



Meeting the Needs of All Kinds of Learners: A Shared Commitment of Lay and Professional Leaders

The policy decision to service many kinds of learners is a shared challenge for the professional educational leadership and the Board of Trustees of our Schechter schools. When the Board makes this choice, it must, together with the Head of School, consider the budgetary implications of support systems entailed in such a decision. The underlying commitment of the Board must be to meet the learning needs of all the students that the school is prepared to accept. Having determined to meet the needs of diverse learners, the Board must develop a plan for funding educational initiatives to accomplish this goal. This will probably include additional resource personnel and extensive professional development.

Addressing the needs of all kinds of learners is a challenge for educators in any school. The dual curriculum program imposes particular time pressures and concerns about organizational skills for all students and teachers in Solomon Schechter Day Schools. Children who have learning difficulties have even greater challenges to manage and master. It is exceptionally complex for teachers, given the compressed time available in the school day, to provide appropriate attention and sufficient help in order for these students to meet expectations in both general and Judaic studies, and experience themselves as successful, competent learners.

Despite the constraints, it is apparent that in recent years Schechter schools across North America have increased their commitment to recruit and retain a student population with an increasingly diverse range of learning differences.

Boards of Trustees have endorsed more inclusive admission practices, based on their school's mission and/or a concern about enrollment. In order for schools to deliver quality services to the full range of students who are accepted, various models of accommodation are in place in the schools affiliated with the Solomon Schechter Day School Association. They have in common the goal of creating a learning environment where all children who are admitted can reach their full potential without proceeding in lockstep.

One way that Jewish day schools have been grappling with the challenges of meeting individual students' needs is to enroll teachers and administrators in the *Schools Attuned*[®] professional development program. This comprehensive program from All Kinds of Minds[®] offers educators new methods of recognizing, understanding, and managing students with differences in learning. *Schools Attuned* is a neurodevelopmental approach based on over 30 years of work by Dr. Mel Levine, co-chair and founder of All Kinds of Minds and Director of the Clinical Center for the Study of Development and Learning at the University of North Carolina School of Medicine at Chapel Hill, together with experts at All Kinds of Minds, and other leading researchers in the field. *Schools Attuned* provides focused study of eight neurodevelopmental constructs that affect learning: attention, language, memory, neuromotor function, spatial ordering, temporal-sequential ordering, higher order cognition, and social cognition. The program endeavors to give educators the tools to understand

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Group work is one effective way to differentiate learning tasks.

Shibboleley Schechter's Exclusive interview with Dr. Mel Levine

Some weeks ago, Dr. Elaine Cohen spoke with Dr. Mel Levine in an exclusive telephone interview. *Shibboleley Schechter* presents this conversation.

You have become something of a superstar of late! The last time I was in Barnes & Noble, stacks of "The Myth of Laziness" were piled from the floor to the top of the display tables. Usually, education books are discreetly shelved somewhere at the back of the store. What do you think accounts for the tremendous popular interest in your work?

The stardom part is frankly somewhat disconcerting to me. I'd rather spend time on my farm with my geese! What I think partly explains the interest is that I seem

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the role of these constructs in building (or - as often occurs with children having difficulty in school - undermining) the foundation for learning.

For the third consecutive year, the *Nash Family Foundation* has renewed its support to fund teachers in Jewish day schools in the New York greater metropolitan area to participate in the *Schools Attuned* intensive training program, including the new training for high school educators. Among them are a number of Solomon Schechter Day Schools that have taken advantage of this opportunity to send teams of teachers and administrators to become skilled practitioners in new methods of decision-making and pedagogical interventions. Other schools in the SSDS network have expended their own precious professional development funds for the teacher training that takes place in various parts of the country.

Solomon Schechter Day Schools strive to be on the cutting edge of exemplary practices in education. The considerable investment of time, resources and personnel that many of our schools are making in *Schools Attuned* demonstrates one significant way that we are reaching and sustaining excellence in teaching and learning.

For more information about this program visit the website: www.allkindsofminds.org. From there, you can navigate your way to *Schools Attuned* and to numerous valuable resources about conferences, research and evaluation studies, and student success services.

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Interview with Dr. Mel Levine

to have found a compelling way to explain how people learn. We're seeing that there is a great deal of renewed interest in education these days because people are very preoccupied about the futures of their children. Parents are concerned about whether their kids will be prepared for their life beyond school and whether they will lead productive lives. They look at their children and wonder "What is my kid becoming?"

Thinking about teaching and learning has been changed significantly in recent years, first by the theory of multiple intelligences and then by the concept of differentiated instruction. How do you see "A Mind at a Time" interfacing with these pedagogical frameworks?

What we're about isn't terribly revolutionary. I have formulated a framework that simplifies the way to understand how people learn. I've put a language to it that everyone can use. It's a conceptual framework that doesn't require teachers to stop teaching until they learn a new method. They can keep teaching and incorporate new research about memory, for example, that will help them reach kids more effectively. Kids today need a "full toolbox" and we can help them learn how to use all the tools that they have in the most effective way possible. *Schools Attuned* isn't a doctrine.

