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**Current Economic Recession Effects on Jewish  
Day Schools: New Findings from the DeLeT  
Longitudinal Survey**

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*Brandeis University*

**Background**

In late summer 2008, Lehman Brothers

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filed for Chapter 11 and sent the American economy into the deepest recession since 1929. The shock waves were felt, among other places, in public, private and religious schools. In an attempt to stabilize the economy, in 2009 the federal government established a \$100 billion emergency stimulus package to support public education, and particularly to avoid mass teacher layoffs. This proved a short-term solution for public school districts. Observers argue that, during 2010, beginning teachers in general education have faced the most challenging job market since the Great Depression (Hu, 2010, May 19). In addition, districts that are forced to trim their budgets often lay

off young non-tenured teachers first, adding the extra pressure of teacher turnover to the job market.

In the wake of this recession, Jewish day schools (JDSs), like other religious and private schools, did not benefit from the financial cushion (however imperfect) that was available to public schools. This paper summarizes what we know from the media and Jewish federations open reports about the impact of the recession on JDSs, particularly liberal non-Orthodox day schools. In addition, it reports on recent findings regarding that impact from a survey of teachers who graduated from the DeLeT program at Brandeis University and Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR)<sup>1</sup> and teach in JDSs, primarily in the Boston and Los Angeles areas.

To better understand the potential damage of the current recession, it is worthwhile to begin by look at past recessions and their impact on JDSs during the 1930s and 1970s. “According to Jonathan Sarna, between 1928-1935 there was a 22% drop in Jewish school enrollment in New York City. As Sarna put it, ‘We paid a big price for those declines. Those young Jews never made up what they lost.’ ” (Elkin, 2010, 91-92). In another report, documenting the recession of the 1970s, although Bubis (2008) does not describe the direct

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<sup>1</sup> The DeLeT program has tried to recruit and prepare certified teachers who care about JDSs and their students, and want to grow professionally, engage in teacher leadership, and ultimately work as agents of change in their schools. The program incorporates a residency model (borrowed from the medical profession) with some university course work, and reflects a combination of an innovative alternate route program with traditional university-based teacher preparation.

impact on JDSs, he clarifies the overall negative impact it had on the Jewish community as a whole.

“[Ellen] Witman (1984) documented how synagogues, JCC's, and schools... were unable to respond... She estimated that as many as 700,000 or 13 to 15 percent of the total American Jewish population, were poor or near poor. Jewish family agencies corroborated the trends, reporting increased caseloads, while synagogues and centers reported a drop in memberships and increased requests for scholarships” (Meir and Hostein, 1992). (Bubis, 2008, 10).

It is time to have an informed discussion about the impact of the current recession on JDSs that goes beyond personal experiences and anecdotal evidence. To advance that goal, this paper raises the following questions:

(a) In general, what has been the impact of the current economic recession on JDSs?

(b) Specifically, what do JDS teachers tell us about the impact of the economic recession on their schools and classroom?

## **Data and method**

This study used several search engines to find out what types of data were generated about JDSs and the economic recession in the last three years by Jewish associations, foundations and federations, as well as by local and Jewish newspapers and academic scholars. First, we conducted a Google search of the terms “Jewish day school” and “recession” and “teacher,”

which yielded 1170 results with many anecdotal reports published by Jewish and local newspapers, and sizable number of irrelevant texts (I scanned the search results of the first seven pages to get a general sense of the data). I then used the Google Scholar<sup>2</sup> advanced search option to conduct a search for the terms “Jewish day school” and “recession” and “teacher” (throughout the whole text rather than title alone) from 2008 to 2011, which yielded 21 results (none of which discussed or reported on JDSs and the current economic recession). A more traditional search through Academic Search Premier using the term “Jewish day school/s” yielded 46/26 results respectively (two relevant non-empirical works of commentary were identified among them).<sup>3</sup>

