

LET'S STOP CALLING IT "HEBREW SCHOOL"

Rationales, Goals, and Practices of Hebrew
Education in Part-Time Jewish Schools

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study investigated how Hebrew is taught and perceived at American part-time Jewish schools (also known as supplementary schools, religious schools, and Hebrew schools). Phase 1 consisted of a survey of 519 school directors around the United States, focusing on rationales, goals, teaching methods, curricula, and teacher selection. Phase 2 involved brief classroom observations at 12 schools and stakeholder surveys (376 total) at 8 schools with diverse approaches. These observations and stakeholder surveys were intended to determine how teachers teach, use, and discuss Hebrew; how students respond; how students, parents, clergy, and teachers perceive their program; and these constituencies' rationales and goals for Hebrew education.

Here are some of the study's key findings:

- **Most schools emphasize decoding (sounding out letters to form words) and recitation of Liturgical and Biblical Hebrew without comprehension for the purpose of ritual participation.** Many schools also incorporate some Modern Hebrew, but only a small percentage teach Modern Hebrew conversation through immersive teaching techniques.
- **In addition, most schools practice Hebrew infusion—the incorporation of Hebrew words, songs, and signs into the primarily English environment. The (unstated) goal of infusion is to foster a metalinguistic community of Jews who value Hebrew.** This is reflected in the high importance of affective goals—such as associating Hebrew with Jewishness and feeling personally connected to Hebrew—for all constituencies, especially school directors.
- **A major challenge in Hebrew education is the small number of “contact hours” that most schools have with their students.** On average, schools spend 3.9 hours per week with 6th graders, including 1.7 hours on Hebrew. Multiple stakeholders consider this limited time the most significant challenge. Even schools on the high end of contact hours wish they had more time.
- **School directors, clergy, teachers, parents, and students have diverse rationales and goals for Hebrew education, which at times can create tensions.** School directors believe parents are only or primarily interested in bar/bat mitzvah preparation. This is true for many parents, but some parents also have other goals for their children, including gaining conversational Hebrew skills. Parents and students value Hebrew for reasons besides bar/bat mitzvah more than school directors and clergy expect them to.
- **School directors express less interest in some Modern Hebrew-related goals than do parents and other constituents.** Perhaps this reflects school directors' more realistic sense of what is possible with limited contact hours.

- **Students generally express positive feelings about their school and learning Hebrew.** Their responses suggest that schools are generally succeeding in affective goals more than school directors believe.
- **School directors are more likely to feel they are accomplishing goals that are important to them when certain factors are present:** when they have been in their positions longer, when they have realistic goals based on the contact hours they have, when their schools do much of their Hebrew learning in small groups, and when their schools assign a small amount of homework.
- **Many schools have trouble finding teachers with sufficient Hebrew knowledge,** as well as teachers with adequate pedagogical skills for teaching Hebrew.
- Schools are making changes in opposite directions. **Some schools are adding more Modern Hebrew instruction; others are shifting their focus solely to Textual Hebrew.**
- **Hebrew Through Movement and other elements of #OnwardHebrew have become popular.** Many school directors consider these approaches successful.
- **Online Hebrew learning is gaining some traction.** Online options include gamified activities and one-on-one Skype/FaceTime tutoring sessions (this study was conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic). School directors generally feel that these individualized and technologically based approaches are effective.
- **Many school directors and teachers are not aware of the resources for Hebrew education in part-time Jewish schools.**

Based on these findings, we recommend several actions for schools to take:

- Initiate a comprehensive process of collaborative visioning regarding rationales, goals, and practices involving teachers, clergy, parents, and students.
- Make explicit the primacy of affective goals and expand Hebrew infusion practices to accomplish those goals.
- To teach decoding, spend less class time in large groups and more time in one-on-one and small-group configurations.
- With parent buy-in, offer a small amount of gamified homework.
- Offer multiple tracks or an enrichment option for families interested in conversational Hebrew.
- Change the informal nomenclature to stop using the misnomer “Hebrew school,” except where Hebrew language proficiency is the primary focus.

In addition, the nationwide and regional educational infrastructure should offer more funded online training for teachers, information sharing, and consulting and training for school directors.

INTRODUCTION

There is only so much you can do in a 5-hour-a-week program if you want it to be about more than bnei mitzvah prep—and we are firmly committed to offering a well-rounded Jewish education. We don't think we can get any more time from the families, but it's really not enough time for quality second language acquisition.

This quote from a school director sums up a common tension in American part-time Jewish schools¹ (also known as supplementary schools, religious schools, and Hebrew schools, most but not all of which are part of synagogues). Many parents send their children to such schools primarily to prepare them for their bar/bat mitzvah,² but educators (and some families) are interested in graduates attaining Hebrew skills beyond ritual performance. For many centuries, Jews engaged with Hebrew as a language of sacred texts and liturgical participation, but since the revitalization of Hebrew in Israel, it has become a vernacular for a large percentage of world Jewry. This transition led to a dilemma: should part-time Jewish schools teach Modern Hebrew conversation and writing in addition to decoding and recitation of Textual Hebrew? How much time should they spend on Hebrew in relation to other subjects, like Torah stories, holidays, values, and God? Is it possible to do all this in the few hours per week that families are willing to commit to Jewish education as only one of many extracurricular activities?

As a professor who trains Jewish educators explained to us, the field of part-time Jewish education lacks a “cohesive understanding about what Hebrew is taught, what is the purpose.” And, as we learned from surveys with school directors, teachers, clergy, students, and parents, different constituencies have different answers to questions like these, even within the same school. This diversity of opinion often leads to a discourse of failure. If parents expect their children to understand the Hebrew prayers they are reciting and to converse in Israeli Hebrew, they will undoubtedly be disappointed if the school's sole goals are decoding and recitation.

Research questions

The three of us—a researcher of Jewish language and identity (Benor), a researcher of heritage language education (Avineri), and a rabbi-educator (Greninger)—came together to investigate these issues. Our primary research question was: **How is Hebrew taught and perceived at American Jewish part-time schools?** Sub-questions included: How do educators, students, parents, and clergy perceive the rationales and goals for Hebrew education? Which types of Hebrew (Liturgical, Biblical, Modern) and which skills (e.g., decoding, recitation, conversation) are emphasized? Which curricular materials and teaching methods are used? What are stakeholders' perceptions of their school's approach and curriculum?

These questions could be—and have been—asked about other Jewish educational settings, including day schools³ and summer camps.⁴ We opted to study part-time schools because they have been and remain the primary locus of Jewish education for most American Jews,⁵ yet they have received little scholarly attention.

Audiences

We have multiple audiences in mind for this report, including school directors, educators, funders, and other Jewish leaders concerned with the success of part-time Jewish schools, as well as families who participate in such schools. We also envision that researchers of Hebrew education, Jewish education, Jewish languages, and heritage/minority languages will find this report of interest. Our hope is that this research will enable interventions to better align goals and methods among educators, congregations, and families, thereby strengthening diaspora Hebrew education and heritage language education more broadly.

Methodology

Our multi-phase study design⁶ was influenced by previous scholarship on Hebrew education in Jewish day schools and summer camps.⁷ The primary focus was on quantitative data collection and statistical analysis, with qualitative data and interpretive analysis serving to complement and illustrate patterns identified in the quantitative components of the study.⁸ The study was conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic and therefore does not investigate schools' or support organizations' transition to online instruction in spring 2020.

Phase 1 survey: School directors

The study began in 2018 with a review of previous scholarship and interviews with 20 experts on Jewish education, including scholars and staff members at umbrella organizations. Based on this information, we crafted a questionnaire for school directors about why and how their schools teach Hebrew. We received feedback on various drafts of the survey from those we had interviewed, as well as additional experts. The survey was pretested with several people who had previously worked as school directors and modified based on their feedback.⁹

In November and December 2018, we emailed 1,017 direct invitations to school directors of all part-time Jewish schools we could find in the United States¹⁰ (using lists obtained from several umbrella organizations, including national denominational groups, associations of educators, bureaus of Jewish education, and Federations). We publicized the survey through Facebook groups and email lists of educators. The survey yielded 519 usable responses, including responses from 58 schools that were not on our direct email list. This sample represented great diversity in school-synagogue connection, denomination, region¹¹ (43 of the 50 states + DC were represented), density of the Jewish population in the state where the school was located,¹² and school size (Table A).

Table A. Percentage of schools in each category whose directors responded to the Phase 1 survey	
<i>School-synagogue connection</i>	
Part of a synagogue	94
Independent or other	6
<i>Denomination</i>	
Reform	56
Conservative	28
Reconstructionist	5
Chabad	3
Secular humanist	2
No denomination/Independent	2
Israeli, Orthodox, Renewal, pluralistic, or other	6
<i>Region</i>	
Midwest	14
Northeast	46
South	18
West	22
<i>Jewish density of state where school is located</i>	
Dense	83
Sparse	17
<i>School size: Number of students in 6th grade</i>	
Very small: 0-9	43
Small: 10-19	25
Medium: 20-49	24
Large: 50+	8

Given that there is no comprehensive list of part-time Jewish schools, we do not know how our sample is skewed. It is possible that full-time paid school directors were more likely to respond. Even so, 31% of respondents work part-time and are paid, and 5% work part-time and are unpaid. It is also possible that school directors of larger schools were more likely to respond, but almost half of the schools in the sample have fewer than 10 students in 6th grade.

Phase 2 surveys: Students, parents, teachers, and clergy

Based on responses to the phase 1 survey, we curated a sample of 8 schools from among the 111 school directors who responded that they were “definitely” interested in participating in a follow-up study. These eight schools reflected some of the diversity of the phase 1 sample. In April and May 2019, the school director at each of these schools invited members of four constituencies to take similar (but shorter) surveys: students (finishing 6th grade and, at smaller schools, 4th, 5th, and sometimes 7th grades), parents of those students, teachers, and, except for the one independent school, clergy. Out of 781 invitations sent for these

stakeholder surveys, we received 376 usable responses—a 48% response rate. Individual schools’ stakeholder response rates ranged from 26% to 100%. It is not possible to determine how/if the sample is skewed. It is possible that constituents who chose to respond were more likely to value Hebrew or to be satisfied with the school, but we did receive some responses from constituents who were disgruntled and/or have no interest in Hebrew beyond bar/bat mitzvah. Table B lists the eight schools with their location, denomination, and size; the number of people in each group that responded to the survey; and the number of survey invitations sent to each group.

Table B. Numbers of Phase 2 survey respondents from each school / number of survey invitations sent

<i>School location, denomination, size</i>	<i>Students</i>	<i>Parents</i>	<i>Teachers</i>	<i>Clergy</i>
Massachusetts, non-denominational/independent, very small	9/9	9/9	3/3	N/A
Florida, Conservative, very small	2/25	4/25	9/9	1/3
Illinois, Conservative, small	9/21	10/20	5/7	1/2
Idaho, Reform, small	22/25	20/21	8/11	1/1
California, Reform, medium	29/44	19/44	4/6	3/3
New York, Reform, medium	25/80	30/75	10/12	3/6
Massachusetts, Reform, large	18/35	30/35	12/30	5/5
California, Reconstructionist, large	19/100	41/100	12/12	3/3
Total respondents / invitations sent	133/339	163/329	63/90	17/23

Following a parent consent procedure, students participated in the survey one at a time on a school device in a private area during school hours, facilitated by staff. School directors, parents, teachers, and clergy participated via email invitation on their own devices. Participants knew that the survey was optional and they could skip any questions or stop at any time.

Observation

With the help of research assistants, we conducted observations at these same eight schools, plus two additional schools that were originally slated to participate in the constituent surveys but decided not to (a small Conservative school in New Hampshire and a medium Reform school in Florida). We also conducted pilot observations at two additional schools early in the study (a medium Conservative school and a large Reform school, both in California). At each school we observed one or two entire sessions, including a class geared toward Hebrew and at least one other class. Other activities we observed included communal *tefillah* (prayer), snack/dinner, singing, Israeli dancing, Purim *shpiel* rehearsal, and drop-off and pick-up. During these site visits, we briefly interviewed some school directors, teachers, and clergy.

The 12 schools we observed represent a range of Hebrew approaches. Because this portion of the research included only schools whose directors indicated interest in participating in

follow-up research, it likely excluded schools whose directors have little interest in Hebrew. We did not conduct observations at any schools run by Chabad or geared toward Israelis. Although we did visit schools in the sparsely Jewish states of Idaho and New Hampshire, we did not visit any schools in the Deep South.¹³

Review of curricular materials

We reviewed educational materials geared toward part-time Jewish schools through internet searches, an analysis of materials listed in publishers' catalogues, and consultation with Jewish educators through listservs and Facebook groups such as JEDLAB.

BACKGROUND

Previous scholarship and conceptual frameworks

This study addresses a major gap in the scholarship. A few studies reference trends in Hebrew education in supplementary schools¹⁴ or investigate Hebrew education in a particular school.¹⁵ And several practitioners have offered possibilities for how Hebrew education in these schools might be improved.¹⁶ However, as Avni, Kattan, and Zakai point out, there has not yet been a landscape study of Hebrew education in supplementary schools nationwide,¹⁷ nor has there been a comparison among various stakeholders' approaches and perceptions.

Based on previous scholarship and our own experiences as researchers and practitioners, we approached this project using several conceptual frameworks. First, Hebrew is not one unified linguistic entity. Hebrew has many historical phases, most notably the ancient phase when it was codified in sacred texts and its transformation to a modern language (called *re-vernacularization*) in the 19th and 20th centuries.¹⁸ Decoding a biblical verse and conversing about the weather, for example, require different skills. Our research therefore distinguishes between two different types of Hebrew, Textual (including Biblical and Liturgical) and Modern, while recognizing their great overlap.¹⁹

In addition, Hebrew serves as a *flexible signifier*: it has multiple potential symbolic meanings.²⁰ Hebrew can symbolize Jewishness in general, or it can symbolize Jewish religiosity, Israel, or even the particular Jewish communal setting or subgroup in which it is heard or seen. Different people might ascribe different symbolic value to the same Hebrew word, or an individual might have different associations with the word in different contexts.

Related to these diverse symbolic meanings, Jewish educational institutions (and individuals) have diverse rationales and goals surrounding Hebrew²¹ and use different amounts and different types of Hebrew. In a school geared toward secular Israeli children, Hebrew might be seen as connected to Israel, and students might learn little Textual Hebrew. A synagogue-based school might be solely concerned with Hebrew for ritual recitation and offer no instruction in Modern Hebrew. One school might be filled with Hebrew words, signs, songs,

activities, and instruction, and another might have hardly any. Researchers have referred to this diversity as a “continuum of Hebrew richness.”²² Our study was designed to analyze this diversity. The surveys asked about multiple possible rationales (e.g., bar/bat mitzvah preparation, Hebrew as a language of the state of Israel, the Jewish religion, and the Jewish people) and multiple goals (e.g., skills in Hebrew decoding, writing, and conversation). We selected schools to observe that were at various locations along the continuum of Hebrew richness.

We also came to this study aware of a discourse of failure regarding Hebrew education in part-time Jewish schools and knowing that some leaders in the field have introduced innovations intended to address this perceived failure. Some alternative approaches to Hebrew education have gained traction around the country, including *sound to print* (introducing decoding only after students have been exposed to spoken Hebrew for several years), *Hebrew Through Movement* (a Hebrew version of an approach to language learning called Total Physical Response²³), and *Jewish life vocabulary* (Hebrew words used within English in Jewish communal life). All of these are part of the #OnwardHebrew approach.²⁴ Educators, including us, have expressed interest in Hebrew education serving *affective goals*—strengthening students’ personal connections to and feelings about Hebrew.²⁵ Finally, some schools have incorporated one-on-one learning, including using technology like Skype.²⁶ Our surveys probed how widespread these approaches are and how stakeholders perceive them.

This study also draws from descriptive, theoretical, and methodological advances in scholarship on language education more broadly.²⁷ American Jews may approach Hebrew differently than immigrant and indigenous groups approach their languages, because of the multifaceted history of Hebrew, including both ancient/sacred and modern/vernacular status. As Ergas notes, “Hebrew, at least in the context of Hebrew instruction for Jews in a Jewish educational setting ... is probably best understood as some amalgam of a heritage language (the language of actual ancestors), a second language (one spoken at school but probably not at home), and a foreign language (a language learned in a place where very few people speak the language).”²⁸ Despite the differences, research on American Jews’ Hebrew education can still incorporate insights from other languages and groups and contribute to this growing body of scholarship.

There are several possible approaches to language education. Teachers might focus on communication skills, including the *productive skills* of speaking and writing and the *receptive skills* of listening and reading. A foundational component of reading skills is decoding—sounding out letters to form words. In most language education, reading skills involve both decoding and comprehension, but many part-time Jewish schools focus only on decoding so students will be able to recite Hebrew prayers and Biblical passages, skills necessary for ritual participation.

In contrast to communication skills, another possible approach to language education is *ethnolinguistic infusion*—when group leaders incorporate elements of the group’s special language in the context of another primary language of communication to foster connection to the language and the group.²⁹ For example, in the Elem Pomo tribe in California, most tribe members communicate in English and know very little Elem Pomo, but leaders frame ceremonies with brief prayers in Elem Pomo.³⁰ Ethnolinguistic infusion can involve songs, *loanwords* (words from one language used within another language), signs, and metalinguistic conversation and activities (talking about the language). The goal of these infusion practices is not for participants to become proficient in the language, but rather for them to feel personally connected to the language and the group. In other words, by exposing group members to elements of the special language, group leaders strengthen ideological links between the language and the group, between the individual and the language, and between the individual and the group. A possible result of Hebrew infusion in Jewish educational settings is that Jewish children feel connected to a local and/or worldwide *metalinguistic community*³¹ of Jews who value Hebrew and use it ritually even if they have limited productive language skills.

Some community members may be critical of ethnolinguistic infusion, especially of the hybrid language practices and the lack of focus on linguistic proficiency. Sri Lankan Tamil immigrant communities in the UK, US, and Canada serve as examples of this tension. Some immigrants are critical of their children or grandchildren using only loanwords and memorized chants and hymns, rather than learning productive speaking and writing skills in Tamil.³² We find similar conflicting discourses in Jewish communal life. Although many schools (and summer camps³³ and other settings) focus primarily on ethnolinguistic infusion, some feel they should also teach productive Hebrew conversation skills.

We found the notions of ethnolinguistic infusion and metalinguistic community useful in analyzing how part-time Jewish schools approach Hebrew education in their limited contact hours. And we believe Jewish educational leaders will feel comforted knowing that American Jews are not the only group grappling with how best to approach language education in a society in which learning a second language proficiently is rare and many activities compete for children’s time. Finally, we hope our research will be useful to scholars and communal leaders interested in heritage language education in immigrant, indigenous, and religious communities.³⁴

Historical background

Hebrew education today has been influenced by over a century of diverse orientations and pedagogical approaches. In the early 20th century, Hebraists—Jews ideologically committed to the revival of spoken Hebrew—dominated American part-time Jewish schools, including Talmud Torahs but excluding Reform Sunday schools. In fact, part-time schools focused so much on Hebrew that they came to be called “Hebrew schools.” In 1902, Samson Benderly began to experiment with lessons conducted entirely in Hebrew. The schools he ran focused

solely on oral skills in the early grades and only later introduced reading and writing.³⁵ As philanthropist and benefactor Harry Fidenwald gushed in 1903, “In our schools, Hebrew, which some called a dead language, comes to life under the magic of speech, for all instruction excepting History, is in Hebrew. The exercises in physical culture and the games and songs are conducted in Hebrew only.”³⁶ Benderly’s disciples continued to run supplementary schools in which Modern Hebrew language acquisition was a central goal—one that, it seems, they accomplished.

The focus on Hebrew conversation skills was possible because of the large number of contact hours at these schools: two hours a day for four to six days per week. **Over the decades, contact hours decreased due to suburbanization and the rise of competing activities.** In addition, the primary venue moved from dedicated schools to synagogues, and the emphasis shifted from general Jewish education to bar/bat mitzvah preparation.³⁷ The focus of Hebrew instruction transitioned from both productive and receptive Modern Hebrew language skills to receptive skills in Textual Hebrew and eventually primarily to decoding. These changes led to the tensions schools are still experiencing today. For example, research on Conservative congregational schools in the 1970s and 1980s found that “educators were increasingly reassessing their Hebrew-centered curricula, as they were confronted with damning reports about student outcomes. After twenty years of closing their eyes, they felt forced to confront the mismatch between their ambitious curricular aims and the declining number of teaching hours.”³⁸

In the Reform movement, Hebrew education underwent a different series of trajectories. In the early years of the 20th century, Sunday schools were the dominant form of education for youth in Reform communities. The schools held classes one day a week (Sundays) and incorporated very little, if any, Hebrew. In 1923, one of Benderly’s disciples, Emanuel Gamoran, was recruited to head the Reform movement’s Commission on Jewish Education, where he encouraged Reform part-time schools to expand from one to two days a week and to incorporate Hebrew into the curriculum. Gamoran was initially met with resistance, but over time, his proposals took hold. By the mid-to-late 20th century, many Reform synagogues had incorporated more Hebrew into their schools, in many cases adding one day a week for “Hebrew school” in addition to the usual “Sunday school” on Sundays.³⁹

As is clear from this brief historical background, part-time Jewish schools in the United States have taught Textual and Modern Hebrew using diverse methods in service of diverse goals. The diversity, tensions, and changes-in-progress that we found in contemporary schools continue this long history.

Concerns of educational leaders

When we interviewed leaders in the field of Jewish education, including several who work for umbrella organizations that support part-time schools, they expressed a number of common concerns. Many worried that school directors tend to lack coherent goals and means of

assessing them. A few complained that some school directors are set in their ways and have little interest in innovation or do not have the training to research and implement changes in pedagogical approach.

Educational leaders also bemoaned the misalignment of goals, such as parents (and some clergy) wanting to focus primarily on bar/bat mitzvah preparation and some directors and teachers who are interested in skills beyond this life cycle event, including Modern Hebrew conversation. This can at times create tensions among stakeholders in part-time schools.⁴⁰ Based on these conflicting concerns, leaders characterized bar/bat mitzvah using metaphors like “the elephant in the room,” “an albatross around these organizations,” and “the third rail of Jewish education.” One leader explained, “Parents still see bar mitzvah as the test, so we’re still teaching to that test. If that wasn’t an issue, we could teach Modern Hebrew.” Another called for more transparency: “If the goal is bar mitzvah, let’s just get honest about it.”

A few leaders relayed concerns that parents were not on board with best practices in the field. In particular, when a school adopts the increasingly popular sound to print approach, some parents complain that their child is “not learning Hebrew,” by which they mean decoding. This leads to some schools continuing to spend years on decoding, when they could be teaching different skills. As one leader put it, they are “wasting time doing the thing the customer demands,” because “in the end, they have to meet the demands and the needs of the people who pay their salary.”

Some educational leaders pointed to the diversity of schools in different parts of the country. In large cities, there is an ample pool of prospective teachers, including many Israeli immigrants who speak Hebrew fluently. In small towns, especially in the Deep South, there are so few Jews that at some schools, all administrators and teachers are volunteers, including some non-Jewish Hebrew teachers (more on this below).

Another issue that leaders highlighted is a tension between teaching skills and making learning fun. This tension stems from school directors trying to shed the bad reputation of Hebrew school as something that parents hated and now send their children to, expecting them to hate it too. One leader said, “Some educators take content away in an attempt to make it more fun for kids. This is most evident in social action/*tikkun olam*, but it happens in Hebrew too.”

Finally, educational leaders brought up the issue of limited time. **School directors must make difficult decisions about which topics and skills to prioritize in only a few hours per week.** One director noted, “The hardest thing to teach with less time is Hebrew because language learning is incredibly intensive.” We had these issues in mind as we crafted our surveys and planned our observations.

SURVEY FINDINGS

This section reports findings from the phase 1 and phase 2 surveys. First, we present mostly quantitative data regarding structural features, school directors, teachers, various constituencies' rationales and goals for Hebrew education, and the extent to which they feel their schools are attaining those goals. We also report how schools assess students' progress and to what extent schools communicate goals and involve various constituencies in envisioning goals.

Then we turn to the diversity of schools according to denomination and Jewish density of location, various constituencies' satisfaction, and correlations with school directors' perceptions of success. Finally, we report qualitative survey data, including factors that various constituencies feel are helping and hindering their schools from achieving Hebrew goals, how schools have recently shifted their Hebrew education, and how they hope to shift it in the future.

Schools' structural features

Schools exhibit diversity in several areas. In this section, we present quantitative findings on contact hours and Hebrew hours, topics covered, learning configurations, approaches to Hebrew education, grade levels when certain skills are introduced, and attendance.

