

Hebrew for What?

Hebrew at the Heart of Jewish Day Schools



Alex Pomson
Jack Wertheimer

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A Report of The AVI CHAI Foundation



In Cooperation with Rosov Consulting



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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
Introduction	5
Findings	9
Review and Reflection: Hebrew at the Heart of Jewish Day Schools	37
Recommendations	41
Appendix A: Hebrew for Prayer or Text Study – A Deep Fault-line	45
Appendix B: Methodological Synopsis	47
Bibliography	52

Charts and Tables

Charts

Figure 1: The Importance of Hebrew When Choosing a School	10
Figure 2: How Important is Hebrew to Stakeholders?	10
Figure 3: Students' Feelings toward Studying Modern Hebrew	14
Figure 4: Parent Satisfaction with the Quality of Instruction	14
Figure 5: Quality of Child's Hebrew Instruction Compared to Parent's Own Experience	14
Figure 6: Assessment of Current and Expected Hebrew Skills	15
Figure 7: Parents' and Teachers' Satisfaction with the Quality of Instruction in Modern Hebrew	16
Figure 8: Students Comparing the Quality of Hebrew with Other Subjects	16
Figure 9: Types of Stories Shared	17
Figure 10: Perceptions of Students' Current Hebrew-for-Communication Skills	19
Figure 11: Perceptions of Students' Expected Hebrew-for-Communication Skills	20
Figure 12: Perceptions of Students' Current Hebrew-for-Communication Skills - By Gender	21
Figure 13: How Teachers and Parents Perceive Hebrew Instruction	35
Figure 14: Teachers' Perception of Modern Hebrew Instruction by School Denomination and Grade Level	35
Figure 15: Teachers' Perception of Students' Current and Expected Hebrew Skills in Hebrew for Communication	36
Figure 16: Reasons to Study Hebrew: Symbolic Reasons Compared with Practical Reasons	39
Figure 17: Why is Hebrew for Text Study or Prayer Important?	46

Tables

Table 1: Number of Survey Respondents	7
Table 2: Percent of School Time Devoted to Hebrew and/or Judaic Studies	9
Table 3: Percent of Schools Where Modern Hebrew Is Optional	9
Table 4: Parents', Students' and Teachers' Preference for Their School's Hebrew Focus	11
Table 5: Parents' Ratings of Reasons to Learn Hebrew	12
Table 6: Ratios of Native to Non-Native Teachers of Hebrew Language	31
Table 7: Conceptions of Why Hebrew for Text Study or Prayer is Important	45
Table 8: Classification of Participating Schools	48
Table 9: A Conceptual Framework for Specifying the Purposes of Hebrew	50

טרוויה אקראי ישראל



SCIENCE

מדע



באיזה עיר נמצא מוסד וייזמן למדע?
In which city is the Weizman Institute of Science?

באר שבע

חיפה

רחובות

ART

אומנות

המפלצת - HaMifletzet (the monster)



באיזה עיר בישראל נמצאת "המפלצת"?
In which city in Israel is the "Mifletzet"?

תל אביב

ירושלים

אילת



הזוכים!!
הדסה - ביתה ה
אבגיל סגור
ארי קלין

THE WEEKLY CROWN QUESTION!

We will put the crown at one of the categories in the board. You need to take a note, write the correct answer you think is, and put it in the Crown bag (+name+grade). 3 Students of those who were right will get something sweet! Good Luck!! ♥

Executive Summary

Jewish day schools serve as a unique setting for learning the Hebrew language. It's not only that they devote considerable time to the enterprise; they also have the ambition to teach Hebrew *both* for Jewish religious and cultural literacy and also for purposes of communication. Whereas other educational settings, such as Hebrew charter schools, may strive to teach students how to speak and read Modern Hebrew, and supplementary Jewish schools may try to teach literacy in the decoding of liturgy, day schools have a more ambitious set of goals: to foster facility in the study of sacred Hebrew texts *and* proficiency in communications skills.

Needless to say, this is easier said than done. Schools face a broad range of challenges to attaining these goals: finding the personnel who are able to teach classical Hebrew texts and also spoken Hebrew; carving out time in school days to devote to these topics while also attending to other subject matter that must be taught; winning support from parents for a demanding language curriculum; and keeping students focused on Hebrew language from grades K-8, let alone during the high school years when many competing concerns are on their minds. Last but not least, compared with other modern languages like Spanish and French, which employ the same characters and construction as English, Hebrew is rated as one of the harder foreign languages for English-speakers to learn; a Level III language, according to the Defense Language Institute.¹

Nonetheless, Hebrew remains a defining feature of day schools. It is not only prevalent in all kinds of day schools. It is also perhaps the most prominent feature shared by a highly diverse, and frequently fragmented, collection of such schools.

Given the ubiquity of Hebrew language in Jewish day schools, it is all the more remarkable that we lack systematic information on the role and function of Hebrew in day school education. This study attempts to remedy that information gap by addressing three questions:

1. From the perspective of the various stakeholders in Jewish day schools – administrators, teachers, parents and students – why should Hebrew be studied?

¹ <http://www.effektivelanguagelearning.com/language-guide/language-difficulty>

2. How do schools differ in the types of Hebrew they prioritize? And what accounts for those differences?
3. Are day school stakeholders aligned in their perceptions of what is being achieved in their schools with respect to Hebrew language acquisition, and what facilitates or impedes that acquisition?²

To answer these questions, a team working under the sponsorship of The AVI CHAI Foundation and drawn from the personnel of Rosov Consulting gathered both quantitative and qualitative data. It fielded four different questionnaires to a sample of 41 day schools in North America selected to ensure representation by affiliation, size, grade levels (K-8, K-12 and 9-12) and different regions of the country. We gathered data from the top administrator at each school about the school's approach to Hebrew. Then the project team surveyed lower-rung administrators, teachers, parents and students. In all, over 7,000 people participated. The tally of useable surveys is as follows:

- Of the student respondents, 1,036 were in grade 5, 1,017 in grade 8 and 1,007 in grade 11.
- Of the educator respondents, 500 were teachers only; the rest also played administrative roles.
- Among the parent sample: 1,477 parents had graduated day school after 12 years; 1,335 had not attended day school at all; 390 attended day school for 6 years or less, and 550 attended day school for between 7 years and 11 years.

To round out the study, researchers visited nine schools to observe first-hand the presence of Hebrew in the life of schools, and to interview administrators, teachers and students about their perceptions. The report that follows synthesizes

² To be sure, there are many additional questions deserving of exploration, especially those concerned with the assessment of achievement. Which schools do a better job? How do different curricula shape the learning experience and enhance the likelihood of learning achievement? And what is the package that makes for the most effective Hebrew language outcomes? Important as these questions are, they would require an intensive set of site visits and testing of students at various intervals over a protracted period of time. The process of answering these questions would also be complicated by sharp differences of opinion about the purposes of Hebrew language education.

our findings from these various data sources around five major areas of findings.

It must be stressed that this study does not evaluate the quality of Hebrew language study, but examines how stakeholders in schools *perceive* Hebrew language studies, what they expect of them, and how they assess the current and future attainments of students when it comes to Hebrew.

Key Findings

- Although the majority of parents and educators attribute importance to the study of Hebrew in all kinds of day schools, there is a deep denominational divide in the priorities and purposes of Orthodox and non-Orthodox schools, with Conservative Schechter schools occupying a middle ground. Most Orthodox parents value their children developing skills to work with classical Hebrew religious texts above communication skills in Modern Hebrew, an assessment that aligns with priorities enacted by Orthodox schools. Most non-Orthodox parents, by contrast, tend to place greater priority on Hebrew for the purposes of communication over Hebrew for prayer and studying sacred texts. This difference in priorities is mirrored by differences in why parents in each sector think Hebrew is important. In Orthodox schools, parents value symbolic reasons for becoming proficient in Modern Hebrew; for example, they say that they're interested in sustaining the language of the Jewish people. In non-Orthodox schools, parents are more concerned with practical or instrumental goals, most strikingly through seeing learning Hebrew as contributing to their child's cognitive development. These differences are echoed among students, although overall students attribute more importance to practical reasons for studying Modern Hebrew such as being able to communicate when visiting Israel.
- When students get to high school, Modern Hebrew becomes optional in many instances, especially in the highest grades. In Community and Reform day schools (where fewer hours are devoted to Hebrew and Judaic studies overall), Modern Hebrew is already optional in a minority of middle schools where students are given the opportunity to study another modern language instead. In the Conservative day schools in our sample, all students are required to take Modern Hebrew at all grade levels, a policy that sets these schools apart from all others.
- All types of stakeholders in day schools perceive elementary school students to be making good progress in learning the Hebrew language, and express a great deal of satisfaction with their progress. However, by middle school and certainly by high school, students express increased dissatisfaction with the quality of Hebrew instruction as compared to other subjects. The parents and teachers of high school students are more likely to offer critical assessments of Hebrew language classes. Older students also rate their own abilities in Modern Hebrew language more critically than do younger students. One explanation for these symptoms of dissatisfaction attributes it to rising expectations as students advance in school: the expectations of how students should be able to express themselves in Modern Hebrew by the time they reach high school are more rigorous than expectations placed on lower school students. Still, the dissatisfaction alone is noteworthy because it may itself impede language learning. And as is evident from student and parent comments, it may also lead to questioning the continuing importance of studying Modern Hebrew.
- When we looked closely at those schools where students express high levels of satisfaction with their Hebrew language classes and levels of achievement, we found three features that make a difference: ensuring and communicating that Hebrew matters; strong and visible leadership; and investing resources and attention in staff. These are institutional features that transcend the specifics of what material is used in the classroom and what pedagogic approach teachers employ. These institutional commitments indicate that the schools are not simply going through the motions when it comes to Hebrew; they are not simply doing what is expected of them. Specifically, we found in these schools a commitment to Hebrew as a required language at all grades; a concerted effort to integrate and support *shlichim* in their classrooms; the careful tracking of students' progress in Hebrew; strong, hands-on specialist leadership in school capable of providing clinical support to teachers; and the presence of a high proportion of Israeli educators in the school deeply committed to speaking only in Hebrew.

- In conversation with students and teachers in day schools of different types, it became apparent that many schools do not make a case for why it is important to learn Hebrew. Administrators take for granted the centrality of Hebrew as a self-evident feature of day school education. Based on our survey data, a considerable minority of parents and students are unpersuaded that the emphasis placed upon Hebrew is worthwhile. They fail to accept the necessity of Hebrew for text study or for communication – or both. Undoubtedly some of these dissenters do not give high priority to the school’s mission of strengthening Jewish literacy; and some students are turned off to Hebrew because they find it hard to learn a foreign language. Other motives may play a role too. It is an open question whether those who are disenchanted can be persuaded otherwise, but schools are not helping themselves by failing to make the case as strongly and directly as possible.
- The conventional wisdom about teachers of Hebrew language in day schools is that they are Israelis whose credentials are limited to their fluency in Modern Israeli Hebrew

but they allegedly lack training as teachers. Our survey research shows this is a false perception. Most Hebrew language teachers are native speakers who grew up in Israel. But significant proportions studied education as undergraduates and/or also received certificate training in pedagogy and also for the teaching of specific Hebrew curricula. What most, however, do lack is training in language instruction per-se. Some have taken courses to remedy this deficiency, but many teachers of Modern Hebrew fail to do so because they do not see their primary role as teaching a foreign language. Rather, they understand their responsibility as helping students decode and understand sacred texts. In some schools, the primary role of all Jewish Studies teachers, moreover, is to serve as religious role models. Hebrew, in short, is not perceived solely as “second language” or foreign language in the same category as Spanish or Mandarin. Our survey of teachers also reveals that they are clear-eyed about their mission and the obstacles to attaining their goals. Hebrew remains a complex enterprise in day schools, and teachers understand that reality.



Introduction

The distinguishing feature of Jewish day schools is their emphasis on both Jewish literacy and Hebrew proficiency. In these schools, *Classical* Hebrew – that is, Biblical, Mishnaic and Medieval Hebrew – is central to the study of religious texts, such as the prayer book, *Tanakh*, and rabbinic works. *Modern* Hebrew is also taught in day schools as a contemporary, living language that serves as a rich medium for communication. Not only are students taught to pray and sing in Hebrew, they are also encouraged to speak, read and write the language. In many day schools, the signage is in Hebrew: classroom walls are plastered with Hebrew aphorisms and religious quotations; hallways and stairwells often display murals painted by students illustrating a Hebrew passage. Some schools insist upon teachers and students conversing entirely in Hebrew (*ivrit be-ivrit*) during Judaic studies classes; many also introduce students to Israeli slang and other forms of street Hebrew; and some use Israeli newspapers, television shows and movies as a means to teach the modern Israeli idiom.

Hebrew is perhaps the single feature of school culture that most strongly distinguishes Jewish day schools from other educational settings, even more so than the study of Torah or fostering students' relationships to Israel. In their commitment to cultivate *both* Jewish literacy (competence in Classical Hebrew so as to access and appreciate traditional Jewish texts in their predominant original language) as well as proficiency in communication (the capacity to converse in Modern Hebrew), Jewish day schools differ from other types of institutions where Hebrew is also part of the educational mission.

The distinctiveness of day schools is especially evident in comparison with the three alternative settings for educating Jewish children. Congregational schools primarily teach students to decode Hebrew letters and vowels, so that students will be able to read liturgical texts and chant from the Bible on their *bar* or *bat mitzvah* and participate in prayer services. Given the very limited number of hours a week these schools meet – usually between 3-5 hours for roughly half the weeks of the year – not much language acquisition is possible for their

students. Students in congregational or other types of supplementary schools rarely learn to speak Hebrew or comprehend the Hebrew texts they learn to decode. Most Jewish summer camps, as a recent study has shown, are oriented to a goal of Hebrew “infusion” rather than literacy or proficiency; that is, they expose campers to “fragments of Hebrew through a different primary language of interaction (in this case, English)” with the “goal of [connecting] to the language and to others who share that connection.”³ Hebrew language charter schools, by comparison, do prioritize communication proficiency in Hebrew but as a means to “getting students more engaged in their studies, building [general] literacy, raising academic achievement, and preparing children to live and thrive in a global, interdependent environment.”⁴ Proficiency in Hebrew Charter Schools is not linked to a goal of fostering Jewish cultural literacy: pre-modern Jewish civilization and the Jewish religious tradition are off-limits. Jewish day schools, therefore, are unique in their dual concern with both Classical and Modern Hebrew: they seek much more than Hebrew infusion when it comes to modern spoken Hebrew, and they typically value Hebrew for being more than a contemporary medium of communication.⁵

The prevalence of Hebrew in Jewish day schools not only distinguishes these settings from other educational institutions, Hebrew also constitutes the single feature shared by a highly diverse, and frequently fragmented, collection of schools. At least until ten years ago, Hebrew was the one aspect of the curriculum that all Jewish day school students required of

³ Bunin Benor, S., Krasner, J. & Avni, S. (2016) *Connection, Not Proficiency: Survey of Hebrew at North American Jewish Summer Camps*. Waltham, MA: Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education. <http://www.brandeis.edu/mandel/pdfs/2016-Hebrew-in-Camp-Survey-Report.pdf>

⁴ “Why Hebrew,” Hebrew Public Charter Schools for Global Citizens, <http://hebrewcharters.org/about-us/why-dual-language/>

⁵ We are comparing Jewish day schools with other educational programs for young people. Other settings attempt to teach Hebrew to adults, including language programs on college campuses, at religious seminaries, JCCs and synagogues, and of course in Israel. The challenge of teaching Hebrew to adults is vastly different from teaching children, as are the goals.

every student, regardless of their age. While some day schools taught Jewish history, many did not. While others invested their efforts in teaching Talmud and Rabbinics, many devoted very little time to these topics. Some hold *tefillah* for their students at least once a day; others rarely do. In general terms, schools are oriented to a wide variety of educational philosophies that distinguish them from one another. Amidst all of this variety, Hebrew has been the common curricular denominator in Jewish schools.⁶

Given the ubiquity of Hebrew language in Jewish day schools, it is all the more remarkable that we lack systematic information on the role and function of Hebrew in day school education. This study attempts to remedy that information gap by addressing three questions:

1. From the perspective of the various stakeholders in Jewish day schools – administrators, teachers, parents and students – why should Hebrew be studied?
2. How do schools differ in the types of Hebrew they prioritize? And what accounts for those differences?
3. Are day school stakeholders aligned in their perceptions of what is being achieved in their schools with respect to Hebrew language acquisition, and what facilitates or impedes that acquisition?⁷

Implicit in these questions is our awareness of the variety or “registers” of “Hebrew” encountered by students in Jewish day schools: these include Biblical, Mishnaic, Medieval and Modern – Hebrew, that is, in all of its sacred and profane forms.

⁶ Another indication of Hebrew’s status as common currency in the otherwise diverse enterprise of Jewish day schools is evident in the widespread adoption of the TaL AM curriculum, albeit not uniformly. This most widely adopted curriculum is employed by more than 300 schools around the world, including self-identified centrist Orthodox, Modern Orthodox, Conservative, Community and Reform Jewish day schools. These schools differ in almost every other aspect of the Judaic studies curriculum, but – remarkably – not when it comes to Hebrew.

⁷ To be sure, there are many additional questions deserving of exploration, especially those concerned with the assessment of achievement. Which schools do a better job? How do different curricula shape the learning experience and enhance the likelihood of learning achievement? And what is the package that makes for the most effective Hebrew language outcomes? Important as these questions are, they would require an intensive set of site visits and testing of students at various intervals over a protracted period of time. The process of answering them would also be complicated by sharp differences of opinion about the purposes of Hebrew language education.

While we are interested first and foremost in the choices and emphases with respect to the teaching and learning of Hebrew for communication, we recognize that choices about why and how to study Hebrew are weighed in relation to competing priorities in other subject areas and in relation to other forms of Hebrew too. For this reason, our inquiry has tried to engage all of those educators and school settings involved in the teaching, learning and recital of any Hebrew text, even when those school-people and school-places are not primarily identified as concerned with Hebrew.⁸

This study does not evaluate the communicative outcomes of Hebrew language study. It does examine how stakeholders in schools *perceive* those outcomes. And it looks at what stakeholders expect from Hebrew language study, and how they assess the current and future attainments of students when it comes to Hebrew.

This report is primarily based upon surveys of students, parents and teachers, and also brief site visits conducted during the winter and spring of 2016. Over four months, our team was able to survey an unprecedented number of day school stakeholders. We fielded four different questionnaires to a sample of 41 day schools in North America selected to insure representation by affiliation, size, grade levels (K-8 vs K-12 vs. 9-12) and different regions of the country. We gathered data from the top administrator at each school about the school’s approach to Hebrew; then the project team surveyed lower-rung administrators, teachers, parents and students. In all, over 7,000 people participated. The tally of useable surveys is as follows:

- Among the parent sample: 1,477 parents had graduated day school after 12 years; 1,335 had not attended day school at all; 390 attended day school for 6 years or less, and 550 attended day school for between 7 years and 11 years.
- Among the student sample: 1,036 were in grade 5, 1,017 in grade 8, and 1,007 in grade 11.

⁸ This focus and its formulation is strongly influenced by the following Research Brief for the Consortium for Applied Studies in Jewish Education: S. Avni, S. Kattan, & S. Zakai, S. (2013). “Purposes and practices of Israel/ Hebrew education: Toward and joint agenda for applied research.” CASJE. <http://www.casje.org/resources/israel-education-brief-purposes-and-practices-israelhebrew-education>

**Table 1:
Number of Survey Respondents**

	TOTAL	Centrist Orthodox	Modern Orthodox	Conservative	Reform	Community
Parents	3,422	373	1,103	562	171	1,213
Students	3,060	280	941	566	101	1,172
Educators	553	58	174	107	24	190

- Among the educator sample: 500 are teachers only; the rest also played administrative roles. 35% teach elementary school student, 49% teach middle and high school students, and 16% teach students of all grades.⁹ 40% of the teachers teach Jewish studies but no Modern Hebrew, and 60% teach at least some Modern Hebrew.

To round out our study, researchers visited nine schools to observe first-hand their cultures of Hebrew and to interview administrators, teachers and students about their perceptions. The report that follows synthesizes our analysis from these various data sources and presents five major areas of findings.

⁹ We combined middle school and high school because some teachers who teach middle school also teach high school students. We did not have a sizable group of teachers who teach only middle school (n=66) so we combined this group with those who teach in high school (n=130) or teach in both (n=30).

עֲרוֹב



עֲרָוִין



צִפְרָדִּיעַ



Findings

Diverging Hebrew Priorities

How schools spend their time

Day schools may be united in their general concern with Hebrew, but day school stakeholders differ in the types of Hebrew they prioritize, the importance they attach to different kinds of Hebrew, and what they hope students will get out of their studies. The key line of demarcation is denominational.