The second data set utilizes data collected by the DeLeT Longitudinal Project at the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University. The project tracks DeLeT students and alumni from the time they enter the program and throughout their careers in order to understand their background, motivations, commitments to teaching and Jewish education, school context, and career trajectories. The

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<sup>2</sup> A few recent studies have suggested that Google Scholar is relatively reliable in estimating the impact of journal articles in education when compared with the more traditional Web of Science and Scopus (e.g., Jan van Aalst, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> When I used the terms “Jewish day schools,” “teacher,” and/or “recession” I did not receive any result. Thus, I decided to broaden the search only using the terms “Jewish day school/s.” The relatively small number of search results allowed me to review all the JDSs related items and confirm that except of the two relevant items the terms “recession” and “teacher” were reliable and were not replaced by other terms.

study surveyed alumni from cohorts one to six (2003-2008) from the program’s two sites at Brandeis University and HUC-JIR. Seventy-eight surveys were filled out online through surveymonkey.com, representing a 88% response rate.

### **The impact of the economic recession on JDS student enrollment**

Scanning through the search results of Google, particularly during 2009, one may note that the tone in most news items is of deep concern and uncertainty about how the future will unfold and whether JDSs will survive the recession. For example, the *Jewish Daily Forward* quotes Marc Kramer, executive director of RAVSAK (The Jewish Community Day School Network), who argued that,

“The recession has been devastating... this is the ‘perfect storm’ for day schools: Enrollment is down, requests for financial aid are up, attrition is up, new applications are down, donor dollars are down and the costs associated with health care are up. I know one should never say, ‘Things couldn’t get worse,’ but it is starting to feel that way.” (Cohen, 2009)

National newspapers like *USA Today* described a similar picture of other religious schools crumbling under the severe pressures of the recession:

The Association for Christian Schools International, which represents about 3,800 private schools, says enrollment is down nationally by nearly 5%. About 200 Christian schools closed or merged in the last academic year, 50 more than the year before. The National

Catholic Education Association is still measuring the toll on its schools, but expects grim news from the hardest hit states, after years of declining enrollment. "Some schools that were on the brink — this whole recession has just intensified that," says Karen Ristau, president of the association. (Zoll, 2009)

In this article, too, Marc Kramer is quoted describing some community schools as standing on the brink of collapse:

School enrollment at RAVSAK's 120 Jewish community day schools is down by 7% this academic year [2009 compared to 2008]. At least half a dozen schools closed down in 2009. A few schools lost as many as 30% of their students. Many of the hundreds of other Jewish day schools, which are affiliated with Reform, Conservative and Orthodox movements, are also in a financial crunch... 2009-10 will be a "make or break" year for Jewish education, partly because of the additional damage to endowments and donors from Bernard Madoff's colossal fraud. Overall, U.S. Jewish groups are estimated to have lost about one-quarter of their wealth. "It's going to be painful," Kramer says. "There will be some losses."(Zoll, 2009)

The reports, which try to describe the macro trends in the field, were accompanied by numerous stories from California, Florida, New Jersey, and New York about individual JDSs that were forced to close down after their enrollment and donations decreased and the schools were unable to find alternative sources of revenues to balance their budgets.

All the while, the media also illuminated and celebrated the few cases of success, where JDSs, despite the hard times, retained a steady enrollment and/or brought new substantial gifts. For example, the case of Gann Academy, which received \$12.25 million, attracted nationwide attention from the news media and blogosphere (e.g., Rakowsky, 2009).

