

THE DELET ALUMNI SURVEY:

A COMPREHENSIVE REPORT
ON THE JOURNEY OF BEGINNING
JEWISH DAY SCHOOL TEACHERS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research confirms what we know from personal experience—that good teaching matters (Rice, 2003; Rockoff, 2004; Sanders, Saxton & Horn, 1997). In fact, having a good teacher in the classroom is considered the single most important variable in students’ success (Darling-Hammond, 2000). While this finding comes from studies of public school teachers, it is likely that teachers in Jewish day schools also have a strong positive impact on their students’ development and learning.

Finding and keeping good teachers remain persistent challenges for Jewish day schools, challenges that are affected not only by compensation, but also by strong preparation and ongoing support. The Commission on Jewish Education in North America (1990) identified a lack of preparation and support for teachers in Jewish day schools, and this finding has been confirmed by subsequent studies (Gamoran et al, 1998).

DeLeT (Day School Leadership Through Teaching) was launched to help address these challenges. After learning about the shortage of qualified teachers for Jewish day schools, venture philanthropist Laura Lauder imagined a program that would attract a new cadre of young adults and mid-career changers to day school teaching. She invited Michael Zeldin of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles and Sharon Feiman-Nemser of Brandeis University outside Boston to design such a program, and she enlisted a group of philanthropists to support the program during its first five years.

DeLeT, the Hebrew word for “door,” was designed to open the door on a career in day school education. The program formally began in 2002 at two academic sites—HUC-JIR and Brandeis—as a thirteen month post-BA program encompassing two summers of study on campus and a yearlong mentored internship in a local day school. The program took shape during an initial five-year pilot phase and is now an established component of each institution’s educational offerings.

The DeLeT Alumni Survey was designed to follow DeLeT alumni over time. Sponsored by the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University, the study examines the background, motivations, practice, working conditions and career commitments of a special population of Jewish educators. This report focuses on graduates of the program at both sites between the years 2003-2006. During these early years, the

program was a “work-in-progress” and some findings presented here do not reflect recent program changes. For instance, the Brandeis program was approved as an alternate route to teacher certification from the very beginning, an option that was unavailable for HUC-JIR. As a result, only recently did the HUC-JIR achieve full accreditation, and now both programs meet the requirements for a state teaching license.

Under the leadership of Eran Tamir, senior researcher at the Mandel Center, a survey was sent to all DeLeT alumni from cohorts 1–4 at both academic sites, a total of sixty-five day school teachers. The survey, which was distributed through SurveyMonkey.com, included seventy questions dealing with the following topics: background, choosing to teach, choosing DeLeT, program characteristics, school context, professional development and leadership, retention, and career commitments. Sixty-one surveys were returned, representing a 94 percent response rate. Below we highlight key findings for the main topics addressed by the survey.

BACKGROUNDS OF DELET ALUMNI

Seventy-three percent of respondents entered DeLeT within two years of graduating from college. The other 27 percent include mid-career changers, former lawyers, businesswomen, social workers, and educators who sought a higher degree of training. The gender divide in DeLeT resembles the gender divide among public elementary and Jewish day school teachers in general: 83 percent of DeLeT alumni are female, and 17 percent are male.

The majority of DeLeT alumni grew up either Conservative (42 percent) or Reform (41 percent). Twelve percent of respondents were raised in Modern Orthodox homes and 5 percent in more traditional Orthodox homes. When asked how they would currently describe their affiliation, respondents gave a different set of answers. The largest percentage of respondents continues to identify with the Conservative and Reform movements, 20 percent and 21 percent respectively. Overwhelmingly, however, respondents chose a religious affiliation that defies conventional categories, such as conservadox, post-denominational, non-practicing, and Jewish.

Growing up, many DeLeT alumni were engaged in Jewish learning opportunities in day schools, supplementary schools, and various informal Jewish educational settings such as summer camps. An overwhelming majority attended elite colleges and majored in Jewish studies.

