

How Schools Enact Their Jewish Missions

20 Case Studies of Jewish Day Schools

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Meshuga' La-Davar: Hebrew

Michael Berger

Pearl Mattenson



Over 50 tired 8th graders piled off the bus, but you could tell they were excited. For slightly more than half of them, this was the first time they were in Israel, and they had been anticipating the trip for months, if not years. They had heard about the cities, the sites, the history and of course the foods of Israel for almost a decade at The Epstein School, Atlanta's Solomon Schechter day school. They weren't about to allow some jetlag to get them down.

They gathered around their tour guide, Amos, who was about to explain to them the background and significance of where they were. As he began, one of the students in the back yelled, “*be-ivrit!*”¹ Several students echoed their colleague, “*ken, be-ivrit!*” Stan Beiner, the Head of School, and Myrna Rubel, the middle school principal, did a double-take — could it be? Were their students asking to hear a tour in Hebrew? The tour company had arranged to have two guides who were fluent in English accompany the students for their two-week trip. That's what the school had done in the past, and that's what their colleagues in other schools that held 8th grade Israel trips recommended when Epstein renewed its Israel trip in 2010. You wouldn't want the kids to miss anything on what would hopefully be a trip they'd remember for the rest of their lives.

But as committed educators, Epstein's leaders had always hoped for more. For students with 8–10 years of exposure to Hebrew, was it unreasonable to expect a greater level of fluency? And here it was: a chance to use their Hebrew in a most natural way — on a class trip to Israel — and the students themselves were asking for it.

Beiner and Rubel did a quick huddle, and decided to offer the students a choice; those who wanted the tour conducted in Hebrew could go with one guide; those who wanted English could go with the other. To their amazement, more than half the students wanted to join the Hebrew-speaking guide.

They looked at each other and whispered, “*zeh ha-yom kivinu lo!*”² And they both grinned from ear to ear.

¹ Hebrew for “In Hebrew.”

² Hebrew for “This is the day we hoped for!” based on Isaiah 25:9.

A Source of Pride or an Obstacle to Recruitment?

For years, The Epstein School had enjoyed a stellar reputation for Hebrew instruction and a focus on Israel, both in Atlanta and beyond. Rather than rely on Israelis who happened to be in the city (and who may or may not have had formal training in language instruction), administrators went to Israel each year to recruit the best native Israeli teachers who would be willing to come to America and train ‘in the Epstein way.’ When Cheryl Finkel took over as Head of School in 1983, Hebrew became a central axis of the school's program, along with the cultivation of a warm, nurturing environment centered on the students. Every year, school leaders and staff looked to improve the school program and make incremental changes, and the many years of investment in Hebrew were evident. For Israelis in Atlanta for a few years, Epstein was their destination school: they knew their children would not fall far behind their classmates in Hebrew if they attended Epstein. Alumni were reputed to be the most fluent in and comfortable with Hebrew in high school and beyond, compared with any other day school in Atlanta.

And yet, one could hear the not infrequent complaint about Hebrew from parents and children, especially once they were in middle school. If a student needed extra attention in a general studies subject, the time was inevitably taken from a Hebrew or Judaics class. For all the emphasis on Hebrew and Israel, it still felt like a stepchild as parent concerns turned towards high school preparation.

Stan Beiner learned all this when he became Head of The Epstein School in 2004. He, too, was looking to figure out how to reach a wider audience to ensure the school's viability, and the question of Hebrew came up immediately. Like others at Epstein, he was committed to keeping Hebrew language central, yet he knew that this fact brought to the school only his “committed core”: those who wanted Hebrew, Zionism, and/or a strong Conservative Jewish environment. To attract the other 50%, Beiner noticed that in admissions tours, his staff — and often he himself — muted the Hebrew so as not to scare away prospective families who were on the fence about Epstein, or were unsure about the school being “too Jewish.” By the end of his first year, he knew he had to resolve Epstein's

main conundrum: how Hebrew could be both the school's main source of pride and be less intimidating to families considering Epstein.

As an educational administrator, Beiner had always espoused the importance of using data. To him, it was the best tool to cut through politics or overcome indifference, and in every position he held, he insisted on developing these tools and giving teachers the support and time to do it well. Here, too, he felt that data collection would lead to an answer. As he saw it, the problem was not educational — it was a marketing issue. Epstein needed help from someone who understood marketing, branding, and data.