The most obvious difference between schools of the various denominations is in how much time they devote to Hebrew, whether as a component of Jewish studies or independent of it. As Table 2 shows, on average a much greater proportion of time is devoted to Judaic and/or Hebrew studies in Orthodox and Conservative day schools than in Community or Reform day schools.

Table 2:
Percent of School Time Devoted to Hebrew and/or Judaic Studies

	Orthodox Schools	Conservative Schools	Community Schools
Grade 5	46%	42%	29%
Grade 8	43%	40%	28%
Grade 11	43%	40%	27%

If anything, these data fail to capture the full extent of the time allocated for Hebrew. First, non-Orthodox schools tend to count hours for prayer within these reported numbers, while Orthodox schools do not. Second, day schools vary in the length of their school days. And third, these data do not reflect whether Hebrew and/or Judaic studies is optional for students. They report how much time a student *might* devote to Hebrew and/or Judaic studies. In reality, the difference between the sectors is greater still.

Table 3 shows that when students get to high school, Modern Hebrew becomes optional in many instances, especially in the highest grades. In Community and Reform day schools (where fewer hours are devoted to Hebrew and Judaic studies overall), Modern Hebrew is already optional in a minority of middle schools where students are given the opportunity to study another modern language instead. Strikingly, in the Conservative day schools in our sample, all students are required to take Modern Hebrew at all grade levels, a policy that sets these schools apart from all others.

Table 3:
Percent of Schools Where Modern Hebrew is Optional

	Orthodox Schools	Conservative Schools	Community Schools
Elementary School	0%	0%	20%
High Schools	60%	0%	40%

Different priorities

Given the wide variations in how much time schools devote to Hebrew and/or Judaic studies, it should come as no surprise that parents in different school sectors view Hebrew differently. As seen in Figure 1, for two-thirds of parents in Modern Orthodox schools, Hebrew was very or extremely important when they chose a school. For parents in Community or Reform schools, it was very or extremely important for less than half of the parents. Conservative and Centrist Orthodox parents fall somewhere in the middle.

These patterns are consistent with the responses of parents, students and teachers when asked how important different

kinds of Hebrew are to them – whether Hebrew for text study (Classical Hebrew) or Hebrew for communication (Modern Hebrew). Both types of Hebrew are “very important” or “extremely important” to a greater proportion of respondents at Orthodox day schools than to respondents at all the varieties of non-Orthodox day schools. A majority of parents at Conservative day schools do indicate that Hebrew for communication is very important or important to them. Otherwise fewer than half of the stakeholders in the non-Orthodox sector – whether parents, students or teachers – regard either form of Hebrew to be of high importance (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 also indicates a profound difference with regards to which types of Hebrew are perceived to be more important. For parents, students and almost all teachers in non-Orthodox schools, Hebrew for communication is more important than Hebrew for text study. By contrast, Hebrew for text study is consistently more important than Hebrew for communication for parents, students and teachers in Orthodox schools.

These patterns are consistent with responses to a different question in which stakeholders indicated the extent to which they would like their day school to focus on Hebrew for text study or Hebrew for communication. All stakeholders in non-Orthodox schools regard Hebrew for communication as much more important than Hebrew for text study. In Orthodox schools, Hebrew for text study is of greater importance, although for parents and students it is not much more important than Hebrew for communication (see Table 4).

Figure 1:
The Importance of Hebrew When Choosing a School

Percent of Parents who chose “very important” or “extremely important”

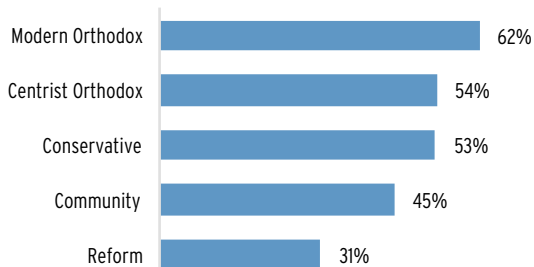
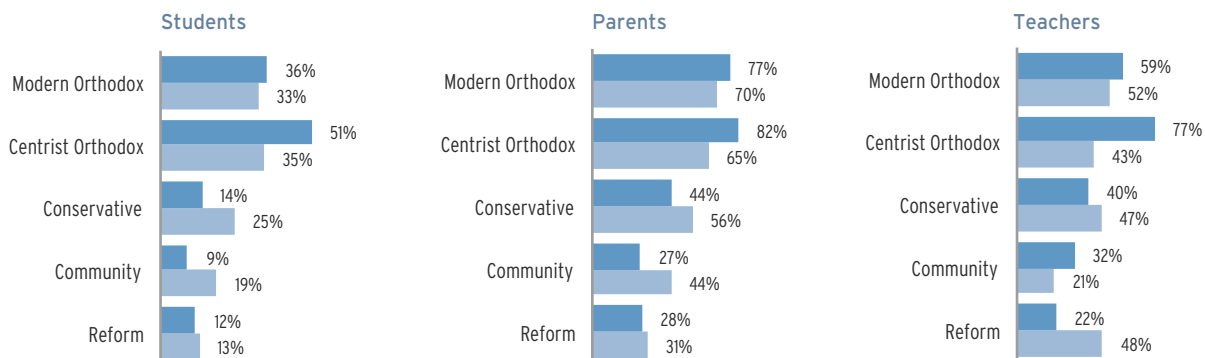


Figure 2:
How Important is Hebrew to Stakeholders?

Percentage who chose “very important” or “extremely important”

■ Hebrew for Text Study/Prayer ■ Hebrew for Communication



**Table 4:
Parents', Students' and Teachers' Preference for Their School's Hebrew Focus**

School denomination	Type of Hebrew					
	For Prayer/Text Study			For Communication		
	Parents	Students	Teachers	Parents	Students	Teachers
Orthodox	80%	50%	82%	80%	56%	71%
Non-Orthodox	40%	24%	49%	75%	58%	79%

Note: Percentages represent those who chose scores of 4 or more on a 5-point Likert scale in response to the questions: Some parents/students/teachers would like the school to focus more on Hebrew for everyday communication, other parents/students/teachers would like the school to focus more on Hebrew for prayer or text study. Where do you place yourself on this range? (1=low focus, 5=high focus).

Practical or symbolic: A fundamental disagreement about the utility and meaning of Modern Hebrew

These differences between the denominational sectors with regards to the type of Hebrew they prioritize are further clarified when explored in relation to the purposes for studying Hebrew. When asked, “Why study Hebrew?” the gap between the denominational sectors is especially notable.

All survey respondents were presented with a list of 11 possible reasons to “learn Hebrew for communication” and 11

reasons to “learn Hebrew for prayer and text study.” Survey items were selected to express, on the one hand, symbolically oriented concerns such as what it means to be Jewish or feeling connected to Jewish tradition, and, on the other hand, more practically-oriented concerns such as helping with communication when visiting Israel or developing skills to study Jewish texts in their original language.

Generally, with respect to Hebrew for communication, parents indicated that symbolic statements resonated slightly more

Doubling Down on Hebrew

At a K-8 Community day school on the West Coast, the value of Hebrew language study is hardly taken as a given by parents. Although some parents would like their children to be sufficiently prepared to perform at their *bar* or *bat mitzvah*, many parents are prepared to dispense with Hebrew language instruction altogether once that milestone has passed. Some have pushed for substituting Spanish for Hebrew in the 8th grade, or at least for making Hebrew optional.

The push for Spanish is surprising since this particular school was deliberately founded in order to foster a love of Israel and the Hebrew language. Nevertheless, the school has faced rising parent displeasure over its emphasis on Hebrew, two decades after its founding. However, rather than bow to that pressure, the Head of School stood firmly behind the school's established commitment, explaining, “We would never reduce the standards for Jewish or general studies.”

To address this challenge, the School Head initiated a few change efforts. First, the school developed a mission statement for its

Hebrew programming – and then processed that statement with its faculty. The professional leadership acknowledged this should have been articulated and shared earlier on.

Second, the school introduced the TaL AM curriculum and over time offered training to teachers. They also created a special track called “*dovrei ivrit*.” Initially, this was designed to attract children of Israeli families in the area, but in time children of American-born parents began to aspire to join that track. Hebrew became “cool.”

The school also deliberately raised the profile of Hebrew, with open houses for parents and evening programs (such as “*Erev Ivrit* on Dizengoff Street,” and a Hebrew “American Idol” program). These events have permeated the culture.

With all these advances, the school continues to find a balance between emphasizing communicative Hebrew and Hebrew for text study or *tefillah*. Throughout these discussions, the school has demonstrated to its stakeholders that its commitment to Hebrew is non-negotiable.

**Table 5:
Parents' Ratings of Reasons to Learn Hebrew**

	Orthodox	Non-Orthodox
It helps my child form a connection with Israel	6.5	6.3
It maintains the Jewish people's language	6.4	6.2
It helps my child when visiting Israel	6.3	6.1
Learning a second language contributes to my child's brain development	6.1	6.3
It is a part of being Jewish	6.3	5.9
It helps my child communicate with people who only speak Hebrew	6.2	5.8
It connects my child to Jews around the world	6.1	5.9
It helps my child communicate with other Jews around the world	6.1	5.7
It makes my child feel a part of the group when people mix Hebrew into English	5.4	5.3
It allows my child to read modern Israeli books, newspapers, websites or music lyrics	5.6	5.1
It prepares my child to make <i>aliyah</i> (move to Israel) in case s/he wants to	5.8	4.6

Note: The numbers represent average responses on a 7-point agree/disagree scale in response to asking parents to rate their level of agreement with several statements about why Hebrew is important (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=somewhat disagree, 4=neutral, 5=somewhat agree, 6=agree, 7=strongly agree). Differences of 0.2 or more are statistically significant.

than did practical reasons. For the students, it was the reverse; they found more resonance in practical reasons to study Hebrew. Studying Hebrew, students felt, had to be useful, not only meaningful.

Overlaying this generational divide was an important denominational one. Both non-Orthodox parents and students approached Hebrew with a more instrumental orientation than did their Orthodox counterparts. Symbolic reasons were less compelling for them.

These different orientations are most evident in parents' responses to one particular survey item: when asked whether Hebrew language learning is important "because it contributes to brain development," non-Orthodox parents found this a more compelling reason than did Orthodox parents (it was the only reason to which non-Orthodox parents gave a higher rating than Orthodox parents). In fact, for the aggregate of parents from Reform and Community day schools, this was one of the two most important reason to study Hebrew. Their Orthodox counterparts were less impressed with this pragmatic motive (see Table 5).

Though students in non-Orthodox schools did not rate "brain development" quite as highly as their parents, they nonetheless attributed greater importance to it than did students in Orthodox schools. (The most important reason cited by non-Orthodox students was practical: "It helps me when I visit Israel.") Interestingly, among teachers in non-Orthodox schools, neither brain development nor managing in Israel was rated highly. Instead, these teachers favored the symbolic reasons selected by parents in general and by their colleagues in other schools – i.e. Hebrew as a means to be Jewish or feel connected to Jewish tradition,

When it comes to Hebrew for communication, then, students and parents in non-Orthodox schools assess Hebrew's value in highly instrumental terms, as a means to an end. The ultimate rationale for studying Modern Hebrew is not only whether it can help a child communicate with other members of the global Jewish community or on a visit to Israel, but also how good it is for one's brain.

It is not immediately clear how this rationale for studying Hebrew has made its way into non-Orthodox schools. Still,

in promoting the value of Hebrew education, non-Orthodox schools have increasingly made the case in these terms; and it is evident from survey responses and from our site visits how powerfully this argument resonates with many parents, even if teachers themselves are not convinced it is the strongest rationale to offer.

Promoting Hebrew because of its utility for brain development is, in fact, a double-edged sword, as we learned when interviewing parents during school visits. For, if the purpose of studying Hebrew is to develop the brains of children, any foreign language will do. As one parent put it: “*While I think the idea of learning a second language is good for brain development, I would not choose Hebrew if given the choice.*” As we have already noted, some middle and high schools – especially in the non-Orthodox sector – are now making Hebrew optional and count other foreign languages as the equal of Hebrew. For some parents,

this shift in policy makes perfect sense if the motivation for studying Hebrew is solely to develop young minds.

In Orthodox day schools the debates are different. Few parents question why their children should acquire some familiarity with modern spoken Hebrew as the language of the Jewish people (just 10 parents among the more than 1,500 survey respondents from Orthodox schools did so). But a vocal minority do question the wisdom of investing time in such an effort if it comes at the expense of developing Jewish literacy. This surely explains the phenomenon, reflected in Table 3 on p. 9, where Orthodox high schools make Hebrew optional in the highest grades.

Our findings also revealed significant differences between the denominations with regards to thinking about why study Hebrew for text study and prayer. These are described in Appendix A.

Religious Role Models or Strong Hebrew Teachers?

A Centrist Orthodox school illustrates the dilemmas faced by schools in the Orthodox sector when it comes to Hebrew. The K-8 school defines itself as “*dati Tzioni*” – an Orthodox school deeply committed to Zionism and Israel. As evidence of the importance it attaches to Hebrew proficiency, Jewish studies teachers receive contracts requiring them to speak in Hebrew during class sessions.

And yet the school confronts an intractable reality: the Jewish studies personnel who best exemplify the religious values of the school rarely have the ability to teach in Hebrew. Products of American yeshiva education, they are capable of teaching classes in an *ivrit be-ivrit* manner only in exceptional cases. The school is then caught between its commitment to Hebrew language instruction and its mission to provide students with religious role models in the classroom who best exemplify the kind of Orthodox Judaism for which the school stands. The school clearly opts for the latter.

To resolve this dilemma, the *Torah shebaal peh* teachers are exempt from teaching in Hebrew. This has meant that Mishna and Talmud classes are conducted in English, while Bible classes would be *ivrit be-ivrit*. The former classes begin already in grade 4.

Matters were not improved when the Head of a distinguished Israeli yeshiva urged the school not to focus on *ivrit be-ivrit*, stating that “The battle is lost. Hebrew is not the language of the Jewish people; Torah is.”

Still, the school tries. In grades K and 1, there is an immersive Hebrew track, yet it does not continue beyond because there aren't teachers to carry it forward, and because the school is not prepared to sacrifice content and coverage for language. A teacher who had previously taught in an *ivrit be-ivrit* school and now teaches 4th and 5th grades, states that he is more concerned about teaching Torah, inspiring students and teaching them critical reading skills. “The students think in English and their higher order thinking will always be in English,” he states. “Conveying love of learning is hard to do in Hebrew.”

A contrary perception is offered by a Hebrew language teacher from Israel who teaches modern Hebrew to her students. She claims parents want more spoken Hebrew instructions, not at the expense of *Torah shebaal peh*, but as a complement to it. Another 8th grade teacher shared how she was tempted to give up on *ivrit be-ivrit* in her Bible classes, realizing the difficult struggle her students were experiencing. She stuck it out and feels her students have improved considerably. Her sense is that parents prioritize the spoken Hebrew, and develop doubts about the feasibility of it when they see their children struggle.

And so students are whipsawed between a few teachers who are committed to conducting classes in the Hebrew language and others who dispense with it. Because Jewish studies classes are divided by gender, girls tend to study with female teachers who fall into the former group, while boys study with male teachers who generally teach in English.

Figure 3:
Students' Feelings toward Studying Modern Hebrew

Percent of students who chose each option

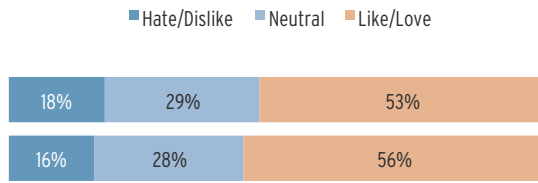
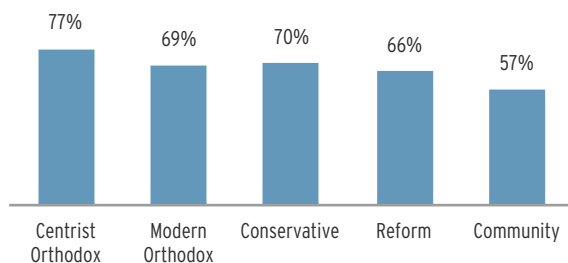


Figure 4:
Parent Satisfaction with the Quality of Instruction

Percent choosing satisfied or very satisfied



**Hebrew for communication:
similarly satisfied, and dissatisfied**

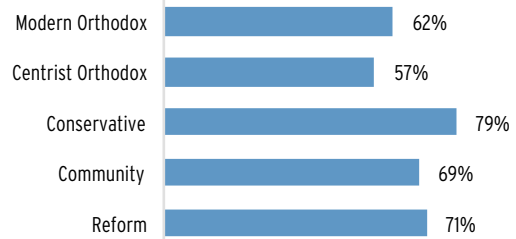
Given the deep denominational divide over the priorities and purposes for Hebrew, it is surprising that the students' experience of Hebrew in different school networks does not appear to vary greatly. There are few differences in stakeholders' emotional orientation to the study of Hebrew for communication, in their perception of the quality of the instruction in Hebrew classes or in how proficient they perceive students to be.

As seen in Figure 3, whether in Orthodox or non-Orthodox schools, three times more students indicate that they like studying Modern Hebrew than indicate disliking it.

There are also no statistically significant differences between the responses of students from different denominational sectors when asked to compare the quality of instruction in Hebrew with that of other school subjects. While it is

Figure 5:
Quality of Child's Hebrew Instruction Compared to Parent's Own Experience

Percent who chose "better" or "much better"



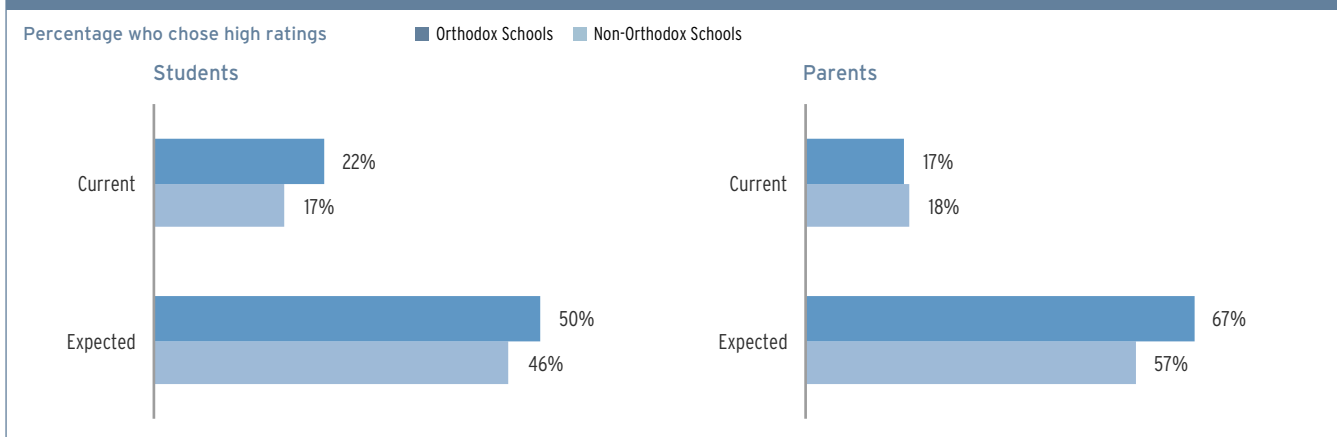
surprising that the responses were generally negative, given the students' positive emotional orientation to the subject, there were again no major differences between sectors: in both Orthodox and non-Orthodox schools, between a third and a half of students indicated that they thought that the instruction in Hebrew compared unfavorably to other subjects. To put this finding more provocatively: a majority of students like the subject, but they don't like how it's taught.

When parents were asked questions that probed their views of the quality of instruction in Hebrew language classes, there were sharp differences between parents in Centrist Orthodox and Community day schools, but again those in other school sectors share very similar views, with about two-thirds expressing satisfaction with their experience (see Figure 4).

It is hard to know what shapes parents' assessment; their views are colored as much by what they see their children experiencing as by their own experiences with Hebrew. When asked to compare the quality of their child's Hebrew instruction with the quality of the instruction they themselves received as a child, the parents of children in non-Orthodox schools offer a consistently more favorable response than do their peers in Orthodox schools (see Figure 5).

These diverse responses could be a result of a different frame of comparison: The Orthodox parents probably attended day school themselves and received a Hebrew language education they deem satisfactory. The non-Orthodox parents may have attended supplementary schooling and are more impressed with the intensive Hebrew their children have learned in day school and that they themselves probably did not experience.

