

A Collaboration of the Field and the Academy

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Building on 13 years of experience designing standards-based curriculum in TaNaKH, the Jewish Day School Standards and Benchmarks Project (now the [Legacy Heritage Instructional Leadership Institute](#)) of the [William Davidson School of Jewish Education](#) at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, launched the Rabbinics Initiative to develop a compendium of standards and benchmarks for the teaching and learning of rabbinics. We began the process at our February 2014 advisory board meeting entitled *A Collaboration of the Academy and the Field*.

We brought together teachers, scholars and the leadership of the day school associations. Practitioners shared experience from the classroom and their knowledge of children. They represented schools from grades K-12 and a broad spectrum of religious affiliations. By design, they pushed the group to see the faces of diverse learners. Scholars from the fields of Jewish education and rabbinic literature supported the work and ensured that we remained authentic to the disciplines of rabbinics and education.

Inviting Jewish education scholars created a bridge between the field and the academy that had immediate impact on the work of developing standards and benchmarks for Jewish Day Schools. Inspired by their participation in the Rabbinics Initiative, the Davidson School and the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University launched a partnership to develop a research project, [Students' Understanding of Rabbinics](#). The project brought the experiences of students to the forefront of our deliberation in new and invaluable ways during the writing and initial implementation phases of our work. During the initial writing phase, the voices of the students represented in the study helped us develop criteria to select which standards to develop. Those voices reminded the pilot schools to place student at the center when selecting standards to guide the development of their curriculum.

We had some trepidation about sharing this research with our schools. We wondered how teachers would respond when they read that some students who were interviewed for the project walked away from their Jewish day school rabbinics classes thinking that studying rabbinics is largely about highlighting, making charts, and dictionary work. A few students were able to articulate the purpose and joy of reading rabbinic literature, and some offered insightful comments about specific texts. But others noted how distant the texts felt from their lives. Would the teachers dismiss these findings as not representative? Would they say that their students would respond differently, and that the 13 students in the study were an anomaly?

That did not happen. Instead, an inspiring, energetic conversation took place. Participants of the pilot cohort of Legacy Heritage Instructional Leadership Institute said that they recognized their

own students in the voices of study participants. Rather than taking a defensive stance, teachers listened closely and acknowledged that their own teaching practices might elicit similar responses. These observations then led to an important discussion about the need for pedagogies that make the learning of rabbinics accessible and meaningful to students.

This experience, and others like it, have confirmed our hopes for the research on students' experiences. When we are able to capture students' voices and share them with talented and thoughtful practitioners, those practitioners take those voices seriously and use them as resources for critical reflection on their work. Furthermore, we have found that teachers articulate a desire to analyze their practice using research based methodologies. Schools are asking their colleagues from the academy to identify the instructional approaches that align with their chosen standards so that they can help their students achieve mastery.

The Rabbinics Initiative has already benefitted from the collaboration of teachers and scholars. It is exciting to watch the first fruits of this partnership grow. The key is to ensure that this collaboration continues. Our students deserve no less from all of us.

Charlotte Abramson has directed the newly renamed Jewish Day School Standards and Benchmarks Project, now the Legacy Heritage Instructional Leadership Institute, since its inception in 2003. She developed and launched the TaNaKH standards in 2005 and designed the professional development to ensure the successful enactment of standards and benchmarks in Jewish Day Schools.

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