From Heritage Language to Bilingualism as an Academic Standard

A few months after arriving in Atlanta, Beiner had met Darren Katz, the head of a local marketing firm who had worked with Atlanta's Federation on branding and was well-regarded professionally. Beiner was impressed with Katz's business approach, but also with his deep understanding of Jewish Atlanta, something that would help a relative newcomer interpret the data. Beiner was convinced the data would be the lever that would help Epstein develop a compelling strategic plan for growth and reach those families that would truly benefit from sending their children to the school.

Katz was impressed by the school and agreed to volunteer his time. Using his company resources, he conducted focus groups and surveys with every stakeholder group — teachers, staff and students, past and current parents, alumni and communal leaders, and even prospective parents. His research identified two unique characteristics at Epstein — community and a strong bilingual program — but it also confirmed Beiner's hunch: that while many went to Epstein because of the Hebrew, that focus also kept many people away. Atlanta's day school market had already boxed Epstein in — with a popular traditional day school and a growing Reform day school, only those “in the middle” would be interested in Epstein. But Katz learned that the school's well-known attention to Hebrew was boxing them in even further, preventing a wider range of Jews from considering Epstein for whom Hebrew felt “too Jewish” or too costly in terms of school time.

Katz offered Beiner a Solomonic solution: focus not on Hebrew as a cultural norm, but rather as a second language, pivoting to brain research. Instead of hiding its focus on Hebrew or muting it, the school should proudly announce its ‘bilingualism’; learning in a second language from an early age helps the brain in its development. Scientific studies showed the advantages of bilingual education, everything from making the acquisition of **other** languages easier later on in life, to higher performance on high school standardized tests and in college. Students who were immersed in other languages together with their native tongue also showed greater sensitivity and appreciation of other cultures into adulthood, a clear desideratum in an increasingly global world. The evidence was compelling.

From all the research with surveys and focus groups, Katz concluded that a mere four words best captured Epstein's “brand”:

“Two Languages. One Community.”

Beiner knew he had Epstein's new tagline. It was pithy, incisive, and comprehensive. He could see himself explaining to prospective parents: “We are bilingual by philosophy; we choose Hebrew because it is our heritage.” The school leadership team insisted, over Katz's objection, that the Hebrew translation had to be added to the brand: *Shtei Safot. Kehillah Achat*. After all, if they were bilingual, their tagline needed to include both languages. Katz came to agree.

Beiner was thrilled. He knew both his core families and a whole new set of young families would be able to connect with that approach — some with the strong connection to Israel and Hebrew, others with the enhanced academic preparation provided by bilingualism. More importantly, no longer would staff have to try and explain how academic excellence could be achieved in “only half a day”; if your family was choosing the Epstein School, you knew you were committing to a bilingual program and all its benefits. In time, he was confident the data would support his prediction: Epstein's numbers would grow. It was a calculated risk he was willing to take.

Above all, as a seasoned administrator, he knew he could build the school's strategic plan, both internally and externally, around those four words. If only he could convince the board and the staff.

Getting on the Same Page: A School Community Learns about Bilingualism

Professional development was a core value at Epstein. Even in hard times, the budget always included a substantial percentage dedicated to training teachers and administrators in new instructional methods, in content related to their own areas of teaching, or merely in worthwhile Torah study together. Moreover, time was allocated for staff meetings, whether by grade, department, or with administrators, to ensure important subjects were processed well and that everyone who needed to be on the same page — was. Beiner was grateful to be leading a school that did not believe good teachers were simply “born,” but that everyone — not just the students — should be involved in learning, always.

With this new approach in hand, Beiner led his administrative team in a few months of intensive learning about bilingualism, studying the extensive research available proving its cognitive benefits. His division heads sensed that this gave them language and vocabulary to describe many of the things they were already doing. Using this new lens, his administrative leaders examined every aspect of the school — bulletin boards, assignments, websites, and brochures — to see where the commitment to bilingualism was not yet complete, and how it could be improved. Moreover, bilingualism was a potentially powerful bridge between the general and Judaic studies “sides” of the school: while collaboration and integration had been a strength at Epstein for over a decade, this approach would promote it even more, particularly between the elementary and middle schools, where integration had been more episodic. Excitement was beginning to build within Beiner’s admin team. They began to update and upgrade materials using the new concept.