Figure 6:
Assessment of Current and Expected Hebrew Skills



Note: Percentages represent those who chose scores of 4 or more on a 5-point scale in response to several questions asking stakeholders to rate their current and expected reading, writing, speaking and understanding levels of Hebrew for communication (1=low proficiency focus, 5=high proficiency).

Consistent perceived outcomes

While we have no objective measure of the outcomes of instruction in different schools, we have no strong reason to assume a denominational gap in the outcomes of Hebrew language instruction when it comes to Modern Hebrew, especially given the generally consistent assessment of the quality (or lack of quality) by parents and students across the denominational different sectors.

Figure 6 shows that students and parents in both Orthodox and non-Orthodox schools have a similarly critical view of how well children are doing in the various domains of Hebrew for communication: reading, writing, speaking and understanding: Fewer than 20% of students or parents perceive students to currently be achieving high levels of proficiency. Both parents and students expect the students, however, to do much better by the time they graduate. While Orthodox parents are more optimistic about the long term, their children share a similar outlook to those of their peers in non-Orthodox schools. In these respects, as in many others – as we will see in a later section – teachers share these perceptions.

Probing the similarities and differences between the different denominational sections, we found just one respect in which students from the different sectors diverge in their attitudes to Hebrew and in their perception of proficiency. This is when the students are classified in terms of how many times

they have visited Israel. Among students at Orthodox schools there are no consistent differences in students’ feelings about Hebrew for communication whether they have never visited Israel, whether they have visited once, twice or three times, or four times and more. Likewise, there are no consistent differences in terms of students’ self-assessment of their reading, writing, speaking or understanding. But among students at non-Orthodox schools, there are statistically significant differences in this respect. The more students travel to Israel, the higher is their Hebrew proficiency, the more positive their feelings toward Hebrew, and their ratings of why Hebrew for communication is important. Four or more trips is the sweet spot. Students in non-Orthodox schools who travel to Israel with such frequency exceed students from Orthodox schools in their perceived reading, writing, speaking and understanding skills.

In summarizing these findings about the priorities, purposes and perceived outcomes of Hebrew language education in various denominational school contexts, we note a kind of paradox. On the one hand, stakeholders in the different school systems have significantly different views of which types of Hebrew should be taught in schools and to what end. Parents, especially, have different interests with respect to their children’s Hebrew language education. And yet whatever the differences between their priorities and purposes, the perceived

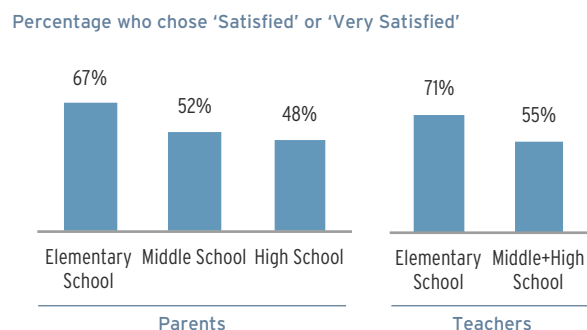
outcomes of this effort are not all that different. School denomination accounts for different goals for Hebrew, and it accounts for the different amounts of time devoted to Hebrew language instruction. But it does not seem to result in a great deal of difference in what students experience or how well they are perceived to function in the language, unless one takes into account how often students have visited Israel. Perhaps this is not so surprising when, as reported in an earlier section, schools of different denominations often make use of the same curricula, and when, as we will see in a later section, the faculty hired to teach Hebrew in each sector are not so different from one another. The denominational divide goes only so far, and, as we will discuss when considering the implications of our research, this finding offers some promise for a cross-communal strategy for improving Hebrew language proficiency.

Mixed Reviews: How Parents, Students and Teachers Perceive Modern Hebrew Language Learning

Levels of satisfaction with language studies

To reiterate a point made earlier: This study did not set out to measure achievement in Modern Hebrew language; rather, it asked different stakeholders about their perceptions of Hebrew language learning. Overall, parents, students and teachers were moderately satisfied. Based on a variety of measures (asking parents and teachers directly about their satisfaction with the quality

Figure 7:
Parents' and Teachers' Satisfaction with the Quality of Instruction in Modern Hebrew



of Hebrew instruction; comparing students' experience in Hebrew with other school subjects; and analyzing the kinds of stories that all three groups of stakeholders tell about students' experiences with Hebrew), it is evident that the various populations we surveyed expressed high levels of satisfaction with student learning in elementary school. As the focus shifted to middle and high school, however, levels of satisfaction diminished.

Both parents and teachers were asked: "How satisfied are you with the level of Modern Hebrew instruction at the school?" As seen in Figure 7, while overall a majority of parents and teachers were satisfied or very satisfied, the parents and teachers of children in younger grades were significantly more satisfied with instruction than were those with children in older grades.

Figure 8:
Students Comparing the Quality of Hebrew with Other Subjects

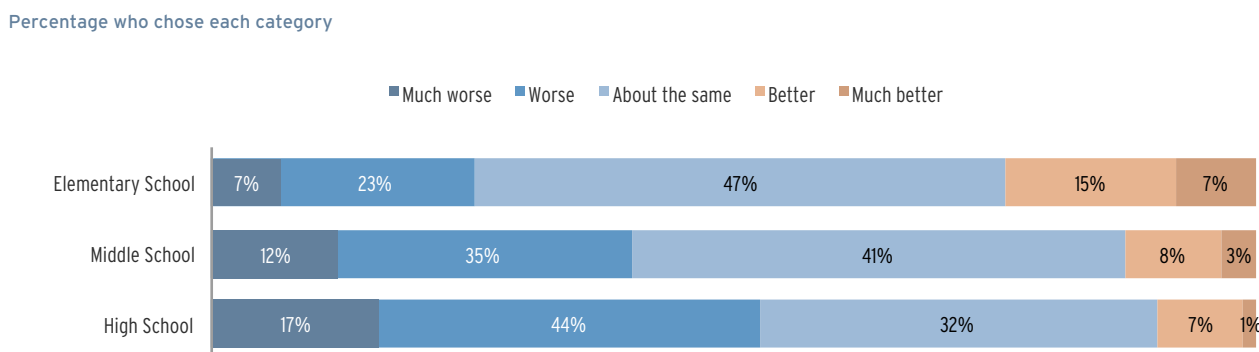
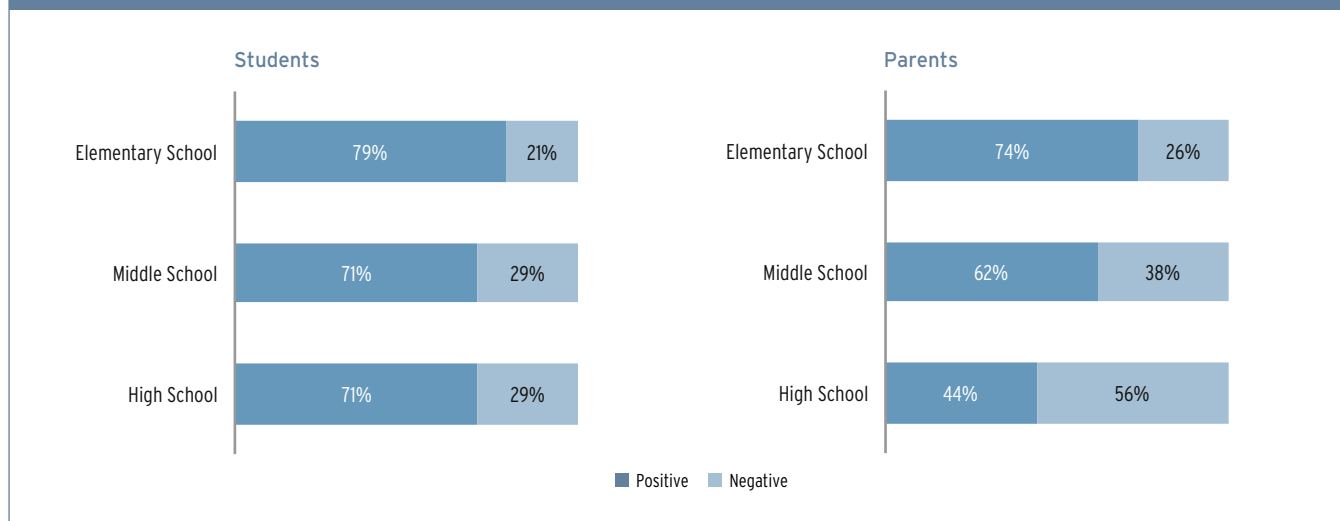


Figure 9:
Types of Stories Shared



A similar pattern was evident when students were asked to compare the quality of instruction in Hebrew with that in other subjects. We have already seen that students across the denominational spectrum differed little in response to this question. However, when these data were analyzed in relation to grade level, striking variations did emerge. As seen in Figure 8, a majority (70 percent) of elementary level students thought Hebrew compared similarly or favorably with other subjects, but only a much smaller portion (40 percent) of high school students described the quality as similar or better.

To identify the sources of dissatisfaction we turn to the responses provided to an open-ended question: stakeholders were invited to “share a story” about their experiences in Hebrew language classes. Responses to this question were categorized as either positive or negative. The patterns of response are revealing:

As can be seen from Figure 9, students at all grade levels were at least two times more likely to relate positive stories than negative ones. Parents of elementary school students were three times more likely to tell positive stories, whereas parents of high school students were more likely to tell negative stories.

The problem in analytical terms is, first, that while the frequency of parent complaints (as conveyed by negative stories) increases across the grades, the content of the complaints does not change. A second analytical challenge is that the same

specific phenomena seem as likely to prompt positive as negative stories. Thus, parents are as likely to bemoan the presence of Israeli teachers as they are to celebrate them. For example:

“The challenging part is that the teachers usually are Israeli and have little experience teaching a language as a foreign language. They are experts because they can speak Hebrew but not teach it well. Their classroom management skills are less than the English teachers and so the classes become chaotic and overly strict because they don’t have the skills to control the class.”

“He had an Israeli teacher a couple of years ago that had such an interesting background and life story which he always shares with the students. It inspired my son to love Hebrew.”

“I would love to see more native Israeli teachers like Morah X.”

In a similar vein, parents are as likely to be excited to observe their children communicate in Hebrew during family trips to Israel as they are to be disappointed by their inability to do so.

“When we visited Israel last summer, my son regularly translated for me whenever I was with Hebrew speakers who did not speak English well or when we shopped and the salespeople did not speak English well. He was really proud of himself and I was proud of him. He also made friends easily with Hebrew-speaking children on the beach and on the playground as he conversed with them in Hebrew.”

“We went to Israel after my kids had spent 6 years learning Hebrew and they could not communicate with a 5-year old. They could not even have a basic conversation. But if you ask them to list the colors or certain foods, they are able to do that.”

“We went to Israel. I was embarrassed that they could barely communicate. They could read everything, and understand some, but could barely speak.”

Reviewing the more than 1200 accounts written by parents, we are struck by two patterns: first, the variability in parents’ accounts. They describe curriculum as “outdated” and “useless” and also as “organized” and “thorough” (although more do tend to be negative than positive); they view teachers as “unqualified” and “unable to control the class” and also as “experienced” and “inspiring”; they complain about too much time or too little time being devoted to Hebrew; and they specifically identify the school’s accommodation or lack of accommodation of students with special learning needs.

Parents and children experience Hebrew language instruction differently across the various school sectors – and even within the same school. This variability may reflect the general ability

of children as students, but it also does suggest that parents’ assessment of their child’s experience is strongly colored by their own interest in Hebrew and their alignment with the school’s goals, a point made earlier with reference to differences between the denominational sectors.

There is a second pattern in these open-ended responses that relates to the frequency with which parents comment on how much time has been devoted to Hebrew over so many years, and their concern about how little progress their children have to show for this investment of time. Thus, while the parents of older children may point to the same specific problems as those with younger children, the fact that their children are older and these issues are still problems becomes a source of frustration in and of itself. It is as if some parents run out of patience. They perceive that spoken Hebrew has become less of a priority for their child’s school, just as it is less of a priority for them.

How proficiency is perceived

These diverging responses bring us to the most ambiguous set of findings turned up in our study. During the course of our research, evidence began to accumulate to suggest a surprising

Maintaining High Standards in Middle School

At the start of its fifteenth year, a Modern Orthodox school in the crowded day school market in suburban New York will enroll almost 500 students from nursery through 8th grade. One of the school’s special propositions at the time of its launch, and still today, is a Jewish studies curriculum conducted entirely in Hebrew, and taught almost exclusively by Israelis, most of whom are shlichim.

While a great many day schools promise an *ivrit be-ivrit* curriculum, this can be hard to sustain in the Modern Orthodox sector where parents “want it all”: high levels of proficiency in modern spoken Hebrew (an indicator of religious Zionist sensibilities) alongside age-appropriate mastery of traditional Jewish text. If in many schools this is assumed to be a zero sum game, where something (usually Hebrew proficiency) has to give in the higher grades, it does not seem to have happened at this school.

An hour-long focus group with a cross-section of six 8th grade students, conducted in charmingly accented Hebrew, revealed them to be articulate in modern spoken Hebrew. Students were more than capable of speaking on a wide range of topics. One

student revealed that he has caught himself dreaming in Hebrew (at night, that is).

Interviews with teachers – shlichim brought for three or four years from Israel – revealed their surprise at the students’ ability to cope with middle-school level text study of Talmud and Torah. The teachers observe a strict requirement of speaking only Hebrew with the students, and don’t seem frustrated by it. The teachers’ only real annoyance is that they did not themselves have any special preparation as instructors in a second language. They have had to learn on their feet, and from one another.

The school, it seems, has made Hebrew a normative part of its culture. Interviews with parents reveal that many did not choose the school specifically for the Hebrew programming it offers, but they take high level Hebrew study for granted. Parents were drawn by other features of the “child-friendly” school. However, they certainly don’t feel that the school should water down its commitment. Middle-school *ivrit* is assumed to be a win-win: both for proficiency and literacy.

finding: on average, the students we surveyed, whether they attended Orthodox or non-Orthodox schools, perceived their skills in Hebrew for communication to be less advanced, the higher their grade-level. This phenomenon was specifically noted by dozens of parents in open-ended survey responses. For example: *“My child spoke better Hebrew, with more confidence, coming out of 5th grade than currently in the 11th grade.”* Or as another put it: *“I definitely find the [Hebrew] experiences much more positive for younger grades (junior and senior kindergarten and grade 1). For older grades, I have noticed enthusiasm waning with each year.”* And still a third wrote: *“Love the high school for all things except Hebrew language instruction. Hebrew language knowledge may have decreased in high school.”*

For their part, some of the teachers we interviewed claimed to have observed the same pattern. As one veteran Hebrew language teacher put it about his students’ speaking abilities, *“Around 60 percent of the high school kids are locked into a 5th grade level of Hebrew.”* Confirming this impression, an administrator at another school under different denominational auspices stated: *“Somewhere between 6th and 9th grades, kids lose their Hebrew.”*

Our initial reaction as researchers was to take these data with a grain of salt. Is it possible, we asked ourselves, that students’ proficiency in and enthusiasm for Modern Hebrew actually stagnate the more years they spend in day school? Surely the students judge themselves more critically as they age, and their own self-doubts feed those of their parents? Perhaps parents

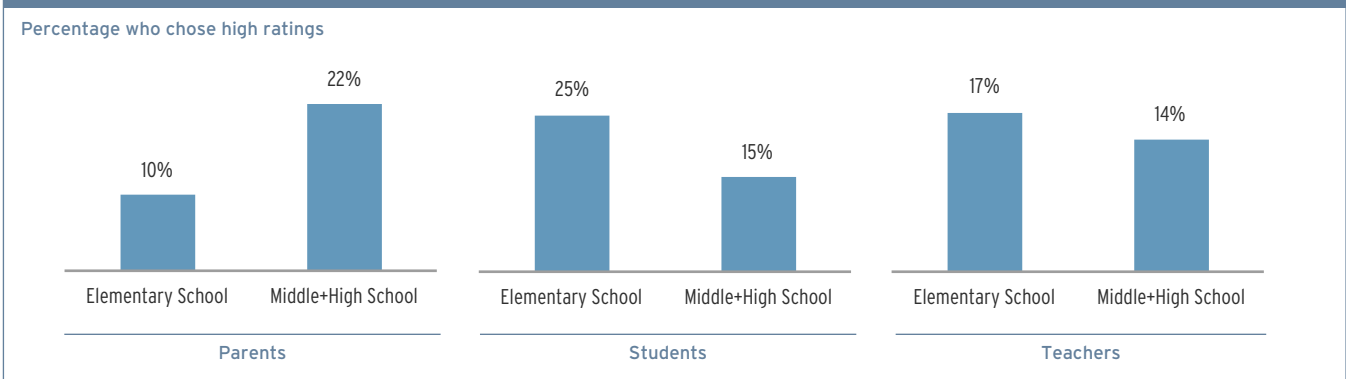
expect more of their children in the higher grades and so are more easily disappointed by what they find? Might it be that when their children are younger, parents are impressed by small gains – their children coming home from school singing Hebrew songs, their mastery of the Aleph Bet, and their ability to recite *brachot* (the blessings) fluently? When their children enter middle and high school, perhaps they are less readily impressed, and much more concerned about other subjects their children had to sacrifice in order to continue with Hebrew.

At a few, although not all, of the schools we visited, we observed classes in which students’ speaking proficiency was evidently poorer in the higher grades than in lower ones. While elementary school students responded in Hebrew to their teachers’ promptings, and seemed able to express themselves quite fluently in Israeli-accented Hebrew, by the time they reached the higher grades students struggled to express themselves. They groped to find the vocabulary to convey their thoughts. Even where the rule in class was to speak only in Hebrew, students would often opt to find the right phrase in English before reverting to Hebrew.

Before attempting to evaluate these phenomena, we turn to survey data to explore the extent to which this pattern is repeated across a broader sample of schools beyond those we visited.

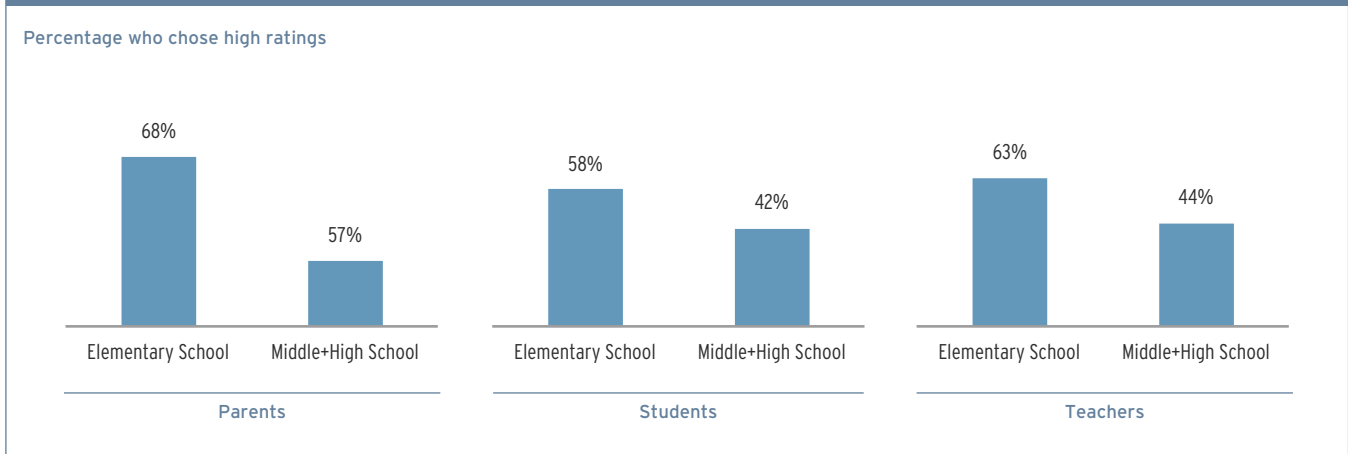
As seen in Figure 10, compared with the parents of students in lower school, the parents of students in higher grades perceive them currently to have superior skills in all forms of Hebrew for communication (including reading, writing, speaking and

Figure 10:
Perceptions of Students’ Current Hebrew-for-Communication Skills



Note: Percentages represent those who chose scores of 4 or more on a 5-point scale in response to several questions asking stakeholders to rate their current reading, writing, speaking and understanding levels of Hebrew for communication (1=low proficiency focus, 5=high proficiency).