Hours

Schools' total contact hours, including classroom hours, private tutoring, and online programs, range from 0.5 to 6 per week, with a mean of 3.5 for 3rd grade and 3.9 for 6th grade (Table C). Most of those contact hours are not devoted to Hebrew. On average, 6th graders spend 39% of their school time on Hebrew learning, with a mean of 1.7 hours. **The vast majority of school directors (91%) report that their 6th graders have less than three hours of Hebrew learning each week.** The number of Hebrew learning hours correlates strongly with the number of contact hours.

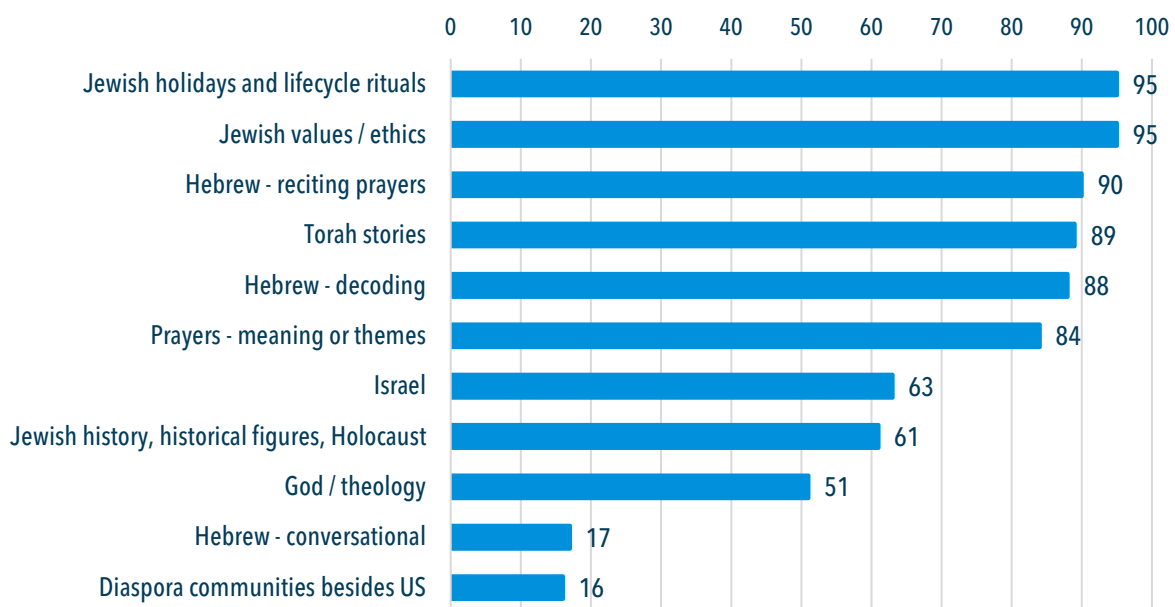
Table C. Percentage of all school directors reporting various ranges of contact hours and Hebrew learning hours in 6th grade

<i>Contact hours (mean = 3.9 hours)</i>	
<2.5 hours	19
3-4.5 hours	56
5+ hours	26
<i>Hebrew learning hours (mean = 1.7 hours)</i>	
0-1 hour	36
1.5-2.5 hours	55
3+ hours	9

Topics

“Hebrew learning” means different things to different people, so we asked a series of questions to determine the relative amount of time students spend on various subjects, Hebrew-related and otherwise (Figure 1). On average, school directors reported that their schools spend more than a moderate amount of time on Hebrew prayer recitation and Hebrew decoding, slightly less than was spent on Jewish holidays and life cycle rituals and on values and ethics. Hebrew conversation and Jewish diaspora communities (outside the US) ranked lowest in terms of instructional time. In other words, **students spend a good deal of time on ritual participation skills involving Textual Hebrew but very little time on Modern Hebrew conversation skills**. Not surprisingly, schools with more contact hours and more Hebrew hours tend to report spending more time on all of the different Hebrew skills.

Figure 1. Percentage of schools that report spending a moderate or great amount of time on various subjects



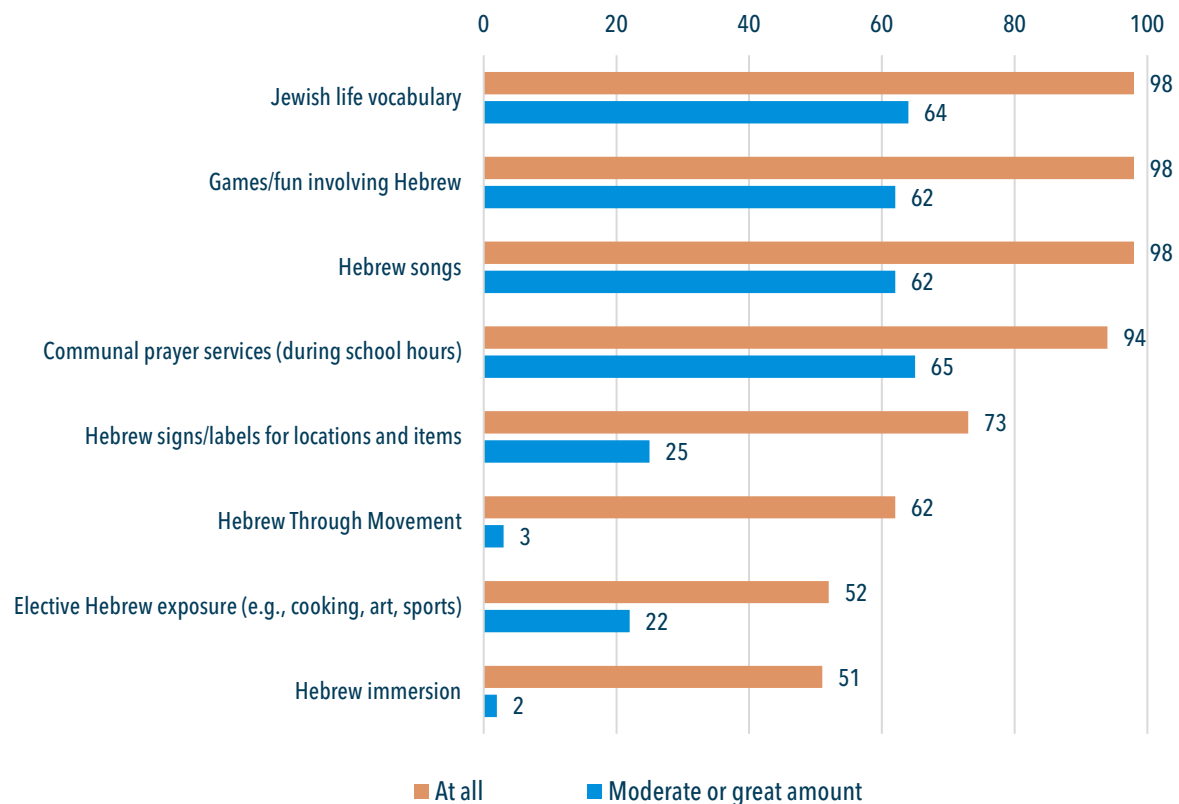
Learning configurations

We asked school directors how much of their schools’ Hebrew learning takes place in various configurations, such as whole class and small group learning. We found that whole class is the most common (80% of schools do this a great or moderate amount), followed by small group (76%), then whole grade (56%). One-on-one in person (25%) and whole school learning are rare (16%), and one-on-one distance tutoring is quite rare (6%), although it seemed to be a growing trend even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Half of schools report assigning a small amount of self-directed learning at home (in other words, homework). Having more small-group learning and assigning a small amount of homework correlate with better alignment between important goals and perceived success, as we explain below.

Approaches to Hebrew education

In response to questions about various approaches to Hebrew education (Figure 2), school directors highlighted their **greater focus on ethnolinguistic infusion than on productive communicative skills**. Almost all schools report using at least some Jewish life vocabulary (which we defined on the survey as “Hebrew words used in English sentences, like *siddur*, *tefillah*”), communal prayer services during school hours, Hebrew songs, and games/fun activities involving Hebrew.⁴¹

Figure 2. Percentage of school directors who report using various approaches to Hebrew education at all and in a moderate or great amount



These activities, along with the use of Hebrew signs/labels for locations and items (73% of schools), represent Hebrew infusion. Schools recognize that proficiency is unlikely in the limited hours they have, but they expose students to routinized elements of Hebrew in fun, communal ways. The practices that are more oriented toward proficiency are less common but are still found at some part-time Jewish schools (in contrast to most overnight summer camps, where they are rare⁴²). About half of schools report using at least some elective-based Hebrew exposure and “Hebrew immersion (activities and conversations conducted in Hebrew),” but very few report doing so more than a small amount. As we found in our observations, such immersive activities might include teachers taking roll in Hebrew, playing

a game in which each student must say an elementary Hebrew sentence, or Hebrew Through Movement (HTM). In fact, in the school directors' survey, using Hebrew immersion correlated strongly with using HTM, suggesting that school directors were thinking of HTM when they reported that their school uses Hebrew immersion.

Hebrew Through Movement

Hebrew Through Movement has become popular: 62% of schools report using this method at least to some extent.⁴³ HTM is a strategy for teaching mostly receptive (listening) Hebrew skills. Students hear and respond to Hebrew commands through physical movements involving body parts, objects, colors, and, in some cases, words that are part of Jewish prayers and rituals. The approach is explained on the [HTM website](#):

The curriculum for Hebrew Through Movement starts with a foundation in modern Hebrew, but in part-time educational settings has as its goal making the prayers in our siddur, as well as synagogue and Jewish vocabulary, more easily accessible to those with limited learning time . . . As with other TPR [Total Physical Response] curricula, it introduces Hebrew in a playful and meaningful way, creating a positive first link between children and Hebrew. Hebrew Through Movement is supported by the latest brain research on learning, providing an aural foundation for Hebrew that opens the door to more facile Hebrew decoding and reading.

We can see the emphasis on affective goals in this description (“playful and meaningful”; “positive first link between children and Hebrew”). Based on this, we might expect that HTM use would correlate with having higher expectations or outcomes for affective goals. This is not the case. HTM use does correlate, however, with interest in Israel and Modern Hebrew. Schools are more likely to use HTM if their school directors value the Israel rationale for Hebrew education and if they feel parents and students are interested in Hebrew education beyond bar/bat mitzvah. Some leaders may intend HTM primarily to improve outcomes in decoding and recitation, but many schools are using it to accomplish their goals of teaching skills in Modern Hebrew: following basic instructions and having basic conversations. As we describe later in this report, the HTM sessions we observed engaged students more than some other pedagogical techniques.

When skills are introduced

Schools introduce Hebrew reading skills in different grades (Table D). **A majority introduce letters by kindergarten and decoding by 3rd grade.** The grade in which each of these skills is introduced correlates with grade size. Schools with smaller populations tend to introduce both letters and decoding earlier. Perhaps this is because leaders feel that it is easier to work on decoding among younger students when there are fewer in a grade, or perhaps larger schools are more likely to have school directors who have adopted the #OnwardHebrew

approach, one tenet of which is to introduce decoding after a few years of exposure to spoken language.

Table D. Percentage of school directors who report that their school introduces letters and decoding as part of Hebrew reading at particular grades		
Grade	Letters (by name or sound)	Decoding
Pre-K	18	1
K	41	5
1	11	11
2	12	28
3	8	35
4	3	11
5	0	1
6	1	1
Other	6	6

Attendance

Educational leaders mentioned that low attendance in part-time Jewish schools hinders Hebrew education. We asked school directors to estimate what percentage of 3rd grade and 6th grade students are present on an average day (Figure 3). Attendance in 3rd grade is slightly higher than attendance in 6th grade, which is to be expected given that students become busier in their preteen years. Over a third of schools report that less than 80% of 6th grade students attend on an average day.

Figure 3. Percentage of school directors who report various attendance levels for 6th grade

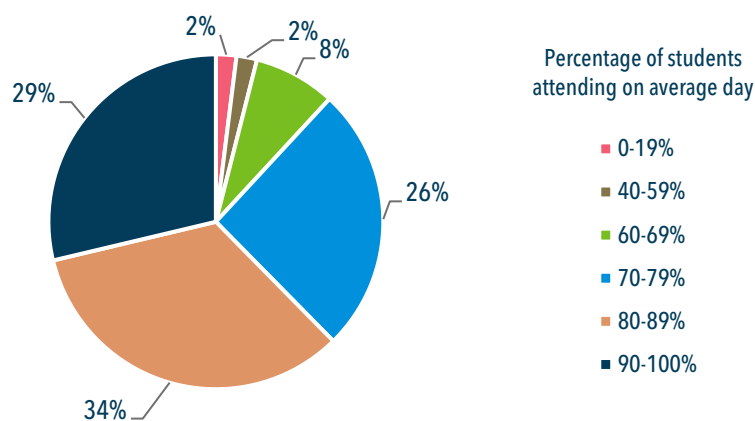


Figure reads: Twenty-nine percent of school directors responding to the phase 1 survey reported that 90-100% of their students attended on an average day.

Attendance correlates with length of directorship; at schools where directors have been there longer, student attendance is higher. And it correlates with contact hours; schools with more contact hours have higher attendance rates. Attendance also correlates with school directors' perceptions of how satisfied students and, especially, parents are with Hebrew education at the school.

In short, the survey responses regarding structural features demonstrate great diversity among part-time Jewish schools in America. As we explain below, several of these factors correlate with goals and alignment of goals and perceived success.

School directors

Who leads the schools we surveyed? About half of school directors report that they are full-time, paid employees; only 5% are part-time, unpaid. Three-quarters of school directors have been in their position for 10 years or less, indicating **high turnover within institutions**. However, there is a great deal of collective experience: three-quarters of school directors have been in the field of Jewish education for over 10 years. Length of directorship correlates with alignment of goals and perceived success, as discussed below.

Just over half of school directors report that they have a relevant advanced degree, including a master's in education or Jewish/religious education, EdD, or PhD. The educational background of the school director was a significant factor in several items on the survey. For example, 92% of school directors with relevant advanced degrees said they communicate goals to at least one stakeholder group multiple times per year, compared to 59% of school directors who do not have any of those degrees. However, there was no significant difference based on degrees in school directors having changed their approach to Hebrew or in their desire to change their approach in the future.

The vast majority of school directors grew up in the United States; only 4% grew up in Israel, with a few from other countries. School directors have a wide range of Hebrew abilities; almost half report that they are personally able to conduct a conversation in Modern Hebrew to a moderate or great extent. In other words, **a majority of school directors consider their Hebrew conversation skills minimal**.

Hebrew teachers

We asked school directors to rate the importance of various traits they look for when hiring Hebrew teachers. Hebrew-related skills were rated much lower than other traits, such as engaging personality (which 95% reported as very important or important) and classroom management skills (83%). The most important Hebrew-related skill school directors look for in teachers involves Textual Hebrew—specifically, comfort reciting prayers (79%). Other Hebrew-related skills were rated quite low: competency in Modern Hebrew (27%), training/certification in Hebrew (12%), training/certification in language teaching (7%), and Israeli accent (3%). These results align with these schools' limited focus on conversational

skills. Similarly, while most schools require that Hebrew teachers align with the Jewish orientation of the school (76%), very few require training or professional development in Judaism (13%), Hebrew (11%), or language teaching (8%). As expected, schools with the goal of students having an intermediate Modern Hebrew conversation were far more likely to prioritize hiring teachers with competency in Modern Hebrew and teachers with Israeli accents.

Our survey allowed for additional write-in responses to the question about traits school directors look for when hiring Hebrew teachers. Common responses included being easy to work with, enjoying teaching, having a good rapport with students, and having confidence in decoding Hebrew. One school director wrote, “The ability to talk with (not at) students and to listen to them. I like people who have retail sales experience.”

Although some schools can hire based on these traits, many school directors, especially those in areas with sparse Jewish populations, pointed out that **they are not able to be picky in whom they select as teachers**. Some schools rely solely on volunteers, mostly parents, to teach (sometimes in addition to clergy). One school director highlighted the most important qualifications for teachers: “Having a pulse, being available during school hours.” Another wrote, “We don’t have very many candidates to choose from in this part of the country. Our Hebrew goals are to a large extent determined by our available personnel.” Because of the “slim pickings” (a respondent’s term), some school directors highlighted the necessity of training teachers after they are hired—in Hebrew, classroom management, or other skills. Even school directors with a deeper hiring pool mentioned training. One wrote, “If they have good class management skills, good rapport w/ kids and make school fun, excellent dedication and willingness to do good prep time and creative lesson planning, AND if they are likely to stick around for more than a year—if I can find that magical quadfecta, I am MORE than willing to put in the time to train them in whatever ways they need.”

Of the 30 teachers we surveyed who teach Hebrew at their schools, a large majority report having at least some training or professional development in Hebrew and in teaching language, but few report a great amount of such training. About half report that they are personally capable of conducting a conversation in Modern Hebrew “to a great extent,” which is more than the school directors. About a quarter of teachers responded, “to a small extent” or “not at all,” reflecting the focus of many schools solely on Textual Hebrew decoding and recitation skills.

Despite the common conception that Hebrew teachers at American Jewish schools tend to be Israeli, **most schools have few Israeli teachers**.⁴⁴ A majority (62%) report having at least one or two Israeli teachers, but only 23% report having more than two. Most schools (59%) also report having only one or two students with at least one Israeli parent; only three schools in our sample report that half or more of their students have an Israeli parent. And less than one-quarter (21%) of teachers who responded to our survey identify as Israeli or Israeli-

American.⁴⁵ A majority of teachers report that they visited Israel at least once in their childhood.

Why Hebrew?

Based on educational leaders' complaints about misaligned goals, we asked all constituencies how much they value Hebrew education for bar/bat mitzvah preparation and for other reasons, and we asked school directors and clergy how much they believe each group values Hebrew education for these reasons.⁴⁶ Most school directors believe that all constituencies value Hebrew education for bar/bat mitzvah preparation to a great extent: parents (85%), clergy (73%), lay leaders (70%), students (62%), and teachers (62%). They think a majority of clergy (55%) value Hebrew education beyond bar/bat mitzvah preparation to a great extent, compared to a smaller percentage of teachers (40%) and lay leaders (21%), and very few parents (4%) and students (3%). Most school directors think parents and students have at least a small amount of interest in Hebrew education beyond bar/bat mitzvah.

Phase 2 surveys found that parents and students indeed value Hebrew for bar/bat mitzvah more than for other reasons (Figure 4), but they tend to value Hebrew for other reasons (besides bar/bat mitzvah) more than school directors expect (Figure 5). In fact, a majority of all groups said they value Hebrew for reasons other than bar/bat mitzvah to a moderate or great extent. We see a similar pattern in clergy's expectations of constituencies' valuing Hebrew for reasons other than bar/bat mitzvah (Figure 5). School directors accurately predicted teachers' responses, but **school directors and especially clergy underestimated how much parents and students value Hebrew for reasons other than bar/bat mitzvah.**

Figure 4. Percentage of various groups that value Hebrew education to a great or moderate extent for bar/bat mitzvah and for reasons other than bar/bat mitzvah

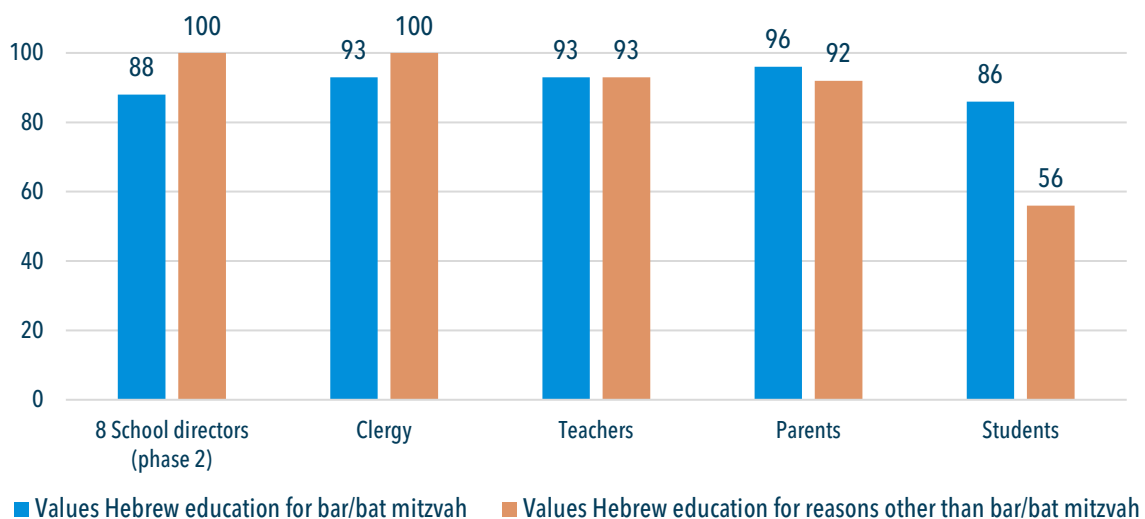
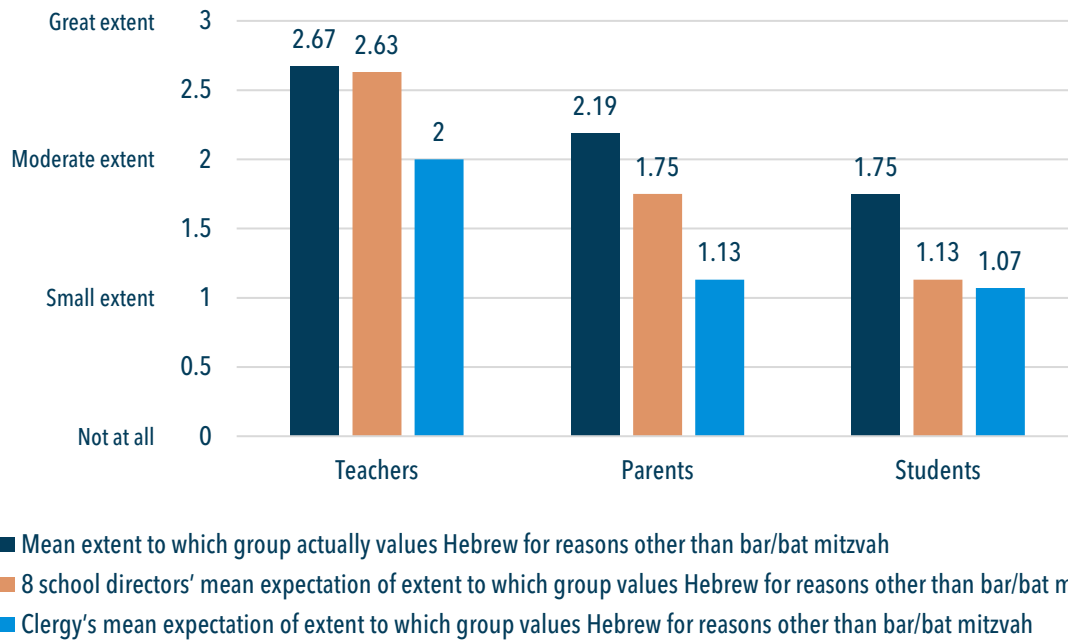


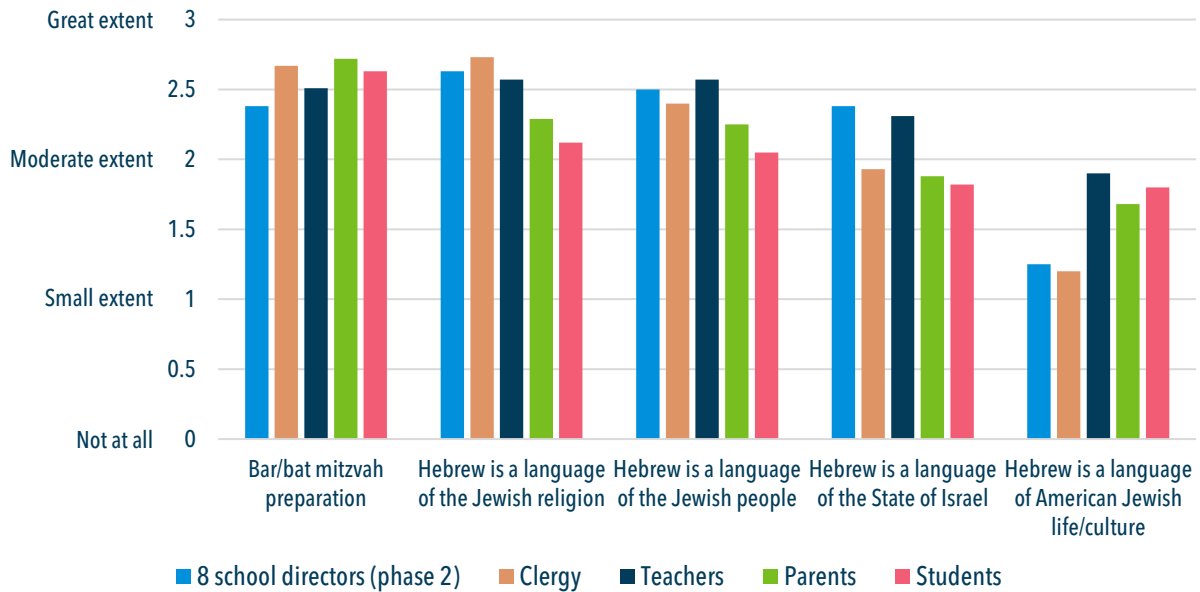
Figure 5. Extent to which constituent groups value Hebrew for reasons other than bar/bat mitzvah compared with school directors' and clergy's expectations



We explored this issue in more depth by asking about five rationales for Hebrew education. School directors oriented most toward Hebrew as a language of the Jewish religion (90% considered this a rationale to a moderate or great extent), bar/bat mitzvah preparation (89%), and Jewish peoplehood (82%). “Hebrew is a language of the State of Israel” was also a rationale for most school directors, but to a lesser extent (64%). “Hebrew is a language of American Jewish life/culture” was the least important rationale for school directors (43%). The more religious rationales are the top two priorities, while the more secular rationales are the last three priorities. This finding aligns with the setting for most of these educational institutions: religious schools connected to synagogues. Compared to synagogue-based schools, school directors at independent schools (only 17 of the 519 schools) tended to rate the bar/bat mitzvah rationale significantly lower and the Israel rationale slightly (but not significantly) higher. They gave the highest average rating to the “Jewish people” rationale.