When asked about their beliefs about being Jewish, DeLeT alumni conveyed a strong sense of Jewish pride and identity. Ninety-seven percent very much agree or completely agree with the statement “I am proud to be a Jew”; 93 percent very much agree or completely agree with the statement “I have a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people”; and 81 percent very much agree or completely agree with the statement “I have a clear sense of what being Jewish means to me.”

CHOOSING TO TEACH

When asked about their decision to teach in a Jewish day school, most DeLeT alumni cited their joy in working with children (93 percent) and love of their chosen subject matter (91 percent). Many participants attributed their choice to teach in a day school to the opportunity to integrate Judaism with general subjects (78 percent).

CHOOSING DELET

When asked about the factors that influenced their decision to enroll in DeLeT, almost all of the respondents indicated that the yearlong mentored internship—one of the program’s defining characteristics—was their top reason (92 percent). The second factor cited most often by alumni was the chance to pursue a teaching certificate (83 percent). Another feature of the program that ranked high among the reasons for choosing DeLeT was the substantial financial package offered to students (63 percent).

PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS

When asked about elements in their preparation, DeLeT alumni highlighted many features associated with strong professional teacher education programs, like a strong vision of teaching and learning, well-defined performance standards, practical experience in reform-minded schools, and use of pedagogies that help teachers link theory and practice (Darling-Hammond and Bransford, 2005).

DAY SCHOOL CONTEXT

The structure and culture of a school, along with the leadership style of the administration, can contribute to a teacher’s sense of satisfaction and success. When asked to evaluate their current school environment, alumni for the most part depicted a partially supportive environment for beginning teachers. Sixty-four percent agreed or strongly agreed that their school administrators support and value teachers’ work. Sixty percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their schools support the teaching practices they learned in DeLeT. Of more concern were teachers’ observations about their

schools' approach to beginning teachers. Only 52 percent agreed or strongly agreed that their school takes the needs of beginning teachers seriously. While these findings are not entirely surprising, they raise concerns about whether Jewish day schools are doing all they should to help new teachers succeed.

RETENTION AND CAREER COMMITMENTS

In general, teaching-force data suggest that young teachers tend to leave the classroom relatively early and in large numbers. On average, almost half of those who start teaching leave by their fifth year (Ingersoll, 2001). Some of the reasons for teacher attrition in Jewish day schools are uniquely related to that context (e.g., low compensation). Yet other factors that contribute to teacher attrition in Jewish day schools are similar to those that affect public school teachers and are related to the lack of support from school leaders and peers; failure to realize one's hopes of becoming an effective teacher; the desire to move into a leadership position (e.g., as a school administrator); and a desire to experience different job environments across one's career (e.g., Johnson et al., 2004; Tamir, 2009a; 2009b; 2010).

DeLeT alumni vary in the number of years they have taught since graduation. Respondents have been in the field for a short time, with a mean ranging from 2.6 years for Cohort 4 graduates to 5.5 years for Cohort 1 graduates. Overall, the findings suggest that, in a relatively short period of time, the DeLeT program's investment in recruitment and professional preparation has resulted in a corps of day school teachers who report feeling well prepared and committed to teaching in Jewish day schools and to becoming teacher leaders.

This report is the first in a series of reports that will track DeLeT graduates over time, documenting how their Jewish upbringing, secular and Jewish education, professional preparation and work experiences relate to their career choices, teaching practices, and leadership roles. One goal is to understand how factors related to teachers' background, preparation, and teaching experience shape these outcomes. A second goal is to provide program leaders with information that can inform ongoing program development. A third goal is to contribute to a critical discussion about the kinds of teachers our day schools need, how well programs like DeLeT prepare such teachers, and how well schools support and sustain them. Data about the experiences and decisions of DeLeT alumni over time can help us understand the opportunities and challenges day school teachers face and the ways in which their professional growth is and can be nurtured over time.