Figure 11:
Perceptions of Students' Expected Hebrew-for-Communication Skills



Note: Percentages represent those who chose scores of 4 or more on a 5-point scale in response to several questions asking stakeholders to rate their expected reading, writing, speaking and understanding levels of Hebrew for communication (1=low proficiency focus, 5=high proficiency).

understanding). The students themselves, however, offer a different verdict: the older students judge their current Hebrew communication skills more critically than do younger students. And the teachers tend to agree with the students; teachers in the higher grades rate older students more negatively than do teachers of elementary school students.

When students were asked about how well they thought they were doing with respect to specific activities in Hebrew, their responses confirmed the same picture. Asked how they rated themselves on a four-point scale (cannot do it; can somewhat do it; can do it; can do it very well), the proportion of students who selected “can do it very well” did not increase in relation to any specific activity between elementary and high school. At best, the students’ responses were stable across 5th, 8th and 11th grade, for the following activities:

“Chat with people in Hebrew; Understand Israeli news or literature; Understand what my teacher(s) says in Hebrew.”

For the following specific activities, there was a significant decline between 5th and 11th grade in the proportion who selected “can do it very well”:

“Speak Hebrew when called on to do so in class; Understand Israeli songs.”

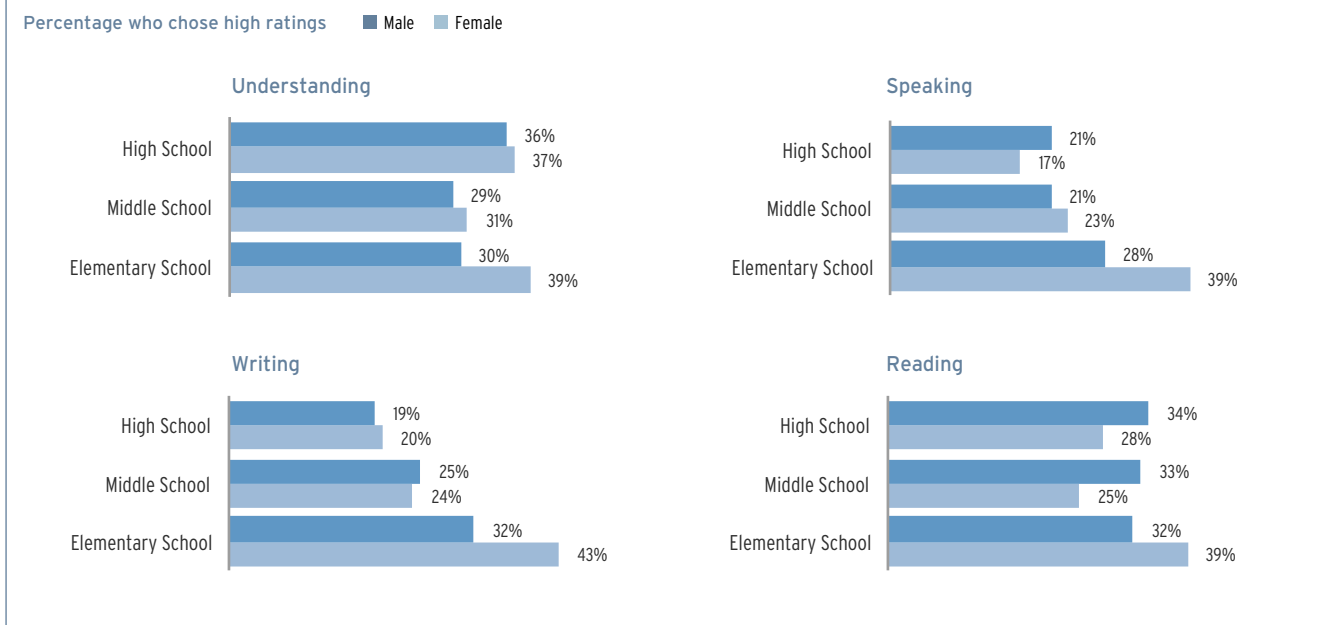
To take another data point, when questioned about what they expected student skill levels to be like in Modern Hebrew “after they complete their time in the Jewish education system,” parents, students and teachers all share a common aspiration: they expect that students will have superior skills as they progress through school. And yet, as students move to higher grades, parents, teachers and the students themselves all have lower expectations of what students’ skills will be by the time they graduate (see Figure 11). In other words, they express continued hopefulness or optimism that students will do better than right now, but they have diminished expectations of how much better they’ll do¹⁰.

It seems that the perceptions of teachers and students are aligned with what we observed first-hand during our visits to schools: many, though certainly not the strongest language learners, are perceived to have plateaued in their speaking proficiency, and quite a few are seen to have taken a few steps backward. Students and teachers see things this way, although parents who are more distant from the classroom are more sanguine.

It is noteworthy that part of this pattern of (self) criticism is attributable to gender differences: girls tended to rate their

¹⁰ Such optimism is commonplace in studies of parents’ hopes of what their children will gain from school, whatever the current reality.

Figure 12:
Perceptions of Students' Current Hebrew-for-Communication Skills - By Gender



Note: Percentages represent those who chose scores of 4 or more on a 5-point scale in response to several questions asking students to rate their current reading, writing, speaking and understanding levels of Hebrew for communication (1=low proficiency focus, 5=high proficiency).

abilities lower than did boys. As seen in Figure 12, in the elementary grades girls rate their competence in the various Hebrew skills significantly higher than do boys. But high school girls consistently rate their competence at a lower level than do elementary age girls, and in some instance at a lower level than their male high school peers. In contrast, while high school males rate their competence with respect to writing and speaking Hebrew at a slightly lower level than do elementary age students, their assessment of their reading and understanding skills is on the same level as the younger male students. If in the aggregate high school students perceive their Hebrew skills to be weaker than do elementary school students, most of that drop-off can be attributed to a loss of confidence among adolescent girls.

This phenomenon is undoubtedly part of a larger trend noted by scholars of education and by educational practitioners in many subject areas who observe diminished self-confidence and enthusiasm for school-learning among adolescents. Stagnating enthusiasm for Hebrew is consistent, for example with research findings in relation to other languages, and especially

heritage languages. For example, Tse identified what she called an “Ethnic Ambivalence Phase.”¹¹ She found that initial enthusiasm for learning the heritage language during the elementary school years decreased during adolescence and then re-emerged during adulthood in the “Ethnic Emergence Phase.” In recent years, other case studies have been published demonstrating this ambivalence phase.¹²

There are also some fascinating echoes between what we have found and recent research on “competency belief in science.” Research indicates that competency belief in science is not

¹¹ Tse, L. (2000). “Student perceptions of foreign language study: A qualitative analysis of foreign language autobiographies.” *The Modern Language Journal*, 84(1), 69-84.

¹² See Cho, G., Shin, F., and Krashen, S. (2004). “What do we know about heritage languages? What do we need to learn about them?” *Multicultural Education* 11, 23-26. Lawton, B.L. and Logio, K.A. (2009). “Teaching Chinese language to heritage versus non-heritage learners: Parent perceptions of a community weekend school in the United States.” *Language, Culture and Curriculum* 22, 137-155; Rifkin, B. (2005). “A ceiling effect in traditional classroom foreign language instruction: Data from Russian.” *The Modern Language Journal*, 89(1), 3-18.

Hitting a Plateau

Hebrew at a K-12 non-Orthodox day school is a case study in improvisation, inconsistency and a lack of clear focus that results in diminishing returns over time.

Hebrew in the high school is not a priority of the Head of School or of top administrators. The school competes with private academies and therefore a strong STEM program in the high school is of considerably greater importance than a well-organized Hebrew program. Moreover, the Head prefers to offer a broad range of Jewish education experiences at the expense of deeper study. He argues that students have a limited amount of time for Jewish studies, and thus should be exposed to a wider variety of subject matters and the tools to explore these on their own.

Hebrew, we learned, is not a major concern of high school parents either. A minority of parents who have a day school background are far more likely to complain about the weaknesses of Jewish text classes than Hebrew language classes. And those without that background are impressed with any Hebrew the students know.

When assessing Hebrew skills, one high school teacher described the students' decoding skills as "terrible" and their comprehension of texts as "poor." Even parents express dismay when their kids cannot recite the *Birkat Hamazon*, the grace after meals, which refers to siddur Hebrew. The teacher explains that parents expect more competence in Hebrew prayer compared to Modern Hebrew (e.g. reading an Israeli newspaper).

The story of Hebrew at this school can be told as a tale of two classes: In a 6th grade Hebrew class, taught by an animated teacher who clearly loves her work, students are required to speak only in Hebrew. Their facility with the language, vocabulary and pronunciation was remarkably competent for their grade level. Only two of the 18 students came from homes with an Israeli parent, and yet they spoke well and clearly understood the teacher. They also were completely engaged.

By contrast, a 10th grade class in which students were explicitly expected to converse solely in Hebrew offered a less impressive tableau. Both vocabulary and pronunciation left much to be desired. The result is that in the lower school (except Kindergarten), all Jewish studies is taught by Israeli-born teachers, whereas in the middle school a division is created between the Hebrew language teachers and the Jewish studies teachers. That is especially the case in the high school where American-born teachers teach Jewish studies. The same point was made by a veteran teacher: "Around 60 percent of the high school kids are locked into a 5th grade level of Hebrew." Clearly, Hebrew peters out in the middle school.

Matters are not helped by the absence of a clear Hebrew curriculum in the high school. Teachers improvise and rely upon 20-year-old Xerox handouts. Like many other day schools, this one has a commitment to Hebrew but it is vague and unfocused.

tightly linked to actual ability related to scientific thinking. Further, interest and competency belief in science for youth tends to decrease over the middle school years and then particularizes during high school and during college. Also, paralleling our own findings, there are gender differences in science where competency belief among girls is on a steeper decline than for boys, again somewhat independent of actual ability to engage in scientific reasoning.¹³

Possible explanations for the weaker ratings of older students

When it comes to accounting for the differences between the self-assessments of high school and elementary school students

with respect to their perceived Hebrew proficiency, rising expectations probably offer the most straightforward explanation. Teachers and their charges probably hold older students to a higher standard than what is expected of lower-school students. As a consequence, the older the students, the more likely they and their teachers judge their Hebrew communications abilities as weaker. High school students may not have actually stagnated but having gained a more realistic sense of what communicative competence involves, they may have concluded that they do not measure up. Similarly, teachers too may hold their students to higher standards, especially when they contemplate sending them off on programs in Israel that require spoken Hebrew skills.

Parents, we note, do not seem generally exercised about these developments. True, we have already cited the proportion who took the trouble to offer negative assessments in writing. But in the aggregate, parents are neither especially disappointed

¹³ Dorph, R., Cannady, M. A., & Schunn, C. D. (2016). "How Science Learning Activation Enables Success for Youth in Science Learning Experiences." *Electronic Journal of Science Education*, 20(8); Vincent Ruz, P., & Schunn, C. D. (In press). "The increasingly important role of science competency beliefs for science learning in girls." *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*.

about their children's experience with Modern Hebrew language instruction nor do most seem to be agitating for change. Moreover, most parents of older students perceive them to be doing better than do the parents of younger children. When asked how satisfied they are with "the quality of instruction in Hebrew for communication," overall 20 percent indicate that they are either "not at all satisfied" or "a little bit satisfied" – the two lowest points on a five-point scale. Broken down by grade level, the proportion of dissatisfied parents rises from 14 percent among those with children in elementary school to 26 percent among those with children in high school. As we have observed when discussing their responses to open-ended questions, while many parents express disappointment and sometime frustration, few seem unusually agitated. The majority seem to have accepted the situation. That seems to indicate either that this issue is not of sufficient importance to them or they have made their peace with the situation.

This interpretation of the data makes a good deal of sense, but the question of how well students are advancing in their communications skills warrants further attention. To begin with, the negative self-assessments offered by students point to a challenge schools cannot afford to ignore. For the moment, this assessment has not colored students' "enjoyment" of Hebrew, which is still moderately robust, at least in terms of their relationships with Hebrew teachers and their comfort in the classroom. Retrospectively, these critical self-assessments may contribute to a jaundiced view of their day school experience, or, worse, may affect their learning experience and outcomes.

Moreover, we also cannot ignore what teachers of Hebrew and administrators in schools told us. Not only did they speak openly about their concerns about how well their older students were progressing in the language studies, they offered analyses of factors that hamper language learning. Among the explanations offered were the following:

1. As students grow older, the gap between the sophistication of their thinking and their capacity to express their ideas in spoken Hebrew grows larger. As one educator put it, "We want to discuss things at higher level with them, but their ability to articulate their thoughts hasn't kept pace." As a result, English is increasingly used by both teachers and students in older grades as compared with lower grades.

2. In the higher grades, the goals of Hebrew diversify. Older students spend more time working on their capacity to express themselves in writing and their ability to make sense of more challenging texts. Their spoken language skills stagnate, and this is something that parents can more readily notice especially during trips to Israel. Parents are less aware whether their children's reading and writing are progressing significantly than they are of a deterioration in their children's Hebrew speaking.

3. Students tire of Hebrew. They're enthusiastic about learning a new language in the younger grades, and they thrill at their competence in this foreign tongue. In the higher grades, although they continue to have positive relationships with their Hebrew teachers, they start to tire of the content, and begin to question the point of all of the time and effort invested, especially if they feel that they'll never speak in Hebrew beyond the walls of their day school.

4. As they enter adolescence, students become far more self-conscious. They therefore are reluctant to speak in Hebrew during class sessions, lest they embarrass themselves in public. (This is an explanation that students themselves offered.)

Our own inquiries in schools revealed that in many instances the priorities of schools shift in the older grades. They give less time to Hebrew language lessons, and as a result students' proficiency slips. We found that in many Orthodox schools Hebrew proficiency is less important in the higher grades than religious inspiration and textual competence. That's reflected in decreased time allocated to classes focused specifically on Hebrew language, and in the profiles of those appointed to teach Hebrew. As one administrator explained, "*In the higher grades...we seem to be prepared to sacrifice Hebrew proficiency as demonstrated by the hiring of rabbis and Judaic studies teachers who can't teach in Hebrew.*"

In Community high schools, where Modern Hebrew is often demoted to an elective, it is perceived by parents and students to be less important than courses connected to college preparation, or other "more useful" languages such as Spanish or Mandarin.

These qualitative data about a shift in schools' priorities are further confirmed by teachers' survey responses. When asked, "How important is it in your school for students to

learn Hebrew for everyday communication?” almost 90% of elementary school teachers said that it was “important” or “very important,” while 70% of high school teachers judged Hebrew important to their school.¹⁴

Based on our research, we are not in a position to offer a definitive assessment of how well older students progress in their Modern Hebrew language instruction. Without testing, it is impossible to compare perceptions against reality. As we have already indicated, we flag the issue for three reasons: first, because when students assess their own attainments critically, their dissatisfaction may itself impede learning; dissatisfaction suppresses both willingness and confidence to learn. Second, the dissatisfaction experienced in the higher grades of day school has potential to color graduates’ perception of the entirety of their day school experience and the value of the many hours they devoted to Hebrew. Last, we raise the issue because it serves as valuable counterpoint against which to analyze (and appreciate) the features of those schools that have found ways to ratchet up the quality of their language studies, and in turn produce above-average levels of satisfaction among students and teachers. We turn our attention now to those schools to learn what steps can be taken to raise levels of satisfaction across the day school system as a whole.

Yotzim Min Ha'klal - Exceptional Practices

Having become aware of the higher levels of dissatisfaction with Hebrew in the older grades, and of the widespread perception of stagnation in Hebrew communication proficiency among older students, we looked closely at the data from each school that participated in the study to see if we could find exceptions to this general rule. Are there schools, we wondered, where the older students express greater enthusiasm and interest in Hebrew, and where older students rate their skills at a higher level than do their younger peers? If such schools exist, what accounts for their exceptionalism? Are there practices they employ that could be adopted by other schools?

Some of these schools are introduced in sidebars throughout this report. In this section, we bring together what we have learned from these schools and from other schools where (at

least as indicated by their survey responses) older students in eighth grade or eleventh grade perceive their Hebrew skills to be significantly higher than do younger students in the same schools, contrary to the trend elsewhere. We further sharpened our identification of these schools by confirming that the students’ responses were not only higher in older grades than younger grades, but that they were also higher than those reported by students of the same age in other schools. These are schools, then, where students not only perceive themselves to be doing better *over time*, the students also rate their performance to be better than do most of their peers *in other institutions*.

Our data about what in practice was different in these schools come from visits to the schools themselves, and from interviews with their students, teachers and parents. These observations and interviews were designed to enable members of each school community to surface what accounted for the positive outcomes reported by students. In short, we used quantitative data to identify the schools. We then used qualitative data to make sense of what was going on within their walls.

Using this approach, we identified six schools that especially stand out:

- A small K-8 Solomon Schechter school
- A large K-12 Solomon Schechter school
- Two large Modern Orthodox elementary schools
- A large K-12 Community day school
- A medium sized K-8 Community day school

Before exploring what distinguishes these schools, we should note what does **not** distinguish them. These schools do not employ a particular curriculum for teaching Hebrew. In this sample of schools, most of the main Hebrew curricula employed by day schools are represented: TaL AM, Neta, the programs of Ulpan Or, and the approach of Hebrew at the Center; and combinations of these curricula. One school is heavily invested in developing its own curriculum. These schools also do not employ a particular pedagogical approach: one in particular is deeply committed to the Proficiency Approach, most of the others are not.¹⁵ Some teach all of their

¹⁴ To be clear, the teachers were not asked to prescribe what they wanted their schools to prioritize, but were asked to describe the reality as they saw it.

¹⁵ The Proficiency Approach focuses on learners’ abilities to function in the target language in the context of real life settings. Consequentially the Approach supports the teaching and the learning of language in contexts where it has meaning, where the focus is on what scholars call “the pragmatics” of the language.

Jewish studies classes in Hebrew (*ivrit be-vrit*), others do not. Some teach Hebrew as a separate classroom subject from an early grade, others only do so from middle schools. And in this mix there are Orthodox, Conservative and Community day schools. When it comes to the profile of their faculty there isn't a consistent pattern either. Some hire *shlichim* to do most of the teaching, some do not hire *shlichim* at all. In most, the great majority of teachers are native Israelis (whether locals or *shlichim*), but, in one, a major proportion of the teachers was not born in Israel.

What distinguishes these schools, what they do have in common, is how they support the study of Hebrew for communication through their leadership, in the resources they commit to this effort, and in the message they convey about the importance of learning Hebrew from the youngest grade to the oldest grade. These school-wide investments transcend the specific language material used in the classroom and the pedagogic approach teachers employ. By making these commitments, schools communicate that they are not simply doing what is expected of them.¹⁶

The following features distinguish these schools:

Ensuring and communicating that Hebrew matters

All of these schools require students to take classes in Hebrew until the highest grade-level. This a requirement that sets them apart from an increasing number of other schools. Interestingly, too, none of the elementary schools in this group teach other foreign languages, either as an additional language option or as an alternative to Hebrew. In these most basic ways, the schools signal how much they value Hebrew more than any other foreign language.

Another signal is provided by the rigor, almost obsessiveness, with which some of these schools track the progress of students in Hebrew. This practice of monitoring the progress of each individual child, and of tailoring their program accordingly, is commonplace in language-focused charter schools. It is quite common in day schools in other subject areas, especially STEM subjects. But it is not widespread when it comes to Hebrew. It is noteworthy then that three of these six schools

employ this practice as a central element in supporting their students' growth. They convey that Hebrew matters as much as does math and science.

How Hebrew matters shows up sometimes in what these schools don't do: As we were specifically told during the course of visits to some of these schools, these are not places where they cancel Hebrew classes when there is something important to be scheduled. They also don't allow parents to pull children from Hebrew unless there is an acutely important reason.

When interviewing the parents at these schools, it is evident that parents notice these commitments. The schools are known and admired for the quality of their Hebrew instruction. Their Hebrew programs constitute a signature that – in some instances - helps set them apart in a competitive day school market.

A flavor of how these intangibles come together is provided by a site-report following a visit to one of these schools:

“When this small Solomon Schechter elementary school was founded, the Head of School had hoped to create a Hebrew immersion program, but parents were resistant because they feared its impact on academic success. Instead, today, the school employs a tracking system that allows those who are capable to achieve unusually high standards in Hebrew. With every core classroom teacher required to be a fluent Hebrew speaker, Hebrew and the study of Israel are integrated across the curriculum. A minority of the teachers are Israeli, and others were raised in America by Israeli parents. The majority are American-born and share the same backgrounds as their students. Because of their fluency in Hebrew, the faculty is able to connect all aspects of the curriculum (music, art, social studies, and science) to Hebrew and Israel.”

