

# **Report for the Partnership for Jewish Learning and Life Central Hebrew High School, MetroWest, New Jersey**

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As they have been for several years, the Legacy Heritage Foundation is committed to continued support of Supplementary Jewish Community High Schools. This specific study was part of a process to help identify schools which the IJE could work with on a systematic basis to learn more about bringing about growth to these schools. This preliminary phase of the research involved speaking with the directors of 20 of these schools and then conducting site visits to approximately 8 schools. As well as identifying potential schools to work with the observations were also able to help strengthen our knowledge of what makes some of these schools effective and successful. In my capacity as a consultant to the IJE I conducted the majority of the interviews and the site visits. I was able to speak with several people associated with the Central Hebrew High School in New Jersey, including Robert Lichtman (Director, The Partnership for Jewish Learning and Life), Rabbi Ed Prince (Interim Director of High School), Adam Oded (Teen Educator at The Partnership for Jewish Learning and Life), Dr. Wallace Greene (Director, Jewish Educational Services, UJA Federation of Northern New Jersey) and several teachers and students involved in the school. Below are some of my findings.

## **The Site**

I was able to observe one site of Central Hebrew High School and I am able to report that the setting of the school is very impressive. The classes taking place in the Joseph Kushner Hebrew Academy give the students no doubt that they are entering into an environment of Jewish learning and socialization.

## **The Faculty**

The teachers are a good mix of new and veteran faculty. In my observations I was very impressed with the faculty, the level of preparation that they put into their classes and the rapport which they have developed with the students.

## **The Classes**

The current classes which the school offers provides a very good mix of more academic and arts based classes. Even more so than many other schools there is a strong commitment within Central Hebrew High School to serious Jewish education.

## **The students**

In terms of national comparisons Central Hebrew High School is regarded as a mid to large size school with enormous potential to grow even further. In my discussion and observation of students I want to make the following comments. The students at Central Hebrew High School enjoy coming to classes on Sunday mornings. This does not mean that they will necessarily admit this, but when asked, it is clear that the students come for three, I believe to be, equally valid reasons. First, their parents want them to get a good

Jewish education. Second, the students want to spend time with their friends. Third, the school is worth their while to attend.

This is not necessarily the case in all schools around the country and is something that Central Hebrew High School should be extremely proud of. In fact, most schools are struggling to attract and retain students, and while the numbers in this school could always be higher, they are still significant given the overall population.

### **Areas for Growth and Development of Central Hebrew High School**

It is the vision for Central Hebrew High School, outlined to me by Robert Lichtman, that made it one of the potentially most exciting sites that I visited. *[The vision has two components: 1) to bring more deliberate experiential learning into the Sunday program as we have begun with Reel Learning, Jewish Civics Initiative, and our Arts program, 2) to create connections with other MetroWest teen programs that include formal, informal and service learning; to provide MetroWest “credits” for any teens who participate in all of these; and for the community to recognize and to honor all teens who pursue Jewish learning in any number of ways through the high school years.]* To understand the significance of this vision the context of struggling supplementary high schools nationwide is important. In my opinion, Robert’s vision is important for many reasons including:

- 1) This vision recognizes that Jewish learning does not take place solely in the classroom.
- 2) This vision values Jewish adolescents as consumers, whose choices will ultimately determine whether they engage in Jewish life today and beyond.
- 3) This vision accepts that we live in changing times and that if our educational models are to remain relevant that they need to adapt accordingly.

This vision accepts that we are currently offering a model of Jewish education that is not serving the needs of many of today’s Jewish teenagers and that Jewish education must be seen as worthwhile to the overall development of each individual student.

### **Conclusions**

Unlike other forms of Jewish education, Jewish teen experiences will never be able to bring dollars into a system. Jewish teen education is expensive and if it is done right should be invested in accordingly. Clearly having the right staff is central to this vision and good staff cost money. Good staff need program dollars.

Only communities which invest strategically in hiring the right people and providing them with program dollars, will be able to attract Jewish teenagers to their educational programming.

If we knew all of the answers then perhaps Jewish education in North America, specifically for teenagers, would not be in its current predicament. But, only through investing in programs like that in Metro West will we be able to start witnessing enduring success. I can assure you that there will be challenges and even some failures along the

way. But we need to be innovative entrepreneurs, willing to take risks. Continued investment in Central Hebrew High School will not only bring success to the MetroWest community but also serve as a replicable model for other Jewish communities nationwide.