The board, it turned out, needed more time. Many were current or past parents, and all knew well how their children developed a lifelong appreciation of, and connection to, the Hebrew language, to Israel and to Judaism. They were so proud of Epstein’s distinctiveness among Atlanta’s day schools, and could point to the many alumni who attributed their facility in Hebrew and attachment to Israel to their years at Epstein.

When the new tagline and what it represented was introduced to them, the reaction was not what Beiner anticipated. On

a procedural level, they were upset: the school had begun to present its new approach in their marketing materials, leaving board members unaware of the change. They expected to be consulted, or at least informed, first. Beiner was surprised: publicity taglines had never required board consent in the past. Something more underlay their reaction: this was not just about a tagline; this felt like a monumental shift.

For some board members, ‘bilingualism’ as a term felt so sterile; it failed to capture the strong ‘heritage’ component that they felt drove much of what Epstein did. Others feared that coming out and broadcasting Epstein’s focus on Hebrew would drive potential parents away, not attract them. As one trustee shared, “I never would have come to the school if I really understood what the program was about, but once I became a parent, I came to appreciate the benefits. You have to get them in the door.” The premise of Katz’s suggestion was that this tagline would attract a wider circle of families; could it be that it would have the opposite effect and scare them away?

Beiner remembers that board meeting well. In his zeal to begin implementing Katz’s idea, which really resonated with him and his leadership team, he realized he may have gotten a bit ahead of his lay leadership. He also understood that their disappointment came from a good place — board members saw their role as Epstein’s ambassadors to the Atlanta community, and they wanted to do that as well as possible. They were concerned that they would be caught off-guard when parents and prospective families approached them in the community to discuss “bilingualism.” They had no idea what was up, let alone the tools to explain it. They were even worried that this approach highlighted the part of Epstein’s program that intimidated many families, adding to the confusion with an unfamiliar and off-putting term. To attract more families, board members wanted instead to draw attention to the academic excellence and high achievement of its graduates.

It did not take long to address the problem. Together with the board chair, Beiner mapped out several months of board development — and many individual conversations — during which lay leaders became schooled in bilingualism, the theory and its benefits, and how Epstein was applying this approach to Hebrew. Even now, years later, Beiner, Katz and lay leaders look back with pride on how a school was able

to acknowledge and accept that something cared about one way — Hebrew as a heritage language that gave students and families a connection to Judaism and to Israel — can also be cared about in a different way by others. The Board had hired Beiner to implement their strategic decision to bring in more families who would want and appreciate an Epstein education for their children — and that’s just what he was doing. They knew he and the administrative and teaching staff they all trusted were up to the task.

As the initial year came to an end, the results of the paradigm shift were clear. Inquiries and enrollment increased. Most impressively, the students embraced the new identity, deciding to sign off the school’s weekly television broadcast with the phrase, “From the school of two languages, one community — *shtei safot, kehillah achat!*” The stage had been set.

In Search of a Middle School Hebrew Program: A Serious Program for Serious Educators

Quality schools know that in the recruitment and admissions process, it is important to focus a prospective family not on the early childhood program, but on the graduating class. For years, Epstein had been highlighting the accomplishments of its 8th graders who went on to excel in local Jewish, public and other private schools, and even more importantly, were leaders in local and even national Jewish youth organizations, such as USY, BBYO, and Camp Ramah. Of the 50–55 students graduating each year, Epstein boasted a disproportionately high number of youth group, school and sports leaders among its alumni, as well as high school valedictorians, and academic award winners. Personally, Beiner loved hearing how an Epstein graduate led Friday night services at a home for senior citizens, or at an Epstein family shiva minyan. To him, these were all great successes, and he knew much of the credit went to the principal of Epstein’s middle school, Myrna Rubel.