Strong and visible leadership

In the great majority of Jewish day schools, the coordinator or department head of Hebrew is not a member of the school's leadership team. The Head of Hebrew usually sits at a middle management level or lower. This is not the case in any of these six schools. In all of them, the individual who leads Hebrew instruction (sometimes also serving in the role of Head of Judaic Studies) is a high-profile individual, with significant responsibilities. She or he is well known across the school and often within the wider community.

¹⁶ With fewer than 10% of Israeli students, none reports an atypical number of students from Hebrew-speaking families.

There is a symbolic dimension to this phenomenon, underlining Hebrew's importance in the school. These individuals are known for their readiness to defend Hebrew to the hilt; often fearfully so. Interviewees – staff, students and parents – told us that they couldn't imagine Hebrew in the school without the contribution of this individual; these people personify or embody the school's commitments to Hebrew as a central educational value. Uniformly, when these people speak with students on the corridor or in the classroom, they insist that students only speak in Hebrew, no matter how haltingly.

There are practical dimensions to the leadership provided by these individuals. It is not only that these people provide visible leadership, they are also known for their expertise as educational clinicians. In a field where a minority of practitioners are expert in language learning (as we will describe more fully below), these people are recognized for being able to support and grow their faculty through skilled supervision. During one of our site visits we observed this for ourselves when visiting a series of classrooms in the company of the Head of Hebrew. In almost every classroom, the Hebrew Head diagnosed a particular communication phenomenon or made a suggestion to the teacher about how to tweak her practice. At times this was overbearing, for sure, but it conveyed the ways in which this person supported and sustained the highest pedagogical standards.

In another school, we observed a different, less combative style. In this instance, an individual – much younger than most of those she supervised – exercised authority through a deep emotional intelligence seen in her interactions with students and colleagues, and through the display of educational know-how. Sitting with her in a focus group with her team members, it was intriguing to see how she opened her team's eyes to different ways of doing things, challenging their assumptions, without losing their support.

Furthermore, and of great importance, in the larger of the schools we have identified, these leaders have only limited teaching responsibilities of their own. Their primary responsibility is to support and supervise their staff. Conveying again how much Hebrew matters, these particular schools are invested in leaders who can make a difference to the quality of teaching and learning through their interactions with front-line educators rather than directly with students.

A flavor of what strong and visible leadership looks like is provided by a site report following a visit to one of these schools, excerpted from a longer description in a sidebar below:

“Over and over, one hears from the staff, “Meirav¹⁷ is the greatest resource!!! The weekly meetings, her knowledge, her experience.” Meirav is the Head of Hebrew, and one of the most senior staff members in the school with extensive experience of teaching Hebrew as a foreign language. Her role is almost entirely devoted to supporting her faculty and to leading the assessment of students' performance. An Israeli educator, she serves as a role model for faculty and students. Her presence makes a palpable difference across the curriculum, holding members of the community accountable to their own shared vision.”

Investing resources and attention in staff

An additional feature of these six schools is the special investments they make so as to hire and support Hebrew language staff, even while exhibiting this investment in dramatically different ways. We have described some of these instances in various sidebars throughout this report; here we highlight the common denominator behind these examples: a significant commitment of financial and human capital to the staffing of Hebrew instruction.

Although it is significantly more expensive to employ a *shaliach* from Israel than to hire a local individual because of relocation expenses and additional benefits, one of these six schools fills about two-thirds all of its full-time Hebrew/Judaic studies teaching slots with *shlichim* (more than ten in total, at any one time). Rather than hire Israelis from the local community, the school employs individuals who often have quite poor English directly from Israel so that they can bring an authentic flavor of the country to their classrooms and the community. As we describe below, the presence of so many *shlichim* in the school helps this school feel very much like an Israeli school. Hebrew is heard within its walls almost as often as English.

Another school in this group also invests heavily in *shlichim* but less in terms of the numbers employed (when we visited four out of the 15 Hebrew/Judaic studies staff were short-term hires from Israel) but more in terms of the extensive support provided to these people before they come to the US and

¹⁷ A pseudonym.

then after they arrive and have started teaching. The investment in this instance is expressed in the extensive time devoted by a senior member of the Hebrew department to mentoring and coaching these teachers during the months before the start of their work and then once the *shlichim* have already begun work. Few other schools give so much attention to supporting the success of their shlichim.

A different strategy at another of these schools, again coming with a price tag and other recruitment challenges, involves having a Hebrew-speaking teacher in the classroom during the entire day, even when it is not Hebrew or Jewish studies time. At those other times of the day, the teacher serves as an aide, while continuing to provide students with opportunities to communicate in everyday Hebrew even when the subject is social studies or science. Then, during Hebrew and Judaic studies time, the teachers' roles swap with the Hebrew-speaker serving as lead educator.

It is surely not coincidental that three of the six schools where student perception of their Hebrew skills buck national trends employ such distinctive approaches to the hire and support of their Hebrew faculty.

A flavor of what these staffing choices involve is provided by a site-report submitted following a visit to one of these schools:

“[This Modern Orthodox] school is most unusual. It feels as if an Israeli school has been created on the banks of the Hudson. Almost all of the teachers are Israeli; five couples specifically brought over from Israel to teach in the school. Very few teachers are Israelis naturalized in the United States. Only one or two are American-born.”

“The culture created is palpably Israeli. When approaching an adult in the school, one doesn't know whether to speak in Hebrew or English. The language is everywhere. That's unsettling and powerful – and must be detected by the students too.”

“A strong ideological commitment lies behind this culture; one that sees Hebrew as the key to a powerful Jewish day school education. And yet it's worth emphasizing, this does not presume some obsession with Hebrew for communicative purposes. It's based on seeing Hebrew as a key that unlocks an appreciation of Jewish texts and fosters closeness with the State of Israel. Not one person I spoke with saw this as a zero-sum game in which the cultivation of Hebrew for communication was at the expense of Hebrew literacy skills.”

Orthodox high schools – exceptions that prove the rule

Overall, our research sample of 41 schools included eight Orthodox day schools that teach students between 9th and 12th grade. These eight schools were either K-12 schools or high schools that ran from 9th to 12th grade. None of these schools fulfilled the quantitative criteria we established to identify exceptional institutions. It is true that in some of them, the 11th grade students expressed greater enthusiasm for Hebrew than did younger students in the same schools (where there were younger grades) or than did the aggregate of 11th graders in other schools. In these respects, these schools seem quite well regarded. However, the students in these places did not rate their skills in the different domains of Hebrew for communication significantly higher than did younger students in their own schools or than did their 11th grade peers overall. To put it differently, the students in these schools seem content enough with their experience of learning Hebrew in day school but they don't rate their skills highly.

We speculate that these schools are precisely those where there is a shift in priorities away from Hebrew for communication to Hebrew for text study in the highest grades. In many of these places, Hebrew for communication is optional at the highest grades, while students continue to be required to take the same number of Judaic studies courses. These are also places where those who staff Jewish studies are more likely to be North American than Israeli. These English-speaking staff are purposely deployed as role models for their students rather than Israelis who speak native-level Hebrew. These choices seem to result in an easing off in the intensity of Hebrew study that is reflected in the students' assessment of their own skills, although not in their attitudes towards Hebrew.

We suggest that, in our search for exemplary schools, we have encountered again one of the central arguments of the previous section: In the higher grades of day schools, a shift in priorities results in a perceived plateauing in students' language skills in Modern Hebrew. At the same time, the case of this subsample of schools further reinforces some of the important conclusions surfaced in this section about the features most strongly associated with exceptional schools in this field: Those special schools do not compromise on the time devoted to Hebrew language learning until their graduation day; and they

indicate through their communications and their staffing that Hebrew matters as much as anything else.

Schools Have Difficulty Articulating Their Rationale for Requiring Hebrew. There Are Consequences to This Omission.

Given the time allocated for instruction in Modern Hebrew, one might expect day schools to be very clear about their reasons for devoting so much attention to the language year after year. Making a coherent case to explain why the school cares about Hebrew would seem to be important for persuading all stakeholders to support a goal that is not understood as a matter-of-course – and that requires a serious commitment of work and time on everyone’s part. Based on what we heard and observed, quite a few schools fail to articulate an answer to the question, “Why Hebrew?”

Students are the first to suffer the consequences of this omission. When asked why it is important to learn Hebrew, they eventually offer a broad range of responses, all of which make a good deal of sense. But they have difficulty recalling explicit discussions about why their school believes it is so important for them to study Hebrew.

The lack of clarity was evident during site visits to schools. At a Modern Orthodox high school, for example, a field report written by one team member notes: *“Although there seem to be three main goals for Hebrew language education (teaching Hebrew for communication, for the study of religious texts, and for building a connection to Israel), none of them is clear to any of the various groups in the school in a formal manner.”* Observations recorded during a visit to a Schechter day school raise a similar point about the lack of coherence and goal-setting for Hebrew language proficiency. And field notes from a site visit to a Community day school note how few parents are on board in support of the school’s Hebrew mission: *“I have never met parents so unapologetic about their disinterest in Jewish learning. Some parents could not see any practical reason for studying Hebrew: no one is going to start a conversation in Hebrew with my child on the street; we have no family in Israel; and we might go there just once in our lives and we’ll be able to manage with English. Why would they need the Hebrew language? With so little*

parental pressure to improve the quality of Hebrew and Jewish studies, the school has progressively whittled away at the time devoted to these subjects.”

The importance of making the case

Parents who saw little value in studying Hebrew for the purposes of prayer and textual study raised the same few points:

- Prayer is learned by doing, not by studying the liturgy.
- The family is not religious and therefore prayer and religious text study are irrelevant.
- Parents are interested in their children’s getting a cultural, not religious education.
- Students are at the school to get a good general education, and therefore learning Hebrew for religious study is of low priority.

When it comes to Hebrew for purposes of communication, a good many parents commented extensively about their negative views. Here is a sampling from parents who send their children to Orthodox day schools:

“All the Judaic courses at my son’s school are taught in English, so it doesn’t really matter.”

“I feel if he has been unable to grasp the language by now, then he is just not going to get it, so why makes his GPA [grade point average] go down for his inability to learn a language?”

“I send my child to learn about Judaism and get a good education. Exposure to Hebrew is par for the course but we live in the United States not Israel. Last I checked, we had no plans to relocate there so there’s no need for Hebrew proficiency.”

“It’s a waste of time to teach Hebrew Language. The day is too intense and at the end, Israelis know you cannot speak it. More time should be spent on text and middot [proper values] so they can be critical thinkers and not Hebrew-speaking Jewish dropouts.”

From parents who send their children to Schechter schools:

“Aside from classes in Hebrew, one doesn’t need Hebrew.”

“Hebrew is more important as it pertains to religious issues and prayers.”

“It’s only [needed] to fulfill a required second language.”

Meshugaim La-Davar

A K-8 Solomon Schechter school has long and proudly enjoyed the focus on Hebrew language instruction and Israel. It has particularly gained a reputation in its local community as a school where students acquire speaking proficiency in Modern Hebrew. Still, it was clear to its incoming Head of School in 2004 that only half the parent body was sold on the importance of Hebrew. There were great pressures to tone down the Hebrew content, and when middle school students needed remedial work in other subjects, they were more often than not pulled from Hebrew and Jewish studies classes. Focus group research conducted on behalf of the school also revealed that though some families were drawn to the school because of its Hebrew program, other parents deliberately decided against enrolling their children because of the demanding Hebrew program. Rather than abandon the school's commitment to Hebrew, the school doubled down on Hebrew. It framed Hebrew's importance not only as a heritage language but also marketed it as an important step toward bilingualism. Students' brains would develop better by learning a second language. The school's motto now became, "From the school of two languages, one community – *shtei safot, kehillah achat!*"

A motto alone was not enough. Over time, the Head of School brought the board along in support of his new emphasis, as well as the Middle School principal. Together they hired a Hebrew language coordinator trained in the proficiency method promoted by Vardit Ringwald, then of Brandeis University. The Head of School explained his unabashed approach: "Decide what your Hebrew program is going to be and be proud of it out there: celebrate it; be dogged about it; get data; train teachers and parents; and get them into alignment." Yet the challenge was for all the players to be dedicated to succeeding with Hebrew. They were, to use the Hebrew expression, *meshugaim la-davar* (fanatics).

The pay-off was evident in rising enrollments. Deeper satisfaction came when students, exposed to the revitalized Hebrew program, went on their 8th grade trip to Israel. On their first day of touring, the Israeli tour guide began to speak in English. More than half the students demanded that he speak to them in Hebrew. In one spontaneous burst of idealism, the students justified all the hard work of aligning stakeholders in a common commitment to the Hebrew language.

Parents whose children are in day schools under Reform auspices write:

"I like the value of learning Hebrew for general development of language skills and for tradition purposes, but it has no use to my family for purposes of everyday communication."

"Our life in America doesn't require it; it's not necessary to the way we live (and we're at no loss without it)."

Finally, from parents in Community day schools:

"I like the benefits of a Jewish education, especially the focus on becoming a person with Jewish ethics and merit. However, I'd rather my child learn fluent Spanish, a practical language in the United States. If Hebrew were learned as an elective, I would not oppose it."

"Teach a language or subject that is more relevant today for children living in the US. Most parents at the school share my view and would prefer to have another language besides Hebrew offered. We're paying for a good education; we should get to choose which language our children learn."

There are several dozen more such negative views expressed by parents about the irrelevance of studying Hebrew for purposes of communication. In citing them, we are well aware that they represent the views of a minority of parents and that they may reflect frustrations by parents whose children struggle with language study. We also have no way to know whether a more coherent case made by the schools for "why Hebrew" would sway these parents. But if nothing else, these remarks suggest that schools have a way to go in bringing their full parent bodies on board in support of their Hebrew mission.

The same can be said for persuading their students. Here is a sampling of negative views expressed by students at Orthodox schools; the same points were made by over 500 students (one-sixth of the sample) at schools across the denominational spectrum. About Hebrew for the purposes of studying texts:

"I will never use these skills for the rest of my life, unlike conversational Hebrew which I can use in daily life."

"I do not really see myself using these skills in the long run."

"I don't find it important because if I want to know what my prayers mean I can look at the English translation."

As for those students who hold negative views of Hebrew for the purposes of communication, their views are stated even more emphatically:

“Hebrew is not a language that I would use every day. I speak English at my house and I speak English to all my friends and family, and don’t know anyone I would speak to in everyday life in Hebrew.”

“I don’t believe you can achieve much just by learning Hebrew.”

“I live in a place where not one person needs to know how to speak Hebrew. There is a very small population of people who even understand Hebrew.”

Are these representative views? They are not. Nor are they held by the majority of students or parents. To the contrary, most stakeholders acknowledge the value of Hebrew language study. Significant majorities see both Hebrew for the study of texts and for communication to be worthwhile.

But what of the minority who are resentful and disenchanted? We have already seen in Figure 5 that over one-third of students (36 percent) in non-Orthodox schools describe their

attitudes toward text study in Hebrew in the most negative possible terms – “they hate” their studies. Those schools have a major challenge to address both in their student and parent bodies, if they are to change attitudes and create a more Hebrew-friendly culture.

It is possible, of course, to dismiss them as students who have little talent for learning languages or who are tired of day school education or who are just sounding off because on an anonymous survey they can do so without fear of paying a penalty. Perhaps they cannot be brought around. The question is whether schools are even trying to win them over – and perhaps confronting their disenchantment directly by making the case for Hebrew.

At the least, day schools cannot afford to coast on the assumption that everyone understands and appreciates the importance of learning Modern Hebrew. Most students and parents do, but the absence of clear messages about the rationale for studying Hebrew may contribute to the low standing the study of Hebrew language has among some day school students – and for the pushback by parents who feel Hebrew should no longer be a requirement in high school.

Dilemmas in Making an Instrumental Case for Hebrew

This K-8 Community day school on the West Coast serves a diverse population, 35 percent of whom are interfaith families. The school markets itself as a top-tier private school and competes with non-Jewish private schools for enrollment.

Hebrew here is recognized as a means of connecting with Jews around the world, especially Israelis, and as a language that can provide access to Jewish religion, culture and history. The eighth-grade Israel trip is a strong motivator for learning Hebrew among students.

Wherever Hebrew is found in the school, it is always accompanied by a translation. Jewish Studies are taught in the vernacular and Hebrew is woven in as part of text study where applicable. All texts are provided in translation and transliteration to be sure no one feels alienated or excluded. In choosing curricula, the staff focus on Hebrew as an expressive language and on materials that hold relevance to their students’ lives. Students noted that Hebrew was necessary as part of their *bar/bat mitzvah* preparation but none of them imagined using Hebrew outside of the religious services in the future.

Several years ago, the school decided to make Hebrew optional in the middle school. Students now choose either Spanish or Hebrew as a second language requirement. According to the administration, this was a pragmatic decision that reflects the ethos of the school community. From the point of view of school leadership, families are focused on their children getting into top independent high schools. “Spanish is more useful. Maybe even Chinese.” Hebrew is not as relevant. It’s not taken into account into the test scores for high school entry: “No one wants to hear that it’s going to enhance their Jewish identity.”

Since communication has become the main goal for Hebrew language education, the school is trapped in a dilemma. To remain relevant to students’ day-to-day lives, Hebrew is taught primarily as a modern language, and proficiency is the goal. However, for most families, Hebrew is not a very useful language outside of the school itself. So, when the case is made for Hebrew on the basis of utility, Hebrew begins to compete with other foreign languages, and those other languages are more relevant and useful for students’ day-to-day lives.

Table 6:
Ratios of Native to Non-Native Teachers of Hebrew Language

	Orthodox Schools	Non-Orthodox Schools	All Schools
Elementary School Teachers	41%/59%	75%/25%	62%/38%
Middle and High School Teachers	63%/37%	88%/12%	80%/20%
All Grades	49%/51%	81%/19%	70%/30%

Teachers of Hebrew - Myths and Reality

Thus far, this report has focused on perceptions of how schools are managing their Modern Hebrew offerings. In this section, we turn our attention to the most important link in the chain of language transmission – the teaching personnel. How do teachers perceive the priorities of their schools? What do they report about their students? And what are their own priorities when it comes to the teaching of Modern Hebrew?

To arrive at answers to these questions, this project fielded a survey to all of the educators in the 41 participating schools who teach Hebrew and/or Jewish studies, and to relevant administrators. Forty-eight individuals identified themselves as full-time administrators; the remaining 543 respondents identified themselves as teachers, of whom 504 did not have any administrative responsibilities at all.

If day school teaching is typically a gendered profession, with 79 percent of teachers reported to be women,¹⁸ then Hebrew language teaching is no different. 77 percent of survey respondents are female. As for the age composition of the teaching staff, it is clear this is not a profession with many young people: just 14 percent are thirty years old or younger. More than half (56 percent) are between 31 and 50 years old, and about a third (30 percent) are older than 50. We therefore can expect school to be confronted over the next decade with major challenges when they seek to replace their personnel who will be retiring.

Among the 504 teachers in our sample, just under half (48 percent) identified themselves as Israeli. Nearly all of these

Israeli-born teachers (92 percent) teach Hebrew language; 20 percent also teach some Jewish studies. Of those Israeli-born who are strictly language teachers, 84 percent are women, over a third are older than 50 and hardly any are younger than 30.

While almost all Israelis who work in day schools teach Hebrew for at least some of their time, that does not mean that all teachers of Hebrew are themselves Israeli. In fact, almost a third (30 percent) of those in our sample who teach Hebrew language reported that Hebrew is not their first language. In terms of grade levels, these non-Israeli teachers of Hebrew are more likely to be teaching at the elementary level (73 percent vs. 27 percent in middle or high school), where Hebrew is integrated with Jewish studies. At the middle and high school levels, one-fifth of those who teach Hebrew report that Hebrew is not their first language. These non-Israelis are also more likely to be teaching in Orthodox schools (60 percent vs. 40 percent in non-Orthodox school), where just under half of those who teach Hebrew (49 percent) report that Hebrew is not their first language. Table 6 shows the distribution of native Hebrew speakers versus non-native speakers by school denomination in grade level.

As we learned from our interviews with parents during the course of site visits to schools, and as indicated by a great many open-ended survey responses, many parents believe that a high proportion of day school Hebrew teachers possess few appropriate qualifications other than their ability to speak native-level Hebrew. The following quotations vividly convey this perception:

“The teachers tend to be Israelis who came to the US ... and end up teaching Hebrew as a default.”

¹⁸ Kress, J. & Ben Avi, M. (2007) *Educators in Jewish Schools Study*. NY: Jewish Educational Services of North America.

“Many times Hebrew teachers are simply Israeli, but not actual teachers with education degrees. It shows a lot in class. They have trouble controlling the kids.”