Besides the success and failure stories, there has been extensive coverage of "average" JDSs and their struggle to keep afloat. I bring some examples below to illustrate how the Boston area JDSs tried to cope with the recession, since most of the Brandeis DeLeT teachers teach in these schools. Most Boston area JDSs were described in the media as being in urgent need of more funding. Here are a few illustrations:

At the Rashi School, in Newton, fund-raisers are going back to donors, asking for additional help to provide scholarships to families hurt by the economic downturn. Kindergarten enrollment is rising but so are requests for help. "We're definitely seeing an increased need, even among existing families who haven't required aid before," said Adrienne Frechter, admissions director at Rashi... [where] a third of the students receive financial aid... Arnold Zar-Kessler, the head of school at Solomon Schechter Day School, said his school is seeking to increase its funds for financial aid by 15 to 20 percent next year... Jane Taubenfeld Cohen, the head of school at South Area Solomon Schechter Day School in Norwood, said administrators there are visiting some family homes, urging people to

apply for financial aid rather than withdraw students; she said raising financial aid has become such a priority that when two staffers married one another this year they decided to ask their wedding guests to donate to the school's scholarship fund. (Paulson, 2009)

One year later, Lisa Wallack from Boston's Combined Jewish Philanthropies (CJP) was quoted on the federation's website as saying that:

In general [in the Boston area], enrollment has stayed flat or increased slightly. I think that shows that the schools are weathering the crisis. Even in harsh economic times, the value of a day school education is so great that families make it a priority. (CJP, 2010)<sup>4</sup>

A recent survey of JDS enrollment data by Marvin Schick reinforces this last statement suggesting that overall student enrollment in 2010 as compared to 2009 has stabilized. Community and Reform schools contracted by 0.70%, while the Conservative Solomon Schechter schools, constituting a third of the non-Orthodox liberal day schools, continued to suffer heavy losses at an annual rate of 4.80% (eJewish philanthropy, 2010).

I will conclude this section with a few brief thoughts about the ways traditional and non-traditional news media have reported on the impact of the

recession on JDSs. This reporting is significant because it has the potential to frame the ways various constituencies and individuals think about problems and how they are inclined to solve them. I base my remarks on reading hundreds of news articles, blogs, and Jewish websites, but not on a systematic analysis of the data.

It seems to me that, in this important discussion over the future of JDSs, Jewish federations, philanthropists, and school leaders and administrators are the ones who get to frame the discussion, identify the problems, and offer the solutions. Missing from this discussion are parents and particularly teachers, two groups who have important stakes in schools, but are largely disregarded in the coverage. The media shapes this type of coverage by seeking information from institutional agents who hold high administrative offices and as such are considered more reliable (e.g., Tamir & Davidson, 2011). This dependency of the media on institutional sources also means that what the public know about JDSs might be a softer version of reality, which does not necessarily reveal all the problematic aspects or implications associated with implementing a plan for strict budget cuts. Another contributing factor to this "softer" representation of problems is the fact that JDSs are often fiercely competing for resources, and consequently are reluctant to share data in public due to a fear of appearing weaker, which might lead to reduced enrollments and donations, further exacerbating their financial problems.

In the following section we present a more detailed and comprehensive picture of the scope, nature, and especially impact of the budget cuts that were implemented during 2010, as perceived

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<sup>4</sup> Note, that in Boston, as in a few other big cities, families' commitment to JDSs was also helped by an emergency \$11 million pledge of the Jim Joseph Foundation (CJP received \$2 million of the total) targeted to offer financial aid to Jewish families seeking to send their offspring to JDSs and camps.

and reported to us by teachers who teach in more than 30 JDSs, primarily in Boston, Los Angeles, and New York, but also in cities like, Toronto, San Francisco, and New Orleans.

**What do DeLeT teachers tell us about the impact of the recession on their schools and classrooms?**

Limited as it is, the news coverage nevertheless reflects a real problem--that is, the economic recession has had direct impact on JDSs. As unemployment, job insecurity, and foreclosure rates increased across the country, many families started rethinking their spending habits. Many decided that they could no longer afford private education. In addition, long time benefactors of JDSs who lost substantial amounts of wealth became increasingly reluctant to offer what they used to give in the past. As a result, many schools were forced to make hard choices about cuts and future spending. We discuss below an illustration of the impact of these decisions on JDS teachers.

