Jennifer Hale, second and third grade general studies teacher at Solomon Schechter Day School of Queens.

For Tiphonie Rosenblatt, a middle school humanities teacher at Luria Academy in Brooklyn, acclimating to the school’s culture was the most difficult part of being a new teacher. Luria is a small Montessori day school that defines itself as “open Orthodox.”

“When I first began teaching, my main fear was that I wasn’t Jewish enough for the school,” said Rosenblatt, 30, who comes from a Conservative background. Rosenblatt will be mentoring a first-time Judaic studies teacher this year.

“I’m excited that I have the chance to give this new teacher a leg-up when it comes to understanding the culture of the school,” she said. “If I had a mentor, my transition into teaching would have been so much easier.”

Giving new teachers that leg up, or “turbo-boost” in the classroom is what JNTP is all about, said Nina Bruder, the director of JNTP.

“Treating the incoming staff well creates a positive feedback cycle,” said Bruder. “Not only are teachers able to meet classroom challenges more effectively, the support system decreases chances that teachers will leave, and creates a higher-caliber applicant pool of future educators.”

Indeed, a 10-year impact study of JNTP analyzed by Wellspring Consulting, an independent nonprofit management consulting company, demonstrated that the mentoring program is especially effective at strengthening teacher retention, accelerating teacher improvement, and increasing collaboration among teachers. More than 86 percent of past JNTP participants continue to work in Jewish education, with 80 percent still in Jewish day schools.

For Rabbi Daniel Rockoff, an administrator at Hyman Brand Hebrew Academy (HBHA) in Overland Park, Kan., having a mentor would have decreased the likelihood of his leaving Jewish education, he said. Instead, Rabbi Rockoff left education for many years to do Jewish organizational work. He has since returned to the field, and will mentor a first-time teacher at HBHA this year.

“Without an adequate support system, being a Jewish educator can be draining,” he said, comparing his first-time teaching experience to being “thrown into a pool.”

“The demands and expectations are intense — having someone to consult who is not assessing your performance is critical,” Rabbi Rockoff said.

“Teachers don’t come into the classroom as pedagogical experts,” said Chip Edelsberg, executive director of the Jim Joseph Foundation. “JNTP gives new teachers the resources to become experts, as early as possible.”

Though 80 percent of schools helped by JNTP fall under the Orthodox umbrella, 8 percent of schools identify as Conservative; three Conservative schools will be among the ranks this year: Solomon Schechter School of Manhattan, Golda Och Academy in New Jersey, and Solomon Schechter Day School of Queens.

Hale, a teacher at Solomon Schechter Day School of Queens, never had a mentor, but wishes she had.

“When you walk into the classroom the first day and kids are screaming, and you’re not Mommy, what do you do?” she said, recalling her first experiences as a kindergarten teacher.

This year, as a mentor for one kindergarten teacher and one first grade teacher, she’s happy to pass on what she knows.

“I’m there to tell these new teachers they’re doing something right, even when everything seems to be going wrong,” she said. “In the beginning of my career, I missed the special ‘aha’ moments of teaching because I had no one to tell me, ‘You’re doing OK. Keep at it.’”

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