In actuality, this is simply not true in the overwhelming majority of cases. Just 8 percent of Israeli-born respondents report that they have no teaching credentials; almost half (47 percent) have formal teaching certification, and 40 percent indicate that their highest academic degree was in the field of Education. Almost 85 percent have a Bachelors or Masters level degree. Just under a quarter (23 percent) report having completed a training program with at least one or two of the main curriculum frameworks used in day schools, TaL AM or Neta.

What about the 31 percent of Hebrew language teachers who were not born in Israel? Eighty-two percent are women, a similar proportion to the Israelis, but they tend to be younger; 18 percent are under the age of 30, nearly one-third are older than 50. Eighty-five percent have a Bachelors or Masters degree. Only 12 percent don't have any teaching certification, while 53 percent report that their highest degree is in Education. And slightly over one-fifth report having completed a training program with TaL AM or Neta. Over half of these teachers (59 percent) are day school alumni themselves, and the great majority (almost four out of five) report having learned Hebrew in Israel, typically for two years or more.

While the perception of most Hebrew teachers as formally unqualified to teach is a myth, our survey confirms that few teachers in Jewish day schools have specialized training in second language instruction, and certainly not at a degree level. The teachers may be quite highly educated themselves but not, in large part, in their specialized field of endeavor.

Sometimes their lack of training is incongruous. Our team made a site visit to a school with an intense commitment to Hebrew language learning, where all Hebrew and Judaic studies classes, from kindergarten to eighth grade, were taught “*ivrit be-ivrit*.” Students and teachers displayed impressive self-discipline in speaking only in Hebrew both in language and Jewish studies classes. Almost all of the teachers were native Hebrew speakers, brought especially from Israel as *shlichim*. And yet hardly any of these teachers had been trained as language educators. They were certified teachers for sure, but they lacked training in how to teach a foreign

language. One even reported that she took summer courses in the United States in order to develop expertise. This disconnect between proper preparation and the actual work required of teachers is repeatedly evident when it comes to the experience of *shlichim* in day schools.

Shlichim: more than a stop gap?

Over a period of many decades, Jewish day schools have hired educators from Israel, *shlichim*, on limited-term contracts of between one and four years. As the term *shaliach* indicates, these people come to North America as emissaries of the State of Israel, bringing expert knowledge of Judaic studies or Hebrew. Twelve of the 41 schools that participated in this study report hiring *shlichim* as classroom teachers. In some schools, the *shlichim* make up the great majority of the faculty responsible for teaching Hebrew and/or Judaic studies. In other schools, an individual *shaliach* has been recruited to take up a specialist position, sometimes at a quite senior level.

It is evident that in a great many cases *shlichim* in our sample constitute a kind of stop-gap measure because of the general difficulty finding appropriate candidates in the local community to teach Hebrew. For sure, school administrators are also aware that student learning is enhanced if they study the language with native Hebrew speakers who can convey an authentic flavor of Israel. Yet few schools properly orient and prepare such teachers for their work in the North American day school classroom. Although *shlichim* are typically selected through an extensive process managed by the Jewish Agency for Israel and are then required to participate in a short orientation course before they come to North America, few of the *shlichim* we interviewed felt that they had been sufficiently prepared for the culture and norms of the North American day school. Although they were capable educators, they had been given only minimal information about how to teach Hebrew as a foreign language, how North American schools handle disciplinary issues and how to interact with American parents. Even in schools that employed large numbers of *shlichim*, these recruits were more or less left to sink or swim, and had to rely on the support of the more veteran *shlichim* who worked alongside them.

It is no wonder that parents complained about this state of affairs in their narrative accounts. To cite an example:

“The teachers are for the most part Israeli and the cultural differences make it hard for them to effectively teach. Often their English is limited, which makes communication hard. The materials they choose often don’t resonate with the students. They aren’t well versed in second language teaching and pedagogical skills. My son is easy going and gets along with all his teachers except for his Ivrit teacher. This has been the norm, with one or two exceptions.”

One of the schools where we conducted a site visit provided an especially instructive counter-case because of the unusual rigor with which *shlichim* were oriented before they came and then supported once they arrived. (We have described their practices in the vignette below.) Having learned about the deliberate manner in which *shlichim* were absorbed in this school at the start of their three or four year contracts, we wonder why such practices are not more widespread. As an exception to the rule, this case highlights the degree to which, at best, *shlichim* are

an underutilized resource, and, at worst, they serve as a foreign workers making up for a labor shortage in the local community.

Teachers’ perceptions: positive but realistic

Our study was designed with an eye to exploring the extent to which teachers’ goals, priorities and perceptions were aligned with those of parents and students. All three groups of stakeholders answered identical or closely overlapping survey questions, and we have already commented on the alignment of teachers’ views with those of parents and students.

When asked to “share a story about teaching Hebrew that stood out for you (either positively or negatively),” the teachers’ narratives without doubt were generally more positive than those told by parents and by students; it would have called for an unusual degree of self-effacement if they were not.

Teachers tended to tell one of three kinds of stories: first, those about children finding special meaning or achieving

Maximizing the Promise of *Shlichim*

This Modern Orthodox school is one of the oldest in the mid-West. For most of its more than 50 years it has occupied the same premises, parts of which are beginning to show their age. Having educated numerous generations of students, today the school recruits the children of alumni who, when interviewed, express a deep sense of loyalty to the school’s mission. The school is truly an anchor for the sizable Modern Orthodox community in a number of the adjacent neighborhoods.

The school resembles many other Modern Orthodox schools in sustaining an *ivrit be-ivrit* orientation in the elementary grades, staffed largely by *shlichim*. In the middle school grades, Hebrew becomes a compulsory specialist subject taught by Israelis, while the rest of the Judaic studies curriculum is typically taught by American-born educators who are supposed to teach in Hebrew but typically use English, even while the texts they teach are in the original Hebrew.

The school stands apart in its planful approach to the hire of Israeli staff, first, and less unusually, through the hire of *b’not sherut*, two or three young Israeli women recruited each year to provide adjunct support to the faculty and who infuse the school with an Israeli spirit and presence. Second, through the extensive

support given to at least six *shlichim* (three couples) present in the school at any one time, contracted to the school for three-four years at a time, and hired on a rolling basis so that only two new people need to be integrated at any one time.

Many schools employ *shlichim*; this school provides the *shlichim* it recruits with extensive orientation and preparation even before they arrive in the United States. Coached by a mentor (a seasoned Israeli teacher herself), the incoming staff observe by video some of the classes they will teach during the coming year. Once they’re in the US, the *shlichim* meet with their mentor a couple of times a week during their first semester in the school to make sense of their experiences and to trouble-shoot any challenges. With ongoing support like this, the culture shock experienced by these new staff is minimized and there is only a short ramp-up time before they can be maximally effective. During these first months, another member of staff is tasked with making sure the material needs of the new arrivals are appropriately met.

The outcome of these investments is an authentically Israeli feel to the lower grades of the school, in the kind of language spoken in classes and in the physical environment as a whole. A relatively small investment of time and money goes a long way.

real understanding in their Hebrew class, as illustrated by the following:

“The children in second grade are learning the story of Purim in Hebrew and are discussing the word to bow and I pointed out that the word also appeared in the prayer “Aleinu.” The next day they were excited to share with me that they had noticed that they had bowed when they said the word!”

They reported occasions where children’s Hebrew abilities exceeded all expectations:

“While sharing what we see outside during a morning meeting around Tu B’shvat, shortly after I increased my Hebrew speaking in my teaching, my 2nd grader used his vocabulary to say “אני רואה עצים בלי עלים”. This was a huge accomplishment for this student who could not say “אני רואה שמש” weeks before.”

Or they told of how they themselves had made a special difference to a child or of how they were (positively) perceived by students:

“My students so identify me with Ivrit that they often address me in the hall in Hebrew!”

The generally positive impression conveyed by these stories does not, however, mean that teachers are unaware of students’ negative experiences with Hebrew. Teachers do not perceive their classes through rose-tinted spectacles. On the contrary, as their survey responses indicate, they seem quite realistic overall about the challenges they face and the ways in which their teaching is more or less effective. It is actually surprising how similar teachers’ responses to survey questions were to those of parents and students.

Priorities: In terms of their personal priorities, teachers tend to view matters from the perspective of their own teaching assignment: Those who teach Hebrew for text study, but not Hebrew for communication, personally prioritize Hebrew for text study, while those who teach Hebrew for communication think it is more important than Hebrew for text study. However, like parents and students, their perspectives vary greatly depending on where they teach. Those who teach in Orthodox schools, whether or not they teach Hebrew for communication or Hebrew for text study, assign greater importance to text study than to Hebrew for

The Critical Role of Leadership: “We Couldn’t Do This Without Meirav”

This East-coast K-8 Community day school was one of the first to adopt Hebrew at the Center’s Proficiency Approach to Hebrew language learning. Families constitute a self-chosen community and enroll their children knowing what to expect. Hebrew may not be a priority for all parents, but it is important enough for them to choose this school rather than others where modern spoken Hebrew is less of a prominent feature of school life.

The importance of Hebrew to the school’s culture is conspicuous in students’ work on the walls, and in signage around the building. It can even be heard outside the classroom where Hebrew teachers make a point of talking only in Hebrew with their students.

Members of the school community are proud of the levels of communication proficiency that students reach by the time they graduate. It seems that a number of factors are responsible for these strong outcomes.

First, the school’s leadership conveys a consistent message about Hebrew’s importance, even into the middle school. In these higher grades, Jewish subjects are not taught in *Ivrit*, for fear of undercutting the depth of intellectual engagement with content, but ample time is nevertheless devoted to Hebrew as a serious subject in its

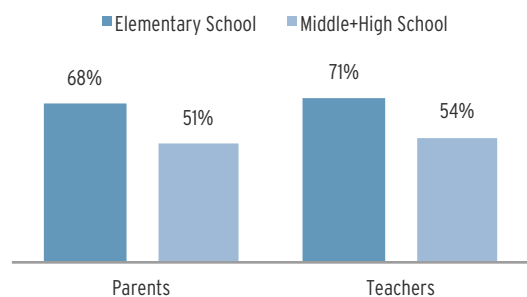
own right. There is also a widely noted determination not to cancel Hebrew for the sake of other special programming, and to balance the importance of Hebrew with all other school happenings.

Another contributor to these strong outcomes is seriousness about assessing the proficiency of each student in Hebrew and using these assessments to make modifications to the programs. Using the MOPI (Modified Oral Proficiency Interview) assessment, school leadership carefully diagnoses students’ progress on a yearly basis.

The last and most frequently noted contributor to the observed outcomes is the role of school leadership. Over and over, one hears from the staff, “Meirav is the greatest resource!!! The weekly meetings, her knowledge, her experience.” Meirav is the head of Hebrew, and one of the most senior staff members in the school with extensive experience and training in teaching Hebrew as a foreign language. Her role is almost entirely devoted to supporting her faculty and to leading the assessment of students’ performance. An Israeli educator, she serves as a role model for faculty and students. Her presence makes a palpable difference across the curriculum, holding members of the community accountable to their own shared vision.

Figure 13:
How Teachers and Parents Perceive Hebrew Instruction

Percentage who chose 'Satisfied' or 'Very Satisfied'



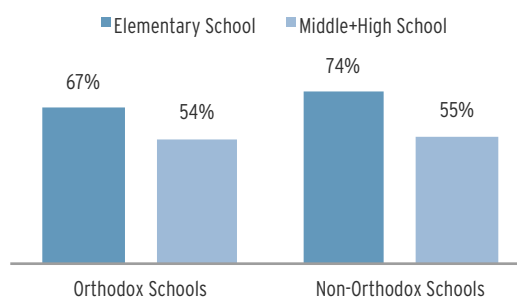
communication. And those who teach in non-Orthodox schools, again like parents and students, assign greater importance to Hebrew communication. Teachers are evidently influenced by or contribute to the different day school cultures in Orthodox and non-Orthodox schools that we have previously observed.

This impression is further underlined in terms of teachers' thinking about why learning Hebrew for communication is important. Like parents and students, those who teach in non-Orthodox schools agree more with the notion that, *"Learning a second language contributes to brain development"* than do those who teach in Orthodox schools. Nevertheless, teachers in non-Orthodox schools do not see this as the most important reason to learn Hebrew for communication. For teachers, whatever the denomination of the school where they teach, symbolic reasons for learning Hebrew (*"It forms a connection with Israel; It maintains the Jewish people's language; It is a part of being Jewish"*) are more important than are practical ones (*"It helps them when visiting Israel;" "It helps them communicate with people who only speak Hebrew"*). In this respect, teachers differ from the students, who attributed greater importance to the practical reasons for learning Modern Hebrew than to the symbolic reasons.

Satisfaction: The alignment between teachers and parents is especially dramatic when it comes to their satisfaction with the quality of instruction in their schools. As seen in Figure 13, both

Figure 14:
Teachers' Perception of Modern Hebrew Instruction by School Denomination and Grade Level

Percentage who chose 'Satisfied' or 'Very Satisfied'

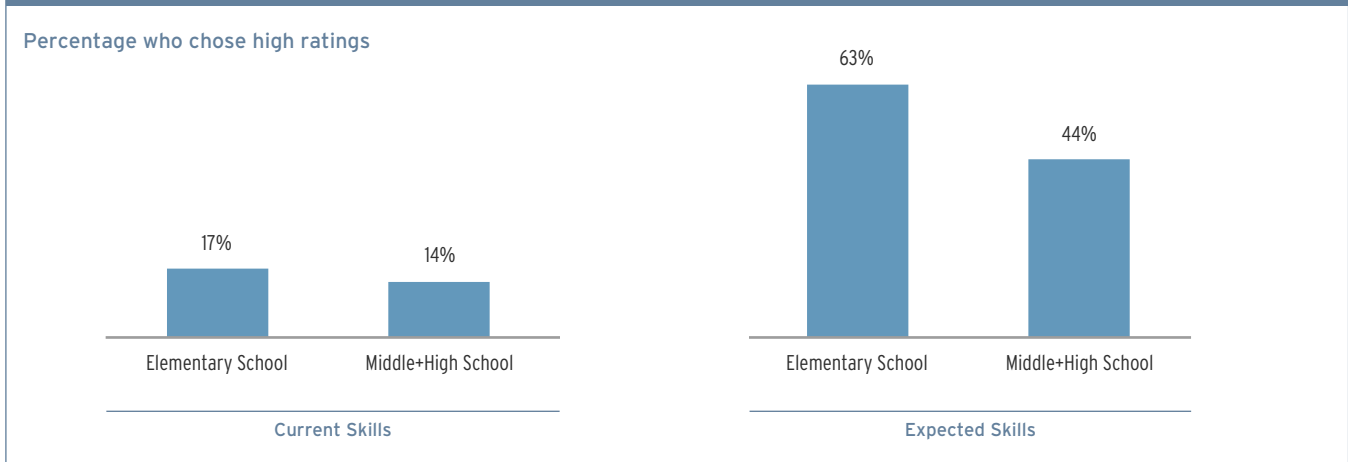


the teachers and parents of students in elementary school were much more satisfied with the quality of instruction in Hebrew for communication than were the teachers or parents of students in middle or high school. In fact, it is noteworthy that barely a majority of teachers in middle or high school are satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of instruction: 54 percent. In this respect, teachers are much less satisfied than are parents.

As can be seen in Figure 14, there is little difference between teachers' perception of the quality of Hebrew for communication in different denominational sectors. However, when we probed what teachers perceive to be the challenges to delivering better-quality instruction, a difference between the sectors emerges. In Orthodox schools, the diversity of levels in the class seems to be a particular problem, especially at the elementary level where a third of teachers identified this as the leading challenge. In non-Orthodox schools there is a feeling that the curriculum is not good enough, especially at the middle and high school level where a quarter picked this as the leading challenge.

Assessment of skills: As we have already argued in an earlier section, levels of satisfaction with the quality of instruction must surely be related to expectations of what the students' skills will be when they graduate. Just as high school teachers are consistently less satisfied with the quality of instruction, they also have lower expectations than do elementary school teachers of the skills with which students will graduate (as seen

Figure 15:
Teachers' Perception of Students' Current and Expected Hebrew Skills in Hebrew for Communication



Note: Percentages represent those who chose scores of 4 or more on a 5-point scale in response to several questions asking stakeholders to rate their current and expected reading, writing, speaking and understanding levels of Hebrew for communication. (1=low proficiency focus, 5=high proficiency).

in Figure 15). When it comes to their assessment of current skills, high school teachers perceive current skills to be lower than or the same as what elementary school teachers perceive, a perspective, as we have seen, shared by their own students. These data about teachers' perceptions make clear – contrary to some of the assumptions aired by parents – that teachers

are not out of touch with the variable quality of students' experience in schools. In fact, the general alignment between teachers' perceptions and those of their students is unusually and unexpectedly strong. Like the data we collected about teachers' professional preparation and certification, these findings undercut a widespread myth about Hebrew in North American day schools.

Review and Reflection: Hebrew at the Heart of Jewish Day Schools

Teaching Hebrew in America is counter-cultural work. America may no longer be an overwhelmingly monolingual society, but learning a foreign language continues to be most commonly justified in instrumental terms, and these terms don't readily suggest a reason to study Hebrew. Typically, it is said that being proficient in a foreign language can help you in business or a career, it can facilitate communication with neighbors, schoolmates and professional colleagues, and, when learned at a young age, it can be beneficial to brain development, thereby strengthening all kinds of cognitive growth. These arguments have become commonplaces of contemporary education, and they in fact undergird the pitch made by America's small emerging Hebrew charter school sector. But they don't necessarily make a case for Hebrew that most people (inside or outside the Jewish community) find compelling.

As we have seen in previous sections, it is difficult to argue on instrumental grounds for investing in Hebrew. While learning Hebrew may be good for your brain, why not learn a language that's also good for your career or your social life? In school communities where the majority of families don't attend synagogues where the liturgy is in Classical Hebrew, or where families don't have many relatives or personal friends in Israel who might expose them to Modern Hebrew, the instrumental case for Hebrew – as have we seen – is hard to make persuasively. Students simply don't have much day-to-day practical use for Hebrew outside school. In more traditionally religious schools, where stakeholders are more receptive to the symbolic or intrinsic reasons for studying Hebrew (where there is resonance to the contention that Hebrew is inherently important to the Jewish people and its cultural sustainability), there are other kinds of challenges. A commitment to Hebrew language education often clashes with the goals of religious socialization and a commitment to Torah education. The dueling commitments of Hebrew and Torah are seen by some to exist in a zero-sum game.

Complicating matters for educators, it's hard to know what kind of language Hebrew is. For most American Jews, Hebrew is not a heritage language. It is not a language that parents and grandparents have brought with them to North America from another place and still use to communicate at home or within ethnic enclaves. The language does not possess the kind of valence that researchers of heritage language learning have found to be compelling within ethnic communities. At the same time, within the Jewish community, Hebrew is not a foreign language in the strict sense of the term either; it is freighted with (positive and negative) emotional baggage, cultural associations of varying depths, and different degrees of social significance typically associated with a heritage language.¹⁹ Not being a foreign language in the strict sense, it's not clear who in schools is ultimately responsible for teaching it: modern language faculty, Jewish studies faculty, or both.

At first glance, these circumstances make it all the more remarkable that Hebrew looms so large in the culture and curriculum of today's Jewish day school. One might have expected the time devoted to Hebrew to have dramatically eroded, shaved back by competition with more utilitarian concerns, even within the Judaic studies curriculum. The fact that this has not happened in most schools (although it is a developing trend in high schools) takes us back to a claim we made at the outset of this report: Despite some erosion, Hebrew continues to be the most singular and omnipresent feature of the contemporary Jewish day school.

In this final section, we draw on findings from earlier sections of this report to confirm that this indeed is the case and to explain why.

¹⁹ Avital Feuer has clarified the complicated implications of these ambiguities for researchers of Hebrew language. See A. Feuer (2016). *Implications of heritage language research for Hebrew teaching and learning*. Consortium for Applied Studies in Jewish Education.

The Pervasiveness of Hebrew: A Matter of Both Supply and Demand

Investment of time: A majority of day school students continue to be required to devote a very sizeable portion of their school time to different forms of Hebrew, even if there has been some attrition in this requirement in the higher grades. Without exception, the 41 schools that participated in this study reported devoting between 25% and 50% of the week to Hebrew and/or Judaic studies.

To gain a perspective on what this means: few subject-focused charter schools or magnet schools come close to devoting such a high proportion of the school day to their specific specialties, whether science, technology, music or a modern language. In curricular terms, then, Jewish day schools have made an exceptionally deep commitment to Hebrew.

