



Jewish Educational Wisdom,
Experience & Leadership

Written Response to a Query about Particular Issue:

Considering Having Congregants Serve as School Faculty?

by Rabbi Erin Hirsh

“Congregants as Faculty” is an issue some congregations and schools take for granted, but which others find exceedingly challenging.

Why “Congregants as Faculty”?

1. Having congregants as teachers can be a matter of philosophy (Havurah Shalom in Portland <http://havurahshalom.org>, the Avocational teacher’s model from Lansing, Michigan <http://kehillatisrael.net/docs/atp.html>).
 - a. At its best, when adults in the community really take responsibility for educating their community’s children, they bring a high level of commitment to their work and to the children.
 - b. Congregations which have congregants effectively serving as faculty members avoid the perennial problem of the school and the shul functioning as separate silos.
 - c. Schools with congregants as faculty also often have particularly positive and transparent financial relationships with the shul itself.
2. Probably more often schools have congregants serving as faculty by necessity and without a full appreciation of the potential rewards and pitfalls of this situation. The two primary reasons schools might just notice one day that they have congregants as faculty are as follows:
 - a. When a congregation is the only Shul or “Jewish Hub” in town, congregants are often the only people in the area qualified to teach Jewish topics.
 - b. Sometimes there are other Jews in town, but they do not have the particular Jewish values/observance patterns/perspective according to which the school believes the children should be educated (this is often about denominational differences).
 - c. Perhaps the congregation can’t afford to hire a full paid faculty and so relies at least partially on congregants (generally specifically parents) donating their teaching services.

d.

“What to Watch Out For”

Financial Issues That Can Come with “Congregants as Faculty”

- Congregations can try to save money by having parents volunteer to run school.
- Congregations with congregants as teachers can end up paying at least some people from who you may or may not also be collecting dues and tuition. This predictably leads to congregations having a whole array of inconsistent financial arrangements with their congregant/faculty.
- If you are relying on congregants’ generosity to any extent, you have to be prepared for curve balls as their financial flexibility changes, as their commitment to the congregation changes, etc.

Another real cost to the congregation that may not show up in the balance sheet:

- Having congregants working in the school may decrease their availability for other “more traditional” volunteer roles in the congregation. For example, if you teach every week at the congregational school, are you also likely to want to serve on the board? Usher at services? Etc.

Relationship Issues That Come with “Congregants as Faculty”

1. It can be extremely challenging for an Education Director to comfortably supervise a faculty member who is also a congregant. Politics and other relationships swirl around them.
 - What if the President of the Board offered to teach in the school but turned out to be a terrible teacher. How hard would it be for an Education Director to fire the person who signs their paycheck?
2. In certain instances, a congregant’s ability to be in a pastoral relationship with the rabbi can be compromised if they work together professionally in the school – this can be all the more true if the rabbi actually directs the school.

3. The congregant faculty member is a obviously a fellow congregant of the parents of the students and this can be challenging in terms of establishing appropriate student-parent-teacher boundaries.
4. When a congregant is a faculty member, the possibility obviously increases of having a faculty member whose own children are in the school. Parents teaching their children's classes can be a whole issue in and of itself.

All of these issues are certainly surmountable. In fact, they only become problems when the potential complexities of employing congregants as faculty members is not attended to thoughtfully.