As can be seen, the three most prevalent approaches to cut budget deficits were to implement a salary freeze (reported by 27 teachers), make budget cuts across the board (24 teachers), and fire staff and teachers (20 teachers). Also notable are 8 teachers who reported on working longer hours for the same salary, and 6 teachers who reported on deterioration of esprit de corps in their school, as a result of growing concerns about their school’s capacity to survive the downturn.

In addition to school-related effects, I also asked teachers to what extent if at all have they felt the impact of the recession on their own classroom instruction. Here I was trying to test the validity of JDSs’ statements, which usually try to represent budget cuts as necessary steps that might be painful but are not harmful to the quality of instruction and student learning. The findings suggest that some cuts, like asking teachers to cut back on their classroom activities and materials, probably do not represent a grave threat to teacher instruction. Nevertheless, other cuts, which included “eliminating special ed,” “eliminating PD (Professional Development),” and “increasing class size” seem to have potentially more serious implications for the quality of instruction. Few teachers (about 5%) reported that although enrollment was down in their classroom, the school decided to open with the same number of teachers and in doing so lowered the ratio of students per teacher in the school.

Figure 1: Impact of the economic recession on JDS teachers

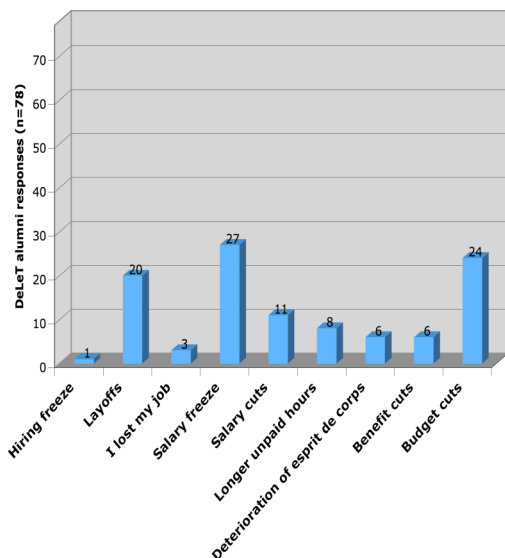
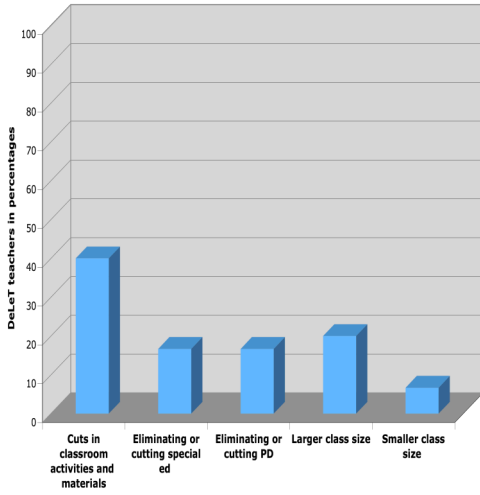


Figure 2: Budget cuts affecting the classroom



Next, I divided the open comments of teachers into three groups: 1) those who did not experience negative impact of the recession on their class (e.g., “Not at all. I haven’t been denied any materials, supplies or field trips for my classes”); (2) those who experienced minor negative impact of the recession on their classroom (e.g., “less money available for special programs and reimbursements,” “less money for classroom materials”), and 3) those who experienced significant negative impact of the recession on their classes. DeLeT teachers were divided roughly equally between the three categories.

