It’s a Revolution!  
Inside The New Jewish Day School Classroom

A SPECIAL SERIES PRODUCED BY AVI CHAI AND MOMENT

There’s a slow-moving revolution happening in Jewish day schools. Over the past eight years, Jewish day schools have embraced a new philosophy called personalized learning where students work simultaneously on different assignments tailored to their individual needs. Blended learning, the method used to achieve personalized learning, structures the classroom so it’s less “teacher at the front of the room” and more a mix of teacher-led and independent and group student learning.

“If there is one takeaway from the burgeoning learning sciences research, it is that no two of us learn in exactly the same way,” one teacher explains. “Students sit where they are comfortable and in what works best for them in that moment. They have their optimum learning right there because they’re in their most comfortable position,” says Rabbi Bassman, the media and instructional technology coordinator at Scheck Hillel Community School in North Miami Beach, Florida. After careful research about the benefits of flexible seating—deciding which seats to select and how to set them up—teachers at Scheck Hillel Community School have found great success with their new learning environment.

Of course, there have also been some challenges along the way. In the early days, not all teachers were on board with a personalized learning model because they were accustomed to a teacher-centered classroom or uncomfortable using new technologies. Schools found it was important to move slowly and make sure teachers felt supported. “It took a lot of explaining and a lot of professional development and coaching,” says Penchev. As for parents, communicating the value of using technology in addition to teacher-led instruction has made the transition to a blended learning environment possible.

To help administrators and teachers incorporate personalized learning into their classrooms, Miami’s Center for the Advancement of Jewish Education (CAJE) in partnership with The AVI CHAI Foundation launched JBlend in 2015 with four local Jewish day schools. Participants receive regular professional development and coaching from BetterLesson, a leader in the field of K-12 personalized professional development.

BetterLesson has supported close to 400 educators from 77 day schools throughout North America “to build their capacity to bring blended and personalized learning strategies to their students.” In addition JBlend teachers work together, and brainstorm about what’s working and what’s not working in ways not traditionally practiced between competing schools. Teachers even traveled to The Moriah School in New Jersey to learn how teachers there incorporated personalized learning into their classrooms.

“JBlend’s focus is on school culture and the teachers,” says Valérie Mirrani, director of Day School Strategy and Initiatives. “It takes work to get started and it takes work to learn how to do this. It’s that shift in mindset, going from the teacher as the ‘sage on the stage’ to a ‘guide on the side.’”

The AVI CHAI Foundation encourages schools to experiment and discover what works best for them. Personalized learning looks different at every school and in every classroom. “We’re content agnostic. It’s really more about opening up the model and getting schools to try this,” says Abrahams. And it seems to be working. Although personalized learning may create more work for teachers, the excitement and learning that take place make it well worth it. “To quote one day school teacher: ‘If you told me that I had to go back to standing in front of a room telling them all to do the same page at the same time, I would turn around, walk out and never come back.’” —Suzanne Borden

In a blended learning classroom, there are times when the classroom will come together for a shared lesson. But more often, you’ll see a shared lesson. But more often, you’ll see a blended learning classroom, where students work simultaneously on different assignments tailored to their individual needs. Blended learning, the method used to achieve personalized learning, structures the classroom so it’s less “teacher at the front of the room” and more a mix of teacher-led and independent and group student learning.

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