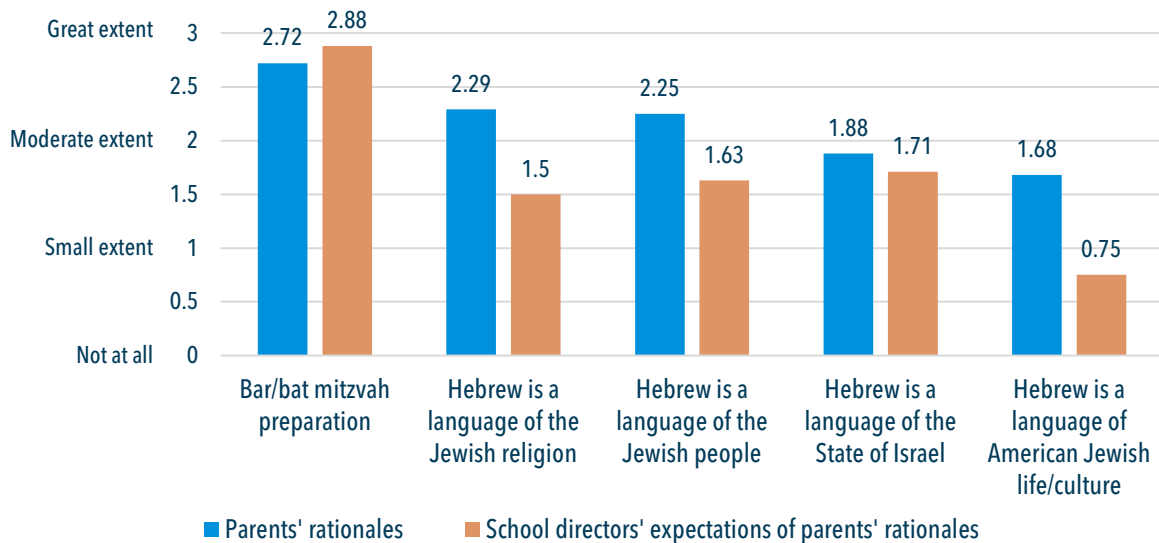
We asked the same questions about rationale for Hebrew education on the phase 2 surveys (Figure 6). On average, all groups rated bar/bat mitzvah, religion, and the Jewish people as rationales to a moderate or great extent. School directors and teachers rated the Israel rationale about the same as these rationales, but the other groups rated it a bit lower. The American Jewish culture rationale was rated lowest, especially among school directors and clergy. In this American context, Hebrew, it seems, is associated more with Israel than with America. **Parents and students rated the bar/bat mitzvah rationale higher than other rationales**, in line with the concerns expressed by educational leaders.

Figure 6. Constituents' mean ratings of importance of various rationales for Hebrew education



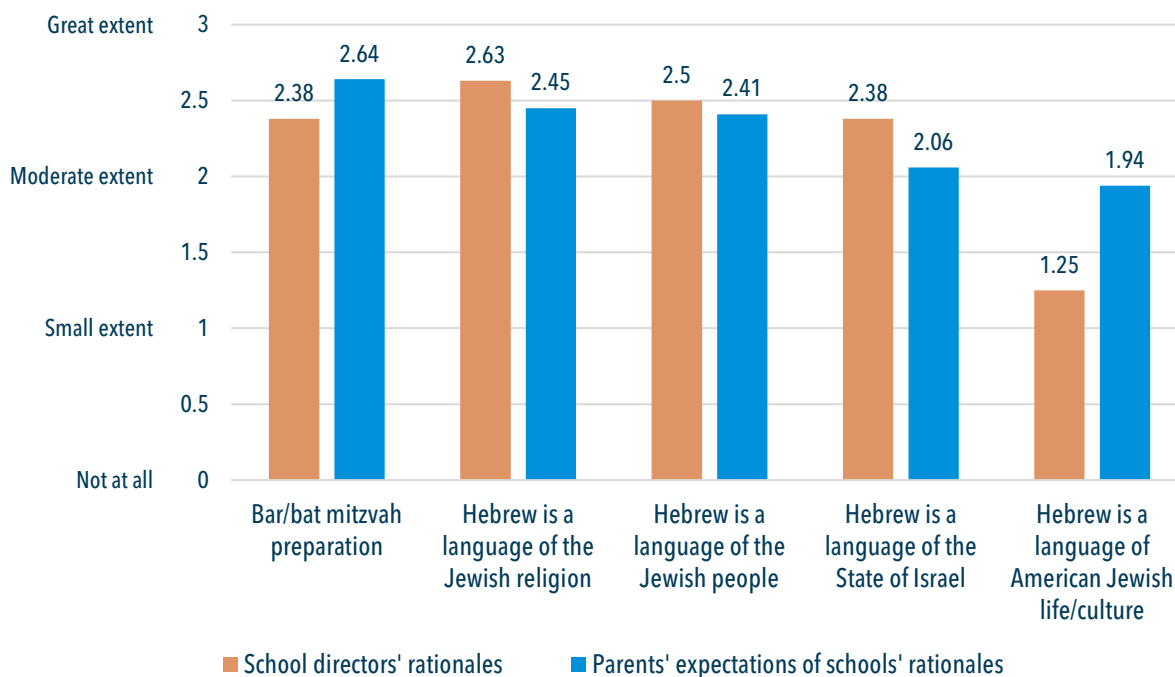
We also asked school directors about their perceptions of other constituencies' rationales. School directors believed parents are most concerned about bar/bat mitzvah preparation and less interested in the other rationales. This is accurate, but school directors significantly underestimated parents' ratings of religion, Jewish people, and American life (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Parents' mean rationales for Hebrew education compared to school directors' expectations of parents' rationales



Parents' estimates of school directors' rationales were closer but still different from their actual rationales. Parents overestimated school directors' ratings of bar/bat mitzvah and American Jewish life/culture and underestimated the Israel rationale (Figure 8). These results suggest that **there is room for increased communication regarding rationales for Hebrew education.**

Figure 8. School directors' mean rationales for Hebrew education compared to parents' expectations of school directors' rationales



On the student and parent surveys, we asked an open-ended question about rationales before asking them to rate particular rationales. The student survey said, “People have different reasons for learning Hebrew. Why are you interested in learning Hebrew?” while the parent survey asked, “Why do you want your child to learn Hebrew?” Students’ responses confirmed the **centrality of bar/bat mitzvah**. A large percentage mentioned this life cycle event, and some alluded to family: e.g., “So I can do my bar mitzvah and make my grandparents proud” and “All of my cousins are having their bar and bat mitzvahs. So I want to have mine to[o].” A few explicitly reported no interest in other rationales: e.g., “I am not very interested in Hebrew outside of bar mitzvah preparation.” A few students mentioned that they are not interested in Hebrew or only attend because their parents force them.

However, many students did report **an interest in broader Jewish religious and cultural orientations**. Several described Hebrew as the language of their ancestors, their people, their culture, or their heritage, generally using the first-person possessive pronoun “my.” For example, one student wrote, “Because being Jewish is in my blood and I would like to know

all I can about being Jewish,” and another wrote, “I am interested because it is very important to me to learn my culture and be able to pass on the same traditions to my family.” Israel was also a common motif in response to this question; several wrote that they want to have Hebrew conversations with Israeli friends and relatives or during trips to Israel. While most students mentioned Jewish-specific rationales involving bar/bat mitzvah, religion, culture, and/or Israel, a few offered generic language-learning answers, as in these comments: “Because I think it is cool and it will help to speak another language” and “It is a very pretty language and it’s challenging to learn a language with different letters.”

Parents’ write-in responses demonstrated a similar diversity. **A large percentage mentioned bar/bat mitzvah**, and some explicitly described that as their sole reason for pursuing Jewish education. One wrote, “Learning a language is always a good skill and good academic exercise however I don’t think Hebrew is that relevant except for a bnei mitzvah.” Another stated bluntly, “Bar mitzvah done, we are done with the school.” Other parents, however, mentioned **lifelong engagement** in Jewish religious life, including holidays, prayers, and Torah reading. One wrote, “For her bat mitzvah and for participation in Jewish/synagogue life as she grows older. It helps bolster her Jewish identity.” Another specified particular Jewish religious rituals: “Connection with Judaism, ability to participate in prayer, ability to lead shabbat at home, ability to say kaddish when needed in the future.”

Some parents implied that decoding and recitation are sufficient, but a few want their children to learn the meanings of the words they are singing or chanting.

Be able to understand some basic Hebrew words. Every kid should know what ‘David Melech Yisrael’ means, but I would venture to guess that less than 5% know. They should also know, for example, how to translate each word of the Shema. I think knowing the words (not just being able to read them) gives a kid a sense of ownership and accomplishment.

Beyond bar/bat mitzvah, many parents mentioned other aspects of Jewishness when discussing rationales for Hebrew education, using words like “Jewish identity,” “culture,” “history,” “tradition,” and “heritage.” Many of these responses emphasized **connection**, as in “to be connected to our culture and traditions.” Some mentioned familial ties, such as “ancestors,” “roots,” or “passing down from generation to generation.” Others linked Hebrew to a broader “Jewish community,” “Jewish people,” or “Jewish experience,” often using first-person plural possessive pronouns, like “have a connection to our people’s language.”

A smaller group of parents mentioned **Israel**. Those who did focused on traveling to Israel or connecting with Israeli relatives. One wrote, “Conversational = travel options, communication options, business options, aliyah options, etc.” An Israeli parent wrote, “Ani Sabra! [I am an Israeli-born Jew] (Would like them to be able to communicate with family in Israel).” Another small group of parents mentioned foreign language learning more generally. One mentioned the “mental plasticity” that results from language learning. Another wrote,

“Learning a second language—any—is imperative to my child enjoying a life that is full. I think knowing Hebrew makes attending religious services more engaging so that is why I am happy for them to have the knowledge. Other than that, I am indifferent to it.” Comments like this indicate that some parents do not share the sense of personal connection to Hebrew that was so common among respondents.

Several parents expressed multiple rationales. One wrote, “It is central to Jewish identity and a link to our sacred texts. And all exposure to a second language is great.” Another added, “I want her to access connection with people in Israel to navigate her own future experiences, I want her to feel comfortable with a Siddur in any synagogue in the world, I want her to feel confident in her knowledge of a second language and her relationship with her people.” Notably, parents who expressed rationales beyond bar/bat mitzvah and ritual participation tended to be less satisfied with the school’s Hebrew education.

On school directors’ surveys, we left an “Other” write-in box on the question that listed rationales. In this space, some of their responses reiterated rationales we listed. Some mentioned prayer and Jewish peoplehood, e.g., “It is the language of our Prayer and when they travel—no matter what country they see, the Hebrew should be familiar to them—it is what connects us to our global Jewish community.” A few mentioned changes at their school: “We are moving away from Bar/bat mitzvah focus and moving toward Hebrew as a language of Jews and a gift to us. The culture adjustment is slow.”

As this section has highlighted, there are a range of possible rationales for Hebrew learning for students, parents, and educators. Therefore, it is important for all stakeholders to engage in ongoing discussion of rationales and calibration of goals and practices. The diversity suggests that multiple tracks—some focused only on bar/bat mitzvah preparation, others focused (also) on Modern Hebrew conversation—might be warranted in some contexts.

Goals

The surveys included a series of questions about 24 Hebrew-related goals in recitation, decoding, comprehension, conversation, writing, and affective dispositions. School directors, teachers, and clergy were asked to what extent each is a goal for students by the time they graduate (graduates *should* be able to do it) and to what extent students are achieving that goal (graduates *are* generally able to do it). Parents were only asked to what extent each is a goal, and students were only asked to what extent they are able to do each skill.

School directors’ responses indicate that most want their students to learn enough Hebrew skills to participate in Jewish religious and communal life, and they want them to feel part of a metalinguistic community that values and feels personally connected to Hebrew. The goals that school directors tended to consider most important involve affective orientations (associating Hebrew with Jewishness, feeling a sense of accomplishment regarding their Hebrew knowledge, feeling personally connected to Hebrew, and associating Hebrew with

fun) and decoding and recitation (recognizing Hebrew letters, decoding Hebrew words, and reciting Hebrew prayers while reading Hebrew letters). Also highly valued were understanding Jewish life vocabulary, understanding themes of key prayers, and singing Hebrew songs.

School directors rated as moderately important reciting Hebrew prayers by ear/heart, reciting or chanting Torah in Hebrew, having a desire to pursue further Hebrew education, writing Hebrew block letters, and using Jewish life vocabulary. Somewhat important were understanding basic Hebrew instructions (e.g., *la'amod bator* [stand in line], *lashevet b'sheket* [sit quietly]), reciting Hebrew prayers while reading transliteration (Hebrew words written in the English alphabet), and understanding key Torah passages in Hebrew.

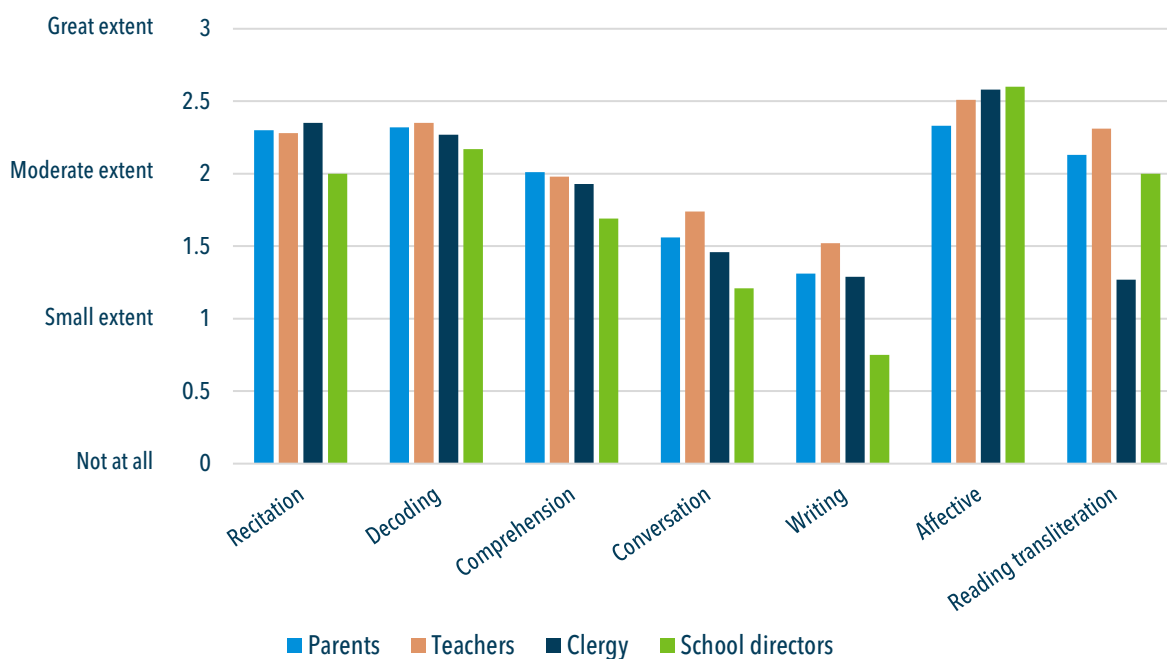
Few directors reported interest in the goals of students having a basic Modern Hebrew conversation (e.g., greetings, directions, ordering food) or decoding or writing Hebrew words using cursive letters. The least important goals were having an intermediate Modern Hebrew conversation, comprehending Modern Hebrew prose, and producing Modern Hebrew prose. Only 14% of school directors consider "having an intermediate conversation in Modern Hebrew" to be a goal at all. (Figure 10 below lists all goals, as well as evaluations.)

How did other constituencies rate these goals in the phase 2 surveys? Parents, teachers, and clergy agreed with school directors that affective goals, recitation, and decoding are more important than conversation and writing. However, these groups rated most goals higher than school directors did (Figure 9), meaning they are more interested in students acquiring each skill. In some cases, parents differed widely from other groups. For example, 56% of parents reported that understanding a story in Modern Hebrew is a goal to a moderate or great extent, compared to 39% of teachers, 13% of school directors, and 7% of clergy.⁴⁷ This difference likely reflects school directors' (and clergy's) more realistic orientation, grounded in years of experience. The largest discrepancy between school directors and other groups was in writing goals, as few school directors considered this important. School directors were in line with or slightly higher than other groups regarding affective goals, which were the most important goals for all groups. Clergy rated recitation goals higher than other groups and reading Hebrew in transliteration lower than other groups. Teachers rated conversation and writing goals higher than other groups.

We asked students about goals in an open-ended question: "What are your goals regarding Hebrew? What would you like to be able to do by the time you are done with 6th grade?" **The most common responses mentioned bar/bat mitzvah, reading, and prayers, but many students also discussed comprehension or conversation.** One student's response implied frustration regarding the focus on decoding: "I would like to be able to understand what the words I'm reading actually mean." Several students mentioned a desire to have Hebrew conversations, including with friends and relatives in Israel. A few expressed ambitious goals, like "speak fluent Hebrew" or "read a book in Hebrew," but most were modest, such as learning specific prayers and learning "useful phrases, such as 'where is' or 'can I please.'"

One student expressed negative feelings toward Hebrew when reporting their goal: “Leave it behind me.” Here again, we can see a wide range of goals for students, highlighting the importance of differentiation in curriculum design.

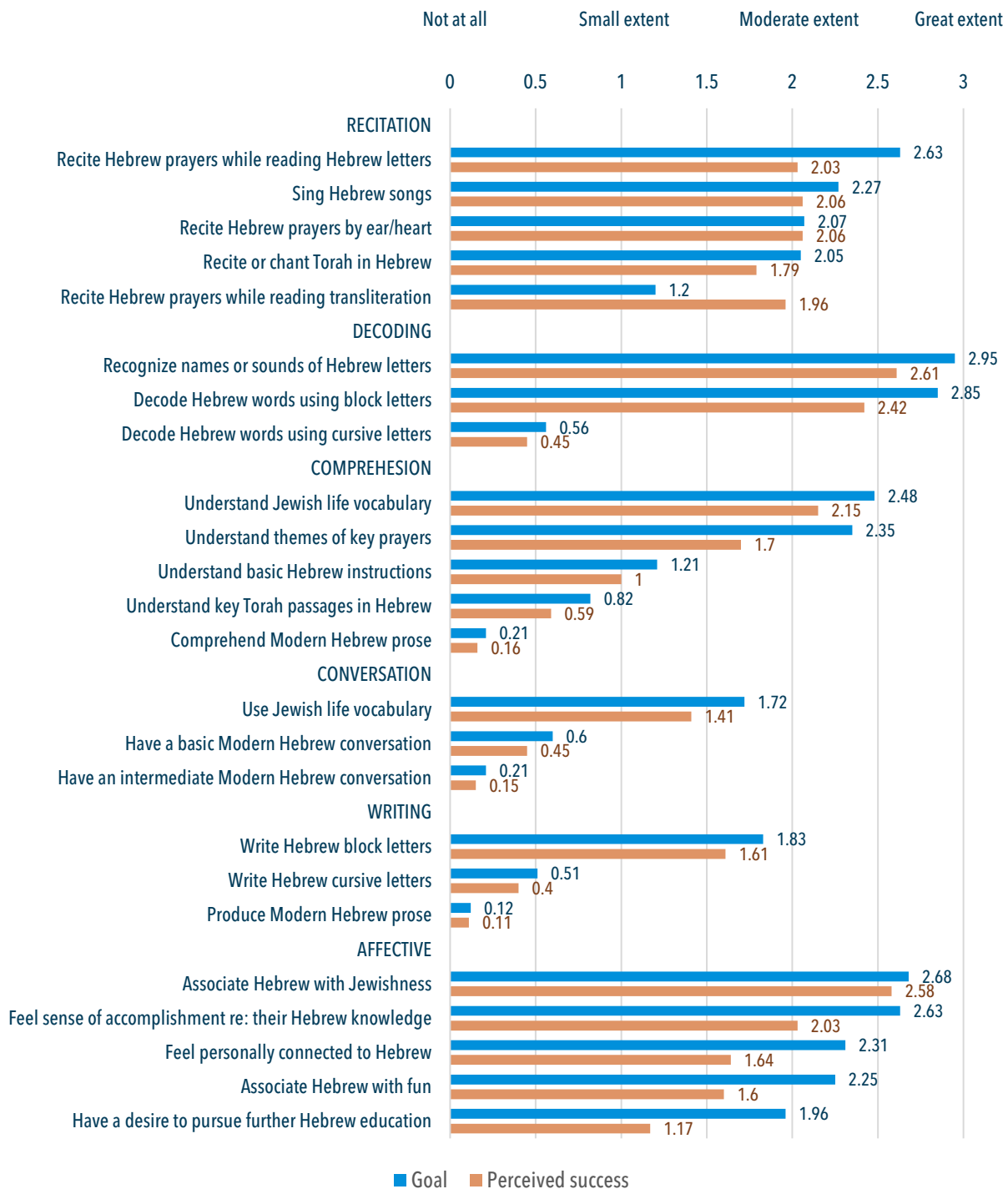
Figure 9. Constituencies' mean ratings of goals for Hebrew education



Perceived success in goals

Many would like to know to what extent part-time schools are meeting these goals. Our research did not involve assessment of students, but we did collect data on perceived success: to what extent various constituencies feel their programs are meeting these goals. School directors gave the highest success ratings to goals regarding decoding, associating Hebrew with Jewishness, and understanding Jewish life vocabulary. In general, however, **school directors felt that students were meeting most goals less than they would like.** The goals with the largest discrepancy (i.e., the largest difference between school directors' rating of importance and their reports of student success) were also goals that were quite important to school directors. These include four affective goals (that students should have a desire to pursue further Hebrew education, feel personally connected to Hebrew, associate Hebrew with fun, and feel a sense of accomplishment regarding their Hebrew knowledge) and two goals related to ritual participation (understanding themes of key prayers and reciting Hebrew prayers while reading Hebrew letters). For one goal, school directors reported that students are succeeding more than they would like: reciting Hebrew prayers while reading transliteration. In other words, students use transliteration while reciting Hebrew prayers even though educators want them to use Hebrew letters.

Figure 10. School directors' mean ratings of the extent to which various skills are school goals (blue) and the extent to which they feel graduates generally succeed in those goals (orange)



In the phase 2 surveys, we asked students—with age-appropriate wording—to what extent they were able to do each skill.⁴⁸ Students felt they were succeeding most at recognizing

names and sounds of Hebrew letters, reciting Hebrew prayers while reading transliteration (which we defined for them as “English letters”), decoding Hebrew words (defined as “sound out letters and vowel sounds to form words”), singing Hebrew songs, associating Hebrew with Jewishness, and writing Hebrew block letters (all of which averaged at least “more than a little bit”). In addition, **students evaluated themselves highly for the affective goals, contrary to the common trope that students hate “Hebrew school.”** A majority gave the two highest ratings—“more than a little bit” or “a lot”—on these questions: “Do you feel a sense of accomplishment about your Hebrew knowledge?” (69%); “Do you have positive feelings about Hebrew?” (63%); and “Do you think Hebrew is fun?” (53%). Significantly, a majority also responded with “maybe” or “definitely” (rather than “maybe not” or “definitely not”) to the question about their desire to pursue further Hebrew education: “Do you hope to learn more Hebrew in high school, college, or beyond?” (63%).

