HEBREW FOR WHAT?

Jewish day schools are a unique setting for learning the Hebrew language. They devote considerable time to the enterprise and also have the ambition to teach Hebrew both for Jewish religious and cultural literacy and also for purposes of communication.

Hebrew for What explores key questions from different perspectives. Why should Hebrew be studied? How do schools differ in the types of Hebrew they prioritize? Are stakeholders’ perceptions of their schools’ outcomes in Hebrew language acquisition aligned with reality?

The AVI CHAI Foundation

This infographic is based on the case study “Hebrew for What? Hebrew at the Heart of Jewish Day Schools,” part of a series on how day schools enact their Jewish missions. Read the full case study at https://avichai.org/knowledge_base/hebrew-for-what-hebrew-at-the-heart-of-jewish-day-schools/

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE REPORT

Denominational divide in the priorities and purposes of Orthodox and non-Orthodox schools

Orthodox parents value their children developing skills to work with classical Hebrew religious texts and to sustain the language of the Jewish people. Most non-Orthodox parents, by contrast, tend to place greater priority on Hebrew for the purposes of communication and for developing cognitive skills, over Hebrew for prayer and studying sacred texts. Different schools reflect the priorities of parents.

Fewer hours devoted to Hebrew for older students

When students get to high school, Modern Hebrew becomes optional in many instances, especially in the highest grades. In Community and Reform day schools (where fewer hours are devoted to Hebrew and Judaic studies overall), Modern Hebrew is already optional in a minority of middle schools where students are given the opportunity to study another modern language instead.

Increased dissatisfaction with Hebrew language classes in high school

Stakeholders in day schools perceive elementary school students to be making good progress in learning the Hebrew language, and express a great deal of satisfaction with their progress.

However, by middle school and certainly by high school, students, parents, and teachers express increased dissatisfaction with the quality of Hebrew instruction as compared to other subjects. This dissatisfaction may impede language learning and lead to questioning about the importance of studying Modern Hebrew.

Hebrew teachers are often well-trained and certified.

Conventional wisdom about teachers of Hebrew language in day schools is that they are Israelis whose credentials are limited to their fluency in Modern Israeli Hebrew. In reality, while most Hebrew language teachers are native speakers who grew up in Israel, a significant number of them also studied education as undergraduates and/or also received certificate training in pedagogy and also for the teaching of specific Hebrew curricula. Some do lack training in language instruction per-se, but many also have taken courses to remedy this deficiency.

Schools need to more strongly make the case for Hebrew

From conversations with students and teachers in day schools, it is apparent that many schools do not make a case for why it is important to learn Hebrew. Administrators take for granted the centrality of Hebrew as a self-evident feature of day school education.

Based on survey data, a considerable minority of parents and students are unpersuaded that the emphasis placed upon Hebrew is worthwhile. They fail to accept the necessity of Hebrew for text study or for communication – or both.

Key features improve student satisfaction levels

Three features make a difference in students’ satisfaction with Hebrew learning:

1) Ensuring and communicating that Hebrew matters.
2) Strong and visible leadership.
3) Investing resources and attention in staff.

These institutional features transcend the specifics of what material is used in the classroom and what pedagogic approach teachers employ.