

Jewish Educator Recruitment and Retention Initiative (JERRI)

Central Agency for Jewish Education in St. Louis

# Jewish Heroes Wanted: Inquire Within

An Advocacy Campaign for  
the Recruitment and Retention  
of Congregational Teachers

## Executive Summary

January 2007

*from Data collected Winter 2006*

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# JERRI Project Executive Summary

Education directors at St. Louis congregational schools often find themselves struggling to find qualified teachers for their classrooms. With more than three fourths of St. Louis Jewish students participating in formal Jewish education programs, this problem is shared by the entire community. Strong congregational schools are fundamental to the vitality of the St. Louis Jewish community, and having excellent teachers is the key to their success.

The Central Agency for Jewish Education (CAJE) in St. Louis has undertaken an advocacy project as part of a North American effort to work on the recruitment and retention of Jewish educators. CAJE is partnering with the Laboratory Communities Project, a unique partnership of four communities (working through their central agencies for Jewish education) – Toronto, Philadelphia, St. Louis, and San Francisco – to test, assess, and disseminate findings from four strategies to increase educator recruitment, improve educator performance, and enhance the likelihood of talented educators remaining in the field. CAJE St. Louis's strategy focuses on the effects of community perceptions of congregational schools and teachers. The Laboratory Communities work under the framework of JERRI, the Jewish Educator Recruitment and Retention Initiative, an endeavor being spearheaded by JESNA (the Jewish Education Service of North America), and funding for this project has been jointly provided by the Covenant Foundation and JESNA.

In the fall of 2005, CAJE St. Louis hired researcher Dr. Roberta Louis Goodman to examine the St. Louis Jewish community's perceptions of the status and kavod (honor and respect) of congregational teachers. Data gathered during this process supports the community's need for assistance in the recruitment and retention of congregational teachers. The study used surveys, focus groups and interviews to gather information from congregational board members, education committees, education directors, rabbis, teachers and Jewish Federation board members. (Hereafter this collective group will be referred to as "stakeholders.") More than 500 individuals, 71% of the stakeholders, responded to the surveys and 34 individuals took part in focus groups and interviews. All eleven congregational schools (eight Reform and three Conservative) participated in the study.

One of the primary discoveries from the study is the closer to the educational process the stakeholders are, the more knowledge and positive perceptions they have of the program and teachers. In turn, the opposite is true as well; stakeholders further removed from the congregational schooling experience are less knowledgeable and less positive about its programs and teachers. This is a noteworthy point since collectively, less than 50% of stakeholders know what is happening in their schools, only 26% know of the teachers' classroom and professional accomplishments, only one third speak often to parents about the quality of the school experience and just 52% know many of teachers. (See Table 1)

A closer look at these numbers is even more revealing when examining the stakeholders who are in positions to influence the congregational and community perceptions of the schools and teachers. Only 28% of congregational board members and 14% of

Federation board members know what is happening in the schools. On a positive note, 86% of congregational education committee members do know what is happening in their schools.

The large discrepancy between education committee members and congregational board members perhaps reflects the lack of inclusion of school issues or decisions on congregational board agendas. Stakeholders indicated most educational decisions and issues, beyond the approval of budgets, are not brought to the attention of these boards. In fact, there are some education directors who are not invited to attend board meetings.

Not including school information and decisions at the general board level might convey the message that those decisions are not significant for board members and in turn, the congregation as a whole. In addition, the lack of information at the board level also means board members are not as knowledgeable about their schools and teachers when representing their congregation to members, potential members and the community-at-large. This diminishes the status of the school, and by association, the teachers. In turn, board members' lack of knowledge about their educational program and teachers contributes to their unfavorable perceptions of the congregational school.

The importance of the teacher's role in the educational process is diminished when the congregational culture considers it more prestigious to sit on the congregational board than to teach. It also impacts the perception of the school when serving on the education committee or school board is believed to have less status than teaching or serving on the congregational board. In these ways the culture of the congregations unintentionally diminishes the status of their school and teachers.

TABLE 1

## What do Stakeholders Know about Congregational Education?

Percentages represent those who strongly agreed to the following questions

Strongly Agree	I know what is happening in the schools.	I know of the teachers' professional and classroom accomplishments.
Stakeholders/Cumulative	49%	26%
Education Directors	100%	90%
Teachers	76%	38%
Rabbis	83%	44%
Congregational Education Committee	86%	39%
Congregational Board Members	28%	15%
Federation Board Members	14%	25%

TABLE 2

## Congregational Support of Schools and Teachers

Attitudes	Agree/ Strongly Agree
Jewish education is a priority in the congregation(s).	85%
Congregation(s) is/are supportive of its/their teachers.	64%
Recruiting, developing, and retaining excellent teachers is a congregational priority.	50%
Congregational board support of teachers.	64%
Education/Religious School Committee support of teachers.	68%
Parental support of teachers.	51%
<b>Resources</b>	
Rabbis are actively involved in the educational program of their school(s).	63%
Congregation provides adequate resources for teachers to do their jobs effectively.	57%
Teachers are well-paid.	23%
Teachers receive desirable benefits.	12%
Congregation provides adequate professional development subsidies and opportunities for teachers.	43%