Student self-evaluations were generally in the ballpark of school directors’ evaluations of students, but **students more often rated themselves higher than school directors did.** In particular, students felt they were much better than directors assessed them to be at understanding a story in Modern Hebrew (unlikely in most schools), understanding key Torah passages in Hebrew, writing Hebrew (block) letters, and having a desire to pursue further Hebrew education. It is possible that students’ higher scores in some of these areas reflect a social desirability effect: because the questions were on the survey, students may have assumed they were supposed to be learning how to understand key Torah passages in Hebrew and write Hebrew block letters, even at schools that do not teach those skills. Some of the discrepancies could be due to the different wordings of the questions and scales.

Directors’ evaluations of students were higher than students’ self-evaluations for reciting or chanting Torah in Hebrew, reciting Hebrew prayers while reading Hebrew letters, understanding Jewish life vocabulary, and associating Hebrew with Jewishness. Such discrepancies call for schools to be more explicit about their goals (and about what the school does *not* teach), conduct periodic assessments, and share the results with students and their families.

The survey also asked students additional questions about language acquisition. When asked, “Did you learn new Hebrew words this year?” the vast majority responded affirmatively—“a lot of words” (30%), “some words” (31%), or “a few words” (28%), while only 11% responded, “no new words.” We also asked students two write-in questions about specific areas of language: “What, if anything, have you learned about Hebrew pronunciation at [school name] (for example, how the sounds differ in Hebrew and English)?” and “What, if anything, have you learned about Hebrew grammar at [school name] (for example, roots, prefixes, suffixes, order of adjectives and nouns)?” In response to these questions, a few students’ reported learning little or nothing, but most mentioned specific linguistic facts. Regarding pronunciation, several students mentioned differences between Hebrew and English, such as the “ch” sound in Hebrew, the “w” sound in English, the two languages’ different pronunciations of “r,” and the greater number of vowel sounds in English. Others

offered facts about Hebrew vowels, silent letters, or letter pairs that sound the same, like *kaf* and *kuf*. Some mentioned idiosyncrasies of Hebrew, such as, “If there is a chet at the end of a Hebrew word with a vowel under it, you pronounce the vowel first and then the chet.”

Regarding grammar, more students indicated learning little or nothing, pointing to the greater focus on decoding than comprehension or production of Hebrew. In fact, one student replied, “I think that this year has been more about being a good Jewish person more than learning the language.” However, several students did mention specific facts about grammatical features prompted by our question, such as roots (“Roots are the base of most to all words and they will always be in order in a word”), prefixes, suffixes, and the placement of adjectives after nouns. In addition, some students mentioned grammatical gender (using child-appropriate descriptions like “I learned a little bit more about what is his and what is her” and “that girls and boys have their own prefixes and suffixes”). One student wrote, “I’ve learned the grammar by learning the prayers.” This integration of linguistic and content knowledge seems to be effective for the learners, and research on content-based language instruction confirms this.⁴⁹ Schools may not have sufficient time for explicit instruction on Hebrew grammar, but students do acquire some grammatical knowledge from hearing and using Hebrew recitation in the experiential contexts of prayer and ritual and Hebrew loanwords (Jewish life vocabulary) in the course of many interactions.

Rather than ask parents to what extent their children are succeeding in all 24 goals, we asked an overarching evaluation question: “To what extent do you feel the school is succeeding in Hebrew education, according to the goals you identified as important?” Most responded positively: 29% said “to a great extent” and 51% “to a moderate extent.” In write-in comments, **several parents emphasized their desire for their children to acquire more skills in Hebrew conversation and/or writing**; a few requested more instruction by Israelis or exposure to contemporary Israeli music. One wrote, “Our school is a religious school and not a Hebrew school. It’s unfortunate.” Several parents recognized that such skills are impossible in the short time the teachers have with the students. To address this, a few parents suggested a weekly online component that students would complete at home. Some parents expressed desire for more differentiation, both for students who are struggling and for advanced students, including one-on-one tutoring and small groups. One wrote, “Hebrew tutoring [is] by far [the] best component of [this school]. 1 to 1 is fantastic for learning.” These findings once again highlight diversity in goals and point to the importance of school leaders communicating with parents and other constituencies about goals and potentially offering multiple tracks.

Assessment

How common is Hebrew language assessment, and what forms does it take? Most schools reported that they assess student progress through observation and conversation with teachers. Most assess students’ decoding abilities orally, and about half use some kind of written assessment of Hebrew skills. Some schools are more likely to use tests: in particular,

larger schools, schools with full-time directors, and schools whose directors have a relevant advanced degree (master’s in education or Jewish/religious education, EdD, or PhD).

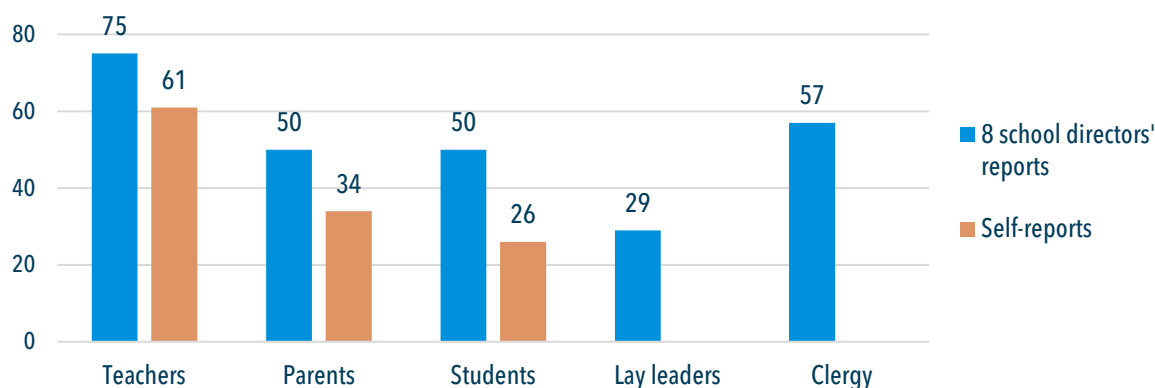
Envisioning and communicating goals

Based on educational leaders’ concerns about discrepancies in goals, our surveys asked to what extent various constituencies are involved in envisioning Hebrew-related goals and methods for their schools. Most school directors reported that clergy (85%) and teachers (81%) are involved to a moderate or great extent, as are about half of lay leaders (56%), but fewer directors reported that parents (38%) and students (24%) are involved in this way.

In the phase 2 surveys, we asked parents, teachers, and clergy about their perceptions of their involvement in this envisioning process.⁵⁰ Parents’ reports of their involvement were on par with school directors’ perceptions of parent involvement, but teachers and, especially, clergy reported less involvement than their school directors perceived. **On average, clergy believe they are involved to a small extent, but school directors believe clergy are involved to a moderate or great extent.** This may reflect school directors feeling pressure from clergy to teach Hebrew a certain way even if clergy members do not participate in dedicated meetings regarding the school’s Hebrew-related goals and methods.

We see a similar discrepancy in *communication* of goals. The school director survey asked, “How often have you communicated your school’s Hebrew-related goals to each of the following constituencies? Parents, Students, Teachers, Clergy, Lay leaders.” We did not survey lay leaders, nor did we ask this question of clergy. But we did ask teachers, parents, and students questions about this.⁵¹ **School directors believe they are communicating goals to each group more frequently than each constituency reports** (Figure 11).

Figure 11. Percent of school directors reporting that they communicate school goals to various constituencies “multiple times each year” vs. percent of constituencies self-reporting that their director communicates this frequently to them.



Note: Self-reports were not collected from lay leaders or clergy.

There are many ways to communicate goals, as well as student progress. At a school with an online tutoring component, one parent pointed out that these sessions help them understand what the child is accomplishing: “The Skype program is incredible. But without it, you really don’t know how well your child is doing in Hebrew. I don’t get any reports and indications from the school about personal progress.” Comments like these highlight the **importance of ongoing communication among all stakeholders** in the educational context to ensure that everyone is on the same page as much as possible.

Denominational differences

When we compared schools by denomination, we found several differences in structural features and goals. First, we present results from Conservative and Reform schools because they had enough respondents to enable statistical analysis. Then we present some striking differences regarding other denominations, which may be skewed by the small number of each in our sample (the *N* figure given in parentheses is the number of respondents in each denomination who answered enough questions to be included in this analysis).

Directors at Reform schools (*N*=255) were slightly more likely than directors at Conservative schools (*N*=130) to value Hebrew education for bar/bat mitzvah, and Conservative school leaders were more likely to report that parents, teachers, clergy, and lay leaders value Hebrew beyond bar/bat mitzvah. School directors’ reported goals reflect these slightly different orientations. In particular, Conservative schools were more likely than Reform schools to report having goals for Hebrew skills beyond the decoding and recitation necessary to perform at a bar/bat mitzvah; these goals include understanding key Torah passages in Hebrew, understanding basic Hebrew instructions, understanding and using Jewish life vocabulary, having a basic and an intermediate Hebrew conversation, decoding cursive Hebrew letters, and writing block and cursive Hebrew letters.

Based on these different goals, we found differences regarding personnel and teaching approaches. Directors of Conservative schools tended to report personally having stronger Hebrew conversation skills than directors of Reform schools and having more teachers who are Israeli. We also found differences in certain classroom activities: **Conservative schools were more likely to spend class time on Hebrew conversation and have some “immersion (activities and conversations conducted in Hebrew)” than Reform schools.** Conservative schools tended to introduce decoding earlier: 85% reported introducing decoding by 2nd grade, compared to 29% of Reform schools. Reform schools were slightly more likely to report that parents and students are satisfied with Hebrew education for bar/bat mitzvah.

We also found differences that are not necessarily related to the orientation toward bar/bat mitzvah. Reform schools tended to have larger classes (average 6th grade size 23.8 students vs. Conservative 13.5) and slightly fewer contact hours (3.7 vs. 4.6 in 6th grade). While schools of all denominations were more likely to separate Hebrew and Judaics than integrate them,

Reform schools tended to separate them even more than Conservative schools. Reform schools were slightly more likely to give a small amount of homework.

In goals, Reconstructionist schools ($N=20$) generally patterned between Conservative and Reform schools but closer to Reform schools. However, in rationales for Hebrew education, they rated Israel lower than other denominations did (Reconstructionist mean of 1.45 vs. Reform 1.75 and Conservative 1.79). Reconstructionist schools were less likely than Conservative and Reform schools to report having services during school hours.

Secular/Humanist schools ($N=8$) differed from other denominations in rationales for Hebrew education: they were most concerned with peoplehood and least concerned with religion. They were barely interested in most of the Hebrew-related goals, except a few that they rated as goals to a small-moderate extent: singing Hebrew songs, decoding, and the affective goals. They reported higher levels of parent and student satisfaction than did other denominations.

Israeli schools ($N=2$) were quite interested in both the religious participation goals and the Hebrew conversation and writing goals, and they reported less interest in the bar/bat mitzvah preparation rationale for Hebrew education. They reported giving more homework, doing more Hebrew Through Movement, and having more Israeli teachers.

Compared to other denominations, Chabad schools ($N=7$) were less concerned with the bar/bat mitzvah preparation rationale for Hebrew education and more concerned with the religion rationale. Chabad schools patterned between Conservative and Reform schools on several goals, except they were less interested than Conservative and Reform schools in some affective goals, singing songs, and reciting/chanting Torah in Hebrew. However, Chabad schools were much more likely than other schools to report reciting Hebrew prayers by ear/heart and reciting Hebrew prayers with transliteration as goals: six of the seven Chabad schools reported transliteration as a goal to a moderate or great extent, reflecting the movement's desire to make Judaism accessible to a broad population.

We found a particularly striking **denominational difference regarding Hebrew cursive**. A majority of schools that identify as Conservative, Israeli, no denomination, and pluralistic (and the one Orthodox school) considered cursive decoding a goal at least to a small extent, but a majority of Reform, Reconstructionist, Secular/Humanist, and Chabad schools reported that cursive decoding is not at all a goal. In addition, schools that ranked "Hebrew is a language of the State of Israel" higher as a rationale were more likely to report cursive decoding and writing as goals. Behrman House, a publisher of curricular materials popular among part-time Jewish schools, reported a decrease in demand for cursive materials over the past few decades.⁵² This could be due to a decrease in the Conservative movement's size, and/or it could represent a historical shift away from a focus on cursive, as it is not necessary for bar/bat mitzvah preparation.

Differences by Jewish density

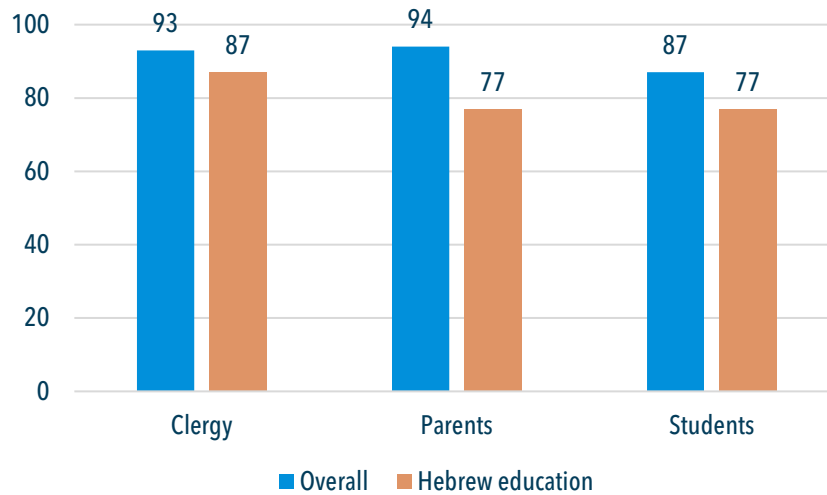
In addition to denominational diversity, we also found a few differences according to the density of the Jewish population in the state where the school is located. Schools in Jewishly dense states tended to have larger class size, higher attendance rates, and a longer length of directorship (the current school director has been in their job on average 7.5 years in Jewishly dense states, compared to 5.7 years in Jewishly sparse states). Schools in Jewishly dense states were more likely to give a small amount of homework, to have some Hebrew teachers who are Israeli (66% vs. 42%), and to feel that teachers value Hebrew beyond bar/bat mitzvah. Most of the goals did not reflect these differences, except that **schools in Jewishly dense states were more likely to have a goal of students understanding basic Hebrew instructions, and schools in Jewishly sparse states were more likely to have a goal of reciting Hebrew prayers with transliteration** (as were schools without full-time directors). The emphasis on transliteration is necessary in some schools in Jewishly sparse areas with few available teachers with Hebrew knowledge, as a leader at the Institute for Southern Jewish Life explained. For example, at one school, the Hebrew teacher is a Baptist father of one of the students, and at another the only teacher is a Catholic neighbor. Neither can read Hebrew, so they make ample use of the curricular materials provided by the Institute, which are written in transliteration, Hebrew, and translation. The diversity according to denomination and location reminds us that there is no one best approach to Hebrew education in part-time Jewish schools. Schools' rationales, goals, and practices differ based on many factors, including ideologies and orientations of the leaders and constituents and their broader movements, as well as resources available locally.

Satisfaction

One might be surprised at the surveys' findings regarding satisfaction, given the pervasive discourse of parents disliking "Hebrew school" and expecting their children to dislike it too. All groups are, on average, quite satisfied with their school and its Hebrew education (Figure 12).⁵³ **The vast majority of students—87%—report either liking or loving the school** (20% love it, 67% like it, 9% do not like it, and 4% hate it). Parents are more satisfied than children (61% of parents are very satisfied, 33% moderately satisfied, 6% a little bit satisfied, 0.6% [1 parent] not at all satisfied). For each group, satisfaction with the school's Hebrew education is lower than their satisfaction with the school overall, but still high: a majority in each group are somewhat or very satisfied with Hebrew education at the school.

Parents, teachers, and clergy all feel that Hebrew should be more central at the school than they currently perceive it to be. (We did not ask this question of students or school directors.) This is an important finding, given many educators' assumption that parents are generally not interested in Hebrew. Teachers feel Hebrew should be slightly more central than parents and clergy do. This is not surprising, given that the teachers who completed the survey are those who teach Hebrew (among other subjects).

Figure 12. Percentage of various groups that are very or moderately satisfied with the school overall and with Hebrew education at the school



In write-in responses at the end of the survey (“Is there anything else you want to tell us about learning Hebrew at [this school]?”), **students generally offered positive comments about Hebrew.** An especially grateful student wrote, “Learning Hebrew is very fun and I love it very much. Thank you very much for helping me reach my goal of Hebrew Ninja and beyond” (this school uses a level system with “Ninja” as the pinnacle). However, some students expressed negative feelings, as in this example:

It is very hard and boring . . . I plan to never use Hebrew again after my bar mitzvah, I doubt that it will but I might change my mind . . . For anyone planning to become Jewish for personal reasons I do not recommend it unless you are willing to spend your time learning things you will never use in your life again (unless you become a Jewish leader). I guess Hebrew is not useless for people living in Israel, but it is almost pointless if you live anywhere else.

A few students criticized how their school teaches Hebrew, as in this comment: “I wish that you could learn the prayers in a fun way. Just reading them is a bit boring and hard to learn.” Some gave specific suggestions for improvement; for example, “I would enjoy learning Hebrew more if I could learn it from games.” Others expressed a desire to learn more Hebrew: “I feel like [school name] is really fun, but I also feel like I am not learning Hebrew as much as I could be.” As these responses demonstrate, students have a range of affective and linguistic goals along with their own metrics for success. Consistently asking about their perspectives in relation to their learning is an effective way for their teachers and school directors to get a clear sense of what pedagogical approaches are most appropriate at the individual, class, and school levels.

Correlations with perceived success

When we have discussed this research with Jewish educators (including some who participated in this study and some who did not), many have asked us what works—what practices lead to better outcomes in Hebrew education. Of course, the answer to this question depends on what the goals are. For a school whose goals relate only to Textual Hebrew decoding and recitation, the measures of success will be quite different from a school that also has goals for Modern Hebrew conversation and writing. Our study was not designed to measure actual outcomes; we did not test students or conduct quantitative analysis on students' Hebrew use in the classrooms where we observed. And because we conducted constituent surveys only at eight schools, we cannot offer statistical analysis comparing constituent perceptions at schools of different types (size, denomination, etc.). However, we can provide data on school directors' perceived success, using two measures:

1. **Evaluation scale:** School directors' evaluations of the extent to which students are achieving all goals (or particular goals).⁵⁴
2. **Alignment scale:** Extent to which school directors' perceptions of student success in all goals (or particular goals) align with school directors' ratings of goals' importance.⁵⁵

It is important to note that a school director's positive evaluation does not imply students' actual success. In fact, some highly trained school directors might be more critical of their students' success than novice school directors, perhaps indicating a more realistic perception. Even so, these measures offer a useful means for comparing various teaching approaches.

The factors that correlate most strongly with the evaluation scale are, in order starting with the strongest correlation, having more hours devoted to Hebrew learning, introducing decoding earlier, doing more work in small groups, giving a small amount of homework, and having more contact hours. This means that directors of schools that do these things are more likely to feel their students have acquired Hebrew-related skills and affective orientations than are directors of other schools. However, this does not mean that these schools are more successful. In general, the high ratings reflect these schools' more ambitious Hebrew-related goals.

The alignment scale is a more equitable way than the evaluation scale to compare schools and determine factors contributing to success because it offers data on school directors' perceptions of their students' success in goals that are important at their school. Scores on the alignment scale correlate, in order, with small group work, length of directorship, contact hours (negatively), and homework.⁵⁶ In other words, **schools that do more work in small groups, have a longer-serving director, have fewer contact hours, and have a small amount of homework are more likely to report they are successful in goals that are important to them.** In addition, introducing decoding *later* correlates with alignment in particular goals.

This section offers more detailed analysis of these factors using these measures, both overall and regarding specific goals.

Hours

School directors' evaluations of student achievement for various Hebrew-related goals correlate with contact hours and Hebrew learning hours (the questions specified hours in 6th grade). At schools with more contact hours, school directors were more likely to report success in a few goals, such as decoding Hebrew words using block letters, understanding basic Hebrew instructions, and having a desire to pursue further Hebrew education. But the number of hours devoted to *Hebrew* learning correlates more strongly with those and with many additional goals, such as decoding and writing cursive Hebrew letters and having a basic and intermediate Hebrew conversation.

It is not surprising that schools with more Hebrew hours reported more success in goals that are important only in a minority of schools. But there are also strong correlations between Hebrew hours and perceived success in more common goals, such as reciting Hebrew prayers while reading Hebrew letters, feeling personally connected to Hebrew, and feeling a sense of accomplishment regarding their Hebrew knowledge. Clearly, **directors of schools that devote more hours to Hebrew learning feel they are better able to impart skills and positive affective orientations.**

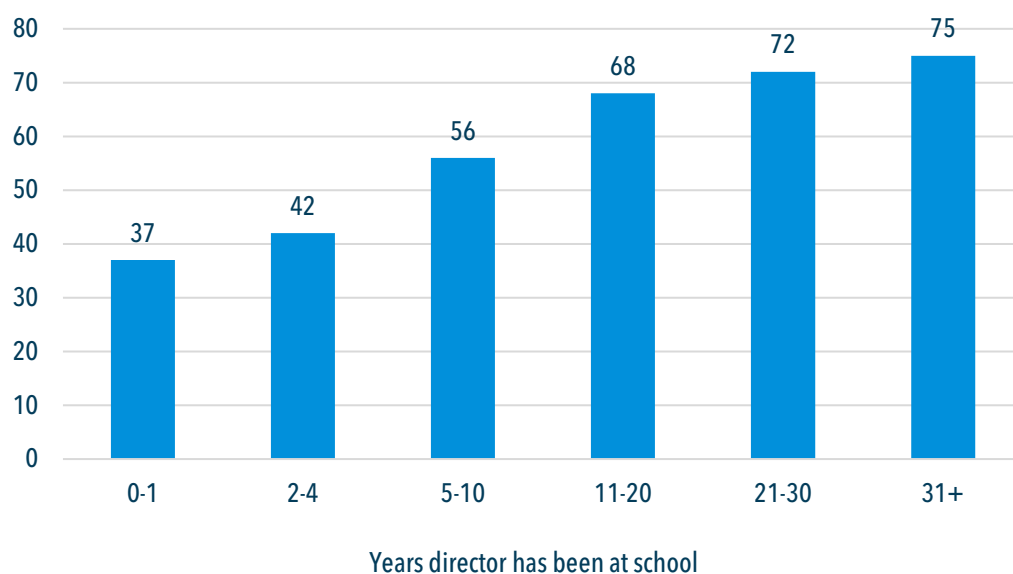
When we analyze contact hours in relation to the alignment scale, we see the opposite trend. Schools with more contact hours have *less* alignment between goals and perceived success than schools with fewer contact hours. This is because schools with fewer contact hours have more modest goals, knowing that they are unlikely to accomplish goals regarding conversation and writing in only a few hours each week. In other words, schools with fewer contact hours tend to prepare students for bar/bat mitzvah but not offer instruction in most other Hebrew skills. Schools with more contact hours may attempt additional Hebrew-related goals but may not feel they are achieving them as thoroughly.

Length of directorship

The length of time the director has been at the school does not correlate with the evaluation scale, but it does correlate with the alignment scale. **The longer the director has been in their current position, the more likely they are to feel their school is succeeding in goals that are important to their school.** Similarly, the longer they have been in their current position, the more likely they are to feel that parents and students are satisfied (Figure 13).

These results likely stem from the changes directors make and the relationships they build. They could also reflect higher turnover in executive leadership at schools with less engaged families or less competent teachers.