The physical and human environment of schools: Heads of Schools at participating schools completed an inventory detailing the various ways in which Hebrew is present outside the classroom – in public announcements, signage around the school, art work on corridor walls, in the conversation of teachers in public places and other ways. Their responses confirmed Hebrew’s ubiquitous presence in the physical and human environment of schools, although, again, there is a definite decrease in their presence at the high school level. Schools listed a variety of Hebrew outlets we had not even considered when constructing the inventory, making reference to school publications, library holdings, music classes, end-of-year events, holiday celebrations, Kabbalat Shabbat, Yom Ha’atzmaut and Yom Hazikaron assemblies, “Hebrew lunch,” *tefillah*, conversation among Israeli students and with *shinshinim* and *b’not sherut*.

These responses confirm an impression from school site visits. In many, although not all, day schools, Hebrew is employed as a material indicator of the school’s special identity. Hebrew helps mark out the day school as a space different from other community institutions. Hebrew introduces students to a kind of private world they share with one another and with their teachers. Although it is used in any number of secular ways, its ubiquity contributes to marking out school as a kind of special, even sacred, space.

These commitments of time and resources by the school are shared on the demand side by parents and students.

Motivations: Although very few parents (just 6 percent) reported that Hebrew was the top reason why they chose their child’s school, just over half (52 percent) of the almost 3,500 individuals who responded to the parent survey claimed Hebrew was either “very important” or “extremely important” when making a decision about the school in which to enroll their child. Hebrew may not be the magnet that draws parents in, but it is a significant factor informing their choices, although this does play out differently by denominational sectors.

Values: Even though a minority of parents and students did not express great satisfaction with their experience with different kinds of Hebrew instruction, and even if in some denominational sectors there is greater ambivalence about Hebrew, a majority of the students and parents who participated in this study nevertheless indicated that they think it important to study Hebrew. Sixty percent of students and 82 percent of parents believe it is either “important” or “very important” for [their child] to study Hebrew for communication. It seems that parents and students can see beyond any deficiencies in their current experiences with Hebrew to the deeper values such study furthers.

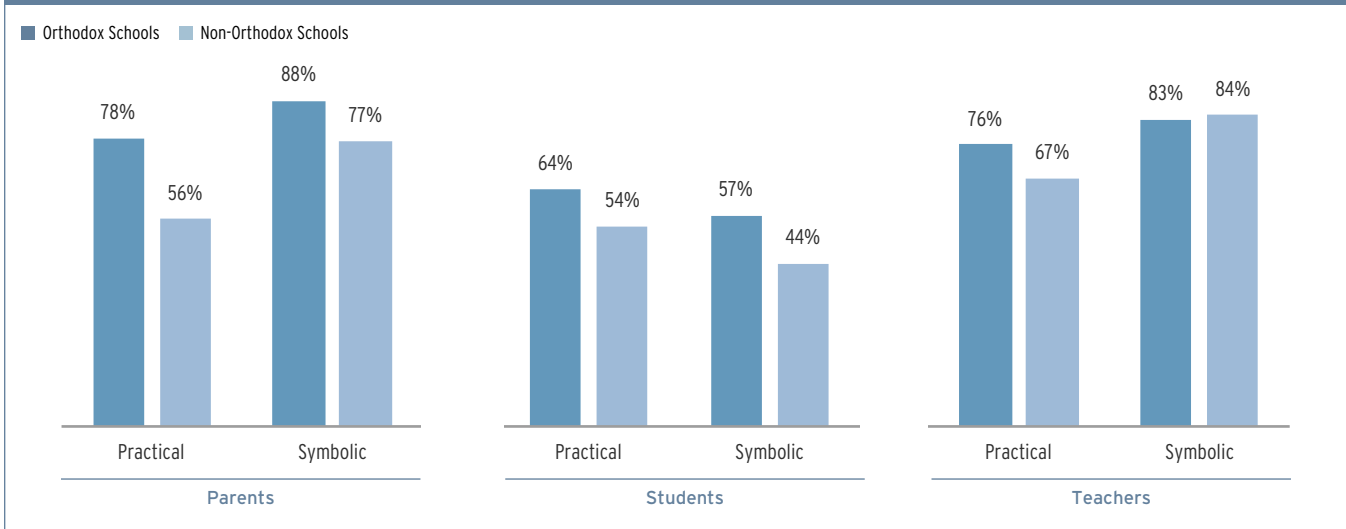
Why Is Hebrew So Pervasive?

These findings might seem surprising in light of the analyses in the previous sections that have highlighted gaps and discrepancies especially between different grade levels. Amidst our analysis of what parents, students and teachers perceive to be the nature and outcomes of their experience with Hebrew, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that Hebrew continues to be both important and valuable to most of those experiencing day school education, and it continues to be a substantial contributor to the content of that experience. Several factors account for this commitment.

An existential reason

While in an earlier section we saw differences between parents and teachers at schools of different denominations regarding the relative importance of Hebrew for prayer and Hebrew for

Figure 16:
Reasons to Study Hebrew: Symbolic Reasons Compared with Practical Reasons



Note: Percentages represent those who chose an average score of 5.5 or more on a 7-point agree/disagree scale in response to asking stakeholders to rate their level of agreement with several statements about why Hebrew is important (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=somewhat disagree, 4=neutral, 5=somewhat agree, 6=agree, 7=strongly agree).

text study, when it comes to Hebrew for communication there is a remarkable degree of agreement among adults about why study Hebrew. Employing the technique of Factor Analysis, we see in Figure 16 that in schools of all denominations both parents and teachers attribute greater importance to symbolic reasons for studying Hebrew than practical reasons. These symbolic reasons include: studying Hebrew because it's a part of being Jewish; because it is important to maintain the Jewish people's language; and because Hebrew helps develop connections to Israel, among other reasons.

Of course, parents and teachers want Hebrew to be useful, but it seems that fundamentally they share an appreciation of deeper – more existential – reasons why Hebrew is important for Jewish children. These symbolic reasons get to the core of Hebrew's meaning as the language of the Jewish people and set it apart from other – more practical – languages. Paradoxically, these symbolic reasons provide a deeper purpose for the study of Hebrew than schools typically communicate.

Hebrew's special status in day schools is grounded in this point of consensus: parents and educators regard Hebrew differently than any other foreign language and therefore generally agree about its special significance. Even though many students tend

to prefer a more instrumental approach, that may be a developmental issue reflecting a lack of life experience or of sensitivity to the meaningfulness of such symbolism. The symbolic significance of Modern Hebrew continues to be compelling to a great many day school stakeholders.

A functional reason

There may also be a functional reason why Hebrew looms so large in North American day schools. Drawing on what we learned from interviews with day school stakeholders, we suggest that Hebrew serves as a portal to a variety of educational destinations or outcomes. Parents, teachers and students don't all share a desire to reach the same destinations. Those destinations include a closer relationship to Israel and Israelis, a deeper experience of worship or competence in prayer leadership, and the mastery of Jewish texts whether contemporary and secular or traditional and religious. Parents, teachers and students make shared use of Hebrew as a portal through which to embark on various and often discrete Jewish journeys. While different forms of Hebrew serve as a means to reach these different ends, stakeholders can agree on some shared features of the means to be employed. In fact, they

find it much easier to agree on the means than on the ends in this case. This accounts for why so many Reform, Conservative, Community, Modern Orthodox and Centrist Orthodox schools all find it possible to employ the same TaL AM curriculum (a remarkable and initially surprising phenomenon we noted in an earlier section). Of course, schools differ about their ends, and that is a large part of why there are so many different Jewish day schools today. Some are more interested in nurturing closer relationships to Israel, others prioritize what they call the outcomes of a Torah education, and yet others see Jewish education and Jewish cultural literacy as providing a starting point from which to engage the wider world. Hebrew can contribute to all of these outcomes.

This isn't to say that all stakeholders agree on the usefulness of Hebrew or that Hebrew doesn't inspire intense disagreement. This disagreement is part of why schools find it so hard to clearly state their goals for Hebrew. Our point is that by serving different uses, this single medium possesses much more shared utility than most of the other components of the Jewish education that students experience. That's why Hebrew is so much more prevalent than other subcomponents of Jewish education; it can be utilized to achieve different ends. When Hebrew inspires intense debate, those debates more often concern the ends to which Hebrew teaching and learning is directed than the means being employed, or they involve a confusion of means with ends.

Inertia

A third possible reason for Hebrew's pre-eminence in day school education is, simply, because it has been so for a great many years. Inertia, more than anything else, may be a

primary factor. When our team probed educators, parents and students about why Hebrew language learning is important, many of our interviewees found it hard to tell us. We were left with the impression that commitment to Hebrew derived as much from institutional conservatism and nostalgia as from a clear sense of purpose. It is possible, we suggest, that Hebrew is being sustained by an inchoate sense of its worth, a residual commitment left over from the past.

If more parents start to question why it is worth investing so much time and effort in Hebrew, school leaders will need a thought-out set of concepts and commitment to make the case. In select vignettes we have shown how rare individuals have done precisely that and doubled down on their investment in Hebrew; we have also seen how other schools have surrendered, transforming Hebrew into one option among other foreign languages. We see an analogy in this situation to sweeping changes in the norms of Jewish afterschool education in the last twenty years. For decades, schools were able to sustain three, four or five day a week programs. Once this practice was undermined by parental pressure and by a few entrepreneurial providers, the norm eroded rapidly. Today, few congregations run programs that meet more than twice a week. If day schools find themselves acquiescing in a similar way to market forces that aim to dilute Hebrew offerings, their commitment might dissipate at a very rapid rate.

Hebrew unquestionably remains a pre-eminent component of current day school education, both for existential and functional reasons. It would be foolhardy to take its special status for granted or assume it will always have staunch champions. All the more reason for day schools to make the case for Hebrew.

Recommendations

1. We begin by reiterating a recommendation explicitly detailed in section 3 of this report, which we regard as the key practical take-away from this study: In schools where all stakeholders, especially students, express high levels of satisfaction with their study of Modern Hebrew three features are evident: they ensure and communicate that Hebrew matters; their top staff exercises strong and visible leadership specifically when it comes to communicating in Modern Hebrew; and they invest resources in the development of their Hebrew language staff. These are institutional features that transcend the specifics of what material is used in the classroom and which pedagogic approach teachers employ. These institutional commitments indicate that the schools are not simply going through the motions when it comes to Hebrew; they are not simply doing what is expected of them.

2. Though some day schools go so far as to include Hebrew learning as part of their mission statements, quite a few do not make explicit what they intend to accomplish in Hebrew, particularly when it comes to Modern Hebrew. It is abundantly clear from our surveys and from numerous narrative comments by parents and students that the case for investing time studying Modern Hebrew is far from self-evident, and, if anything, is contested by significant minorities of parents in all types of schools. Just as schools make a point of articulating their other values, so too do they need to reiterate why Hebrew for communication is a value. This can be done in a less overt fashion by sponsoring parent/student evenings devoted to Modern Hebrew culture, inviting parents to Yom Ha'Atzmaut festivals, and perhaps even offering a Yom Ivvit. But it also is a value worth articulating and championing explicitly.

3. In making such a case, it is tempting to argue for the practical importance of the language: Modern Hebrew is useful when visiting Israel, and like other languages, it may help in brain development. But in stressing these two instrumental

arguments, school leaders ought to be mindful that these arguments can backfire. What if students do not attain communications proficiency? And what if any language will do for brain development? Educators should not underestimate the potency of symbolic arguments in making their case. Hebrew is important as the medium for cultural and religious expression for Jews across the millennia and today is a language unifying Jews around the world. To be part of the Jewish conversation one needs to be a Hebraically literate Jew. Whether these contentions will persuade all doubters is certainly a question. But without making a case statement, there is even less of a chance to bring parent bodies along in support of the school's mission of developing a student population able to communicate in Modern Hebrew.

4. Teachers, both of Jewish and general studies, are among the most important stakeholders who need to hear and support the case for Hebrew. This means, most importantly, that schools have to work through with their personnel what they are trying to achieve. It also means valuing those teachers who specifically develop student language skills. And it involves educating *general studies* teachers to internalize the importance ascribed by the school to the study of Modern Hebrew. All teachers ought to be supportive of the Hebrew mission.

5. Our findings about Hebrew language teachers point to the need for a support system for this population. We found that the large majority of these teachers had engaged in formal study of pedagogy and in many cases also acquired proficiency in teaching specific Hebrew language curricula. What few of these language teachers had received was training in second language instruction. Between their busy family lives and the high costs of taking additional courses, teachers understandably eschewed investing in their own skills as second language instructors. For that reason, schools and possibly local agencies for Jewish education may wish to band together to create an

incentive system for teachers to take such courses, offer tuition assistance and possibly even provide a salary differential for those undertaking such study. Of course, there are any number of practical reasons why this might be unfeasible. But if the goal is to ratchet up the quality of student performance in Modern Hebrew language, it's time to acknowledge that the current laissez-faire system that leaves each school to figure out its own approach is not especially effective.

6. To implement any such program, whether locally or nationally, a fundamental issue must be addressed that has not been within the purview of the current report: What are good and effective teachers doing? We have noted in section three of this report that in some schools much of the school personnel, including the administrative leadership, take responsibility for speaking Hebrew with students – in classrooms and in other settings. The amount of resources devoted to Modern Hebrew, we have learned, make a difference. That said, the enterprise of Hebrew in day schools would benefit from some hard information about what goes on in classrooms where students develop a superior ability to communicate in Modern Hebrew. Which techniques and curricula seem to work best and at which grade levels?

7. This, in turn, leads to still a larger question posed by school administrators in schools we visited. There is a dearth of information available for day schools about what are realistic goals for Hebrew language learning. School heads have lamented their inability to judge how well their schools are doing based on realistic considerations as opposed to ideal, and perhaps unrealistic, expectations. “How do we assess our achievement levels compared to other schools?” several of our interviewees asked. Schools would find it very helpful to gain a sense of what are reasonable standards and benchmarks in this field. Recommendations 4-6 point to a felt need in schools for capacity building in the area of Modern Hebrew instruction. The obvious question is who will pay for such efforts. What this study points out is a common set of dilemmas faced by schools when it comes to the teaching of Modern Hebrew. As our findings are digested, perhaps some supporters of language

instruction will be galvanized to address the capacity needs of day schools when it comes to Modern Hebrew.

8. This study identified a perception shared by students and teachers in middle schools and especially in high schools that Hebrew for purposes of communication is far from an unalloyed success. Section 2 of this report contains a range of data to support this finding. In addressing this issue, we have put forth a variety of possible explanations, including: the competition of other demands on the attention span of students; the decision of schools to permit students to express themselves in English, rather than Hebrew, in order to free them to articulate more sophisticated thinking; the lack of qualified language teachers on the high school level; the deliberate decision of schools not to invest additional resources because other matters are more important; and the self-consciousness of adolescents about embarrassing themselves in public. No matter the cause of the weaknesses, it does no one any good to pretend otherwise, although one scholar has described the situation paradoxically as a story of “successful failure.”²⁰ By this she meant that stakeholders in schools are so proud of having Hebrew in their schools and describe it as a central component of what makes for a Jewish day school that they can then push aside any doubts about how well students are actually learning Modern Hebrew language skills in the upper grades. It would seem that the aspiration itself brings with it a good deal of satisfaction. But educators also need to think about actual learning. The first step to addressing the problem is to acknowledge it for what it is.

9. Orthodox schools have a specific set of issues to address. Providing religious role models and teachers who can inspire students is a high priority for those schools. Accordingly, Orthodox day schools may opt to hire teachers who can play such roles, even if they lack the ability to teach in Hebrew. The question is whether this either/or formulation does justice to the actual options available. If training institutions were to invest in intensive language programs in Israel for current and

²⁰ Sharon Avni, “Hebrew-only Language Policy in Religious Education,” *Language Policy*. 2012, p. 183.

future Jewish studies teachers – perhaps held over summers, perhaps as part of college study – a cadre of religious educators born in the United States may gain proficiency to teach Torah at higher levels in *ivrit be-ivrit*. An obvious place to start is with the gap programs offered by yeshivas and seminaries in Israel. Each year, hundreds of young Modern Orthodox Jews attend those programs, but come away with little proficiency in Modern Hebrew because classes are conducted in English. (In a few exceptional cases, gap programs at yeshivot for Israelis are attended by some North Americans whose Hebrew communication abilities improve markedly.) There is no necessary reason why yeshiva and seminary gap programs cannot take upon themselves responsibility to develop communication skills in Modern Hebrew.

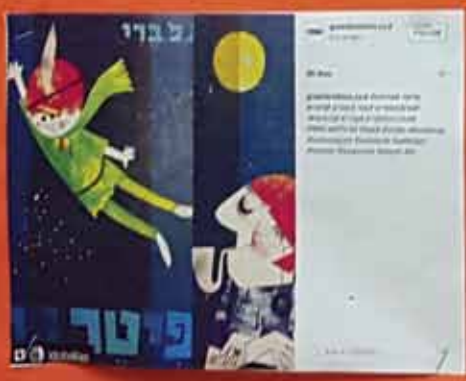
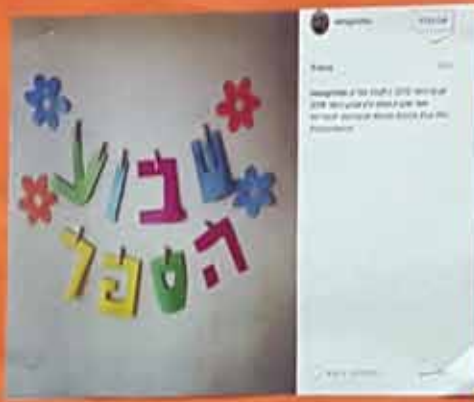
10. *Shlichim* are a valuable asset. A proportion of day schools employ them on multi-year contracts. Unfortunately, a good part of their time in North America is absorbed with learning about the environment and the very different educational cultures found in the New World as opposed to Israel. By properly preparing *shlichim* for their work in day schools, their impact may be vastly enhanced – for the benefit of their students. An additional means to increase the effectiveness of *shlichim* is to keep them on for more years (something not possible under current policies of the sponsoring agency).

Undoubtedly, this may prove a great challenge, but from an educational perspective, research has shown that it takes 5-6 years to become a good teacher. It is hard to imagine that parents would be satisfied with their children studying other subjects from novices who are passing through after a brief stay. Why should this be satisfactory when it comes to teachers of Modern Hebrew?

11. This, in turn, leads to a larger recommendation: The challenges facing day schools in regard to Hebrew are not solely theirs to solve. Creating *ivrit be-ivrit* training programs for Jewish educators is the responsibility of communal leaders and philanthropists. With the proper incentives, such programs can be created in Israel for future day school teachers. What makes this matter even more pressing is our finding that nearly one-third of Hebrew language teachers are over the age of 50. They will retire in the coming decade or two. And then who will succeed them? Planning ahead for the inevitable retirement of personnel is a challenge for Prizmah, the new day school umbrella group, for philanthropists invested in helping day schools and supportive of Hebrew language study, and perhaps too for the Israeli government. It is our hope that this report will challenge those who share these concerns to address the strengths and weaknesses of Hebrew language instruction in Jewish day schools, the most important locus of such training in North America.

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Appendix A

Hebrew for Prayer or Text Study - A Deep Fault-line

Although the primary focus of this study was on attitudes and expectations with regards to Hebrew language education, we uncovered important findings regarding other forms of Hebrew too. Just as parents in Orthodox and non-Orthodox schools diverge over the utility and meaningfulness of Modern (spoken) Hebrew, they also part ways in another significant manner, with regards to Classical Hebrew. They disagree about which kinds of classical Hebrew are most important. Among the parents who responded, two distinct conceptions emerged from our analysis of why Classical Hebrew is important to parents: studying Hebrew for the purposes of prayer and studying Hebrew for text study (Table 7).²¹

When parents, students and teachers from non-Orthodox and Orthodox sectors indicate how important each of these distinct conceptions of Hebrew are, they generally see things with decidedly different perspectives, as shown in Figure 17.

Both parents and teachers from non-Orthodox schools, including those from Conservative schools, rated the items associated with Hebrew for prayer as more important than the items associated with Hebrew for text study. (Students ranked Hebrew for prayer and for text study as of similar low importance.) The priorities of stakeholders from Orthodox schools were the reverse: In the aggregate, they assigned greater importance to text study over prayer.