The latter group of teachers was naturally the most articulate about the impact of the recession on their classrooms and schools. For example one of the teachers noted,

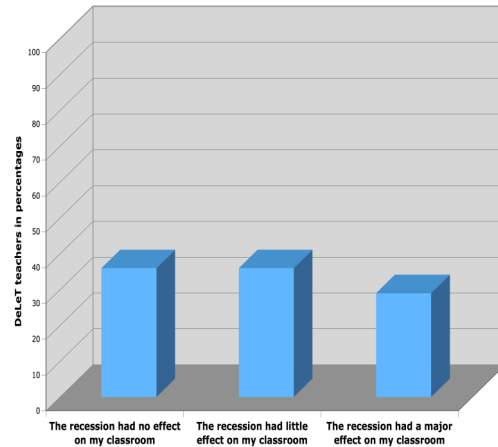
“I have taken on extra duties and am sometimes spread thin due to the number of responsibilities I hold. Additionally, because of extra duties, it is difficult to find time for planning and collaboration with other colleagues, not to mention to

plan for special needs in each class.”

A second teacher noted: “I am more stressed. Working more hours and complaining less.” A third teacher offered a dire account of the situation in her school:

“We have had budget cuts and layoffs as well as enrollment decrease. Last year they cut about 15 assistant teachers/auxiliary staff to make the school more efficient. Consequently, teachers have taken on a larger burden of the work and our salaries were frozen from last year... Further, I was the inclusion teacher in [X]st grade and they got rid of the inclusion program (amazing special ed support program) and now I am the [X]st grade teacher with no extra support for students in need.”

Figure 3: Summarizing recession effects on teachers’ classrooms



## Conclusions

No empirical research is available on the impact of the economic recession on JDSs. Jewish federations, school associations, and foundations collect

basic data regarding student enrollment and school finances. These data can help identify key financial trends, which are critical to the survival of schools, yet they fall short of providing a nuanced picture of the impact of falling enrollments and budget cuts on a school's work and learning environments, as well as the staff's satisfaction and motivation to continue teaching. In the absence of such empirical research, the media fills this niche with news about enrollment and donation levels (supplemented by sketchy reporting based primarily on conversations with school heads).

In this paper, we began to explore the impact of the recession on liberal non-Orthodox JDSs by tapping into an alternative source of information: DeLeT teachers in more than 30 schools. The teachers were asked to lay out the impact of the recession on their schools as a whole, and on their own practice as classroom instructors. The picture revealed differs from the one often portrayed in the news (often focusing on enrollments and gifts in either failing or extremely successful schools). Instead, the data in this paper shed light on the struggles of teachers and schools to make hard choices in hard times despite a significant loss of revenues, and the implications of these choices for the schools' learning environments.

The signs suggest that, for the most part, JDSs have so far managed to survive the current recession. In 2010 enrolments have stabilized and only a handful of schools was forced to close down, but most that remain intact sustained significant loss of revenues and enrollments (which have occurred primarily during 2009). Nevertheless, this paper suggests that in order to

understand better the impact of the recession, we also ought to be looking beyond these basic indicators. Saving a school from closing is just a first step in making a JDS a place where Jewish parents would like to send their children, and where good teachers would like to work. In almost a third of the JDSs represented in this study, teachers reported serious problems that may challenge the core mission of providing high quality of instruction and support for learning. These deficits are a cause of concern for everyone who would like to see JDSs flourish.

In the absence of immediate action, many JDSs may lose the best and brightest teachers that they have on staff. Teachers who have better alternatives, like the DeLeT teachers who are included in this study and hold a state licensure, may move to better JDSs or public schools or leave teaching all together, resembling the ongoing exodus of the more academically skilled teachers from hard-to-staff urban schools to lucrative professions or to schools in affluent suburbs (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2005; Henke, Chen, & Geis, 2000; Rockoff, 2004). We have already seen early signs of this trend among some DeLeT teachers, who have left teaching or moved to public schools or JDSs that offer better salaries and work environment. For example, one former teacher noted, that

my last teaching job offered me \$29k/yr. I left the teaching profession and have been working in educational sales [making almost twice the money]. I had to seek an alternative career path to support myself.

Another DeLeT teacher who was not

satisfied with salary reductions at her school and decided to move to another school reports:

I switched schools because of budget cuts and salary reductions. The day school where I am currently working does not appear to be directly hurting from the economy. I don't feel it in a tangible sense.