Rubel had been at Epstein a few years when Beiner arrived, and he could immediately see why the school could produce the graduates he had heard so much about. She embodied the essence of the Schechter School movement — a passion for high-quality education matched only by an unflagging commitment to Judaics, Israel, and Hebrew. In her view, a day

school cannot divide its administrative team between general and Judaic studies — that “kills what you are trying to do.” She embodies both. Speak to her for five minutes, and you will hear a detailed account — peppered with modern Hebrew expressions — of the latest educational innovation, and how one can creatively bring that pedagogy to **both** sides of The Epstein School.

That’s just what Rubel did years earlier with UBD (Understanding by Design), an approach to curriculum — and lesson-planning that starts with the “big ideas” and “essential understandings” and moves backwards, first to units and then to individual lessons and assignments. Rubel received extensive training in this approach and brought it back to Epstein’s middle school — to **both** the Judaics and general studies staff. She is keen on ensuring that all teachers are inducted into the same curricular and pedagogic approaches, thus enabling the kind of integration and “spillover” that she feels is critical for a successful and dynamic dual-curriculum school. She relishes the staff meetings where she brainstorms with department chairs and faculty how science or social studies can be brought into *Tanakh*, and how Hebrew or Judaic texts can be incorporated into math and language arts units. Rubel herself models that bridging on a daily basis.

As an educational leader, Rubel fits right into the culture of The Epstein School that prefers the empowerment of teachers over a top-down style of educational decision-making. The division heads hire very carefully, and then support their teachers through mentoring, professional development, and data-driven evaluation. Rubel attributes the low teacher turnover at Epstein to this culture of investment and trust that her teachers know is there — teachers are simply reluctant to leave.

With the middle school program grounded in UBD, about nine years ago Rubel looked for a comparable Hebrew program that would focus on the teachers’ pedagogic approach and empower them to develop their own materials. She was also looking for ways to enhance the bilingual approach that the school had embraced. Rubel felt strongly that the middle school Hebrew program had to complement the elementary school’s approach, as well as be consistent with how she expected all Epstein’s middle school teachers to function and think. After researching and experimenting with several

nationally-known programs, she found what she was looking for in the “proficiency approach” developed by Brandeis Hebrew professor Vardit Ringvald and based on the standards of ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language). This approach, focused almost entirely on spoken language, uses multiple techniques to move students along a rubric from beginner, through three levels of intermediate (low, mid, high), to advanced. The elements of mastery at each level are clearly spelled out — and teachers and students know what must be learned in order to move to the next level. While up in Boston for another program, Rubel spoke at length with Ringvald, and learned that fate was on her side: Liat Kadosh, an Israeli trained and certified in the “proficiency approach” in Boston, was moving to Atlanta with her family for her husband’s business. Not wasting a minute, Rubel got Kadosh on the phone and saw the secret ingredient that makes for a successful Epstein teacher: she was *meshuga’at la-davar*, crazy about the method, and wholly committed to it. Rubel knew she had the person she had been looking for.

Student-Centered Curriculum; Data-Driven Pedagogy

Kadosh has been at Epstein for nine years. She beams with pride as she walks into classes, showing off her middle school students and her teachers. But she was not always so proud — when she first began at Epstein, there had been days when she came home unsure whether or not she would succeed in implementing the proficiency approach the way she knew from Boston it could and ought to be done. She had told Rubel that it would take three to five years to transition fully from the existing program to the new method — but would Kadosh herself last that long? She would not give up; as she herself would say, Israelis do not give up. Now, looking back, she is pleased she was as tenacious — *meshuga’at la-davar* — as she was.

Kadosh is a true believer in the proficiency method. The primary goal is for students to function proficiently in the language along an accepted range of performance that starts at “beginners,” moves through various “intermediate” and “advanced” levels (low, mid, high), and culminates in “superior.” The middle school program at Epstein aims for most students to be comfortable with reading, speaking and writing

the language, in other words to reach “intermediate mid” and “intermediate high,” by the end of the 8th grade. And as we saw, about half do.

Teachers do not work off of a given curriculum. Rather, students are assessed individually through a taped conversation (OPI — Oral Proficiency Interview), and teachers dip into a tool kit that they use to address student needs and help them move from level to level. The pace is set not by a book but by the learners. Students who move more rapidly through the levels may switch classes mid-year; all levels of Hebrew classes are offered simultaneously per grade to enable students to be placed properly, thus preventing the scheduling nightmare many day schools encounter should students need to move up or down based on clear indicators of their proficiency levels. Even “heritage learners” — those who hear Hebrew outside the classroom but are not native speakers — are able to move through the levels as the assessments help zero in on the lacuna in their knowledge of the language.

