

The Challenge of Staff Retention

Posted by eJP | July 14, 2009 | Category: [Education](#), [Professional Development](#) |

[eJP note: while the following guest post by The Curriculum Initiative's Adam Gaynor deals with Jewish educators, the issues raised are applicable to all organizations, especially during the current economic climate.]

by Adam Gaynor

The question of how to retain staff in tough times has plagued a range of organizations in recent months, but in Jewish education, the ability of organizations to retain educators for more than a couple of years has been an ongoing challenge. In part, high turnover among Jewish teen educators in particular is the result of an under-investment in staff salaries and training, combined with the fallacy that only young staff can “relate” to teens. These issues lead organizations to rely on college students or recent college graduates with limited experience; sadly, young employees receive little professional mentoring or training. Not surprisingly, young staff members often leave out of frustration or simply the realization that their interests lie elsewhere. It goes without saying that high turnover renders it difficult for educational organizations to develop strong organizational capacity or the depth of programming that only experience can bring. High turnover also makes it difficult for organizations to develop deep ties to students, families, and communities. [The Curriculum Initiative \(TCI\)](#), an organization that supports Jewish identity and culture in independent high schools, wrestled with these issues for several years before re-conceptualizing our approach to staff.

In the past couple of years, we realized that in order to meet the intellectual, emotional, and social needs of teens, we would have to adopt an “emergent” approach to educational programming. This means that rather than imposing educational programs on students, we now build Jewish programs together with students and their teachers based upon their interests. However, to do this requires skills that only experienced educators can bring to bear. Because TCI works with a small staff dispersed across several geographic regions, we realized that experienced educators could also operate more independently, and could interact more effectively with a range of constituents including students, teachers, parents, principals, and local supporters. Therefore, whenever a position opened at TCI, we filled it with a more experienced educator.

This shift has paid off in terms of the depth of relationships we have developed and the quality of programs we offer, but it has meant a

reallocation of resources in order to pay the competitive salaries that help us to retain quality educators. On the one hand, we had to assess our programs in order to shed those that had drifted from our mission. On the other hand, with more experienced educators, we don't have to rely upon expensive outside speakers, pre-packaged curricula, and other gimmicks that often take the place of high-quality program development and teaching.

The other way that we are experimenting with investing in and retaining staff is through a revised professional development model. Dispersed across five cities, TCI's nine staff members are not able to gather on a regular basis for group professional development. Therefore, we now offer staff members funds to take advantage of professional development options tailored to their individual growth needs that are offered by other organizations. This gives staff members a sense of ownership over their professional growth and diversifies the overall expertise of our staff.

The second strategy we have adopted is to creatively cut costs in order to bring the TCI staff together as a group on a more regular basis for team building and professional development for core organizational needs. Previously, we had brought everyone together in New York City once a year, an expensive undertaking in which staff gather in a sterile office during the day and retreat to sterile hotel rooms at night. This year, we will borrow a home just outside the City for three days in July. We will bring in a chef for dinners and otherwise cook as a group. Half of the staff will stay at a nearby bed-and-breakfast, which in this economy offers non-profit discounts and low weekday rates. The relaxed, homey atmosphere will hopefully promote a spirit of family and camaraderie, important in a time of great anxiety. The total savings will allow us to hold two retreats this year. For a third retreat, all staff - program and support - will attend our interschool student retreat hosted mid-year in one of our regions, giving us an additional opportunity to gather for important relationship building.

I don't mean to minimize the painful decisions and cuts that have plagued our sector for many months; however, I think that this moment in our communal history can be instructive. It can allow us to consider creative ways to fortify our organizations through relationship building, in-kind donations, and flexibility in the loss of cash revenue. More importantly, this moment can spur us to reconsider our typical *modus operandi*; no organization can manage to successfully implement its mission without a serious investment in individual staff members and team-building over the long-term.

Adam Gaynor is the Executive Director of [The Curriculum Initiative](#) - a Jewish educational organization serving independent high schools.