Figure 13. Percentage of school directors' who perceive that students are satisfied to a great extent with Hebrew education at the school according to their length of directorship (in years)

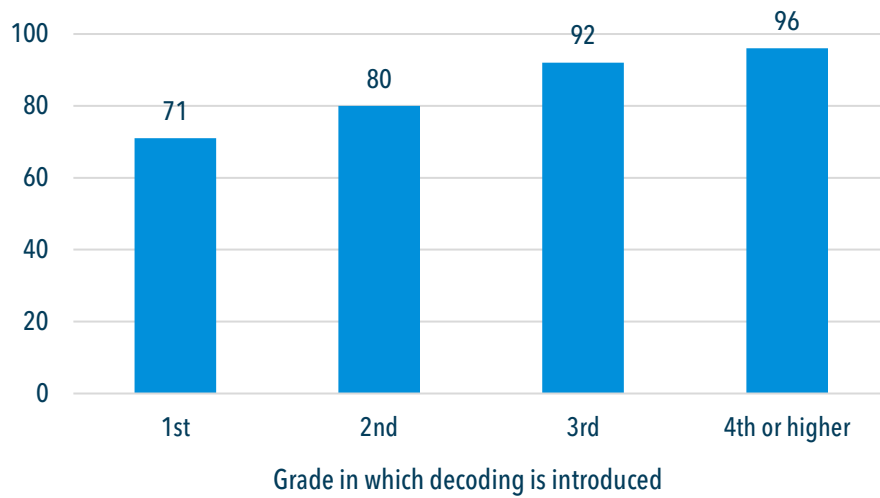


When decoding is introduced

We found negative correlations between the grade in which decoding is introduced and evaluation of many Hebrew skills. This means that the later decoding is introduced, the lower the rating of success given by school directors. This is the case for skills that are rarely identified as goals, such as decoding and writing Hebrew in cursive letters and having a basic Modern Hebrew conversation. But it is also the case for skills that are commonly identified as goals, such as understanding and using Jewish life vocabulary, understanding key Torah passages in Hebrew, and writing Hebrew in block letters, as well as commonly held affective goals, such as feeling personally connected to Hebrew and having a desire to pursue further Hebrew education.

However, many of these correlations can be explained by the fact that schools that introduce decoding earlier tend to have more ambitious goals. When we look at alignment, we see correlations in the opposite direction. **At schools where decoding is introduced later, school directors tend to report higher alignment between goals and perceived success.** These include skills that are goals at many schools, such as reciting Hebrew prayers by heart (not surprising, given that they spend more years doing just that before introducing decoding) and understanding key Torah passages in Hebrew. They also include skills that few schools expect, such as decoding Hebrew words using cursive letters, writing cursive Hebrew letters, having a basic Modern Hebrew conversation, having an intermediate Hebrew conversation, and comprehending Modern Hebrew prose. Figure 14 gives an example of this alignment regarding Modern Hebrew conversational ability.

Figure 14. Percentage of school directors who feel their graduates are at least as successful as they would like (alignment) in having a basic Modern Hebrew conversation, by grade level in which decoding is introduced

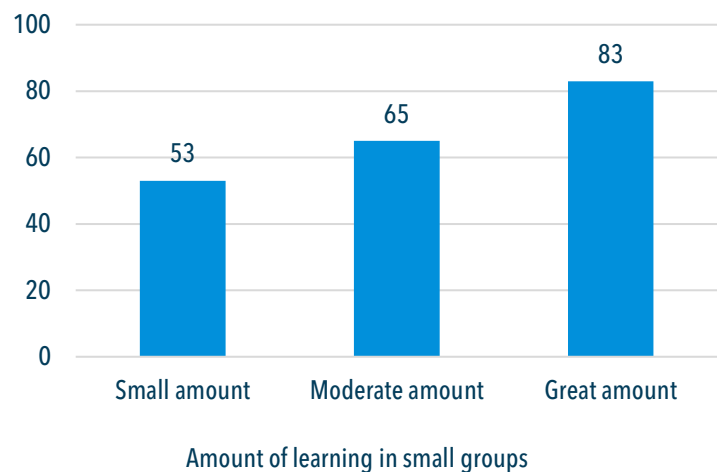


These findings can be explained by the fact that schools that introduce decoding later have more modest goals—and more realistic goals given the small number of contact hours. The findings suggest that such schools are able to focus more on skills beyond decoding in the many hours they save by not teaching decoding in the early grades. While we found correlations between the grade in which decoding is introduced and specific goals, we did not find correlations with the overall alignment scale, nor did we find correlations with perceptions of parent and student satisfaction. In other words, whether schools introduce decoding earlier or later, parents and students are perceived as no less or more satisfied with the Hebrew education they receive.

Small groups

Among the several learning configurations we asked about, one stood out as correlating with the alignment scale. **The more schools report that their Hebrew learning takes place in small groups, the more aligned their perceived success is with their goals** (Figure 15). This likely reflects students' more frequent opportunities to practice skills in small groups compared to whole-class configurations. Students are better able to learn language-related skills when they have more opportunity to practice them.

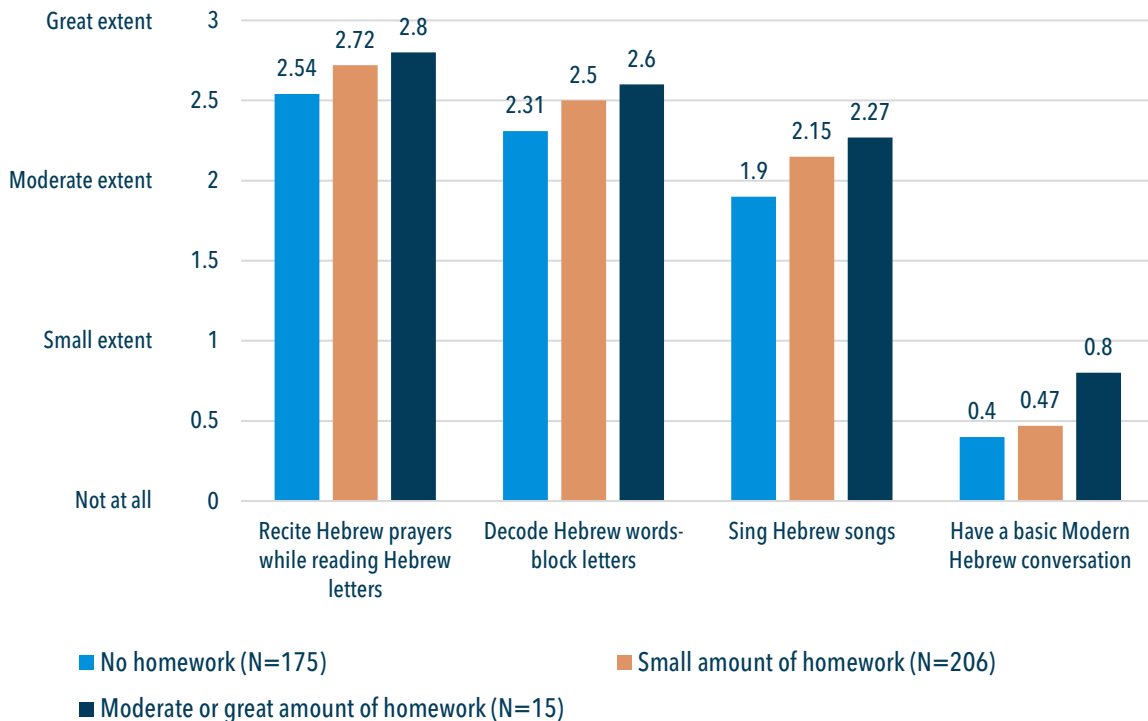
Figure 15. Percentage of schools that have mid-level or high scores on the alignment scale, according to the reported amount of learning done in small groups



Homework

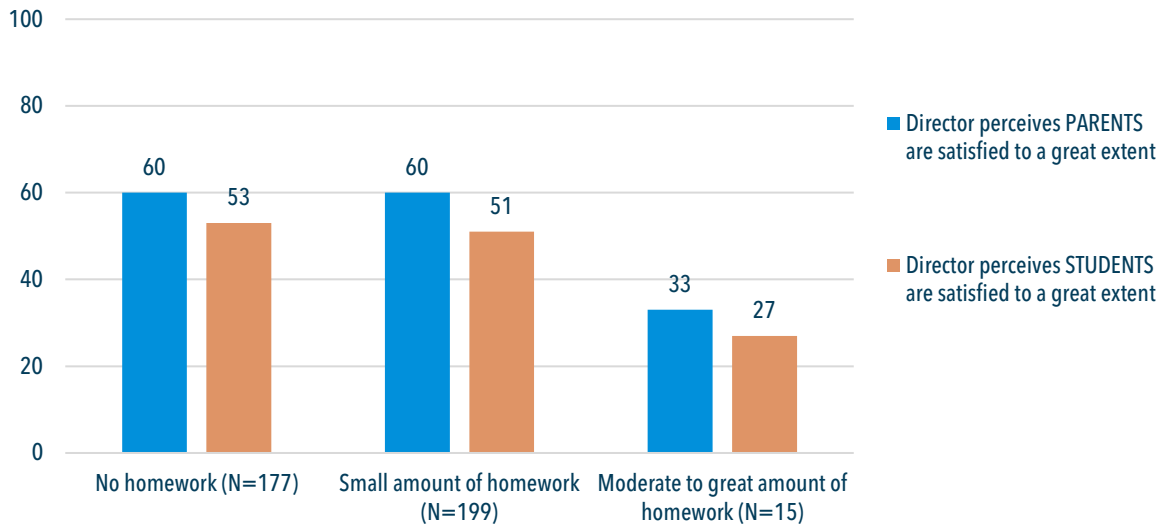
The amount of homework schools assign correlates with evaluations of various goals. The more homework schools give, the more likely school directors are to offer higher evaluations in the goals of reciting Hebrew prayers while reading Hebrew letters, decoding Hebrew words using block letters, singing Hebrew songs, and (a weaker correlation) having a basic Modern Hebrew conversation (Figure 16). We also found positive correlations between homework amount and school directors' perceived success in affective goals: graduates associating Hebrew with fun and (a weaker correlation) feeling a sense of accomplishment regarding their Hebrew knowledge.

Figure 16. Mean of school directors' perceptions that graduates can do various skills, by amount of homework assigned



We found no negative correlations between homework amount and perceptions of success in any goal. However, we found a negative correlation between homework amount and school directors' perceptions of student and parent satisfaction. Perceived satisfaction levels were the same at schools that give no homework or a small amount of homework, but directors at the few schools that give a moderate to great amount of homework tended to report lower levels of perceived student and parent satisfaction (Figure 17).⁵⁷

Figure 17. Percentage of school directors who perceive that parents and students are satisfied “to a great extent” with Hebrew education, by amount of homework assigned



These findings suggest that schools that assign a small amount of homework yield greater (perceived) success in Hebrew learning, but that they must balance this success with student and parent satisfaction. If they give too much homework, they may face unhappy families who choose to leave the school. And, as we discuss below, many school leaders report low homework completion rates or family opposition to homework.

Factors helping schools achieve their Hebrew educational goals

In addition to the statistical analysis above, we collected qualitative data on factors in perceived success: we asked school directors, teachers, and clergy what factors are helping their schools achieve their Hebrew-related goals. Common responses reiterated several factors that we heard from educational leaders and that showed up in our quantitative analysis, but they also surfaced new issues. Their responses included clear goals, communication with various constituencies, strong leadership and personnel, dedicated families, bar/bat mitzvah as a motivating factor, high attendance, many hours of Hebrew instruction, small class size and differentiation, optional instruction, and various pedagogical approaches and curricular options, including engaging activities. Several of these factors also came up as hindering factors.

Goals

Many of the school directors’ responses mentioned goals—having clear, measurable goals, assessing whether those goals are being met, and/or regularly re-evaluating and revising the goals. One emphasized the need for “lots and lots of attention to the Hebrew goals, including clear goals and assessments and teacher training.” Some specified that they use pre- and

post-unit assessments or multiple assessments throughout the year. Of course, goals must be attainable. Some school directors pointed to their “modest” or “realistic goals.” One director pointed out, “We have reasonable goals for the time allotted— aspiring to fluency with limited hours once a week would be unreasonable.” Having reasonable goals allows schools to have high expectations regarding those goals. In fact, several school directors with various types of Hebrew-related goals considered their high expectations to be a helping factor.

Communication

Another helping factor school directors commonly mentioned was communication—**building relationships and buy-in among teachers, students, parents, and clergy**. This can involve communicating about goals and student progress. One director reported communicating goals “over and over and over and over again to parents and students and teachers.” Another wrote, “Regular and consistent attention and observation of students; regular and consistent communication between teachers and the director; regular and consistent communication between school and home (teacher and parents or director and parents).” As we discussed above, in the schools where we collected data, constituencies reported some communication from the school director but not as much as the school directors reported.

Leadership

Who determines goals and executes communication? Generally, the school directors. Most school directors did not mention their own leadership, visioning, and implementation as helping factors, but a few clergy members and teachers praised their school directors. One clergy response lauded the school director for “**continually engaging in task force work to update the Hebrew program and try new methods to achieve goals.**” Leadership can be key to setting out missions, visions, and goals to ensure consistency and satisfaction for all involved in a particular context.

Personnel

Many school directors did mention personnel—administrators, clergy members, and, most commonly, teachers—as central to attaining their schools’ Hebrew-related goals. They highlighted **several traits of teachers, especially their experience, their training, their commitment, their ability to engage students and serve as role models, their Hebrew skills, the fact that they are Israeli, or the fact that they “return year after year.”** One wrote, “Having an effective teacher who connects with the kids determines effectiveness about 90% I would estimate.” This statement aligns with teachers’ most common responses regarding helping factors: themselves—skilled, motivated, dedicated teachers who prepare well for class. Some school directors pointed to specific teachers or groups of teachers: “A great 2nd grade teacher who sets our students up with a desire to continue to learn after creating a solid foundation.” One director touted his new policy of hiring only teachers who are certified by the state Department of Education. Some school directors pointed to their regular

supervision and guidance of teachers and teachers' continuing professional development as important factors in the school's success.

School directors also mentioned other personnel, including bar/bat mitzvah tutors, teaching assistants (sometimes known as *madrichim*—generally teenagers who were previously students), volunteers or lay leaders, and, in one case, *shinshinim*—young Israelis completing their year of service in an American community. One teacher highlighted the potential of her school's *madrichim*: “When the teens are able to support small group interactions, the younger students thrive and the teens reap the benefits of the saying, ‘What one teaches, one also learns.’”

Families

Many school directors also mentioned parents as a helping factor, including their involvement with their children's learning, their volunteer activities, or their desire for more Hebrew. Some indicated that the success of the school revolves around parents. One wrote, “**The greatest factor of achievement is how dedicated the parents are to making sure their child attends and studies.**” Directors also praised students, focusing on their commitment, enthusiasm, and desire to learn.

Bar/bat mitzvah

Bar/bat mitzvah came up a few times as a helping factor, as in responses like “time pressure to prepare for the b'nai mitzvah” and “the fact that parents value B'nei Mitzvah, which is the chief reason they enroll them in Hebrew School at all.” In fact, the support organization leader who called bar/bat mitzvah “the third rail of Jewish education” said, “**It's the big obstacle, but it's also the big opportunity.**” The opportunity is that bar/bat mitzvah keeps families coming to the schools and engaged in Hebrew learning.

Attendance and hours of exposure to Hebrew

A factor controlled primarily by students and parents is attendance. A few school directors mentioned **high attendance as a helping factor**, and some pointed to their attendance requirements. In fact, reported attendance, especially in 6th grade, correlates with school directors' perception that students and parents are satisfied with Hebrew education. Related to attendance is time. Some mentioned “the massive amount of time that we are devoting to” Hebrew, additional sessions dedicated to Hebrew, or the fact that students practice Hebrew at each session (not limited to once a week) and/or at home.

Another way that schools report increasing students' exposure to Hebrew is by expecting them to participate in prayer services (full-community or youth), especially in leadership roles. One clergy member reported that students are more successful in their Hebrew learning when they attend services, and it helps them understand that Hebrew has an application and does not exist only in the vacuum of religious school.

Small groups and differentiation

Structural factors came up a few times as helping factors, such as the small size of the school or of classes, small-group work, differentiation, individualized attention, or opportunities for students to work at their own pace, including leveling “based on ability rather than grade.” Some of these structural factors were framed as changes from previous years. One school director wrote that their school now has “smaller class sizes, ideally with 8 or less students per class.” Another shifted “from whole class/ whole grade model to Hebrew Reading Groups based on capabilities.” Many reported offering one-on-one or one-on-two sessions during or outside of school hours. A few pointed to specialists who help students with special needs or different learning styles. As discussed above, three-quarters of schools report a great or moderate amount of learning in small groups, but only one quarter report that amount of one-on-one learning.

Of course, small-group and individualized instruction require more staff resources than whole-class instruction. One school director wrote that it was helpful to have “enough staff and space to break up into smaller groups to give students appropriate attention.” One might assume differentiated learning is only feasible in a small school, as this respondent suggests: “Adjusting the approach to Hebrew based on the interests and strengths of students (which we can do in a small school).” Indeed, responses regarding Hebrew differentiation and small-group learning were most common in small schools. But some medium and large schools also indicated individualized pacing and one-on-one tutoring as helping factors. One large school we observed requires weekly one-on-one sessions where students practice decoding prayers with their tutor, either in person or via Facetime or Skype. Several students and parents mentioned this as a positive aspect of the school. One student in a different school wrote, “I would love to have more one on ones with the teachers.”

Optional instruction

One teacher suggested optional additional sessions as a way to address the time crunch. Indeed, a number of school directors mentioned these additional sessions as a helping factor. One wrote, “A free Enrichment section offering has helped make it possible for each student to maximize success with an extra opportunity each week for exposure to the material.” Another wrote about “adding an hour weekly (opt-in) for Hebrew for grades 4-6.” One school director indicated an additional goal: “Help every student who wants to learn Hebrew at a higher level do so, without expecting that most students would have this personal goal. (A few would be interested in learning script and verb conjugations, but not the majority of students . . .)”

Some parents felt their children were being held back by students with lower Hebrew skills and wished there were more track options. A few parents felt their goals would be better met with more immersive Hebrew instruction, especially from Israelis. One parent wrote, “I wish there would be a fully immersive *ulpan* for a portion of the class.” Similarly, some students

mentioned a desire for more conversational Hebrew. One student wrote, “I would, at some point, like to learn to have a conversation in Hebrew at Hebrew school,” and another added, **“If I go to Israel I would like to know enough Hebrew to communicate and have basic conversations.”**

Based on the quantitative data, families like these seem to be in a minority. In fact, some school directors reported mixed success convincing families to take advantage of optional elements of the program, not only additional weekly sessions focusing on Hebrew conversation, but also online distance-learning or sessions where parents can learn the skills they need to support their children’s learning. For example, one school added a Hebrew enrichment track but had to cancel it after two years due to lack of interest. Please see below for our recommendations related to complementary learning opportunities.

Approach and curriculum

As another common helping factor, school directors and teachers identified particular approaches to Hebrew education. Several school directors mentioned specific curricula they have found helpful, including original materials or curriculum guides compiled by current or previous directors and publicly available workbooks and apps. These include materials from Behrman House (especially *Shalom Ivrit*, *Hebrew in Harmony* [a music-based curriculum], *Mitkadem*, and their Online Learning Center), from Torah Aura (*Siddur Hebrew* program and *Prayer Tech*), from the Jewish Education Center of Cleveland (*Let’s Learn Hebrew Side-by-Side*), and Chabad (*Aleph Champ*). A few pointed to the particular immersion or *ulpan*-style programs they use. Some specified changes in approach they had recently made, such as “changing from a tefillah to a modern Hebrew based curriculum.” **No matter which type of Hebrew they emphasized and which curriculum they used, repetition and review of previously learned material came up several times as helping schools achieve their Hebrew-related goals.**

A number of school directors specified [#OnwardHebrew](#) or its components as helping factors. One wrote, “We have just shifted our goals and methods this year; our adoption of HTM and Let’s Learn Hebrew Side-by-Side, Hebrew-rich Tefillah, and JLV [Jewish Life Vocabulary] will help move us toward our revised goals.” Many highlighted Hebrew Through Movement in particular, the kinesthetic approach to Modern Hebrew comprehension used by 62% of the schools in our sample. One said, “Hebrew through Movement has improved students’ comprehension and fostered enthusiasm. It has also made room for more theological discussion.”

Our quantitative analysis revealed a strong correlation between the use and frequency of HTM and school directors’ reports that graduates are succeeding in the goal of understanding basic Hebrew instructions, as well as a weaker but still significant correlation with students’ ability to have a basic Modern Hebrew conversation.

Engaging learning

Several school directors pointed to the importance of class being fun and engaging for students, which relates to the primacy of affective goals. “Fun” and “engaging” are subjective terms, and different students or teachers might evaluate the same activity as more or less fun and engaging. Activities that many consider engaging involve active participation from students and are often framed as games, a common practice in language pedagogy.⁵⁸ Several school directors mentioned specific engaging activities, such as a weekly quiz bowl on Jewish vocabulary that they call The Hebrew Games, or Animal Reading Days where students read in English and Hebrew to dogs. One school director reported integrating Hebrew instruction with aspects of Jewish tradition, especially food, in “an exciting and fun environment.” A few mentioned project-based learning, also a common technique in language education.⁵⁹

Several school directors reported using technology-based multimedia resources, such as apps, music, YouTube clips, and PowerPoint presentations, “to tap into kids’ existing interest in screens,” as one explained. Another school director said a factor helping their program is “playing to the interests of the children and utilizing apps and music.” For example, in the schools where we observed, teachers showed a BimBam video about kashrut, a Chabad video about the Passover seder, and “A Lion King Passover” by the acapella group Six13.

Another aspect of engaging learning that school directors mentioned is gamification, competition, and incentives, such as a Golden Shekel that students receive for demonstrating impressive Hebrew skills and can exchange for prizes, and a reward for spontaneously reading one of many prayer excerpts posted in a particular hallway. Several schools have a karate-belt-style reward system where students earn dog tags or medals of different colors as they learn each set of prayers or skills. One director said that kids “love to earn their next tag” and “are eager to move to the next group quickly.”

One school director explained how engaging learning came to influence several aspects of the school:

Our elective program infuses a lot of Hebrew in a way that is more fun and active (games, active words in Hebrew), and that is migrating more into the (very traditional) class setting—a good thing!! It is easier to allow the teachers to have freedom in a non-classroom setting—and then they understand how Hebrew learning can be more fun—we also have a congregational family trip to Israel which boosts students’ interest in Hebrew before and after the trip.

Additional helping factors

A few school directors mentioned factors outside the school as helpful, such as a Jewish day school that is connected with the part-time school or camps the students attend in the

summer. One director in a Chicago suburb singled out important role of OSRUI (a URJ summer camp) in fostering campers' enthusiasm for Hebrew.

Only a few mentioned funding, including grants they received from their local Federation, or support from specific organizations, such as Gateways, an organization that works toward inclusion of children with special needs in Jewish educational settings. Notably, **nobody mentioned support from umbrella organizations like the URJ or the USCJ**, even though they do provide some resources.

Factors hindering Hebrew educational goals

When we asked school directors, teachers, and clergy what factors are *hindering* their schools from achieving their Hebrew-related goals, we received even more responses. Common responses included insufficient instructional time, opposition to homework, parents and students with poor attitudes, a lack of qualified teachers, a lack of clear agreed-upon goals, lack of differentiation, issues with space, and bar/bat mitzvah. Many of these hindering factors are the flip side of helping factors discussed above, often in different schools and sometimes even in the same school. For example, a school might have some strong teachers but not enough, and each school likely has parents with an array of goals and commitments. Bar/bat mitzvah can serve as both a motivating factor for families to pursue Hebrew education and a hindering factor if families are interested only in bar/bat mitzvah and not in the wider array of Hebrew skills educators wish to emphasize.

Instructional time

A majority of school directors who answered the hindering factors question mentioned the limited number of contact hours with students. Within this limited time, some addressed the lower priority of Hebrew conversation among the many subjects the school focuses on:

Better (in my mind) to spend that time teaching more Jewish history, or famous Jews in American history, etc. Things they will remember going forward that might actually inform and have applicability in their lives. All conversational Modern Hebrew, even if used regularly in all our grades, would be forgotten because it would never be used again after b'nai mitzvah.

A few school directors indicated that they would have additional Hebrew-related goals if they had more instructional hours. One wrote, "Many of the things I answered 'not at all' to were not for a lack of personal wish by me or the *kahal* [community]; there just isn't time." (See also the quote in the Introduction to this report.) Mentions of time constraints did not correlate with number of contact hours or number of Hebrew hours. Even schools on the high end of contact hours expressed a desire for more time.

Some respondents pointed to the consequence of meeting only once a week: "It is hard for the students to really remember each lesson with so much time in between. We spend a lot

of time going over what we learned the week before.” One school director mentioned this issue in particular with regard to the long summer break, citing the “lack of retention from year to year, so teachers end up reviewing, reviewing, and reviewing.”

In write-in comments, many parents also mentioned time, indicating a recognition that it would be impossible to succeed in all of their goals in the limited time available. One parent wrote, “I went to Hebrew school 3 days (7 hours) per week. [This school] is 2.5 hours per week + 30 minute/week Hebrew tutoring. It would be virtually impossible to accomplish everything. I think [this school] is doing [a] good job with their limited time.” Another said, “If we had 4-6 hours a week like the old days, maybe the kids could learn. But 25 minutes a week (after snack and settling down), after a whole day of school. Who can learn anything?” A third wrote, “It’s tough given the hours available. We might be in the minority but would be open to the option for more.”