Key to the success of the proficiency approach is its insistence that teachers develop their own materials. One of the main strategies of the program is to constantly present students with real-life situations to which they must respond, and to incorporate current events into the learning that is focused on the vocabulary and grammar needed to advance to the next level. While individual lessons follow a clear sequence — warm-up, teaching, reinforcement — and there are some curricular units that Epstein teachers have developed over time (especially those connected to their Israel trip), the lesson plans, texts and assignments are always changing as teachers make use of games, topics from Israel, video clips, Jewish values, or holiday themes to instruct the students in the language. And Rubel insists teachers regularly feature student work on bulletin boards throughout the middle school, so that other classes can see what their colleagues are doing and strive to advance to a higher level as well. She, along with the entire Hebrew staff, work hard to make Hebrew public, celebrated, exciting, and relevant.

Not unlike other powerful academic programs, the proficiency method relies heavily on teachers’ ability to plan together and share their work, and Kadosh and Rubel ensure there is plenty of time in the schedule to do just that. Every

member of the Hebrew faculty knows what the others are doing, and two or three can collaborate or coordinate projects and units. Aside from the integration that is now the norm at Epstein, the 8th grade trip to Israel has become a “curricular lightning rod” that gives the middle school Hebrew instructors plenty of material around which to form their lessons. Israel’s cities and sites, geography and history, Tanakh and Zionism are all familiar to Epstein 8th graders, who learned about them throughout middle school, all the while improving their Hebrew. For these young Jews, “it all comes together” in Israel.

It is not hard to see why Rubel found the proficiency method so compelling: its entire approach fits neatly with the Epstein ethos of student-centeredness; of teacher empowerment, collaboration, and creativity; of data-driven decision-making; and of ongoing learning for all.

Hebrew Could Never Be a Second-Class Citizen

As the head of the middle school, Rubel felt more keenly than most at the school what Katz had discovered in his research. She knew from her dealings with parents and students how some complained about Hebrew; she saw on a daily basis how those seeking either enrichment or support looked to take the time out of the Judaics program. Rubel knew that Hebrew and Judaics had to be Epstein’s “shining star” to make sure their time is protected and they receive their due — not only in the weekly schedule (one hour of each four days a week, a time allotment Rubel fiercely protects), but in the way students looked at Hebrew. Hebrew could never be a second-class citizen; she is vigilant to make sure Hebrew and Judaics get equal billing, like at the recent Poetry Slam where students performed poems in English and in Hebrew. To keep students excited about Hebrew, Rubel developed and promoted two annual signature events in the middle school — an 8th grade Hebrew stage production mandatory for the whole grade, and a *shiriyah* (song and dance festival) that brings 800 people to watch students perform entirely in Hebrew. Every year, Rubel wells up with tears as Epstein alumni join current students on stage for the closing number, all singing the

same Hebrew song together, year after year: *Shir Yisrael* (“Israeli songs”).

Finally, knowing how important choice is to middle-schoolers who are beginning to feel the first stirrings of maturity, Rubel developed the idea of electives — creative, fun activities that required final product — for students to choose from, and she turned to her Hebrew staff to develop the first set of offerings. She immediately saw her staff’s creative juices flow. For instance, one elective had students produce an audio CD about a hero (they chose Rosa Parks) entirely in Hebrew, design the CD cover, and record the audio. While some electives were generic, others identified the language skills (e.g., “must know future tense”) that were required to do the work, and students self-selected based on these published criteria. Clearly, students understood what the proficiency method was all about, and accepted it without envy or judgmentalism.

While she never lets her guard down, Rubel knows all her hard work has paid off. Gone are the complaints from parents or students about how much they “can’t stand Hebrew”; no one requests to have support or enrichment during Hebrew anymore. While she was surprised at the students’ request on the Israel trip to have their tour guide speak in Hebrew, for Rubel, it was a pleasant — and not altogether unexpected — surprise.

