Online to recovery

Israeli companies are outsourcing teaching staff to US Jewish day schools

• By SHULAMIT WASSERSTROM

US Jewish schools, like many private educational institutions, are still reeling from the economic crisis in the United States that peaked in 2008. As a result of the challenging financial market, many Jewish parents struggle to pay for private school tuition, and enrollment in private schools is declining. Both secular and religious day schools throughout the country are working to make a place for themselves in the changing face of America's economy.

Along with financial struggles, the greater US Jewish community is also facing a shift in cultural patterns. According to a 2013 Pew Research study, American Jews are questioning their identities now more than ever, and as a result of assimilation, they are less likely to spend thousands for their children to attend private Jewish day schools. As these schools have less

funding and consequently a smaller staff, individual attention for pupils gets sacrificed, as does the variety of courses the schools are able to offer. Many classes outside the core curriculum are being eliminated, and educators are exploring alternative methods.

A new technological trend to combat this phenomenon has entered Jewish education in recent years: Having qualified US teachers work from Israel to teach American children Judaic studies and Hebrew courses over the Internet.

"Over 70 percent of US Jewish schools – both Orthodox and community – are working under capacity," says Chana German, the director of Bar-Ilan University's Lookstein Virtual Jewish Online Academy, which offers online classes to US Jewish day schools. "Whether this is empty seats in classrooms or empty classrooms altogether, Jewish schools in America are facing a budget crisis."

Online learning is broken down into two models, which a variety of

Children taking an online history course at the RPRY Day School in Edison, New Jersey. (Courtesy Bonim B'Yachad)

Bonim B'Yachad director Aryeh Eisenberg.
(Courtesy Bonim B'Yachad)

In the American History course, Shaindy Zudick dressed up as an Eastern European Jew from the shtetl and spoke to her 'children' about the unit's material.
(Courtesy Lookstein's Virtual Jewish Online Academy)

Bonim B'Yachad teacher Avi Mandelbaum with some of his AP Chemistry students at TABC High School in Teaneck, NJ, during a trip to the US.
(Courtesy Bonim B'Yachad)

Israeli businesses are utilizing to create systems for American Jewish day schools.

The most common method of online teaching, often associated with higher-level education, is the synchronous model. In this model, the curriculum is preset by fully qualified educators and specialists, and students work at their own pace to fulfill the course requirements. For self-motivated students, the synchronous method works well, as it allows them to flourish outside the traditionally structured classroom.

The alternative method is the asynchronous model, which is more interactive: The teacher sets the curriculum to cater to individual children's needs. This model is deemed more successful, particularly for high-school and middle-school students, who are often less motivated in the classroom.

Some models, such as the one that Lookstein uses, combine the two methods: There is a structured and predetermined course, and once every two weeks the child has a virtual meeting with the teacher to receive live feedback about their progress.

IN THE typical asynchronous method – such as the one utilized by another Israel-based online academy, Bonim B'Yachad – a teacher guides the children in a live session for the allotted time of the class. The virtual classroom opens at a scheduled hour, and children from elementary school to high school sit at personal computers and either receive an email invitation to enter the virtual classroom, or log on via their schools' online systems. The interactive system allows the virtual teacher, who is often teaching during the evening hours in Israel, to monitor the children. The teacher is in contact with the school constantly, and even conducts virtual parent-teacher conferences.

Bonim B'Yachad director Aryeh Eisenberg, who was previously a Jewish educator in the United States for over 10 years, finds that the Internet services fill some central voids in US

Jewish education. The financial aspect of online Jewish learning – which is significantly cheaper than the alternative – is what draws in many of the 25 US Jewish schools that work with him. He says these schools all faced some sort of budget crisis, forcing them to cut back on teachers and extra classes that were nonessential to the core program.

"These classes may not be essential, but schools still need them," he explains.

There are also logistical and scheduling issues that many schools face. Jewish day schools tend to be smaller in terms of both classrooms and children. Often, when a child does not fit properly into the core classroom routine or is at a different level than his or her peers, the school is unable to provide an extra teacher and classroom to accommodate that child's needs. An online service can provide the pupil with individual attention.

