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Bringing TLC and PLC to our Synagogue Schools

It is no secret that teachers in synagogue supplementary schools often lack the pedagogical knowledge and skills to teach Jewish subjects in a deep and effective way. Neither is it a secret why. At least three specific factors contribute to this weakness of supplementary Jewish education. First, a majority of teachers in religious schools are not using the job as a means of full time employment. They see the job as supplementary and tend not to plan or know how to prepare successful teaching and learning. Second, the teachers, themselves, are usually products of the poor Jewish education they received. Finally, synagogues tend not to have the time, resources, money, or desire to work with their staff on teaching skills. We have very little control over the first, no control over the second, but enormous potential to influence or even re-invent, professional learning in synagogues.

Synagogues need to recognize the value of their teachers and guide them not only in pedagogic knowledge but also in their own learning about Judaism. Instead, synagogues love their religious schools for bringing in membership, supporting them primarily as “loss leaders” because of Bar Mitzvah education. In other words, religious schools never make a profit, but the Bar and Bat Mitzvah requirements of religious schools make members. In this way, synagogues do not love their religious school teachers. Sadly, they fundamentally do not even seem to expect much of them.

In direct contrast to this reality, Hebrew Union College Professor and Jewish historian, Michael Meyer states, “the school, too, should be understood as a community of learning, the teacher a fellow learner, not alone one who imparts learning.”¹ The teachers should see themselves as learners on journeys. Being further along on this journey than students gives teachers the opportunity to share the additional knowledge they have gained. They should convey to students that learning about Judaism never ends. This, in a nutshell, is what PLCs are for.

A professional learning community, or “PLC,” is the term educational literature uses to describe a collegial group of administrators and school staff who are united in their commitment to student learning. Moreover, the members of PLCs share a vision, work and learn collaboratively, visit and review other classrooms, and participate in decision making.”² While public schools across the nation have been working to implement this model for over a decade, very few religious schools are working consciously on any part of the P, the L or the C.

From my observation, professional learning communities have the potential to succeed for three reasons. First, because teachers become less isolated and therefore have peers with whom to collaborate, they feel linked with the community and are therefore more committed. Second, PLCs provide teachers access to many resources including mentors and administrators. Lastly, PLCs succeed because they bring people together, with shared goals and values. Clearly,

¹ Meyer, Michael A., “Reflections on the Educated Jew from the Perspective of Reform Judaism”, *Visions of Jewish Education*. Editors Seymour Fox, Israel Scheffler, and Daniel Marom. New York: Cambridge University Press 2003. pgs.149-162

² Hord, S. M. (1997b). *Professional learning communities: What are they and why are they important?* [Online]. Available: <http://www.sedl.org/change/issues/issues61.htm>

PLCs require a great deal of time to be invested, but it turns out, that it is worth it for everyone, the administrators, teachers, students, parents, and board members, alike.

Implementing a PLC model in synagogue education bears the potential to affect a liberal Jewish congregational education on different levels, simultaneously. Specifically, a PLC is structured to help teachers increase their knowledge and learn to be more effective in the classroom. These topics can be taught by introducing learning modules (concurrent with the content they are teaching in the classroom) with Director of Education or an experienced teacher. The teachers then collaborate with a group of colleagues to plan lessons using the information they learned in the modules. After this, the teachers put the knowledge they learned into practice in their classrooms. This is evaluated, and discussed with a group of colleagues.

Imagine a religious school that has created a professional learning community. Let's take a glimpse at what that could look like on a daily basis and how it could affect the congregation and its students. When the teachers are hired, they get a free membership to the synagogue; and are paired with a mentoring team that consists of other teachers in the school and occasionally the director of education. When the teacher is hired, he/she would meet at the beginning of the year with this teaching team at a retreat outside of the synagogue. The team sets personal and team goals for the year under the guidance of the educator. The teachers meet with their teams once a month during the year for 45 minutes after school. The hiring interview process establishes that the teacher needs to take his/her own Jewish learning seriously and needs to select a specific focus for his/her own study, formally, classes, etc. These

classes could range from college level courses to those taught at a synagogue. The teacher would receive a monetary bonus as an incentive for taking his/her Jewish learning seriously. The meetings focus on lesson plans for future classes and provide time to discuss classroom management issues. The educator would meet with each teacher for a mid-year check-in and an end-of-the-year evaluation, but these are just two moments in a weekly series of collegial connections among all the teachers as colleagues.

But wait, there's more. PLCs go beyond the classroom. They have the potential to influence the entire congregation. The students are no longer bored with religious school because teachers have the support and skills to take creative risks with their teaching. The teachers, themselves, feel valued as part of the community. The parents no longer feel the strain of the eternal power struggle involved in forcing their kids to go to religious school. Parents and students are intrigued by what Jewish education has to offer them. The teachers feel that they are making a difference. The director of education is empowering the teachers to take ownership of their classroom. All of these stakeholders benefit from creating a PLC and it helps create fully committed Jewish individuals. The religious school as a "loss leader" that brings in membership is simply not enough, synagogues need to shift to function as a PLC that is, attention and care to the teachers, specifically, treating them as professional learners and helping to create a meaningful community.