Two Hebrew Programs: A Singular Commitment to Excellence

Remarkably, Hebrew language in Epstein’s lower school in some ways stands in stark contrast to the middle school’s proficiency method. Almost 20 years ago, Epstein was a beta site for the Montreal-based Tal Sela program, a creative 1st grade curriculum intended to immerse day school students in developmentally-appropriate Hebrew and Judaics material using the most proven pedagogical techniques. Utilizing the feedback of teachers and students at Epstein and other day schools, Tova Shimon, the program’s dedicated and passionate innovator, developed a more advanced version entitled “TaL AM,” with more sophisticated materials and a course of professional development that inducted teachers into the logic and tools of TaL AM. Not surprisingly, Epstein sent all

its lead teachers³ and administrators in its lower school to be trained in the methods of TaL AM; indeed, the lower school principal at the time, Amalia Bilek, was one of the first to be certified as a TaL AM trainer, a role she still plays even after she left Atlanta.

TaL AM had much to commend it. A highly integrated Judaics and Hebrew curriculum, it comprehensively covered the many topics traditionally covered in the lower grades of a Jewish day school: the alphabet and vowels; daily *tefillah*; *parashat ha-shavuah* and the stories of *Tanakh*; the Jewish calendar; holidays and rituals; Israel and Zionism; and Jewish *middot* (values), all the while steadily expanding a child's Hebrew vocabulary. TaL AM has it all: posters and songs, activities and games, all grounded in proven pedagogy that reinforces children's learning. With external funding, TaL AM accelerated its development of curricular materials through 5th grade. Unsurprisingly, Shimon wanted The Epstein School, with its strong culture of teacher support and professional development, to be among the first to "grow with TaL AM" by implementing it and giving her feedback. The school was more than happy to participate, not only out of its commitment to improve Hebrew instruction, but also because TaL AM's materials embodied the fact that Hebrew is a Heritage Language for the Jewish people — an emphasis also at Epstein. Today, TaL AM serves as the primary Judaics and Hebrew curriculum for the entire lower school.

Today, every Judaics/Hebrew lead teacher in the lower school is TaL AM-trained. As Dr. Tal Grinfas-David, principal of the elementary school since 2011, sees it, the TaL AM program and its required half-day partial immersion supports the school's mission: to instill in students a knowledge of Hebrew, a love of Israel, and a sense of Jewish peoplehood. To aid in achieving these goals, the lower school insists, with rare exception, on having native Israelis as its lead teachers in order

³ Structurally, the Epstein Lower School for many years has employed a proven if costly teaching structure that pairs a novice assistant teacher with a proven, veteran lead teacher in every classroom. This two-year relationship is the core component of teacher induction, as lead teachers introduce assistant teachers to the best practices of good instruction, mentoring and coaching them daily, in addition to the 'formal curriculum' Epstein's leadership developed for novice teachers. Even Israeli graduates of teachers' seminaries recruited to teach at Epstein are required to go through this induction, emerging as well-trained teachers who go on to be lead teachers at Epstein or in other day schools.

to bring the flavor of Israel and Zionism into Epstein in an organic, natural way.

At first glance, the two divisions' Hebrew programs appear so different. One is highly structured and scripted, while the other is about empowering the teachers to develop their own materials. According to Grinfas-David, TaL AM uses Hebrew as the "glue" for students to learn about and absorb the values of Judaism, Israel, and a Jewish identity, while the other makes Hebrew proficiency the goal. Can the students transition from 5th to 6th grade effortlessly and seamlessly?

When Grinfas-David joined Epstein, it didn't take long for her to notice the gap between the two divisions and the inconsistencies the varied approaches fostered. If students came out of 5th grade with a rich vocabulary, it seemed to dissipate — in some cases, markedly — in middle school. If the proficiency method required facility in modern Hebrew texts, 6th grade teachers felt the incoming students were unprepared to read Hebrew without vowels. Grinfas-David's first order of business was to stop the blame-game and get the Hebrew coordinators of each division to meet monthly, share their frustrations, and work together to standardize expectations and create a more "united school" at Epstein. Immediately, small but effective measures were implemented: words begin to lose their vowels in 5th grade, and 6th grade begins with a review of the 5th grade material. ACTFL rubrics and the use of the "Voice Thread" computer program with TaL AM are now part of the 5th grade curriculum and anticipate proficiency, while middle school Hebrew teachers are made aware of the 4th and 5th grade TaL AM units so that they can create materials that reinforce what the students learned at the end of lower school.

