

Our Teachers Deserve More!

Paul Flexner

Gabriella is one of many young men and women who are translating their deep commitment to the Jewish people into a career as a teacher in a Jewish day school. After earning her B.A., and traveling to Israel for a year of advanced study and touring, she enrolled in a double master's degree program in Jewish Studies and Education. Upon graduation, she was offered a full-time position at the same school where she had fulfilled her student teaching requirement.

Sounds like a happy story, no? Yet, when Gabriella heard the school's salary offer, she was in shock. Though she had earned a double master's degree and achieved near fluency in Hebrew, the school was prepared to pay her \$22,000 - with no benefits. She could, of course, teach in an afternoon Hebrew School and earn an additional \$4,000 in order to live a little more comfortably.

Gabriella is only one example. There are many others who either struggle to make ends meet, rely on a spouse for his/her support, or simply leave the field. Whether we speak of full-time or part-time teachers and educators, the story is often the same. For the many diverse challenges that a teacher confronts, compensation levels provide little to encourage someone to join or stay in the field.

Although we have very few studies of teacher salaries, the limited data from both independent schools and Jewish day schools indicates that compensation packages for teachers in the private sector begin minimally 20% below those of public school teachers. In many cases, teachers in the independent school system, of which Jewish day schools are a small component, do not receive either health or pension coverage, which reduces their actual compensation even further in comparison with the public sector. As the shortage of teachers in the public sector has grown, many local school districts are increasing their starting salaries, as well as providing signing bonuses to attract new teachers fresh out of degree programs (or from the private school sector), further exacerbating the problem.

The situation is not much better when examining part-time teachers, although some data suggests that teachers do not consider salary to be a serious impediment to their involvement. A more significant issue for many part-time teachers is that the number of hours available for teaching is far too small. Many would be happy to teach more hours but are limited in that pursuit by the system.

In early childhood, the situation is significantly worse. It is not uncommon for an early childhood teacher to be compensated at the same level as an entry-level worker in a fast food chain: approximately \$10 per hour, with top salaries in the range of \$20 to \$30 per hour. Directors of early childhood programs are compensated at an equally low level, even though they are full-time employees working the full year.

Complementary to the issue of compensation is the question of "status" for teachers and educational leaders. Despite the high levels of academic achievement and experience that teaching and administration generally demand, teachers and administrators earn salaries comparable to lower management employees in the business and non-profit sectors. If teaching and educational administration were regarded as higher-status jobs, the preparation and hard work they require would warrant better compensation.

For educational leadership, the story is similar. Professional level salaries lag far behind those for comparable professionals with similar educational backgrounds and experience. Principals of schools in all but the largest and wealthiest communities would have great difficulty supporting a family on their income alone. For many principals who provide the primary family income, the option of leading a fully involved Jewish life style — joining a congregation, sending children to a day school or a Jewish summer camp, and joining a JCC — is out of the question.

From Gabriella to the average teacher with many years of experience to the educational leader, we continue, as a community, to fall further behind in supporting those individuals who are entrusted with the education of our most important asset, our children. Throughout North America, Jewish organizations are raising the issue of the shortage of teachers and educational leaders; one solution that all will agree on is to raise the level of compensation. To do so will require a tremendous commitment on the part of our leadership.
