Skills, Practices, and Habits of Mind: Helping our Day Schools Achieve Lasting Impact

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[This is the seventh article in our series on day school leadership from the Leadership Commons of the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education of JTS. In this series, alumni of our leadership institutes share their visions of effective day school leadership, reflecting on their aspirations for the field and describing paths toward those goals.]

By Debby Arzt-Mor

Helping our students develop and nurture habits of mind and skills for lifelong learning must take precedence over transmission of content. Jewish educators must recognize the importance of articulating the “why and how” when engaging with our students and identify the power of the individual relationships we nurture with each. When sharing about their time at the Brandeis School of San Francisco, our alumni invariably speak about their teachers and classmates, and describe relationships and learning communities as the enduring experiences they carry with them that impact their lives.
In order to offer these experiences to our constituents, Jewish educational leaders must have opportunities to develop these same qualities for themselves. We know the importance of stepping out of our individual schools into the community of our peers and our own teachers for our personal development. We return from professional gatherings, conferences, and learning opportunities with important skills and habits of mind inspired by the expertise of master educators and the relationships we build with our teachers and our peers. In addition to rich content, we have opportunities to develop insights and lasting connections that have the power to endure and profoundly impact our paths as educational leaders.

I have been reflecting recently on the learning frameworks I have experienced over the years, stepping out of the confines of my school and into different professional development settings. I imagine that these frameworks may resonate and can inform our endeavors to help our schools be the very best they can be.

**Cohort Learning**

A cohort creates a shared sense of identity as its members support one another in learning and personal growth over an extended period of time. Successful cohorts develop strong personal and professional relationships and a group identity that offers a safe space for taking risks. Are there opportunities to create lasting cohorts within our school settings? What might be the lasting benefits of creating learning groups within our schools, whose members have the opportunities to work with one another over the course of the year and support one another throughout?

**Mentorship**

Mentorship is a partnership that deeply impacts both the mentor and mentee, opening up new learning opportunities and growth for both. From time to time we are fortunate enough to be in mentoring relationships at our individual schools – as a board member, a supervisor, a peer, or a direct report. A strong mentorship relationship provides ongoing support and helps us push beyond our comfort zones. What impact would a structured system of mentorship relationships have in our schools? What might the impact be if every staff member (faculty and administration) were engaged in a mentoring relationship with one other person in the school?

**Teaming**

Leaders who encourage the creation of numerous teams can help accomplish various educational and organizational goals. A culture of “teaming” must begin with leadership, and powerful leadership training has the potential to cultivate this culture. We refer to leadership teams, teaching teams, grade-level teams, departmental teams, committee teams, and others, but how often do we take the time to engage in teaming, in other words, the important work of cultivating teams so that they can be successful in the marathon of school improvement? Do we create regular opportunities for our teams to engage in reflection, create the psychological safety necessary for the uninhibited sharing of ideas, and overcome defensive interpersonal dynamics that inhibit growth?
Jewish Text

Jewish text is such a powerful vehicle for creating understanding and connection, both cognitively and spiritually. Jewish text provides a great starting point for regular spiritual check-ins and for approaching current dilemmas in our schools. Carefully chosen text and thoughtfully crafted questions can offer deeply meaningful entry points to engaged conversation on many of the dilemmas we face in our schools. Text study in havruta is a cornerstone of our students’ experience throughout the grades, but how consistently do we include this practice in our meetings and team settings?

Our Jewish educators and administrators must be role models, striving to model the habits of mind and heart that we expect our peers, teachers, and students to cultivate. Viewing our schools through a cohort lens, we must do our best to model vulnerability and a learner’s mindset in order to encourage others to do the same. Cultivating a mentorship and teaming approach in our schools reminds us of the importance of seeking out and learning from others who share freely of their experience and insights in order to help others be the best they can be. And drawing upon the wisdom of Jewish text, both ancient and modern, has the potential to inspire and generate new connections, not only with our rich tradition, but with one another as well.

*Debby Arzt-Mor, is the director of Jewish learning at the Brandeis School of San Francisco. As a member of Brandeis’s senior leadership team, Debby partners with faculty and staff in guiding Jewish and Hebrew programming and curriculum throughout the school. She is a member of DSLTI Cohort 10 and has participated in the Legacy Heritage Instructional Leadership Institute.*