Yet while the technical gaps were real, the underlying cultures of the two divisions were remarkably similar. In both, professional development of staff was highly valued, and administrators created the space and provided the resources for it to happen. Both are data-driven in their decision-making, and the two divisions highly prize creative integration between the general and Judaic studies. Grinfas-David beamed as she shared how the science teacher taught a unit on astronomy on the waxing and waning of the moon (complete with Oreo cookies as models!) together with the Judaics teacher's TaL AM unit on Rosh Hashanah. The messaging to parents as well

as students was clear in both schools: it is not the individual subjects but the blend that is the essence, and Epstein must create a professional and learning environment where that can happen. This shared set of educational values and common professional culture are what enabled the problem of the transition from lower school to middle school to be solved relatively quickly.

In spite of these efforts, there's clearly still more work to do. A visit to a 5th grade classroom — TaL AM's final and highest level — will find more than a few students conversing comfortably on a range of sophisticated subjects, a skill that is hard to find in middle school classes. It might be due to the change in the language program: TaL AM subscribes to the proficiency method as well, but believes it can be more tightly scripted. It hired the best curriculum writers to design and integrate the finest, richest materials to put at the teacher's disposal. Moreover, TaL AM differentiates its classrooms and teaches teachers how best to conduct their instruction according to the various levels of the students, using pre-designed materials appropriate to the different levels. The Proficiency Method, on the other hand, is an **approach**; it relies on its teachers, once trained, to design their own units and lesson plans, create their own materials and assignments, and apply techniques of differentiated instruction that they have learned elsewhere — all within Epstein's middle school emphasis on Understanding by Design. The reality is too few Hebrew language teachers are well-trained or sufficiently creative in all these areas, heightening the discontinuities between the programs — and understandably affecting the outcomes. Add this to the shift from half-day immersion in the lower school to the middle school's discrete Hebrew/Judaics classes that constitute a lower percentage of the school day, and diminishing results are no surprise.

Indeed, it was out of recognition of the need to develop one seamless approach to Hebrew that in 2013 the school engaged outside experts in second language acquisition to conduct an 'audit' of The Epstein School's approach to Hebrew proficiency — a rare and bold decision by an American Jewish day school. The report commended the school as one of the finest examples of second language immersion programs in the nation, while also recommending greater consistency throughout the

two divisions in language and assessment tools, and in balancing heritage content with the development of proficiency skills.

Hebrew has a very special place in many Jewish day schools, but at Epstein, the commitment to maximizing students' bilingualism all the way through 8th grade is evident in administrators' unceasing efforts to collect data and improve their instructional approaches. And the work continues.

Making the Case for Hebrew

Everyone who has been involved with The Epstein School for a long time knows that the clientele has changed. If the school was originally established and later built up by committed, synagogue-going Conservative Jewish families in Atlanta — many with their own extensive Judaic backgrounds — that is no longer the profile of the majority of the school's families. As Beiner explains it, studying Hebrew and Jewish texts are no longer self-evident Jewish activities to many young Jewish parents, and so The Epstein School has had to adjust its emphases. Hebrew is taught not just as a conduit to a robust religious tradition as it once was, but also as a living language that connects Jews around the world. The school still teaches Torah — a favorite subject of many elementary school students — but the passion is more focused on Israel, the Jewish community, and living the Jewish lifecycle: the core elements of a continually-evolving American Jewish identity.

This shift in the school's identity — away from a mission statement that highlighted its Conservative Jewish character to one that places equal emphasis on bilingualism and Hebrew as our heritage — is seen by some as the considerable cost The Epstein school has had to pay to survive and thrive in the current environment. During the conversations about the transition to bilingualism, some of Epstein's "Old Guard" of supporters and board members wanted to preserve the school's Schechter brand, but many younger board members, along with Beiner himself, acknowledged that in the 21st century, this brand attracts fewer families. The fortunes of Conservative Judaism in America are well-known. In Atlanta specifically, the young, highly educated and professional Jewish and Israeli couples, particularly those who live within driving distance of the school, might be comfortable with (or relatively indifferent to) the school's Jewish mission, but want

the assurance of strong academics for their children. Excellent language instruction is acceptable provided it is in service of that overarching goal.