Teacher attrition is not a new problem and has been acknowledged as a looming threat to the field (see: Ben Avie & Kress, 2008; Gamoran et al., 1998; Tamir, 2010; Tamir et al., 2010; Tamir & Magidin de Kramer, 2011). Yet the recession and budget cuts implemented by many JDSs may exacerbate factors like poor compensation and working conditions, which have been identified in the past as potential problems, making them a more potent threat to teacher attrition in JDSs.

JDSs need to walk a very fine line. In hard times, they need to survive financially and implement budget cuts, but at the same time they constantly run the risk of crossing the line and alienating both their faculty and parents, who might view some of the changes as creating unacceptable work and/or learning environments. The teacher reports in this study confirm that this line has already been crossed at least occasionally, particularly when schools fired key personnel and increased workloads, which further undermined teachers' professionalism as well as the school commitments to smaller classrooms and support for special education students.

Understanding the specific impacts of budget cuts on teaching and learning in JDSs can help school leaders be more

deliberate about their choices and help other stakeholders be more aware of the implications of those choices, which go beyond the statistics routinely covered in the Jewish and mainstream media.

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This paper is based on data collected for the DeLeT Longitudinal Study project at the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University. For more information, go to the project's website and read our latest report, *The DeLeT Alumni Survey: A Comprehensive Report on the Journey of Beginning Jewish Day School Teachers*:

(<http://www.brandeis.edu/mandel/projects/dletracking.html>). I am grateful to Sharon Feiman-Nemser, the Center's director, for her continuous support of this project and to Sue Fendrick who offered comments and edits to this manuscript. This research was partially funded by a grant from the Jim Joseph Foundation. Please address correspondence concerning this article to Eran Tamir, Senior Research Associate, Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education, Brandeis University, 415 South Street, Waltham, MA 02454-9110; e-mail: [etamir88@brandeis.edu](mailto:etamir88@brandeis.edu).

**ARPE President's Report -  
Gary Railsback.  
AERA UPDATE - New  
Orleans, LA - ARPE  
News,  
April 10, 2011**

The ARPE business meeting was held on Sunday, April 10 in New Orleans, in conjunction with annual meeting. The major items of business that evening were a discussion on the proposed Bylaws, as submitted to AERA Special Interest Group (SIG) office back in 2010. The draft was proposed by members Stephen Denig (Niagara University) and Jerry Furst (Andrews University). After a healthy, informative discussion on the bylaws, they were approved as amended. The final draft of the Bylaws will be emailed to members not present at the Annual SIG Meeting of ARPE.

One of the new initiatives by the AERA SIG Committee is to have an electronic ballot including minimally two candidates for each office. To present these names to the SIG Office by early Fall, 2011, a Nominating Committee was appointed to solicit candidates for the offices. The major part of our Business Meeting included presentations by ARPE members, Thomas Hunt (Dayton University) and Jim Carper (University of South Carolina) who are both co-editors of the *Praeger Handbook on Faith-Based Schools* in progress.

Hunt and Carper invited five of their contributors – who are also ARPE members (Larry Burton, Bruce Cooper, Lydon “Jerry” Furst, Ron Nuzi, and Brian Ray) to make short presentations on their chapters. Following the Business Meeting, members of ARPE enjoy a buffet of cheese, crackers and fruit.

Make your plans now to attend the next meeting of AERA and of ARPE in Vancouver, BC, Canada, from Friday, April 13<sup>th</sup> to Tuesday, April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2012, and we'll see you there.

God bless you, Gary

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**ARPE Treasurer's Report –  
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AERA UPDATE –  
New Orleans, LA –  
ARPE News,  
April 10, 2011**

**Beginning Balance:**

\$ 1,112.97                      February 2011

**Membership Dues Income:**

\$35.00

**Year to Date:**

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**2011-2012**

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