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## Teacher Retention & Development

# A Model Program for Preparing and Launching Novice Judaics Teachers

■ by **DR. JUDY MARKOSE AND DR. SHARON WALL**

**B** EING a first-year teacher is challenging; being a Judaic studies teacher often brings added challenges, such as lack of curriculum, unclear standards, and less buy-in from students and parents. Training institutions, the Jewish community, school administrators, school boards and parents all claim they want the very best Jewish studies teachers. Yet are we doing what it takes to achieve this?

Through the Pardes Educators Program (PEP), a two-year Jerusalem-based training program for Judaic studies teachers in day schools, currently in its ninth year, valuable lessons have been learned about the training of Judaic studies teachers and what schools can and should do to insure their success in the field. Through its work with its graduates, Pardes has seen models of excellence in the support that schools provide, and has observed serious shortcomings with unhappy consequences.

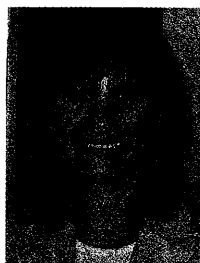
Following is a description of the elements of a program which are critical to the development of Judaic studies teachers, and recommendations regarding ongoing support that schools must provide to assure a successful outcome.

## BACKGROUND AND VISION

PEP was conceived in cooperation with and funded by the AVI CHAI Foundation. With the rapid growth of community day schools in the 1990s, the Foundation was concerned with developing a pool of Judaic studies teachers for these non-denominational schools. As Pardes is an open institution where Jews from a wide range of backgrounds meet over the study of Jewish text, it provided a good training ground for teachers who would teach text to students from diverse backgrounds, in schools whose mission is to accommodate and celebrate diversity. Other critical aspects included the centrality of serious, long-term, in-depth text study (tailored to the level of the individual student), the importance of Israel and Hebrew language, and an emphasis on Jewish community. These are essential components of the training of Judaic studies teachers, beyond the educational theory, applied pedagogy, reflective practice, and subject matter expertise integral to any serious teacher training program.

There is a real concern on the part of the North American Jewish educational community as to how to teach Israel and how to make it a part of one's Jewish identity.

Spending two years in Israel allows educators to get to know Israel both as idealistic homeland and challenged state, and to struggle with their own relationship with Israel in preparation for facilitat-



*Dr. Judy Markose is the director of the Pardes Educators Program. She can be reached at [judy@pardes.org.il](mailto:judy@pardes.org.il).*



*Dr. Susan Wall is the director of the Pardes Educators Alumni Support Project. She can be reached at [susan@pardes.org.il](mailto:susan@pardes.org.il).*

ing discussion in day school classrooms. Israel also provides a natural venue for learning Hebrew. Living in Jerusalem allows future Judaic studies teachers to participate in varied prayer frameworks, to face the secular-religious divide, and to experience the Jewish calendar of Shabbat and holidays in an intense and all-encompassing manner.

Taking participants out of their normal environment makes it possible to structure a program that has maximum impact. Being part of the larger Pardes community exposes the educators to many different kinds of Jews. Planning various prayer options (or a no-prayer option), participating in a community Shabbaton, and learning with a havruta partner who had different beliefs and observances helps students broaden their

understanding of “the other.” Informal education is modeled and experienced regularly through tzedakah projects, tiyulim (hikes), holiday events, visits to teachers’ homes, and even the weekly community lunch. Collegiality is encouraged through varied cohort interaction, including shared Israel experiences and peer collaboration and critique.

In terms of content knowledge, the program seeks to achieve balance between “depth” and “breadth” in the study of texts. The Pardes approach of in-depth learning, using the havruta method, allows students to develop a passion for text study in a Beit Midrash setting, guided by teachers who themselves have a passion for both text and teaching. At the same time, PEP recognizes the importance of exposing students to a broad range of text study, and thus survey courses and independent study are added to the program. In response to feedback from the field, opportunities are provided to develop expertise in areas such as tefillah and holiday programming, preparing our future teachers to take on leadership roles in their day schools.

In 2008, the Jim Joseph Foundation began to fund the Pardes Educators Alumni Support Project to provide more deliberate assistance to PEP graduates, to identify successful models of practice and to learn how to keep novice teachers in the profession. The Alumni Support Project offers a fall retreat in North America and a two-week Summer Curriculum Workshop, in Israel, for novice teachers to develop units and courses (open also to non-PEP novice teachers). Additional support currently includes school visits, conference calls, individual assistance and intervention, a listserv, and a professional newsletter.

## THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL IN NEW TEACHER INDUCTION

There are schools that are models of excellence; they truly “get it” in terms of what novice teachers need. These schools

stand behind their first year teachers (even in the face of initial parental concern) and do everything possible to help novices succeed.

That support begins with the composition of the classes they are asked to teach; the number of courses,



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preps, and duties assigned; as well as the physical space in which they teach. We have seen schools that make sure that first year teachers have no more than two or three different subjects to prepare (as opposed to five preps) and fewer overall courses to teach. The extra expense of fewer courses in Year One may be very cost effective in the long run, helping novice teachers to succeed.

New teachers are sometimes inadvertently undermined by being in rooms that make classroom control challenging. New teachers may be given the most difficult classes that none of the more veteran teachers wanted to tackle. What are the chances these novices can succeed beyond their more experienced colleagues?

Most of the schools promise mentors to novice teachers, but surveys revealed that the school’s definition of what mentoring was, and the quality of mentor provided, varied from institution to institution. What is the requisite scenario? Novice teachers need mentors whose schedules allow them to meet with and observe their mentees teaching on a regular basis. These mentors need to be trained and paid and should not be the novice’s supervisor. Mentoring should continue beyond year one. Novices need the opportunity to continue to grow as teachers, certainly well into their second year of teaching.

Most schools are working to develop a Judaic studies curriculum, which will offer

stability even in years of staff turnover. As novice teachers go out to teach, few are given goals, enduring understandings, standards and benchmarks, suggested assessments, and so on—elements that are standard protocol for general studies teachers. Some are given total freedom to develop units and courses. The latter

may sound attractive to new teachers, who cherish the sense of independence and initiative. That sense disappears very quickly. In hiring and preparing new teachers, schools must understand that all teachers, and especially novices, need ample advance time to prepare, and benefit from the support and expertise of experienced professionals in developing good curriculum.

We want novice teachers to feel confidence, but at the same time, it is important to warn them that they cannot be “great” in their first year. That is especially difficult for the best and the brightest, who are used to succeeding. The challenges of the first year require administrators to understand the difficulties and to provide the maximum encouragement, support, and structure.

In the Pardes Educators Program, training is designed to prepare teachers to meet the real needs of day schools. A good deal of time, effort and community funds have been invested in the training of new teachers. The time has come for all Jewish teacher-training institutions to work together with day schools in asking the hard questions about what it takes to help a teacher to succeed, to enjoy teaching and to remain in the field, to inspire and teach the next generation of Jews.

Note: Students in the Pardes Educators Program pursue a Master of Jewish Education at the Shoolman Graduate School of Education of Hebrew College. ■