

Leadership in Jewish Education: When Leadership Leaves Classrooms Vacant

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Question/Challenge: How do we ensure that those opting for and moving into leadership positions in Jewish education are doing so because of their passion and skill set, not simply for economic reasons? How do we ensure that our Jewish educational system is able to maintain experienced and talented classroom educators in the classroom, and provide ways to celebrate and compensate their expertise without them moving into administrative positions that remove them from teaching?

It is a common complaint. Everyone wants to be the General, no one wants to be the soldier. In Jewish education, the dilemma is more complex, because many actually want to remain in the trenches of learning, but feel they cannot. Many Limudei Kodesh (Jewish studies) teachers have little or no desire to be a leader/administrator. Many Limudei Kodesh teachers love their work, are highly committed to their students, and would like to enjoy a long career in teaching. When they consider their career arc, however, they have no models and often foresee no potential for either career advancement or financial solvency, without making a move into administration or leadership. Few if any Jewish day schools have systems of recognition for senior educators or positions for teacher leaders.

There are two problems that result from this reality. First, great Jewish educators are lost to the classroom and the students who desperately need them. This impacts both the current student population and those to come, as it creates frequent teacher vacancies that are a challenge for day schools to fill. Second, this reality prompts many to enter the field of Jewish Educational leadership for the wrong reasons, and perhaps despite leadership positions poorly suiting their style, skill set, or passion.

I have the opportunity to work fairly intensely with Jewish educators pursuing a professional doctoral degree in Jewish Educational Administration. For a good number, this degree represents the fulfilment of a long-envisioned professional goal. They have a clear vision of themselves as leaders, and a vision for the field that they would like to enact. They are well-suited for advancement to leadership and are prepared to add to their knowledge and skills in order to assume and succeed in leadership roles. Another set of doctoral students, however, are seasoned educators who love their work in the classroom, but perceive no way to advance their professional stature or their financial future, without moving into administration.

Fortunately, Jewish day schools offer multiple administrative opportunities, with varying leadership demands. A curriculum coordinator, director of student support or Israel guidance, and school principal have very different portfolios of responsibility and levels of leadership involved. This does not, however, create compelling opportunities for great teachers to remain in the classroom where their students can benefit. Research on teacher leadership, teacher mentorship, and other forms of advanced professional development suggests that teachers, students, and schools benefit when such opportunities are available. The field of Jewish education would be well served to develop models that would allow such teacher advancement.

With many Jewish educators viewing leadership positions the future for their career, graduate training programs become critical. Our graduate doctoral program faces the basic challenge of evaluating candidates for a program with limited openings and resources. Once we select a cohort, we face the additional challenge of educating a varied group of doctoral candidates, who may be at different stages of their careers and who are interested in different trajectories of leadership. Additionally, Jewish educators do not have the luxury of pursuing advanced degrees full time, and are usually fully employed, often in demanding positions while pursuing their doctorate. Engaging these professionals in the substantive learning for leadership that exemplifies professional doctoral studies is an additional challenge.