Instructional time was also the most common hindering factor mentioned by teachers and clergy. One clergy member wrote, “We need twice as much time with students.” A teacher connected this to the tension between Textual and Modern Hebrew:

I would love to be able to teach these kids some conversational Hebrew or reading comprehension, but in the amount of time we get with them—one hour of Hebrew per week plus a half-hour private Hebrew tutoring session . . . that’s just not possible. Modern conversational Hebrew is not the primary goal—the primary goal of our program is to educate the students in Hebrew that will allow them to pray with other Jews, and to succeed at their Bar and Bat Mitzvahs.

One facet of the limited contact hours is time devoted to ritual participation. Some school directors feel that students’ Hebrew skills would be strengthened if they attended or led services more frequently. One school director laid blame on clergy who do not support students participating in “adult” services. Many schools address this issue by incorporating communal prayer during school hours; 94% report doing this at least a small amount, but only 42% a great amount. Some school directors mentioned this as a missing element: “We really need to add Tefillah to our regular program schedule” and “still need to figure out how to use services and music to best achieve our Hebrew related goals.” Regular participation in communal prayer in Hebrew is a pillar of the increasingly popular #OnwardHebrew approach.

In their discussion of time as a hindering factor, many school directors mentioned students’ (and parents’) **competing priorities**; the word “**overscheduled**” came up often. In theory, sports, dance, and other activities could coexist with Jewish educational activities, but many school directors pointed to students, and especially parents, who make Jewish education a comparatively low priority. This can affect attendance, completion of homework, and families’ willingness to send their children to a school with more required hours or participate in optional programs. A few of the educational leaders we interviewed indicated that time

constraints have gotten worse over the past few decades. One school director reported that trend within their school: “Students are less and less able to commit their time to attending/studying.” To address this, some school directors indicated that their programs had reduced their hours.

Homework

With limited contact hours, one way to increase the hours students are exposed to Hebrew is by assigning independent or parent-guided work at home. Over half of all schools report giving at least a small amount of homework. But homework came up as a hindering factor among both schools that assign it and schools that do not. Among schools that do give homework, many directors complained that students do not complete it, often blaming parents. A few hold themselves accountable, making statements like, “We do not consistently enforce at home work.” A few blame availability of materials, such as “a lack of effective methods [of] out of class engagement” and “lack of excellent online resources for kids to use at home.” These school directors may have tried existing online resources, such as Jewish Interactive and Behrman House’s Shalom Hebrew, or they may not be aware of them. Among schools that do not give homework, **some school directors mentioned that parents are opposed to homework or that students would not complete homework because of their many other commitments.**

One Reform congregation school in New Jersey gets relatively high homework compliance using several techniques. At each year’s orientation, the director runs a parent workshop describing the school’s Hebrew reading method (which emphasizes syllabification) and the expectations for homework (completing a workbook page and reading prayers aloud three days per week for 15 minutes, divided into 5-minute chunks interspersed at the beginning, middle, and end of secular homework). After each class, parents receive an email specifying that week’s homework, and homework is also indicated in the workbook. Students whose parents sign the homework book indicating that they have completed their home practice receive a sticker on a classroom homework incentive chart. If students are not progressing, teachers call their parents to remind them of homework expectations. Even with this multilayered approach, this school finds that only two-thirds of students complete the homework.⁶⁰

Parent and student attitudes

What are the factors behind the problems of limited time, inconsistent attendance, and lack of interest in homework? Many respondents invoked **low student motivation and investment.** Motivation can be defined as “a readiness to learn”; students have an easier time learning and enjoy it more when they are motivated.⁶¹ Research on investment in language learning,⁶² L2 [second language] selves,⁶³ and intergenerational motivation⁶⁴ are important to consider in relation to Hebrew learning. Investment is dynamic and integrates identity, ideology, and context. Whereas motivation is essential to students’ experience of learning Hebrew, it is important to combine motivation with an intentional commitment of time and resources to

truly become invested. Some students may experience low investment because they do not see how learning Hebrew can make a difference in their lives. Perhaps they do not know anyone who speaks Hebrew or they believe that knowledge of Hebrew is not necessary for a meaningful Jewish life. One teacher pointed out that students who are less invested in Hebrew often disrupt the class and make it difficult for motivated students to learn. Another teacher brought up the misalignment of goals: "Students and parents aren't committed to being Hebrew readers or speakers."

Many school directors implicated parents in students' lack of motivation and other problems. "Parents do not feel that Hebrew is important, so students do not practice at home," commented one director. They often attributed this problem to parents' poor attitudes about Jewish education generally or about Hebrew in particular. One school director highlighted "negative feelings parents have about [their] own Hebrew school experiences," and another mentioned the "student and family perception that Hebrew is a necessary evil." Some brought up parents' low Hebrew knowledge or confidence, which makes them less able to support their children's learning at home. Poor attitudes were sometimes explicitly connected to bar/bat mitzvah: "Families who do not see the value of this learning other than for Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation." A less common complaint about parents was that they are uncomfortable with change. At one school that had recently adopted the #OnwardHebrew approach, the director mentioned low parent buy-in regarding the later timing of decoding and the integration of Hebrew Through Movement.

Indeed, in the parent surveys, a few write-in comments expressed concern with decoding practice beginning in 4th grade or later: "Because we don't start Hebrew learning til 4th grade, the kids are getting a late start to learning to decode words." And, "They should start more focused teaching of Hebrew younger. The Skype is the most impactful part and that doesn't start until 4th grade. My kids felt like they didn't learn much for multiple years." These types of responses by parents indicate a lack of awareness about the philosophy and purpose of the #OnwardHebrew approach to Hebrew learning, in which learning to decode is delayed not to delay Hebrew learning overall, but to create time for the scaffolding of language learning (including oral/aural input) that is needed to make decoding easier for students in the long run. Parents' responses, in conjunction with the quantitative findings on decoding, suggest a misalignment of goals and insufficient communication.

A few respondents suggested that Hebrew learning would be enhanced if parents and students studied together, either in school or at home. One teacher proposed a related remedy: "Increased engagement with the families even at the END of Hebrew school as they come to pick up their student(s); for example: a CONSISTENT PRACTICE of a parting song in Hebrew sung with family, classmates, teachers sends a HUGE message of how we VALUE our Jewish Life TOGETHER!" At one Reform school in California, we observed such a practice. All classes gathered in a big circle in the social hall, and many parents stood behind their children or in the back of the room. Using a microphone, the school director had each class do a "silent cheer" and asked them questions about the Hebrew letter and words of the day.

Two song leaders with guitars led “Shalom Chaverim” and “Hashkivenu,” and then students were dismissed. This creation of a community of parents and students participating in activities together at the school may enhance parents’ and students’ investment in the language learning process.

Teachers

Additional hindering factors that came up frequently in school director surveys pertained to teachers. **Many school directors wrote about a “shortage” of teachers who are skilled, experienced, or able to speak Hebrew** (or, in some cases, even able to decode prayers comfortably). One referred to “teachers who can teach to read but do not understand what they are reading; out of a staff of 20, only 2 are Hebrew speakers.” Another wrote, “Our madrichim and supervising teachers are great for prayer book Hebrew, but I don’t have any teachers who know Modern Hebrew. This limits our ability to bring Hebrew into the classroom and our students do not have the opportunity [to] truly hear Hebrew as a conversational language.” One school director mentioned several factors regarding teachers: “A lack of individuals willing to receive guidance on best practices (teaching Hebrew, classroom management), smaller community with less individuals to pull from, lack of individuals educated in teaching/second language acquisition.” A few parents also expressed concern about the teachers. One wrote, “Please hire real Hebrew teachers, not just glorified baby-sitters who happen to know Hebrew.” However, some parents offered praise for specific teachers.

Some school directors wrote about having high turnover in their teacher pool because they do not pay enough or because many of the teachers are college students. Some mentioned that their teachers do not buy into or feel comfortable with changes, such as incorporating Hebrew infusion. One alluded to “teachers stuck on prayer mastery.” Others mentioned lack of time for teacher training: “We have a bi-weekly professional development but it is not enough to properly train the teachers to teach Hebrew.”

Teachers generally did not critique themselves as a hindering factor, but a few expressed a desire for **more professional development opportunities** in topics such as classroom management and curriculum development. One requested training in Hebrew language:

I can only read Hebrew but I have no idea what I am saying which makes it really hard to . . . teach vocabulary or meaningful words when we learn new letters. I definitely wish that there was an opportunity for me to receive Hebrew training as a Jewish educator that is expected to teach Hebrew (even just the basics) because it would definitely enliven the Hebrew experience for my students.

Another teacher pointed out that teachers and students benefit when teachers meet with each other to share instructional strategies.

Goals

As the discussion above implies, goals came up as a hindrance factor; several school directors mentioned **goals being unclear, misaligned with curriculum, or in competition with other goals** (“Judaic knowledge, holidays, etc.”). Some school directors pointed to a “lack of agreement on clear goals among all senior staff members” or between themselves and parents, students, teachers, and/or clergy. Some comments suggest diverse understandings of whether Hebrew education should entail Textual Hebrew recitation for ritual participation and bar/bat mitzvah or Modern Hebrew conversation for interactions with Israelis. For example, one school director wrote about “uneven expectations of outcomes (especially where one parent in the family is Israeli).” Some teachers also mentioned unclear goals as a hindering factor, and a few blamed such problems on weak or inconsistent leadership.

Differentiation

A number of school directors wrote about a need for differentiation,⁶⁵ citing issues such as “not enough individualized instruction” and a “range of levels and seriousness” among students. **Some mentioned diverse student abilities, including special needs, and some mentioned student behavior problems and classroom management.** One school director indicated a need for differentiation due to “kids joining later and wanting to be w[ith their] age group.” This issue relates to class size, classroom space, and teachers. For example, one school director complained about not “having enough staff and space to break up into smaller groups to give students appropriate attention.”

Space

Space came up a few times in survey responses in relation to small-group learning. One school we visited addressed the dearth of classrooms by locating many small groups at tables in a large social hall. Permanent space also came up as a factor in schools’ “ability to create permanent Hebrew visuals.” This connects to the findings of our observations, in which Hebrew schoolscapes, or visual representations of language within schools, created additional opportunities for engagement with the language. This issue played out differently in schools that shared space with day schools. Two such schools we visited had many Hebrew materials on the walls of particular classrooms that were devoted to Hebrew (such as Hebrew conjugations), while secular studies classrooms had only English visuals.

Bar/bat mitzvah

Several school directors mentioned bar/bat mitzvah as a hindering factor. Most such responses focused on **parents or students being interested in learning Hebrew solely or primarily for their bar/bat mitzvah.** One highlighted a different angle: students who do not sign up for religious school until they are approaching bar/bat mitzvah age. A few teachers also considered bar/bat mitzvah a hindering factor. One wrote: “Students are more interested in ‘passing’ their b’nai mitzvah than in engaging with Hebrew as a part of their tradition and heritage.” Although the bar/bat mitzvah is part of the broader Jewish tradition,

this response highlights a common perception that this life cycle ritual holds too much sway in schools' decisions about Hebrew education.

Other hindering factors

Less commonly mentioned factors included transitions in school leadership, which result in a "lack of institutional knowledge of prior results," and the scheduling of **school during afternoon or evening hours when students are tired of being in a classroom**. A few saw curricular materials as a hindering factor. One school director wrote that there was "no science on what method works well for teaching Hebrew in [a] part time setting." A few mentioned money: funds to pay teachers sufficiently or acquire the space or curricular resources they would like. One school director wrote, "More budget would enable me to hire a special education aide, and/or pay our teen aides (which would increase attendance and commitment on their part)."

Recent shifts in approach

School leaders' recognition of helping and hindering factors sometimes leads them to make changes. In fact, **72% of schools reported that they shifted their approach to Hebrew in the past few years** (before COVID-19). Their changes were diverse, often representing opposite trends. Some schools increased their rigor, while others lowered their expectations. Some increased the hours of Hebrew instruction, while others decreased them. Some stopped teaching cursive; others started teaching cursive. Some are focusing less and others are focusing more on Modern/conversational Hebrew. One director wrote, "We are not focusing on Hebrew as a language. It is an introduction that we hope will grow as the students grow." Another responded that they are adding "more emphasis on Hebrew as a language instead of only a means to their b'nei [mitzvah]."

By far, the most common way school directors reported they changed their Hebrew approach is by **incorporating Hebrew Through Movement**. HTM sometimes co-occurred with other elements of the **#OnwardHebrew approach, such as communal prayer, Jewish life vocabulary, and waiting to teach decoding until 5th or 6th grade**. This suggests that initiatives have the potential to spread throughout the country. (In addition, a few school directors used the words "infuse" or "infusion" to describe how they incorporate Hebrew—terminology we have used in our previous research and workshops for educators.)

Other common responses included adoption of new curricula/textbooks, more focus on prayers, more focus on Modern/conversational Hebrew, and more small-group or partner learning, sometimes via Skype or other technology. Many mentioned clarifying goals and expectations. Several of the responses to the question about recent shifts match the important factors in school directors' perception of their program's success (as we discuss in our quantitative analysis and in helping factors).

These diverse shifts in approach demonstrate school leaders' ongoing engagement and experimentation with what is innovative and effective within their contexts. In some cases, changes were sparked by a transition to a new director. One director gave this response to the question about whether they had shifted their approach recently: "Yes, but not intentionally. We've had a lot of education directors over the past 5 years, each bringing different goals so the approach has been changing."

How school directors would like to shift their approach in the future

Many directors indicated that they are satisfied with their program and have no plans for shifting their approach in the future. Several of those said they merely want to convey their goals to students and parents more clearly or obtain more family buy-in. However, **half of school directors reported great or moderate interest in shifting their approach in the next few years.** Among those, the most common focus was increasing students' skills in conversational/Modern Hebrew. One school director said that in the following year, they planned to incorporate more conversational Hebrew in all grades because that is a selling point for parents. Another expressed a common sentiment:

I know realistically with our short time we have with the children, I will not be able to teach them modern Hebrew as well as reach our goals for their understanding and facility with Loshon Kodesh [Textual Hebrew, lit. 'holy tongue'] for Torah study and Tefilah. I am happy we are not a bar mitzvah factory because we have completely different goals that don't have an expiration date. That being said, I'd love to be able to give parents and students a way to learn modern Hebrew on their own time, in their own home.

A few school directors expressed a desire to add a Modern Hebrew track for advanced or interested students. In line with the #OnwardHebrew approach, many school directors planned to change when their school teaches decoding or focus less on decoding.

Another common plan for future changes was adding more differentiated learning and/or individualized instruction. Some planned to incorporate one-on-one tutoring via Skype. One wrote, "I'm questioning our class-based model of Hebrew instruction in grades 4, 5, 6 and wondering if we should join **the growing trend for single or duo-with-teacher weekly learning via Skype or in person in lieu of class-based Hebrew instruction.**" One-on-one learning seems to be common in small schools, as well as in large schools with many available teachers. One school director wrote, "We are getting too large for the one-on-one approach for every student, but it is culturally entrenched. We need a new solution." A few expressed a desire to find new resources for teaching students with special needs.

Technology is a major part of the conversation around individualized learning. This conversation includes not only technologies for remote tutoring, but also apps and websites

that enhance Hebrew instruction in the classroom and/or at home. One wrote, "If there were better on-line games available, I would use them."

Bar/bat mitzvah was mentioned in some responses. One school director hopes to "continue to shift away from rote recitation for BBM and towards meaning." Another wrote, "I would like to fully extricate b'nai mitzvah prep from our Hebrew language curriculum." Some hoped to add a Modern Hebrew conversation component after students completed their bar/bat mitzvah.

A few expected to move toward a more experiential approach, including project-based learning, models influenced by summer camp, and HTM. One director planned to implement an "ulpan camp" the following summer, but when we contacted him a year later he had scrapped the idea due to lack of interest.

In line with the hindering factors, several school directors pointed to the lack of contact hours as a barrier to changes they want to make. Here is a sampling of these comments:

- *Due to current trends, kids have less and less time available for classes following their public school day; I think it may be necessary to come up with a new model for achieving the required number of hours each week.*
- *Parents want less time, we are looking at different options to avoid them going to rent-a-rabbis for Hebrew. More one on one tutoring, teaching to the test, with Hebrew offered as electives for language acquisition for those interested.*
- *Students are overscheduled and attendance affects consistent learning. Think about other online weekday options to increase the retention and focus on Hebrew learning.*

A few school directors reported caution about making too many changes or about making particular changes. One wrote, "Ideally I would like to move decoding even later however I am not sure that the congregation and constituents are open to further change at this time."

Several respondents recognized that change is a long-term process. One wrote, "I feel strongly, but it will take time for the school to shift from B'nai Mitzvah focused to Language focused." Another explained how they expect to initiate changes: "I plan to start a visioning process, formally interviewing parents and lay leaders to identify goals of our supplementary program, including Hebrew. Depending on the outcomes, I would shift our approach to Hebrew to align with our vision."

School directors also recognized that teacher training was necessary for many of the changes they planned to make. Several expressed a desire to add HTM or Modern Hebrew conversation, but they recognized that those changes were impossible or unlikely with the teaching staff available in their region. Professional development opportunities are available

for schools in this situation. The Jewish Education Center of Cleveland offers a 10-hour online certification program to teach HTM. There are many options for teachers to study Modern Hebrew—online and in person—but these courses require many more hours. Most schools do not set aside funds for teachers to take advantage of such time-consuming professional development opportunities.

Many school directors reported that they regularly tweak their program. One wrote, “We’re always innovating based on desires and needs of our community.” In addition, many indicated an openness to future changes, even if they did not have anything in particular in mind. Several indicated that the process of taking the survey was illuminating for them, as illustrated by this comment:

I want to sit down with my teachers, understand what they are trying to teach in each grade, develop goals and a flow so that we can know what the kids ought to know at the end of each year, and also think about which goals we want to meet and don’t want to meet. To that end, I will now go back in this survey and write down all your well-developed goals, because you’ve thought about this much more than I have.

We hope this report will provide many school directors with ideas for future changes in approach.

FINDINGS FROM SCHOOL OBSERVATIONS

Thus far we have sketched a portrait of Hebrew education in part-time Jewish schools using survey data—quantitative and qualitative—about various constituents’ rationales, goals, and practices. In this section, we add nuance and color to this portrait by presenting qualitative data collected during classroom observations in 12 part-time Jewish schools. First, we compare topics covered and describe how students were more engaged in classroom instruction around God, social justice, and Torah stories, as well as HTM, than in the sessions where they practiced decoding and recitation. Then, we explain how schools use ethnolinguistic infusion, exposing students to fragments of Hebrew not only to enable ritual participation but also to socialize them into a worldwide community of Jews who value Hebrew.

Topics covered and student engagement

During our observations, Hebrew language was taught frequently, alongside and intertwined with prayers, holidays, ethics/values, theology, and biblical and rabbinic literature. However, **the interactions surrounding Hebrew were on a far more elementary level than other topics.** In the realm of ethics, for example, teachers led in-depth conversations on contemporary social justice topics, such as refugees, hunger, and veterans’ PTSD, incorporating sources from Torah, *midrash* (rabbinic textual interpretations), *aggadah* (rabbinic lore), and

Maimonides' writings on *tzedakah*. In conversations about theology, students demonstrated strong engagement and critical thinking. At a Reform school, one 6th grader described God as "a figment or idea that holds some meaning," and another said that some people "believe in the values of their religion, but they don't believe in the mythology of it." At a Reconstructionist school, 6th graders learned about theology using printouts of various Jewish philosophers—Heschel, Kaplan, Buber, Borowitz, Plaskow—and then completed worksheets indicating their personal stance on each approach.

In contrast, when students studied Hebrew, most of the work was relatively rudimentary, even in 6th grade. In most of the observed schools, **Hebrew education focused primarily on ritual competence**: recognizing Hebrew letters, decoding Hebrew words, and reciting prayers. A few schools offered some instruction in Modern Hebrew conversation, including using HTM. But the most advanced language instruction we observed—at a Conservative school in Illinois—was only at the "novice high" level,⁶⁶ even though the students had been studying at the school for six or more years. This discrepancy between basic Hebrew learning and more advanced learning in other Jewish content areas (such as theology) is not surprising, since deeper language learning would require more hours of instruction and more consistent attendance than is typical in part-time Jewish schools. Students likely discuss ideas and values in (age-appropriate) sophisticated ways in their homes and secular schools, enabling their Jewish schools to discuss those topics at high levels. But they have little exposure to Hebrew outside of their Jewish schools.

We also found a similar discrepancy between Hebrew and other subjects when we analyzed how attentive and engaged students appeared to be. **Students seemed most engaged in conversations on theology or values and in interactive, gamified activities. In sessions that involved Hebrew decoding practice, they often seemed more detached.** Students also seemed more engaged in smaller classes or classes that broke up into pairs or small groups. Time of day was also a factor: students seemed more attentive in classes that met on Sunday mornings than on weekday afternoons and evenings. The later it got on a weekday, the more students showed signs of fatigue and restlessness. In one school's afternoon session, students were quite attentive in the first class, a bit rowdy but still engaged in the second, and a combination of attentive, fatigued, and complaining in the third.

At an evening session in a Reform school, the topic seemed to influence student engagement more than the time of day. Students were more engaged in the second class, which focused on *midrash*, than the first class, which focused on decoding and recitation. In the first class, the lowest of three levels in 6th grade, the seven students were taking turns decoding and reciting several prayers and blessings that they had been studying all year (this was the fourth year they were working on decoding). Students completed the decoding and recitation tasks, but they also complained, asked when they could eat, and were reprimanded for interrupting. Two students arrived late—coming straight from dance—and exacerbated the chaotic atmosphere. The researcher who observed this class used the metaphor of "whack-a-mole" to describe the teacher's attempts to keep the students on task. The teacher, who had

been in her position for many years, reported that this session was typical, even though the teaching assistant was absent that day. Previous scholarship suggests that the students' disinterested behavior represents a broader trend in classes that practice decoding in a group setting.⁶⁷

Following a break and snack, the students returned to the class, and the same teacher led a discussion of the *midrash* (she called it "story") about Moses visiting Rabbi Akiva's classroom and not understanding the lesson. After the students read and discussed the story in pairs, the teacher asked the students, "What messages are you getting from the story?" A student responded, "Every year, Torah takes on new meaning because we change and our world changes." The teacher asked the students how an orchard is a metaphor for Torah, referring to the PARDES acronym they had previously discussed. One student suggested, "Torah tells stories that have morals or lessons in each story. There's always more to learn if you study again and more." Another added, "Everything has layers." During this conversation, some students were walking around the classroom, and one was sent out for being disruptive, but in general students seemed more attentive and engaged than in the previous session.

Student apathy and disengagement was not limited to Hebrew decoding classes. At a different Reform school, in a 6th grade class session focused on holidays, each student was expected to complete a crossword puzzle involving Jewish life vocabulary surrounding Purim. Some students approached the task seriously, and a few completed the worksheet. But as the class progressed, the students became more rowdy and less on task. Students chatted with each other, leaned back in their chairs, and listened to music on their cell phones.

We observed slightly higher levels of student engagement in a Hebrew decoding class at this school. The six students were divided into groups according to ability, and the teacher and teen madrich were helping them recite the Aleinu prayer. Most students were on task and seemed engaged, but a few slumped in their chairs or sat on the floor, indicating little desire to participate.

These two classes contrasted significantly with this school's sessions of HTM. Although our quantitative analysis did not find correlations between HTM use and reported success in affective goals, the HTM we observed seemed to give students more positive, engaging experiences with Hebrew than their instruction in decoding and content classes that focused on Jewish life vocabulary. The teacher, a young Israeli-born woman, began with basic commands—*lalachet* (to walk) and *laatsor* (to stop)—and the 6th-graders eagerly followed them, moving around a paved outdoor courtyard. Then the commands became more complex: *lasim et yad yamin al ha'af* (put your right hand on your nose), *lasim yad smol al tzeva kachol* (put your left hand on the color blue). Many students immediately understood and demonstrated the appropriate action, but others simply imitated the more advanced students. When individual students were asked to follow commands, a few were unable to do so. Eventually it was the students' turn to give commands, as this was an advanced class. Most

students gave commands that were almost as elaborate as those of the teacher, such as, “*yad smol al habeten*” (left hand on the stomach), but some gave pidginized commands, like “*rosh kachol*” (head blue, meaning put your head on something blue). Most of the teacher’s evaluations and other incidental comments were in Hebrew, e.g., *tov me’od*, meaning “very good,” but some were in English, such as “good job” and “Oh so sorry,” when she called a student by the wrong name. Students made comments to each other in English, but most of the official activity took place in Hebrew. Although a few students used the movement commands as an opportunity to run around, and a few deliberately moved more slowly than the others, most students seemed quite engaged, much more than in the decoding and holiday classes.