"Jewish day schools have extra pressure to compete against independent private schools, which are able to give one-on-one attention to students more easily," says German. "Every school's goal is to lower the student-to-teacher ratio. We can do that better in an online environment."

She says the initial goal of Lookstein, which launched JOLTT – The Jewish Online Learning, Teaching, and Training Center in 2011, was to impact the smaller Jewish schools in the US that had fewer resources.

"What ended up happening, though, was that larger schools in metropolitan areas also found the service to be useful in connecting their students with a wider range of classes," she says.

Bonim B'Yachad takes the same approach, but teaches strictly asynchronously. Eisenberg says he realized the potential in the business when he first arrived in Israel.

"I noticed two things in Israel when I arrived. For starters, I saw firsthand how many qualified and successful teachers there are living here," he says. But the market for teachers in Israel is tough, he explains, and many US-qualified teachers are forced to make a difficult career switch.

Secondly, he continues, "I noticed just how many – in comparison to the US – educational resources there are in Israel."

He was amazed by the technology and tools Israel had to offer in the field of education, and he was convinced that there was a way to use them to bridge the gaps between the two countries.

"I started Bonim B'Yachad to help Jewish education of all kinds," he says. In the Jewish studies curriculum, the program offers courses in Tanach (Hebrew Bible), Talmud, Mishna, Jewish philosophy and Halacha, for all levels – from elementary to high school.

The online system also enables schools to offer classes that they often don't have the resources to provide on their own – for instance, elective classes that provide students with practical skills they can bring to the job market, such as Microsoft Office certifications, architecture, graphic design and sign language.

The virtual lessons cater to the needs of both Orthodox and community Jewish schools.

"Lookstein offers two cohorts of each course so that we can reach the broad range of the Jewish community – one for Orthodox schools and one for community schools. Then the courses are further divided into standard and advanced, with the ability to differentiate within the courses itself," says German.

OTHER GROUPS, such as JETS: Jerusalem Ed Tech Solutions, in addition to teaching online courses, have a program that connects American students with their Israeli peers. The Shutafut Israel Partnership allows students from both sides of the ocean to study simultaneously online.

"It's really amazing," says Smadar Goldstein, who founded JETS with Rabbi Stan Peerless and Rabbi Joel Cohn in 2009. "When I was a kid, we had pen pals. But now the students are so lucky to be enriched and given the opportunity to learn together with students from the US and Israel over the Internet."

Around 20 schools use the JETS service to enhance their daily curricula.

Virtual learning programs have their challenges, however. Integrating an online system into a school is no simple matter.

"It's important to ease schools into online learning," Eisenberg explains – though he adds that the children themselves adapt easily.

The success of online learning is up for debate. Skeptics question whether children are able to absorb the same amount of knowledge from a screen as from a real teacher, and statistics on the subject are scarce; there has been little research into comparing the two forms of learning.

However, Eisenberg says he and his colleagues don't intend to make online teaching a complete replacement for the traditional classroom.

"Philosophically I believe in the importance of having a real teacher. I am not aiming to replace teachers altogether. But online courses are, in some cases, the most viable solution, especially for [those in] the Jewish community who [want to] utilize Israel's resources."

He notes that "students are still entering a real school building. That is crucial. But especially for Jewish education, which in many places is limited, this option holds so many possibilities."

Students taking a class at the Beth Tfiloh Dahan Community School in Baltimore, Maryland. (Courtesy Bonim B'Yachad)

An online module introducing 'milah mancha' (leitwort) to schoolchildren. (Courtesy Lookstein's Virtual Jewish Online Academy)

| Definition | M & M | Example 1 | Example 2 | Example 3 |

Milah Mancha

The Torah often sets a tone or communicates a message or theme by using repeated words or phrases.

We may not notice them the first time, but after a few readings, they will stand out and beg for further scrutiny!

מִילָה מִנְחָה?

Click on the highlighter to see important notes.

Characteristics

- A repeated word or a phrase
- Appears twice or more in a *pasuk, perek, parasha,* or *sefer*
- May appear in different forms of the same root (i.e. אמר, ויאמר, תאמר.)

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> **— Smadar Goldstein, JETS**