One thing nearly all stakeholders agree on is the importance of education and its priority for congregations. They also agree having qualified teachers is the key to an excellent school. However, the actions on the part of many congregations do not reflect these agreed upon priorities: only 50% of stakeholders agree recruiting, developing and retaining excellent teachers is a congregational priority; 51% agree there is parental support for teachers; 57% agree the congregation provides adequate resources for teachers to do their jobs effectively; only 23% agree teachers are well paid and just 12% feel teachers receive desirable benefits. (See Table 2)

Despite these statistics nearly half of all stakeholders feel their own congregational schools are excellent. However, only 20% feel that other St. Louis congregational schools are excellent as well. (See Table 3) Their perceptions about the teachers are divided almost equally. Less than half the stakeholders believe the teachers are excellent and well trained and just over half believe the teachers convey a great deal of Judaic knowledge, while just 64% believe the teachers are Jewishly knowledgeable. (See Table 4)

The poor perception of teachers is generally undeserved. The teachers are highly educated with 79% having earned a bachelors degree and 38% having a degree in general education. Nearly all of the teachers have received some form of formal Jewish education with 75% having participated in adult education courses, 30% completing college level Judaic courses and 24% attending the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School.

The eleven congregational schools have 215 teaching positions. Most of the teachers (92%) are members of congregations. They tend to identify with the movement of the congregation

where they teach and 68% are members of the congregation where they teach. The teachers are 79% female, 16% teach at two or more congregations and 93% of them maintain additional jobs. They were attracted to teaching and continue to teach because they enjoy working with children, have a belief in the importance Jewish learning and education for the students and for themselves, and enjoy the opportunity to make a difference in someone's life.

The teachers' commitment level is evident with more than 50% of them having worked five or more years in Jewish education. Their longevity is an important asset to congregations. On the other hand, the average age of the teachers is 39 with close to one third of them under the age of 30, and almost half the teachers have worked only one to five years. It is equally important to

TABLE 3

## Perceptions of Quality of Congregational Schooling

All Stakeholders	Strongly Agree
This/The school(s) is/are excellent.	49%
I am pleased with the Jewish education my child receives/received [in this congregational school]. (39% indicated do not know/does not apply.)	39%
The quality of this/all the school(s) is as good that in any other congregational school in the St. Louis/other city.	48%
All the (other) congregational school programs in St. Louis are excellent.	20%

TABLE 4

## Perception of Teacher Quality

All Stakeholders	Strongly Agree
Having qualified teachers is a key to an excellent congregational school.	93%
The teachers are excellent.	48%
The teachers are well-trained.	48%
The teachers are Jewishly knowledgeable.	64%
The teachers foster a love for Judaism.	69%
The teachers convey a great deal of Judaic knowledge.	52%
The teachers convey a great deal of Hebraic knowledge.	35%

understand and support this group as well in order to lower the turnover rate of congregational teachers.

Teachers have a need to feel they are honored and respected and their school is honored and respected. Many congregations do not succeed at this task. Unfortunately, only 42% of stakeholders agree their congregations regularly show appreciation to their teachers. Some congregations honor their teachers by giving them holiday gifts or by having some kind of teacher recognition ceremony. However most congregations do not have a plan in place for retaining their excellent teachers.

All stakeholders are in agreement when it comes to the importance of teachers to the success of the school. Most also agree on two main goals of congregational schools: helping students develop strong Jewish identities and fostering a sense of connection to the Jewish people. Yet the general perception of the community is that neither the congregational schools nor their teachers provide a quality education.

This lack of kavod impacts the ability to recruit and retain teachers. Potential teachers want to know they will be supported and appreciated by their congregations and the community if they choose to teach. Usually the recruitment of teachers is handled by the education directors and sometimes the rabbis. However, this responsibility belongs to the entire congregational community. If everyone participates in the process it could help underscore the message of the value of teaching in the congregation.

Of course hiring teachers is just the first step, and then there needs to be support and methods for retaining good teachers. Currently

many congregations rely mainly on their education directors to provide curriculum, materials and supervision as well as assistance in lesson planning, classroom management and basic teaching skills for their teachers. And most teachers (91%) have received some sort of professional assistance from their education director. However, there are many other resources which could be used to support teachers.

There are a variety of recommendations to support and retain quality teachers. One proposal includes making better use of teachers in the community. Many teachers are not given the opportunity to network with other teachers in their schools to learn what is happening in other classrooms and to share teaching strategies. Veteran teachers could be trained as mentor teachers to support new teachers and those with under five years' experience in a classroom. Additional suggestions to improve the perception of teachers include salary increases, which would include lesson preparation time, or giving teachers vouchers which could be used for a variety of purposes including: day school or early childhood tuition, congregational dues, youth group, Jewish camping and tuition for degree programs in Jewish education.

St. Louis CAJE is committed to assisting the community in changing the perception of congregational schools and their teachers. With 77% of St. Louis Jewish students in grades K-12 participating in congregational schools, the strength of these schools is important to the strength of the entire St. Louis Jewish community. There are many ways for the congregations and community to enhance the status of the schools and teachers. This ultimately will benefit the teachers, the congregations, the students and the community.



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