This discrepancy in engagement is not surprising. Most children would feel more engaged in a kinesthetic activity or a conversation that aligns with the level of discourse in their secular school than in the tedious task of learning to decode a foreign alphabet. However, most schools do expect students to acquire skills in decoding Textual Hebrew. How can they accomplish this goal without using so much of their limited class time? Educational leaders have come up with a few creative solutions to this problem. Some schools that participate in the #OnwardHebrew movement introduce decoding in 4th grade or later—through small groups, through one-on-one learning, or through a “decoding boot camp” with volunteer tutors. One Reconstructionist school does some decoding and recitation work in small groups during the regular school sessions, but they also require weekly one-on-one Hebrew tutoring, either in person or via technology. Another approach is to assign homework, especially in the form of web- or app-based games, for students to practice decoding on their own, thereby cutting down on the hours decoding in class.

Hebrew infusion

Aside from HTM and a few other instances of Modern Hebrew conversation, most of the Hebrew instruction we observed at part-time Jewish schools could be classified as ethnolinguistic infusion. **Students were being socialized not only to participate in the ritual life of Judaism through decoding and recitation but also to feel part of a local and international metalinguistic community that values Hebrew.** Schools used several aspects of infusion: loanwords, signage, conversation about Hebrew, and, to a smaller extent, engaging activities. Even the decoding and recitation are aspects of ethnolinguistic infusion: students are engaging with the language in routinized ways without the ability to converse in it.

Hebrew loanwords / Jewish life vocabulary

A common component of ethnolinguistic infusion is loanwords—words from one language used within another language. The most common loanwords we heard in our observations were **Hebrew-origin words referring to Jewish observance, texts, and values** (see examples of all loanword types in Table E). We also heard some Jewish life vocabulary originating in Yiddish and some related to Israel education. All of these are loanwords common in Jewish communities beyond the school, words that the #OnwardHebrew approach calls “Jewish life

vocabulary.” We also heard many Hebrew loanwords beyond Jewish life vocabulary. These included **words referring to roles, periods, and items at school**. In some cases, official documents or signs used Hebrew words, but most participants referred to the item with an English word, such as “Hebrew” instead of “*ivrit*” or “5th grade” instead of “*kitah hey*.” In addition to Jewish life vocabulary and school-specific words, we heard **several other Hebrew phrases used in routinized contexts, such as prayer choreography, greetings and closings, quieting, and evaluation**. Sometimes these were routinized as group utterances, such as at the end of a Reform service, when the rabbi requested, “Everyone please say “*yasher koach*,” and the students responded in unison.

Table E. Loanwords in part-time Jewish schools	
Type	Examples
Jewish life vocabulary	
Jewish observance, texts, and values	<i>seder, bima, kipa, tzedakah</i> , names of prayers
Yiddish	<i>kinderlach, mensch, grogger</i>
Israel	<i>Hatikvah, Haganah, Yom Hazikaron</i>
School-related referents	
Roles	<i>madrichim, yeladim, Morah/Moreh X</i>
Class or period names	<i>Kitah hey, Shorashim, Shira, Yachad, Ivrit</i>
Items used during school	<i>machberet, siddurim, brit kehillah</i>
Prayer choreography	<i>kulam lashevet, lakum b’vakasha</i>
Greetings and closings	<i>boker tov, shalom</i>
Quieting	<i>sheket, sheket b’vakasha</i>
Evaluations	<i>yafe, kol hakavod, yasher koach, nachon</i>

Another common use of routinized Hebrew was counting, sometimes of children, sometimes of objects and, quite commonly, counting off before starting a song: “*Echad, shtayim, shalosh, arba!*” (one, two, three, four). Several teachers also incorporated routinized Hebrew when taking roll: a few classes of all levels began with the teacher saying students’ names and the students replying “*Ani po*” (I’m here) or, if a child is absent, classmates replying “[Name] *lo po*” (not here). Teachers also used other Hebrew words in less routinized ways, such as *yala* (come on), *balagan* (chaos), *toda raba* (thank you very much), and “who’s holding the *delet* [door]?”

When school leaders and teachers use these words, they expose students to some (mostly routinized) fragments of Hebrew within the context of a language they already understand, making it easier for them to figure out the meaning of the words and remember them. In some cases, teachers prompted students to use loanwords too—one more way of infusing Hebrew into the primarily English environment and fostering students’ personal connection to the language.

Linguistic schoolscapes: Hebrew writing on white boards, worksheets, and walls

Another building block of infusion is signage. Research on “linguistic landscapes”—the use of (multiple) language(s) on signs in public space, like storefronts and street signs—sheds light on ideologies and power dynamics regarding particular languages.⁶⁸ The visual representations of language within schools, known as schoolscapes,⁶⁹ are also interesting to analyze, especially when they use minority languages. Schools are intentionally designed spaces over which directors and teachers have some autonomy, and many use those spaces to infuse written fragments of their group’s language, serving pedagogical and symbolic purposes.

In the schools where we observed, **the walls were decorated with signs in a combination of English, Hebrew in Hebrew letters, and transliterated Hebrew** (and in one synagogue in South Florida, Spanish: *Feliz Pesaj* [Happy Passover]). Hebrew was used in synagogues’ room signs, memorial plaques, and event flyers, but most of the posted Hebrew we saw was in pedagogical materials, such as those teaching Hebrew letters, words, *shorashim* (grammatical roots), verb conjugations, body parts, months, maps of Israel, and blessings (Figure 18).

Figure 18. Blessings and alphabet posters at a Reform school in New York



Some signs were professionally printed, and others were hand-drawn by adults or children. Some were artistically rendered, and others were plain. Most were in block letters, not cursive, although we did find a few cursive signs at Conservative schools, including charts of Hebrew block and cursive letters. Some signs had *nikud* (vowel markings), and others did not. When teachers wrote on blackboards and whiteboards, they generally used block letters, sometimes with *nikud*, sometimes not.

Another type of sign we noticed in schools was Hebrew labels, which generally included English and transliterated Hebrew. Some schools had a few of these, but a Reconstructionist

school in California had dozens, labeling items as diverse as sinks, clocks, light switches (Figure 19) and bookshelves (Figure 20).

People who visit the school wing do not need these signs to understand that they are looking at a light switch or a bookshelf, and there is generally no instruction surrounding these particular words. The more functional labels are only in English, such as the topics within the bookshelf. **The Hebrew labels serve a symbolic purpose, emphasizing the importance of Hebrew in this institution and creating a Hebrew-rich space.** One can see a similar phenomenon in other situations of ethnolinguistic infusion, such as the Chickasaw (a Native American language) enthusiast in Oklahoma who posts Chickasaw labels on locations and objects around the recreation center where he works (including a light switch), hoping the young citizens of the Chickasaw Nation who enter the center will recognize the importance of the language and learn some phrases.⁷⁰

Figure 19. Light switch label in Hebrew, transliteration, and English



Figure 20. Bookshelf with large labels in Hebrew, transliteration, and English and small labels for topics only in English



One Reform school uses signage to reinforce Jewish life vocabulary. This school has a bulletin board with a rotating display of letters and transliterated words. One day the Hebrew letter of the week was פ/פ (pey/fey), and This Week's Jewish Life Vocabulary was Purim (Holiday of "Lots"), pri (fruit), and Pesach (Passover). At the end of each day, all classes convened in a large circle in the social hall (as parents looked on) and, after some songs and words of inspiration, reviewed these letters and vocabulary words.

This aspect of ethnolinguistic infusion serves both symbolic and pedagogical purposes. By surrounding students with Hebrew visuals, educators intentionally create spaces that highlight the language and demonstrate its value to

the synagogue and/or school community. And, in the case of labels, some students might learn some Hebrew words after seeing them week after week. The diversity of the schoolscapes—involving various amounts of Hebrew vs. English and block vs. cursive letters—points to the different values each institution places on Hebrew and different types of Hebrew as part of the Jewish educational experience.⁷¹

Metalinguistic interactions: Talk about Hebrew in English

In situations of ethnolinguistic infusion, community leaders and educators often initiate metalinguistic conversation—talk about the language. Research on Yiddish-oriented metalinguistic communities, for example, found that participants were socialized to hold certain ideologies about the language, not only about its importance for their personal identity but also about particular dialects and source languages.⁷² At part-time Jewish schools, we observed several metalinguistic conversations—in English—about Hebrew.

The most common type of metalinguistic conversations we observed centered around decoding instruction. Teachers spent much time explaining how to pronounce certain Hebrew letters and vowel markings and correcting students' mistakes. The dominance of interactions like these **sends the message that the school values correct pronunciation of Hebrew for ritual participation**. In addition, when students recited Hebrew from memory or using transliterations, teachers often instructed them to read the Hebrew instead. This **conveys that reciting Textual Hebrew while following along with the writing is an important part of Jewish religious life**.

We also observed some interactions that implicitly imparted positive ideologies about Hebrew. At a Reform school, one teacher infused her Hebrew class with jokes and lighthearted interactions. When a student asked, "What time does the Hebrew part end?" she replied, "It doesn't—you're gonna be learning Hebrew for the rest of your life."

Several teachers indicated that certain words—in certain contexts—should be spoken in Hebrew, rather than English. At a Reconstructionist school, students were working on the *Avot* part of the *Amidah* prayer, which mentions the three forefathers and four foremothers. The teacher used primarily Hebrew names of biblical characters, and she sometimes offered explicit corrections or more implicit "corrective recasts"⁷³ of students' English responses. Here are some excerpts of this interaction:

Girl: Abraham?

Teacher: *Avraham*—excellent. Who is the second one?

Girl: *Yitzchak* . . .

Boy: Sara [pronounced in English—sera].

Teacher: Excellent. Do you know how to say that in Hebrew?

Boy: *Sara* [pronounced in Hebrew—sara].

Similarly, at a Conservative school, the director asked the students, “What’s your favorite song for *Pesach*?” When students began to volunteer answers in English, she said, “*Aval*, but, the name has to be in *Ivrit* [Hebrew].”

The most common setting for injunctions to use Hebrew was Modern Hebrew conversation classes that were intended to be immersive. At such a class in an independent school, the teacher repeatedly reminded the students to respond to her questions in Hebrew: “*B’ivrit, b’ivrit, zeh shiur ivrit* [in Hebrew, in Hebrew, this is a Hebrew lesson].” These reminders were only necessary because the students were more comfortable speaking English.

Even in English discourse surrounding Hebrew-intensive sessions, like Hebrew Through Movement, **students were encouraged to use select Hebrew words**. An Israeli teacher named Sigal⁷⁴ led an HTM session with 1st graders at a Reform school. At the end, an American teacher asked the students, “Did you guys say thank you to Morah [Sigal]? Kids, say thank you.” Another American teacher inserted, “No! What do you say? Todah, Morah [Sigal].” Metalinguistic interactions like these may use up some of the valuable class time, but they foster more student Hebrew use and convey an **ideology that Hebrew is valued in the school**.⁷⁵

Although we did not observe any teachers explicitly discussing why Hebrew is important for Jews, a few students demonstrated that they had absorbed that message. In a Reform school, students made posters listing reasons why they are “proud to be Jewish.” One of the groups listed “You get to learn Hebrew” as the first of their nine reasons (Figure 21). At the same school, in an activity about *hachnasat orchim* (hospitality), one group of students answered the question, “How do you invite God into your life?” with “by praying, by doing Hebrew, and by kissing the *mezuzah*.” At least in one student’s mind, “doing Hebrew” is associated with theological connection.

Some metalinguistic conversation highlighted the ideology that Israeli Hebrew is the most authentic. Israeli teachers sometimes made comments like, “I’m going to have you talking like Israelis. That’s a good thing.” Some American teachers deferred to Israelis because of their more “authentic” Hebrew pronunciation. Students were also exposed to non-metalinguistic interactions that likely coded the most fluent Hebrew as connected to Israel and Israelis. Often when Israeli teachers spoke to each other, they spoke in Hebrew, and sometimes when teachers (especially Israeli teachers) spoke to children whose parents are Israeli, they spoke to them in Hebrew.

These examples add nuance to the notion of Hebrew as a flexible signifier. **Hebrew can be associated with religiosity in some contexts and with Israel in others**, but often those symbolic realms intersect. In many cases, students associate Hebrew with both Judaism and Israel, both of which are central aspects of American Jewishness.

Figure 21. In a group activity in a Reform school in Florida, students included Hebrew as one of several reasons they are proud to be Jewish



Several teachers emphasized Hebrew grammatical roots and made connections among diverse words with the same roots. Students' recognition of the roots became symbolic of their Hebrew knowledge.⁷⁶ Since we observed classes around Passover, we saw interactions like this at three separate schools: "What is the word related to *seeder*? *Siddur* is the prayer book because it's arranged. And in Israel if everything is okay, we say "*hakol beseder!*" At one school we heard an American teacher elaborate on the root of *Korech*, the seder sandwich: "If you look at the root—the modern Hebrew word for sandwich is *karich*." At another, the teacher taught the word *barech* from the Passover seder and asked, "What word do we know that has that exact same root?" The students were silent. He gave a hint: "How do we say a blessing?" and some students offered the correct answer: "*Baruch*" (blessed). The teacher responded, "That's right. That's why these roots are important."

We also observed several teachers using prayers to teach about Hebrew grammar. At a Reform school, one teacher gave students a brief lesson on gender suffixes for Hebrew verbs: "When you answer *echad mi yodea*, a boy is speaking. So if [Rafi] or [Brad] answer, they say, *ani yodea*. But if it's the girls, you have to say *ani yo-da-AT* (separating the syllables and stressing the last one). So you're saying the verb in the feminine." This connects with our recommendation that schools integrate Hebrew learning into other content-based learning in the educational context.

Lessons about Hebrew vocabulary and grammar also showed up in communal prayer services led by rabbis and cantors. While going over the *Kedusha* (holiness) part of the *Amida* prayer, the rabbi at a Reform congregational school began with a discussion about words related to holiness. He said, "If I say *kedusha* or *kadosh*, what other words do you think about?" He (tactfully) rejected some students' answers, like *keshet* (rainbow) and "cod the fish," and he praised appropriate answers, like *kiddush*. "How many times do you see the word *kadosh* or something that looks like *kadosh*? Let's read it together. Count the number of *kadosh* words." Whenever related words came up that day, he highlighted them: "Oh there's that *kadosh* word again." The rabbi also engaged in explicit conversation about the decorative Hebrew writing that adorned the ark. From metalinguistic interactions like these, we see that some schools are teaching students more than simply rote recitation of Hebrew. **Even if students are not able to translate the prayers word for word, they are taught some key words that Jews have used for millennia.**

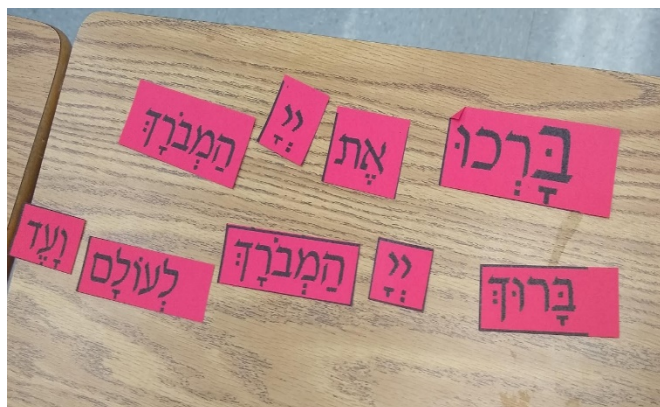
At a different Reform service, the prayer leader, a rabbinical student, also engaged in metalinguistic conversation about particular words. "We're going to continue with *Sh'ma* [a central prayer]. *Sh'ma* means to listen or hear. So we all need to hear, not only our voices but the sounds of God," the rabbinical student taught. Later he said, "We're going to sing a song some of you might know, and it has a very important Hebrew word in it: *Hatikvah* [The Hope (Israeli national anthem)]. Does anyone know what *tikvah* [hope] means?" Instances like these indicate that educators are incorporating Hebrew words into their instruction for pedagogical purposes. This is one of the central features identified among metalinguistic communities⁷⁷ and a hallmark of ethnolinguistic infusion.

Engaging activities

One issue that surprised us was **a dearth of interactive or gamified classroom activities involving Hebrew**. In the survey, virtually all schools reported using at least some "games/fun activities involving Hebrew," but we did not observe many of these at the schools we visited. We observed many such activities that were not specifically about Hebrew, such as art projects about Israel, a charades game where students acted out elements of the Passover seder, a simulation of the *Haganah* smuggling Jews into the land of Israel, and students creating "web pages" on poster board explaining Jewish texts, like *Mishnah* and *Shulchan Aruch*. Hebrew was infused into some of these activities, as when a teacher introduced a pre-Passover activity: "Hey, I got a message! *Paró* [Pharaoh] . . . wants us to build a pyramid! Everybody build a pyramid with the chairs! All the boys here, all the girls here. Ten chairs only. *Asará kisot* [ten chairs]."

We did observe some interactive Hebrew activities; of course, HTM is a prime example of this. Some schools assigned worksheets involving language-based games or puzzles, and at one school students raced to arrange slips of paper with Hebrew words from prayers and blessings (Figure 22).

Figure 22. Activity where students raced to arrange words from a blessing



One teacher at a Hebrew-rich school played BINGO with Hebrew words and, in a separate activity, tossed a ball of yarn to students as they counted off from 1 to 10 in Hebrew. These games integrated an understanding of child development into pedagogical practices and strove to associate the language with fun and engagement. Given the primacy of affective goals, we were surprised that such activities were rare compared with the many hours we observed of students decoding prayers and nonsense syllables

and in contrast to the prevalence of fun, entertaining Hebrew activities at Jewish summer camps, such as chants, jingles, call-and-response sequences, and Hebrew word skits.⁷⁸

Another aspect that was prevalent at summer camps but rare in part-time schools was leaders emphasizing homophony (similarity in sound) between Hebrew and English—for example, “There’s a fork in ma’s leg” (*mazleg* is Hebrew for fork). Homophonic Hebrew word presentations at camp offer mnemonics to help students remember these Hebrew words, and they cast Hebrew as an important, fun aspect of American Jewish life.⁷⁹ Perhaps the reason presentations like these are rare in part-time schools is because they only teach select Hebrew words that sound similar to semantically unrelated English words but are mostly not among the limited set of Hebrew words part-time schools wish to teach.

Although the teachers we observed did not highlight homophony, a few students did so in their informal interactions, sometimes in lighthearted asides. When students were taught about Golda Meir, one boy said to another, “I have some gold in my ear,” and they both laughed. In some cases homophonic connections were not intended as jokes, like the student who answered “God” when asked for the root of *haggadah* or the student who asked earnestly, “Baloney?” when her teacher used the word *beinoni* (in between). Teachers sometimes reacted negatively to student comments like these. An example is this interaction:

Teacher: *Seder*. Can anyone tell me what it means?

Student: Cider, apple juice.

Teacher: You have to know the differences between the languages. Stay in Hebrew.

Teachers’ negative reactions are often warranted, especially when student comments derail classroom activities. However, part-time schools might consider incorporating more multilingual wordplay, not only to help students remember Hebrew words, but also to help them associate Hebrew with fun and with Jewish life—two affective goals that are important to many constituents.

Another way schools can make Hebrew education engaging is to offer **rewards or incentives**—also something found at summer camps. We observed a few instances of incentive (beyond teachers’ abundant compliments); one teacher handed out lollipops for impressive correct answers. Sometimes incentives are built into the school’s structure. In one school students received stickers, which they placed on a chart when they “mastered” a particular prayer, and in another, students earned color-coded dog tags for demonstrating competency in a series of prayers.

Goals

The Hebrew education we observed in part-time Jewish schools was geared primarily toward two types of goals: ritual participation and affective orientations. The extensive focus on decoding and recitation yields graduates who are able—to varying extents—to chant Torah and prayers for their bar/bat mitzvah and in other Jewish ritual contexts, in most cases while following along with (vocalized) Hebrew writing. The Hebrew writing system is clearly a value for Jewish educators, as students spend many hours learning to decode it and are expected to chant from the Torah scroll at their bar/bat mitzvah and from a printed Hebrew prayer book when they pray communally. Students rarely learn the meaning of the sentences they are reciting beyond select words and basic themes of each prayer. This is similar to Greek Orthodox, Hindu,⁸⁰ and Islamic⁸¹ educational settings.

Schools’ affective goals are important not only to school directors but also to all constituencies: associating Hebrew with Jewishness, feeling a sense of accomplishment regarding their Hebrew knowledge, feeling personally connected to Hebrew, associating Hebrew with fun, and instilling a desire to pursue further Hebrew education. The findings of our observations explain the high self-ratings students gave regarding these affective orientations (higher than school directors expected). **Schools seem to be accomplishing these affective goals through their use of ethno-linguistic infusion, especially the ample incorporation of loanwords, some signage, metalinguistic conversation, and, to a lesser extent, engaging activities.** These practices send a clear message to students: Hebrew is an important element of Jewish life, even among a population with limited proficiency.

However, the findings presented above indicate that schools are not completely disinterested in Hebrew skills beyond recitation. Some schools also offer elementary instruction in Modern Hebrew conversation, especially the receptive skills of listening, emphasized in HTM. Even at schools with little or no Modern Hebrew instruction, some metalinguistic interactions focus on the meaning of select words and make connections among words with the same root. Some classroom interactions explicitly and implicitly valorize Israeli-born Jews as the most authentic speakers of Hebrew. Such practices emphasize that Hebrew is not only a sacred language of religious observance but also a modern vernacular in the State of Israel—and an important part of American Jewish culture.

RESOURCES AVAILABLE FOR PART-TIME JEWISH EDUCATORS

Now we widen the analytic lens from individual schools to the broader field of part-time Jewish education. What resources are available to help schools in the task of teaching Hebrew, however that flexible signifier is understood in their setting? Several educators in this study mentioned curricular materials—because they either considered them helpful or had not yet located the perfect workbook, textbook, or online game. We found that printed and online materials are available for both Textual Hebrew and Modern Hebrew, focusing on one or more of the many goals educators are interested in. We also investigated what infrastructure exists in the field. There are several support organizations and more informal networks that support part-time Jewish schools, and some of their initiatives have addressed Hebrew. Even so, **this infrastructure could be expanded and consolidated to offer more support specifically for Hebrew education.**

Curricular materials

Our review of curricular materials found a large number of books and other resources, including a growing collection of online digital resources. The vast majority of these materials focus on Hebrew decoding and prayer reading, recitation, and meaning. However, a handful of materials focus on Modern Hebrew, Jewish life vocabulary, Hebrew songs, or Torah.

The largest publisher of Hebrew materials for part-time Jewish schools—by far—is Behrman House, with over 35 publications, many of which are workbook series, plus enrichment materials such as apps, digital supplements to textbooks, posters, teacher guides, and playing cards. In line with our findings about the diverse rationales and goals for Hebrew education, the materials at Behrman House are designed to provide curricular support for a variety of approaches. Their 2019-2020 guide features a chart, *Use Your Hebrew Goals to Choose Appropriate Materials*, which lists four possible areas of focus for a community's Hebrew program: 1) prayer skills and meaning; 2) Hebrew as a living language (conversational Hebrew); 3) Hebrew in Jewish life (Jewish ritual life and connections to Israel); and 4) Hebrew in lifelong learning (materials to learn Hebrew at any age). There are at least eight different *Alef-Bet* or pre-primer publications; at least six publications (for children) focused on decoding (also known as “primers”); four series that focus on prayer (such as *Hineinu*, *Hebrew in Harmony*, and *Mitkadem*); four series that focus on Modern Hebrew (such as *Shalom Ivrit*, *Let's Talk*, *Ulpan Alef*); four publications geared specifically to adult learners (a combination of decoding and prayer learning); and four digital apps. According to Behrman House, their most popular curricular material is *Hebrew in Harmony*, a series that “uses the power of music to engage students with prayer.”

Torah Aura is the second largest publisher of Hebrew materials, offering a wide variety of resources including primers, pre-primers, books for adults to learn to read Hebrew, a series teaching Modern Hebrew (*Daber Ivrit*), and many books for children and adults to learn Jewish prayer. They also sell enrichment materials for Hebrew learning, such as posters,

flashcards, stickers, and online apps, including Online Primer, which focuses on decoding, and PrayerTech, which allows students to practice Hebrew prayers.