Above all, this shift can be perceived in the recruitment process. Through the purposeful and direct influence of the school's relationship with Darren Katz, recruitment efforts have shifted away from those already predisposed to day school to the target populations of parents who look at Epstein not as a Jewish school but as a private school. Whereas not long ago, administrators would recruit young families by warmly greeting them in Hebrew at open houses and tours, they now accompany this welcome with brain science as the hook. To get many of these families in the door, Beiner believes in overplaying Epstein's Jewish component. Once in the school, students and families are offered a chance to learn, experience, and value Jewish life and culture — not through the prism of Conservative Judaism exclusively, but instead through emphasis on the values of Hebrew, Israel and community, some of Conservative Judaism's central values.

In a similar way, the emphasis on bilingualism and Hebrew instruction has had an impact on the Judaics curriculum, which years ago had more time devoted to classic Jewish texts and even Rabbinics. The focus on Hebrew and Israeli culture, the resolve to add Spanish, and the presence of more families for whom a rich Judaic foundation is less important has reduced the time allocated for more advanced work with Jewish texts. For instance, in middle school, Rabbinics gets only two class-hours a week, and there is only one *tefillah* experience a day (mornings twice a week, afternoons twice a week) and currently no prayer on Fridays (though that is being re-examined). In truth, it would be unfair to characterize this

shift as a zero-sum game, with Hebrew winning at the expense of Judaics; to stay relevant and fill the seats, the school's leadership has for years felt the need to adapt to the times. Non-Orthodox Jewish and Israeli families relate more to Judaism's cultural aspects, and so it is these that Epstein focuses on: a family tree project in 4th grade, writing an ethical will in 5th grade, the 8th grade Hebrew production, and *Shiriyah* (an annual performance of Hebrew songs), along with a very strong Holocaust and Israel education component.

With Darren Katz's help, Beiner also realized he needed to figure out how best to market Epstein's curricular approach to a wider audience. He knows 50% of his seats will be filled by the children of day school alumni and of Israeli expatriates looking for an excellent Hebrew education. But he wants to — needs to — bring Epstein's vital and powerful message of Jewish peoplehood, Israel, and Jewish identity to many more families. Making the case for Hebrew as an academic benefit and providing a nurturing, warm community for one's children is a winning argument. Today, the admissions department sends experts on bilingualism to make presentations at preschools. Talking points for admissions tours highlight brain-based research and the generalizability of second language learning to learning in general.

Beiner is not at all apologetic about this approach. "Decide what your Hebrew program is going to be and be proud of it out there: celebrate it; be dogged about it; get data; train teachers and parents; and get them into alignment." Standing with those 8th graders in Israel as they listened to their tour guide in fluent Hebrew, he was sure he had taken the school on the correct path.

Questions for Further Consideration:

1. Do you think the marketing considerations confronted by The Epstein School are universal, or unique to Hebrew/Judaics? Why or why not?
2. Supporting and empowering teachers is core to Epstein's success in Hebrew. Do you think this must happen school-wide, or can a school choose to develop subject-specific cultures? What if one group, whether in general studies or Judaic studies, refused to adapt to the new cultural norms? Should they be replaced if they cannot "get with the program"?
3. To use Jim Collins' terminology in *From Good to Great in the Social Sector*, Epstein's administrators worked very hard – and had some good luck – to get "the right people on the bus." If a school leader is unable to do that, what strategies might s/he pursue?
4. Are there leadership conundrums that you face for which research and data may hold the answer/s?
5. Hebrew is a shared value within Epstein, but for different reasons for different groups. To what extent may this be the case in your school? Are there other values that could become shared (enjoy greater consensus) if additional rationales for their importance were presented?
6. Passion is a key ingredient in having an impact on students. Many day schools focus on evoking such feelings through connections to text; Epstein has placed its focus on Hebrew and Israel. How does this resonate with you as an educator? As a school community? What are the implications of such an approach?