

LEADERSHIP, JUDAIC KNOWLEDGE, AND PEDAGOGY: THE LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE FOR CONGREGATIONAL SCHOOL EDUCATORS

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The Leadership Institute for Congregational School Educators (LICSE), initiated three years ago with a \$1.8 million grant from UJA-Federation of New York, has enhanced the leadership capacity of the inaugural cohort of 52 educators of Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Orthodox synagogue schools. With a second grant of \$1.9 million from UJA-Federation of New York, this transdenominational program, co-sponsored by HUC-JIR and the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), is recruiting a second group of synagogue educators from the tri-state New York area for training that will begin in January 2008.

“This historic initiative allows the seminaries of the Reform and Conservative Movements to work together to further the professional skills, Judaic knowledge, and vision for leadership of congregational school educators influencing the Jewish education and identity formation of over 30,000 children in this region,” explained Dr. Evie Rotstein, LICSE Project Director. “We are so grateful to UJA-Federation of New York for their visionary commitment to congregational school education through a grant that translates to \$50,000 per educator.”

Rabbi Steven Brown, Ed.D., of JTS, said, “The LICSE is a pioneering and most successful effort to raise the self image and professional leadership skills of synagogue school educators. It has raised the bar on what synagogue school leadership should be and energized a deepening commitment to the excellence of synagogue schools on the part of the participants and their superb mentors.”

Congregational school educators involved in an activity to explore both personal and professional connections to Israel.



THE LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE FOR CONGREGATIONAL SCHOOL EDUCATORS

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“UJA-Federation has demonstrated a strong commitment to supporting and strengthening congregational religious schools. Partnering with HUC-JIR and JTS to create the Leadership Institute for Congregational School Educators was a natural fit for us,” said Alisa Rubin Kurshan, Senior Vice President for Strategic Planning and Organizational Resources at UJA-Federation of New York. “This initiative gives congregational school leaders in our area an opportunity to focus on vision, leadership, and pedagogy, and to deepen their own Jewish knowledge. This in turn will empower participants to im-

plement constructive change and maximize the potential of their synagogue schools.”

Guided by the vision of HUC-JIR’s New York School of Education and JTS’s William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education, the LICSE stands on “three pillars” – leadership, Judaic knowledge and pedagogy – which serve as the organizing principles for each of the Leadership Institute’s professional development experiences.

The leadership component is designed to strengthen each

participant’s skills and identity as a Jewish leader as well as introduce participants to research on effective educational practices. The Judaic knowledge component enables participants to study text on a regular basis and to incorporate these texts into their work with faculty and families. The pedagogic track helps educators strengthen their teaching skills and communicate about Jewish learning effectively.

Over the next two-and-a-half year period, the next LICSE cohort of educators will participate in two ten-day intensive Summer

Seminars, eleven one- or two-day symposia, and a ten-day Israel Seminar. A personal mentor is assigned to guide and supervise each educator, culminating in the design of an Action Research Project. Grants of \$2,000 are provided to facilitate the implementation of these projects in the congregational schools. Small grants are also available for participants to create an Individualized Learning Plan with their mentors. All New York seminars and symposia take place on the HUC-JIR and JTS campuses.

The LICSE cohort at Leo Baeck High School in Haifa, Israel, during their ten-day Israel Seminar.



The inaugural cohort completed its two-year program in April 2007. An evaluation report by the Jewish Educational Services of North America (*JESNA Report*, November 2006) highlighted the program's achievements and the opportunities for those who will join the second cohort. It noted substantive growth in the participants' professional skills and knowledge, as well as their confidence, self-image, and leadership capacity. The report described how the LICSE enabled participants to create a shared language and framework for addressing Jewish educational issues and how the various workshops enabled them to develop new strategies for professional development for staff, including text study, curriculum design, and denominational learning.

Participants from the first cohort attest to the personal and professional transformations that occurred. Educator Judy Jaffe, of Congregation Shomrei Emunah in Montclair, NJ, said, "Two years after being selected to participate in the Leadership Institute, I am not the same person. The Institute transformed my practices and outlook. I learned from the best in the fields of education and Judaism as well as from my colleagues, who I now call my friends. This was the most outstanding learning I have done in my professional life."

Sara Losch, from Barnert Temple in Franklin Lakes, NJ,

added, "The Leadership Institute rounded out the rough edges of professional insecurity, softened the lines of confusion, and strengthened my areas of weakness. The outcome was both fun and fulfilling."

The JESNA report praised the Israel Seminar – a period of intensive study in Israel about the application of Israel studies into their curricula – as well as the preparations and follow-up for this Seminar. This experience enabled participants to enhance their personal and professional connection to Israel and stimulate their thinking about their vision for Israel education and their role as Israel educators.

The evaluation pointed to mentorship as a significant aspect of the program, whereby the educators were given valued support for problem-solving and reflective practice. Each participant met monthly with a personal mentor, drawn from the LICSE's cadre of mentors from the field of Jewish education, to work on their Individualized Learning Plan and Action Research Project, which implemented a change project within their school, and for guidance regarding any issues that arose in their school. The report noted that the Leadership Institute also reinforced and expanded the mentors' mentoring skills and professional knowledge and strengthened their performance in the areas emphasized by the Leadership Institute, particularly with regard to reflective practice,

improving communication skills, articulating Jewish educational vision, and engaging in collaborative decision-making.

Cathy Deutchman, a participant from the Community Synagogue of Rye in Westchester, NY, explained that "the Leadership Institute helped me personally and professionally. I was able to have a wonderful mentor to support and encourage me and an entire group of professional educators to learn from. I literally would not be where I am today without having gone through this experience."

Mentors, like Ira Wise from Congregation B'nai Israel in Bridgeport, CT, also gained from the program. Wise said, "The Leadership Institute has provided me with the most significant professional growth since I finished graduate school. The teachers, participants, and mentors form a community of praxis that will continue for many years."

Lisa Pressman, of Temple Shalom in Chevy Chase, MD, noted that "the quality of the workshops and experiences were exceptional and touched upon a vast array of issues pertinent to my work as an education director. The diversity of our lecturers and our cohort allowed for the sharing of ideas across a broad spectrum of Jewish life. All this was done within a caring framework that created a community of learners and friends that will last for years."

Jo Kay, Director of HUC-JIR's New York School of Education, echoed the importance of relationships developed through LICSE – relationships that continue among participants and mentors across denominational lines. "It became clear quite early in the program that there was much to be learned, not only from the faculty teaching at the Institute, but from one another. Regional principal groups, which are organized by denominational Movement, now meet *together* several times a year. This openness and mutual respect might not have developed if not for the opportunity to study together over a significant period of time."

Kay is optimistic that the second cohort will have equal success. "I look forward to working with, and getting to know, the participants in the second cohort of the LISCE. It has been a rewarding and enriching experience for everyone involved."

To qualify, educators must have at least two full years of experience leading a congregational school and must also demonstrate support from their congregation's Rabbi, Board President, and Education Chair. ■

Further information is available at www.leader-institute.org or by contacting Dr. Evie Rotstein, Project Director, at (212) 824-2248 or erotstein@huc.edu.