In addition to Behrman House and Torah Aura, several other publishers and organizations provide Hebrew learning materials for part-time Jewish schools, for sale or for free. JLearnHub offers *Hebrew Step-by-Step* (Hebrew decoding packets and online programs) and *Beit Midrash Prayer Guides*, and their website says that more materials are planned for trope/cantillation, Modern Hebrew, and Hebrew art. Ktav has a series of materials called *Read Hebrew Now*, and Barvaz Press offers *Kavanah Corner*, both of which include a variety of materials for learning prayers, such as flashcards, puzzles, and prayer practice files. Barvaz also sells prayer-focused textbooks, a Hebrew phrase book (teaching specific Hebrew words and phrases for conversation), and a book focusing on Hebrew roots. The Jewish Education Center of Cleveland offers a number of Hebrew approaches and materials, including *Hebrew Through Movement*, *Let's Learn Hebrew Side-by-Side* (a decoding program for students in 5th and 6th grade), and *jPrayer*. Finally, a few organizations provide resources for particular types of schools. The Institute for Southern Jewish Life offers the schools it supports a curriculum called *Spirals K-7*. Most Chabad Hebrew schools use the *Aleph Champ* curriculum, published by Chanie Markus, which uses a martial arts-inspired, color-coded progress system to teach prayer decoding and recitation.

Through our observations, we found many of these curricular materials in use. At some schools students studied from workbooks from Behrman House or Torah Aura, but other schools used only copies from published books (including an array of *siddurim* and *haggadot*), as well as printouts downloaded from the internet. For example, a Reform school in New York was using a printout from ReformJudaism.org, and an independent school in Massachusetts and a Conservative school in Illinois were using worksheets from the BJE in Chicago. Given this hodgepodge of sources, and the comments from educators who felt they did not have sufficient Hebrew curricular materials, there seems to be an **opportunity for some umbrella organizations to consult with school directors about which resources are appropriate for their schools.**

A relatively new trend in Hebrew education—even before the COVID-19 pandemic—has been online learning. Several for-profit companies and nonprofit organizations, including the ones mentioned above, offer **gamified electronic materials for Jewish education, including for Hebrew decoding and conversation.** Three organizations that focus primarily on this space are Jewish Interactive, ShalomLearning, and JETS Israel. Activities through one of Jewish Interactive's apps, JiTap, have become particularly popular. ShalomLearning, which provides content and a learning management system to 100 part-time Jewish schools in North America, offers some activities using JiTap's technology, among other technologies, in partnership with two curriculum creators, Torah Aura and JLearnHub. In part-time Jewish schools, these online resources generally supplement other activities in the classroom, or in some cases they are assigned as homework.

In our observations we did not notice any students using electronic resources like these; the closest thing we observed was students in one independent school using Google Translate to look up Hebrew words. Electronic resources were rarely mentioned in our interviews or surveys. In fact, **some school directors complained of a “lack of excellent online resources for kids to use at home,”** perhaps not knowing about the options that exist. And some parents requested online Hebrew activities for their children to complete at home to supplement their in-class learning. These findings indicate **an opportunity for umbrella organizations to raise awareness about online resources and perhaps offer educators training on how to use them.**

Educational infrastructure

Through interviews with educational leaders, we learned about the institutional infrastructure supporting part-time Jewish schools in the United States. Some denominational umbrella organizations, such as United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism and Union for Reform Judaism, offer consulting services and downloadable curricular materials. Some groups offer networking and professional development opportunities for educators, including the Association of Reform Jewish Educators (ARJE) and the JEDLAB Facebook group. The authors of this report have presented webinars through ARJE, for example. A group of independent Jewish schools, some of which focus more on Modern Hebrew conversation, has a network called Nitzan. Chabad school directors share resources in Facebook groups and at in-person convenings. Several cities and regions have educational support organizations, generally based at Federations and Bureaus of Jewish Education (BJEs) or other central Jewish agencies. The Institute for Southern Jewish Life supports synagogue schools in the South, providing a fully scripted curriculum of 30 lessons, an annual conference, educational consulting, and school visits three times each year.

A few initiatives are geared toward innovation. A group of educators who have adopted particular innovations in Hebrew education created the #OnwardHebrew initiative to publicize their successes and encourage their colleagues to adopt these innovations. #OnwardHebrew leaders have presented at conferences like the ARJE and offered webinars through BJEs and other umbrella organizations. One of the authors of this report has also provided a webinar series for #OnwardHebrew practitioners to engage in a guided and collaborative process of action research within their contexts. This author also worked with #OnwardHebrew leadership to identify relevant projects that master’s students in her service-learning course could assist with. The Jewish Education Center of Cleveland has supported the work of #OnwardHebrew, and #OnwardHebrew recently received a three-year grant from the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Foundation to support staffing, professional development, and evaluation/research. Related to this work is Shinui, a network of BJEs and similar bodies that are advancing innovation in part-time Jewish schools, including in Hebrew education. For example, the Los Angeles BJE, part of the Shinui network, convenes directors of local part-time Jewish schools for networking and professional development and provides funded training for several teachers in the #OnwardHebrew approach. Similarly, 10

congregations in the Chicago area are part of a two-year project funded by the Jewish United Fund of Metropolitan Chicago called Changing the Paradigm, focusing on #OnwardHebrew's innovations.

In response to our (open-ended) survey question about factors that help their schools succeed in Hebrew education, several school directors mentioned #OnwardHebrew, and a few referred to funding from particular foundations or Federations. However, **nobody mentioned the support, networking, or professional development opportunities provided by ARJE, NewCAJE, JEA, JEDLAB, BJE, and other support initiatives.** It is likely that Hebrew education in many schools has benefited from this infrastructure, and a direct question about that would likely have yielded many positive responses. Even so, this gap in write-in responses suggests an opportunity for support organizations to offer more targeted initiatives to strengthen Hebrew education.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This multi-layered study found diversity in how part-time Jewish schools approach Hebrew, a flexible signifier with several potential symbolic meanings and uses in Jewish communal life. Many schools are solely or primarily interested in Hebrew education for ritual participation, especially to enable successful bar/bat mitzvah performance, and therefore only emphasize Textual Hebrew decoding and recitation. Some schools want their students to gain skills in Modern Hebrew conversation, especially the receptive skill of listening. We also found diversity among various constituencies. Although parents and students are more focused on bar/bat mitzvah than school directors would like, some are more interested in conversational Hebrew than school directors expect. These discrepancies, and the **lack of clearly articulated goals, lead to a discourse of failure regarding Hebrew education in part-time Jewish schools.**

Our findings have much in common with research on Jewish day schools, which also found diversity from school to school and within many schools regarding how much Hebrew and which skills should be taught.⁸² Similarly, research on language education in “complementary schools” in several immigrant groups (e.g., schools teaching Spanish, Mandarin, Bengali, or Polish) found conflicting ideologies and practices regarding the mixing of languages.⁸³ But part-time Jewish schools differ from these institutions in important ways. Compared to Jewish day schools, part-time schools have far fewer hours to focus on Jewish education. And while some immigrant complementary schools offer instruction in other aspects of culture, they tend to focus primarily on language. Given the severe time limitations and the many topics they wish to cover, leaders and constituents of part-time Jewish schools know that advanced skills in Hebrew conversation and reading comprehension are simply not attainable. Some have come to terms with this and have articulated realistic goals, but others evaluate their schools as less effective than they would like in teaching Hebrew.

These findings have led us to recommend the following changes in part-time Jewish education, some geared toward individual schools and some toward the broader field:

- **Engage in collaborative visioning regarding rationales, goals, and practices.** Based on educators' and families' misalignment of orientations toward Hebrew education and each constituent's limited knowledge about other constituents' stances, we recommend more communication within each school. This can occur through guided processes of appreciative inquiry involving appreciating, envisioning, dialoguing, and innovating.⁸⁴ It can also entail collaborative action research involving all members of a school or community in identifying goals, collecting and analyzing data, and identifying findings and implications.⁸⁵ We recognize that this process can be meaningful but also difficult, and therefore should involve honest and ongoing partnership with all stakeholders, perhaps with the guidance of experts in organizational change. School directors should meet with teachers, clergy, parents, and students to find out why they are interested in Hebrew education (rationales), what they hope to get out of the school's Hebrew education (goals), how they prioritize various goals, and to what extent they are willing to commit more hours. Based on these conversations, school directors should determine and articulate which goals their school will work toward—goals they can reasonably accomplish in the hours available. Then, in collaboration with teachers, parents, and clergy, they should **reevaluate their current Hebrew educational practices to align with those goals.** They might need to change the hours devoted to Hebrew, the integration of Hebrew with other subjects, learning configurations, curriculum, activities, homework, and/or teacher hiring and training. If there is great diversity of goals in their school population and enough interest in Modern Hebrew conversation, they might also choose to offer **multiple tracks or an enrichment option** for interested families. Once this process is complete, school directors should **clearly communicate goals to families:** what type(s) of Hebrew and which skills can they expect their children to learn in the brief time they are in school? If some families want additional skills that the school cannot provide, schools should refer them elsewhere, such as to **online conversational Hebrew education programs.**
- **Stop calling it "Hebrew school."** Parents and students often call these part-time schools "Hebrew schools," though few educators do. Most likely this is a remnant of the historical focus on Hebrew in part-time Jewish schools, but it may also symbolize—or engender—an assumption about Hebrew being a primary focus today.⁸⁶ Some schools that prioritize Hebrew conversation and writing skills may legitimately be called Hebrew schools, but most part-time Jewish schools should not. Clarifying nomenclature and associated goals would be important for each school.⁸⁷
- **Set affective goals.** Given the primacy of affective goals among all constituencies, schools can make explicit the objective of socializing students to feel personally connected to Hebrew—part of local and worldwide Hebrew-oriented **metalinguistic communities.**

- **Integrate and infuse Hebrew throughout the curriculum.** To accomplish the affective goals, it may be useful to integrate Hebrew more fully, intentionally, and explicitly into many aspects of the part-time school curriculum, using a **content-language integrated approach**. Most schools report using at least some Jewish life vocabulary, communal prayer services during school hours, Hebrew songs, fun activities involving Hebrew, and Hebrew writing in the schoolscape. By expanding these practices and articulating them as **ethnolinguistic infusion** (or perhaps just “Hebrew infusion”), schools can emphasize the importance of Hebrew in Jewish learning and life. This integration may also increase **motivation and investment** in Hebrew learning.
- **Spend less class time on learning how to decode in large groups.** Jewish children need to learn how to decode and recite Hebrew, but this does not need to be the primary focus of part-time Jewish education. Hebrew recitation may take place during communal *tefillah*, but learning to decode does not appear to be desirable or effective in large groups. Given that students (and teachers) find other activities less tedious and more engaging, schools should consider alternative models for teaching Hebrew decoding, including **waiting until 4th, 5th, or 6th grade** to introduce it (i.e., after years of oral and aural input), teaching decoding only in **small groups or one-on-one**, and/or using **online electronic curricula** that students complete at their own pace (with scaffolding and check-ins from teachers). These alternative approaches will free up precious class time to focus on other Hebrew skills or, in schools not interested in those, other aspects of Jewish education.
- **Assign gamified homework.** Our findings suggest that schools that offer a small amount of homework have higher rates of alignment of goals and perceived success. Schools should consider assigning students to participate on a regular basis in one of the many entertaining online Hebrew educational programs now available. If students have homework that feels like a game, they might be more likely to complete it. This will increase the number of hours students are exposed to Hebrew and further solidify students’ experience of Hebrew as something fun and important in their lives.
- **Increase options for teacher training.** School directors’ complaints and teachers’ requests indicate a need for teacher training in Hebrew language, educational techniques, and the use of particular curricula. Research on language education supports the efficacy of teacher training.⁸⁸ Given the part-time nature of work in these schools, teachers may have limited motivation or time for training. In addition, teachers are located all around the country and might find it difficult (or cost-prohibitive) to travel for training. Therefore, support organizations should offer **funded online training for teachers** in Hebrew language and Hebrew pedagogy. Training could focus in particular on flexible, innovative, and differentiated pedagogical approaches that fit the needs of the individual student (e.g., grouping, classroom management, technology, differentiation,⁸⁹ ability vs. grade level). Another area of training could focus on formative and summative assessments of student

learning as they relate to these diverse approaches to teaching Hebrew. Finally, some teachers would appreciate elementary or advanced training in Hebrew language.

- **Facilitate information sharing.** Despite differences according to denomination and geography, there is a great deal of unity in rationales, goals, and practices. Even so, administrators and teachers often feel they are reinventing the wheel, sometimes on a weekly basis. We recommend that the existing organizations and networks that support part-time Jewish schools collaborate to offer a unified push to strengthen Hebrew education. In addition to the teacher training recommended above, they could offer **consulting and training for school directors** tailored to their particular context. They could create **a repository of information about good practices and curricular resources that can be adapted to particular contexts**. This collaborative effort would likely involve the denominational support organizations, local Federations and educational umbrella organizations, informal networks like JEDLAB and Chabad educators' Facebook groups, and several companies and organizations that create and offer platforms for content. While there is a need for a focus on Hebrew education specifically, this could be part of a broader resource-sharing initiative for part-time Jewish schools.
- **Conduct further research.** This study focused on perceptions of Hebrew education by educators and other stakeholders (clergy, parents, teachers, students)—their rationales, goals, approaches to Hebrew education, and perceived success. The scope of this study did not include the **efficacy of various approaches to Hebrew learning**, but there is a great need for that kind of research. We encourage researchers and practitioners to collect data on student outcomes vis-a-vis Hebrew, using different approaches to Hebrew education. We cannot determine “best practices” in Hebrew education without research into student outcomes—including **short-term and long-term outcomes**. We also recommend long-term ethnography in a given setting, especially during a process of change.

We hope that this report will spark conversations among various constituencies about the rationales, goals, and practices of Hebrew education. Such conversations—within schools and among educational leaders and funders on national and local scales—may transform the discourse of failure into a discourse of success. Our vision is that 20 years from now, leaders and participants in part-time Jewish education will see their schools as meeting or exceeding their goals for Hebrew education, whatever those goals may be.

NOTES

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- ¹ For consistency, we refer to all education programs as “schools,” even though not all institutions use that label.
- ² See Avni 2014b, p. 257; Munro 2016.
- ³ Avni 2012; Zerkowicz and Finkel 2015; Pomson and Wertheimer 2017.
- ⁴ Bekerman 1986; Jakar 1995; Benor, Krasner, and Avni 2016, 2020.
- ⁵ According to Pew’s (2013) study of Jewish Americans, 59% report having participated in part-time Jewish education (“other formal Jewish education”), compared to 23% who attended day school or yeshiva; 38% attended overnight Jewish summer camp.
- ⁶ This study and its consent procedures were approved by the University of Southern California Institutional Review Board: UP-18-00528.
- ⁷ Pomson and Wertheimer 2017; Benor, Krasner, and Avni 2020.
- ⁸ See Ivankova and Greer 2015 on the “quant-qual” approach.
- ⁹ Readers who wish to see the questionnaires are welcome to contact the authors.
- ¹⁰ According to a report by JDATA (2013), there were 1,848 such schools in 2013.
- ¹¹ *West*: AZ, CA, CO, ID, NM, NV, OR, WA, WY; *South*: AL, FL, GA, KY, LA, MS, NC, OK, SC, TN, TX, VA; *Northeast*: CT, DC, DE, MA, MD, ME, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, VT; *Midwest*: IA, IL, IN, KS, MI, MN, MO, NE, OH, WI.
- ¹² Jewish density of school location was determined using the state as an (admittedly rough) proxy, based on a cutoff of 1.2% Jews in the state population (statistics from Dashefsky and Sheskin 2017). *Dense*: AZ, CA, CO, CT, DE, DC, FL, GA, IL, MD, MA, MN, NJ, NY, OH, PA, RI, WA. *Sparse*: AL, AK, AR, HI, ID, IN, IA, KS, KY, LA, ME, MI, MS, MO, MT, NE, NV, NH, NM, NC, ND, OK, OR, SC, SD, TN, TX (except in Houston and Dallas), UT, VT, VA, WV, WI (except in Madison and Milwaukee), WY.
- ¹³ With the help of research assistants, we analyzed the quantitative data statistically using SPSS, and we analyzed the qualitative data interpretively using Dedoose. Multiple coders participated to ensure greater reliability and consistency. Dedoose also allowed for mixed methods analysis, including correlating qualitative codes with independent variables such as denomination and school size.
- ¹⁴ Shohamy 1999; Avni 2014a; Winer, Aron, and Perman 2017.
- ¹⁵ Feuer 2006; Walters 2017.
- ¹⁶ Schachter 2010; Ringvald 2011; Winshall 2011; Moskowitz 2013; Greninger 2019.
- ¹⁷ Avni, Kattan, and Zakai 2012.
- ¹⁸ Zuckermann 2006. On “revernacularization,” rather than “revival,” see Spolsky 2013.
- ¹⁹ Pomson and Wertheimer (2017) distinguish between “Classical Hebrew” and “Modern Hebrew.”
- ²⁰ Benor, Krasner, and Avni 2020.
- ²¹ Spolsky 1986; Avni 2014a; Feuer 2016.
- ²² Benor, Krasner, and Avni 2020.
- ²³ Asher 1969, 2000.
- ²⁴ <https://www.onwardhebrew.org/>; the third author of this report is a co-founder of #OnwardHebrew.
- ²⁵ Benor 2018; Avineri 2019; Benor and Avineri 2019; Greninger 2019.
- ²⁶ Aron 2014; Winer, Aron, and Perman 2017; Greninger 2019.
- ²⁷ E.g., content-based language instruction (Cammarata 2016), curriculum development (Wiggins and McTighe 2005), language assessment (Bailey and Curtis 2015), language for specific purposes (Douglass 2000), language pedagogy (Brown and Lee 2015), task-based language teaching (Ellis 2003), and teaching pragmatics (Taguchi and Roever 2017).
- ²⁸ Ergas 2017, p. 58. See also Feuer 2016; Avni 2016; and Benor and Avineri 2019.
- ²⁹ Benor 2018, 2019. See also Benor, Krasner, and Avni 2016.
- ³⁰ Ahlers 2006, 2017.
- ³¹ Avineri 2012.
- ³² Canagarajah 2013.

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- ³³ Benor, Krasner, and Avni 2020.
- ³⁴ E.g., Creese and Blackledge 2011; Reyes 2016; Brinton, Kagan, and Bauckus 2017; Kagan and Dillon 2017; Dekeyser and Stevens 2018; Kemeh 2018; Seals 2018.
- ³⁵ Krasner 2011.
- ³⁶ Krasner 2011, p. 30.
- ³⁷ Schoenfeld 1987; see also Munro 2016 on tensions between families and synagogue leadership in training for bar/bat mitzvah today.
- ³⁸ Benor, Krasner, and Avni 2020, p. 107.
- ³⁹ Aron 1995.
- ⁴⁰ Avni 2014a, p. 259.
- ⁴¹ Although we asked about a wide variety of approaches to Hebrew education, we did not ask whether schools use workbooks as a methodology for learning Hebrew. As this may be one of the most common approaches, this would have been useful additional information for the study.
- ⁴² Benor, Krasner, and Avni 2016.
- ⁴³ Identical responses to this question may reflect diverse realities. For example, one school that reports having a moderate amount of HTM might use only sporadic instructions in Hebrew, and another might have adopted the full program, carried out by certified instructors.
- ⁴⁴ This finding also contrasts with the prevalence of Israeli Hebrew teachers in Jewish day schools (Pomson and Wertheimer 2017).
- ⁴⁵ This sample probably included more Israeli teachers than the national average because it included schools in areas with large Israeli populations like Los Angeles, New York, Boston, and South Florida.
- ⁴⁶ The phase 1 survey used the wording “for bar/bat mitzvah preparation” and “beyond bar/bat mitzvah preparation.” We realized after completing phase 1 that the second phrase was ambiguous, so we used modified wording in the phase 2 surveys: “for bar/bat mitzvah preparation” and “for reasons other than bar/bat mitzvah.” We also sent a brief survey with these and a few other revised questions to the school directors of the eight schools participating in the constituent surveys so their questions would be comparable. In our data presentation, the category “school directors” refers to the 519 school directors who responded to the phase 1 survey, and “8 school directors” refers to the school directors who participated in phase 2 and responded to these revised questions.
- ⁴⁷ The wording was slightly different on the school directors’ survey: “comprehending Modern Hebrew prose.”
- ⁴⁸ The student survey used a different scale (“not at all, a little bit, more than a little bit, a lot”) from that in the school directors’ survey (“not at all, to a small extent, to a moderate extent, to a great extent”). Ideally, we would have data to compare school directors’ goals and evaluations for the students at their exact current phase, but the school director survey asked about goals and evaluations for graduates. These students were mostly nearing the end of their 6th grade year, which is the final year for some schools. Other schools end after 7th grade.
- ⁴⁹ Cammarata 2016.
- ⁵⁰ Parents’ question about involvement was worded differently: “Has a teacher or administrator asked for your input regarding the way Hebrew is taught at the school?” The options were “Multiple times a year, Once each year, Once every few years, Once, Never, Not sure.” We re-coded these options to compare them with the school directors’ options.
- ⁵¹ The wording was slightly different for parents (“Has a teacher or administrator from [this school] communicated their Hebrew-related goals to parents at the school? If so, how often?”) and for students (“Has a teacher or director from [this school] ever told you about what Hebrew skills they want you to learn? If so, how often?”)
- ⁵² Personal communication, David Behrman.
- ⁵³ Our question to teachers about overall satisfaction cannot be compared to the questions posed to other groups, as it focused on their experience *teaching* at the school.
- ⁵⁴ The evaluation scale combined all goals except recitation of Hebrew prayers by ear/heart and recitation of Hebrew prayers using transliteration because many school directors evaluated their students as succeeding *more* in these goals than the school directors considered them goals.
- ⁵⁵ The alignment scale was determined by subtracting the evaluation scale from a parallel scale combining the extent to which each activity is a goal (also excluding recitation by ear and using

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- transliteration). Because a low raw score on this scale indicates high alignment between goals and perceived success, correlation strength statistics were multiplied by -1, and the ranges were flipped when presented in this report (low raw score = high alignment).
- ⁵⁶ A linear regression analysis using the perceived success scale as the dependent variable and contact hours, length of directorship, small groups, and homework as the independent variables (Adjusted R-square = .123) finds similar relative strengths of the variables. Adding denomination and/or percentages of teachers who are Israeli into the model reduces the explanatory power of the model.
- ⁵⁷ This finding is marginally significant (Chi-square: $p=.043$); note the small N for one category: only 15 schools report giving more than a small amount of homework. We do not have enough data on actual parent or student satisfaction to analyze that.
- ⁵⁸ Research on foreign- and second-language education has found that games, songs, and other entertaining practices can lower students' anxiety and sustain their motivation throughout the difficult task of language learning (Wright, Betteridge, and Buckby 1983; Richard-Amato 1995; Engh 2013).
- ⁵⁹ Beckett and Miller 2006; Petersen and Nassaji 2016; Beckett and Slater 2020.
- ⁶⁰ This paragraph is based on a follow-up email exchange with one school director who responded to the survey.
- ⁶¹ Ostroff 2012, p. 7.
- ⁶² Norton Peirce 1995.
- ⁶³ Dornyei 2009.
- ⁶⁴ Avineri 2012.
- ⁶⁵ Tomlinson 2014.
- ⁶⁶ ACTFL 2012.
- ⁶⁷ See similar description in Greninger 2019.
- ⁶⁸ Shohamy and Gorter 2008.
- ⁶⁹ Gorter 2018.
- ⁷⁰ Davis 2018.
- ⁷¹ On Hebrew signage at Jewish summer camps, see Benor, Krasner, and Avni 2020, chapter 6.
- ⁷² Avineri 2017b.
- ⁷³ Jefferson 1987.
- ⁷⁴ All names are pseudonyms.
- ⁷⁵ See Benor, Krasner, and Avni 2020, chapter 8, for analysis of language policing in Jewish summer camps like Ramah and Massad.
- ⁷⁶ Benstein 2019 advocates for metalinguistic conversation about Hebrew grammatical roots as a way of fostering appreciation for Hebrew, especially in educational settings that do not have time to focus on language proficiency.
- ⁷⁷ Avineri 2012.
- ⁷⁸ Benor, Krasner, and Avni 2020, chapter 5.
- ⁷⁹ Benor, Krasner, and Avni 2020, p. 148.
- ⁸⁰ Canagarajah 2013.
- ⁸¹ Moore 2004.
- ⁸² Pomson and Wertheimer 2017.
- ⁸³ Avineri 2017b; Baquedano-Lopez 2008; Creese and Blackledge 2011.
- ⁸⁴ Cooperrider and Whitney 2010.
- ⁸⁵ Avineri 2017a; Bradbury-Huang 2010.
- ⁸⁶ Or perhaps some people who use this term see "Hebrew" as a proxy for religiousness or connection to Judaism.
- ⁸⁷ Greninger 2015.
- ⁸⁸ See Looney and Lusin 2019, p. 5, for discussion of the importance of teacher training.
- ⁸⁹ Savage 2015.

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