The values that inform these patterns were revealed when parents and students were offered the opportunity to explain why Hebrew for text and prayer study were **not** important to them, if they had indicated as much. Once again, the effects of denomination and Jewish religious commitments came up powerfully. Simply put, those who do not relate strongly to religious imperatives saw little value in learning Hebrew for the purposes of understanding religious texts or to become

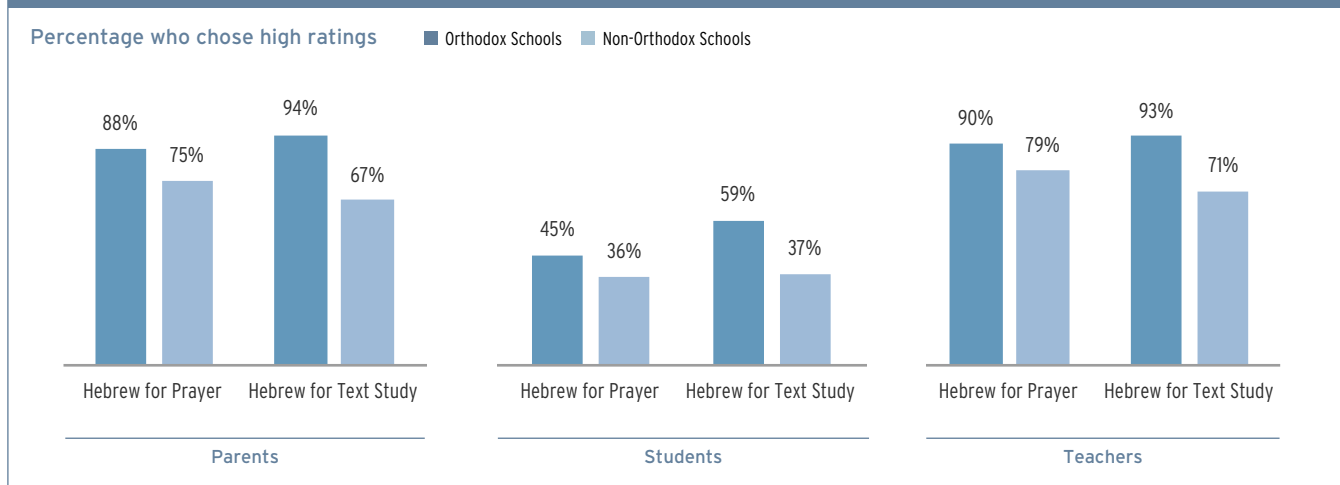
Table 7:
Conceptions of Why Hebrew for Text study or Prayer is Important

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: It is important [for my child] to learn Hebrew for text study and prayer because it helps [my child]...

Prayer	Text Study
To recognize Hebrew prayer as a part of the Jewish heritage/tradition	To understand Jewish texts in their original Hebrew
To feel a part of the synagogue	To understand the meaning of prayers
To feel comfortable when at a service in Hebrew	To prepare for studying Jewish text independently
Prepare [my child] to lead prayers	To deepen the experience of studying Jewish text
To strengthen appreciation of Jewish culture and tradition	To read out loud Jewish texts in their original Hebrew

²¹ Using the technique of factor analysis – a method for looking at underlying patterns behind responses to different survey questions – we found that parents did not distinguish between the symbolic and practical dimensions of Classical Hebrew. Rather, they made a more fundamental distinction between studying Hebrew for prayer and studying Hebrew for text study.

Figure 17:
Why is Hebrew for Text Study or Prayer Important?



Note: Percentages represent those who chose an average score of 5.5 or more on a 7-point agree/disagree scale in response to asking stakeholders to rate their level of agreement with several statements about why Hebrew is important (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=somewhat disagree, 4=neutral, 5=somewhat agree, 6=agree, 7=strongly agree).

proficient in prayer Hebrew. Here are a few examples of what they wrote:

- Parent: *“We are not a religious family. Among all the disciplines taught at school, studying prayer Hebrew is the least critical for my child’s success.”*
- Parent: *“I love the idea of my child being fluent in a language (Hebrew or other). However, I am not a believer in organized religion/G-d, hence my answer [that it’s not important].”*
- Student: *“If G-d can understand you in any language, then why must I pray in Hebrew?”*
- Student: *“I’m not religious, so it is not very important to learn Biblical Hebrew.”*²²

These responses not only help clarify why parents might assign greater importance to prayer or text study, they also help further clarify why, on average, families in non-Orthodox schools value Hebrew for communication over Hebrew for text study or prayer. Respondents consistently explained that because they’re “not religious” or because they’re “atheist” or “not traditional,” they didn’t see any point to devoting time to Hebrew prayer or the Bible. Interest in Hebrew, whether for text study or prayer, is predicated on religious commitment.

²² The language in these comments is uncorrected.

For these parents, by comparison, Hebrew for communication is decidedly more useful, even if it is less useful than many other foreign languages.

Interestingly, there is a noteworthy exception to this pattern: students attending Reform day schools. This small group (all told, 100 in the sample) assigned as much importance to two items – “to help me understand the meaning of prayers” and “to help me lead prayers” – as did students in Orthodox schools. It appears that these 5th and 8th grade students are being educated in school cultures where the importance of prayer is communicated.

In a different vein, the survey responses from stakeholders in Orthodox schools, which so consistently convey the greater importance assigned to investing school time in text study over Hebrew for prayer, indicate why there has now been something of a backlash to this order of priorities in some schools. Our visits to Orthodox schools revealed anxiety about students’ ability to “daven” (pray) fluently and to lead services. In a couple of cases, this has led schools – especially during the pre-*bar/bat mitzvah* years – to devote classroom time to improving students’ fluency in reading the siddur out loud at the expense of text study. This new development serves as a kind of exception that proves the rule: in Orthodox schools, the development of skills in text study have far exceeded those associated with prayer.

Appendix B

Methodological Synopsis

To understand the place of Hebrew in the contemporary Jewish day school, this study has attempted to address three broad questions:

1. From the perspective of the various stakeholders in Jewish day schools – administrators, teachers, parents and students – why should Hebrew be studied?
2. How do schools differ in the types of Hebrew they prioritize? And what accounts for those differences?
3. Are day school stakeholders aligned in their perceptions of what is being achieved in their schools with respect to Hebrew language acquisition, and what facilitates or impedes that acquisition?

As we have made clear, while we have been interested first and foremost in decisions with respect to the teaching and learning of Hebrew for communication (that is, Modern Hebrew), we recognize that choices about why and how to study Modern Hebrew are weighed in relation to competing priorities in other subject areas and in relation to other forms of Hebrew too. This broader framing – one that takes into account the many Hebrews that might be of importance to schools – has determined the composition of the school sample we recruited, from which schools we collected data, and what questions we asked of research participants.

Sample Construction

To capture the various ways in which this broad conception of Hebrew is operationalized and experienced in a day school setting, we set about recruiting a purposive sample of schools for the study characterized by sufficient variability between what we anticipated would be influences on or signifiers of differences in goals and expectations for Hebrew, as follows:

Denomination: We included schools identified as Reform, Conservative, Community, Modern Orthodox and Centrist Orthodox, in line with the classifications employed by Schick

in his *Census of Jewish Day Schools*.²³ We assumed that denominational orientation would have a profound bearing on goals and priorities for Hebrew, and associated choices about how to deploy school-resources.

Age-level: We included elementary, middle and high schools, in K-12 arrangements, K-8 or 9-12. We assumed that goals, expectations and experiences for Hebrew would vary greatly depending on the age of the students.

Locations: We included schools from the main regions of the United States and Canada, while making sure to include areas where parents had few day school choices, as well as regions where they had many more, and where, as consequence, a school's Hebrew program might be an important factor in their school choice.

Hebrew programs/approaches employed by schools: We included schools that worked with TaL AM, Neta, Hebrew at the Center and Uplan Or – the most widespread Hebrew program options available. We also included schools that developed their own curriculum. Although we subsequently discovered how diverse are the schools that employ the same curriculum, especially TaL AM, we anticipated that the particular curriculum or approach employed by schools would reflect distinct goals and priorities for Hebrew.

We did not collect data from Haredi or Hasidic schools; in previous studies, we have found such schools resistant to hosting researchers. The schools we included in this study came, therefore, from those sectors of the day school spectrum that run from Centrist Orthodox to Reform; sectors in which, overall, slightly more than a third of day school students are enrolled.

With a project budget that allowed us to collect quantitative data from approximately 41 schools, we developed a matrix to identify a sample of possible research sites based on

²³ Schick, Marvin. *A census of Jewish day schools in the United States, 2013-2014*. New York: AVI CHAI, 2015.

**Table 8:
Classification of Participating Schools**

Program employed: TaL AM-T ; NETA-N; Ulpan Or-U; HATC-H; Independent-I , Other-O

	Grades K-8				Grades 9-12				Grades K-12			
	Con	MO	Com	Other	Con	MO	Com	Other	Con	MO	Com	Other
North East	[N, O]	[T]	[H]	[T, I]					[N, T, H]	[T, N, O]	[N]	[T]
			[N, T, O]	[T]						[T, N, I]		
New York Area	[I, N]	[T]	[N, H]	[I]		[I]			[N, T]			
				[T, N]		[N, I]			[N, O]			
		[T, N]				[U, I]						
Mid-West		[T, N]	[T, I]				[N, I]			[T]		
			[T, N, O]									
South	[H, U]			[I]		[N]	[H, I]			[T]	[N, U, I]	
West	[T]	[T, N]	[T, N, O]				[N]				[T, N]	
			[T, N, H]									
Canada			[I]				[H, I]					

Note: Each cell displays the program(s) used by one school.

information derived from Schick’s most recent Census of Day Schools and also from the main providers of Hebrew language curriculum to day schools about which schools employed their approaches/programs. We sent invitations to schools based on this mapping of the field. We committed to providing all participating schools with a “school-report” that shared with them the survey data collected from their participating stakeholders alongside an aggregate of anonymous comparison schools that had also participated in the study.

If schools declined to take part, we tried – as far as possible – to recruit other schools from the same segment of the matrix in an effort to preserve a balanced sample. The sample’s balance is as presented in Table 8 above, made up in total of 41 schools.

All schools that agreed to participate in the study completed an inventory of questions about the extent and type of resources they employed for teaching Modern and/or Classical Hebrew. In some cases, these data resulted in us reassigning schools to a different part of the matrix and subsequently recalibrating sample recruitment priorities to reflect the mix of the schools that had committed to taking part.

Research participants

The study’s design was informed by an exploratory phase in which we consulted with scholars of Hebrew language education, senior personnel at the three main Hebrew programs being used by Jewish day schools (TaL AM, Neta, and Hebrew at the Center), and with school heads and senior school personnel in the fields of Hebrew and Jewish studies. We wanted to explore in which ways this study could be of most use to day schools and to those who work with them. One of the central questions in this exploratory phase concerned from whom we should collect data. We knew that we wanted to collect data from students at different grade levels to gauge the extent to which expectations and goals varied in relation to age. We were curious about how young our survey respondents could be if we intended to ask the same questions of all respondents. We received confirmation of our intent to survey students at key terminus points in their day school education: in 5th grade, 8th grade and 11th grade (not 12th grade because of the absence of many students after February of their senior year).

In logistical terms, we asked schools to distribute surveys during school time to students in these three grades. We asked them to indicate how many students there were in total at each of these grade levels and on which days they intended to field the survey. In this way, we could monitor student response-rates and follow-up with schools if necessary. Our efforts resulted in 3,060 student responses overall, comprising 1,036 5th graders, 1,017 8th graders, and 1,007 11th graders. The aggregate response rate was 91%.

While we had considered surveying only the parents of those students who were taking part in the study, the exploratory phase of the design process resulted in an important decision to survey all parents from participating schools: first, because a majority of parents have children in multiple grades, and their responses could not therefore be matched one-to-one to a particular child's experiences; second, because expanding the number of potential parent participants would help us develop a much more robust parent sample than one dependent on just a few grades; and last because doing so would open up an intriguing line of inquiry. A great many day school parents are day school alumni themselves. Their survey responses would offer an important longer-term perspective on the experience of learning Hebrew at day school and on what is seen as the purpose of learning Hebrew at school. It would thereby be possible to explore the relationships between their own experience of learning Hebrew and their expectations for and perceptions of their children's education.

The participating schools sent parents an invitation to take the survey, accompanied by the chance to participate in a prize-draw of a free trip to Israel. In most instances, over a four-week period during which the survey was in the field, the schools sent at least one additional reminder to parents. In total, 3,422 parents responded from the 41 participating schools. Based on information the schools provided about how many families they enroll, we estimate the response rate as 34%.

A last group to provide data for the study was made up of educators and administrators in Jewish day schools. As previously explained, because of the broad definition of Hebrew we employed, we collected data from all of those educators involved in the teaching, learning and recital of any Hebrew text, even when those school-people are not primarily

identified as concerned with Hebrew. We asked schools to field the survey both to administrators concerned with Jewish studies and/or Hebrew and to teachers who are concerned with either of these subjects. Over a four-week period, we asked them to send out at least two reminders to their staff to take part. In total, 553 educators responded to the survey, of whom 50 were administrators who do not engage in classroom teaching. We estimate the overall response rate as 73%.

Survey Design

The surveys fielded to students, parents and educators were designed to explore two broad themes: (i) what respondents conceived as the purposes of Hebrew and the importance they attached to such purposes; and (ii) their perceptions of the outcomes of both learning Hebrew for communication and learning Hebrew for text study and/or prayer. Additionally, the parent survey explored parents' own experiences learning Hebrew and their current proficiency in the language. The educator survey included additional sections designed to collect as much information as possible about who is teaching Hebrew in schools, how they have been trained and what they intend to achieve.

The first of the two broad themes was structured in relation to a conceptual framework that conceived of the goals of Hebrew education, for both language learning and for text study, as having symbolic and practical dimensions, and as involving both the productive and receptive aspects of language. These dimensions, and their subcomponents, were explored along a seven-point scale, in response to a question stem, "How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements: It is important for my child/me/children to learn **Hebrew [for everyday communication/Text and Prayer]** because...." This question thus made it possible to identify the importance ascribed to different purposes for learning Hebrew, as seen in Table 9 on p. 50, where "purpose statements" have been assigned to their relevant cell.

The second major survey theme explored stakeholders' perceptions of the skills students were developing in relation to broad categories of modern language proficiency (reading, writing, speaking and understanding), and of textual literacy (reading and understanding). Survey items then probed students'

Table 9:
A Conceptual Framework for Specifying the Purposes of Hebrew

		Modern		Classical	
		Jewish People	Israel	Prayer	Text
Symbolic	Appreciate	It connects me to the Jewish people It is a part of being Jewish	It forms a connection with Israel It fosters Zionist ideology	It helps me recognize Hebrew prayer as a part of the Jewish heritage	It helps my text study It strengthens my appreciation of Jewish culture and tradition
	Participate	It makes me feel a part of the group in situations where people sprinkle Hebrew into English It maintains the Jewish people's language	In case I want to make aliyah	It makes me feel comfortable when a service is in Hebrew	It makes me feel a part of my synagogue
Practical	Consume		It enables understanding of Israeli music lyrics It allows me to read modern Israeli literature	It helps in understanding prayers' meaning	It enables me to read out loud historical Jewish texts in their original language
	Produce	It allows communication with other Jews around the world	It enables communication with Israelis	It prepares me to lead prayers	It enables comprehension of Jewish texts in their original language

perceptions of their performance in specific Hebrew practices, such as “Speak Hebrew when called on to do so in class;” “Lead prayer;” and “Make small talk with people in Hebrew.” Teacher and parent surveys also explored the obstacles to and enablers of children’s success in the classroom and these stakeholders’ satisfaction with aspects of Hebrew instruction in school. Finally, students were asked to compare the Hebrew language instruction in their school to other school subjects. At the prompting of informants and consultants in the design phase of the project, the student, parent and educator surveys also included a single open-ended item: “Please share a story about [your child learning]/[learning]/[teaching] Hebrew that stood out for you (either positively or negatively).” This question revealed the extent of stakeholders’ satisfaction or

dissatisfaction with Hebrew in the school. It indicated those aspects of the experience that stakeholders perceived to most strongly influence the experience (whether the curriculum, teachers or the time available). And it showed in what contexts – such as trips to Israel – parents saw evidence of their child’s progress or lack of progress in Hebrew.

The pilot phase of this study included cognitive testing of the three surveys. We asked several parents and teachers (from schools not involved in the main study) to provide feedback on the phrasing of the questions, how they interpret the items and whether response options were clear and encompassing. We also administered the student survey to students in three different schools (not included in the original sample) and incorporated questions along the way to assess their understanding of the

items and their level of comfort with the questions asked. Based on the feedback we received, we tightened the language and reduced ambiguity in the very few items that were not clear.

Qualitative Data

In order to provide a context for the survey data, members of the project team conducted one-day site visits to nine of the participating schools to see first-hand how Hebrew fits into the life of day school students, in classrooms, in corridors and in other school settings. (Photos included in this report come from these site visits.) The sample of schools we visited was made up of a mix that reflected the broad contours of the overall research sample based on grade-level, denomination, location and Hebrew program used.

Such visits provided texture and some reality-checking against the quantitative data. For example, in the case of schools that claimed to operate an *ivrit be-ivrit* program, it was helpful to see for ourselves what this actually involved: Were teachers mainly speaking in Hebrew? Were students required to respond only in Hebrew? How much translating occurred, etc.?

Finally, the site visits provided a chance to interview students, parents and teachers to probe their motivations and expectations in ways that went beyond what it was possible to learn from survey responses. As we explained earlier, these visits provided a special chance to probe the perception that students were less proficient in higher grades. We had an opportunity to see for ourselves if this was indeed the case.

Analysis

To assess the conceptual framework described above, we used the method of factor analysis. Factor analysis is a statistical technique that uncovers how survey items organize into underlying, overarching latent constructs. The procedure establishes the construct validity of the survey items tested and is used to reduce the number of elements to be studied. We found that the items listed in the conceptual framework fell under four main constructs (factors): items that relate to learning modern Hebrew for practical reasons, items that relate to learning Hebrew for symbolic reasons, those that relate to text study and those that relate to prayer. We further assessed the reliability (internal consistency) of the survey items that constitute each factor. We found the factors to have good to excellent reliability (as measured by Cronbach's alpha) with all four factors having internal consistency greater than α of 0.8.

We used these four factors as *dependent* variables in further analyses assessing connections among the constructs, relationships between these constructs and other *dependent* variables (such as importance of studying Hebrew, satisfaction with the Hebrew instruction, and students' Hebrew proficiency), and between the constructs and other *independent* variables such as school denomination, grade level, and gender. To assess such connections, we used multiple regression analysis. Finally, to evaluate differences between stakeholders' perceptions, and differences between grades levels, denomination and gender on the different dependent variables, we employed the procedure of MANOVA (multivariate analysis of variance).

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Based in Jerusalem, **Alex Pomson** is Managing Director at Rosov Consulting. He trained in History at the University of Cambridge, and received his PhD in Religious Education from the University of London. He was founding Head of Jewish Studies at the King Solomon High School. He served as Associate Professor of Jewish Teacher Education at York University, Toronto where he coordinated York's Jewish Teacher Education Programme, and as a Senior Researcher at the Melton Centre for Jewish Education at the Hebrew University. He is co-author of *Back to School: Jewish Day School as a Source of Meaning in the Lives of Adult Jews*, and of the soon-to-be-published *Home Work: A New Approach to the Jewish Family and Jewish Self-Formation*. He is co-editor of *The International Handbook of Jewish Education*. Together with Jack Wertheimer and Hagit HaCohen-Wolf, he co-authored a study sponsored by The AVI CHAI Foundation, *Hearts and Minds: Israel Education in North American Jewish Day Schools* (2014).

Jack Wertheimer is a Professor of American Jewish History at the Jewish Theological Seminary, where he served also as Provost for a decade. He writes on the religious, communal and educational spheres of American Jewish life, particularly in recent decades. As Director of the Center for Research and Policy at The AVI CHAI Foundation, he has overseen projects about Jewish supplementary schools, young Jewish leaders, and the nexus of the family, community and Jewish education. He oversaw a Case Study project on how Jewish day schools enact their Jewish missions. With Alex Pomson and Hagit HaCohen-Wolf, he co-authored a study sponsored by The AVI CHAI Foundation, *Hearts and Minds: Israel Education in North American Jewish Day Schools* (2014). Among the books he has written or edited are *A People Divided: Judaism in Contemporary America*, *Learning and Community: Jewish Supplementary Schools in the 21st Century*, *The New Jewish Leaders: Reshaping the American Jewish Landscape*, and *Imagining the American Jewish Community*.



USA

The AVI CHAI Foundation
1015 Park Avenue
New York, NY 10028
Phone: 212-396-8850
Fax: 212-396-8833
E-mail: info@avichaina.org

Israel

Keren AVI CHAI
44 King George Street
94262 Jerusalem
Phone: 02-621-5330
Fax: 02-621-5331
E-mail: office@avichai.org.il

www.avichai.org