How do you approach veteran teachers so that they see how your system builds upon what they already know and understand about learning differences, rather than as another "flavor of the month", that is, as yet another passing educational trend?

We're not giving teachers something else to do. They find that when they utilize our framework in their classroom there are fewer behavior problems, more kids are meaningfully engaged, and as a result, they as teachers have more fun and less stress. The other thing is that our training elevates the status of the teacher in the classroom. She becomes the local consultant who can serve as a resource to parents and to colleagues and administrators. One of the unanticipated findings of our research is that when teachers are trained in the *Schools Attuned* method, the retention rate for teachers (to stay in teaching) goes up.

Your system relies on the rather sophisticated underpinnings of neuro-developmental research, neurobiology and neuropsychology. Yet educational practitioners and parents, too, seem to find it fairly accessible. How do you talk about neurodevelopment in a way that makes sense to lay people?

Our emphasis is on the mind rather than the brain. We look at brain functions to re-examine how learning works because we want to understand how people go about developing their abilities in concept formation, communication and critical thinking. When we study the learning process in these ways, pedagogical methods and curriculum can more readily become aligned.

Jewish day schools obviously present a set of additional challenges to students and to teachers in terms of their dual curriculum. There is never enough time. Kids have a heavy load and need to master the skills of managing their time

and their schedules, their books and assignments. In addition, the linguistic demands of a program that is taught in English and in Hebrew make it even tougher for struggling students. What observations can you share from your experiences in recent years where you have been consulting to Jewish day schools and providing training for their teachers?

Many of the Jewish day schools endeavor to pour more and more facts into their students. They make extraordinary memory demands on the kids. In the adult world, you don't need to memorize so much any more. What you need to know is where to go for the information that you require. There is too much emphasis on memory and the retention of information rather than higher order and creative thinking. However, I have learned something valuable from the yeshiva schools. They value and model teaching through argument. This is a unique aspect of this kind of educational environment and it is a wonderful way to build critical thinking.

When I was a Head of School, one of the concerns that I used to hear frequently from parents was that so much attention and so many resources were directed toward struggling students. In what ways can your system enhance the capacity of accelerated students to thrive?

My approach is geared toward all kinds of learners. It should be just as useful for independent learners and kids who catch on quickly as those who experience difficulties because it can help them use their strengths to become as productive as they can be.

What are your plans for growing and further developing Schools Attuned?

We are making a major effort to advance *Secondary Schools Attuned*. Content area teachers in high schools are very bound to the subjects that they teach and would benefit from a deeper understanding of the neurodevelopmental constructs that affect learning at every stage. This program is about to come off the drawing boards. We're also working on a parent education program. It's very exciting. These are courses that everyone can take. We want everyone to have the same vocabulary when thinking about individual differences in learning. Identifying the students' strengths and weaknesses as learners will help them to respect themselves and one another more and will lead them to develop their capacity to learn, improve their performance in the classroom, and achieve success in life. ◆

One High School Teacher's Experience

Attendance at the *Schools Attuned* Workshop this past summer armed me with the language and the skills I need to implement a program based upon understanding how students' neuro-developmental differences affect their learning, and reminded me of why I went into teaching as a profession in the first place. To help a child become the best he or she can possibly be means that we must acknowledge each child's strengths and weaknesses, build on the strengths, and either accommodate the weaknesses or modify our approach to presenting the material. Now, I know better how to trace strengths and weaknesses to their neurodevelopmental source. I was given tools that I keep at my fingertips, to locate ways to design a program to strengthen learning skills for the individual student. I learned about how to become more attuned to students' needs through a variety of methods including lecture, videos, class discussion, role-playing, and hands-on activities. Now, I feel more confident when I talk to students and parents about how we can work together to help students develop

learning and study skills. I consult more effectively with the learning specialists about how we can work together to help students develop learning and study skills.

One of the best things about the workshop is that it emphasizes the teacher's role in all of this. Who better than the classroom teacher to notice the distinct differences between one child's learning style and the next? Who better than the classroom teacher to accommodate his or her program to help a student who learns differently, to learn, period?

I've also found that intervening to help one child generally results in helping all children. We are continually discovering and uncovering one another's strengths. Once children know that you are looking for strengths as well as weaknesses, they'll find more ways to show you their strengths. The end result of



Investigating nature engages students in science and wonder.

incorporating *Schools Attuned* teachings in the classroom is that students become more tolerant of one another. As children learn to discover and accept strengths and weaknesses in themselves, they also come to accept others for what they are.

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MaToK Feedback

The Pinellas County Jewish Day School adopted the *MaToK* Bible Curriculum in the fall of 2002. We are now in the second year of this dynamic program and are impressed with both our students' growth in Hebrew and in their grasp of the Torah narrative and concepts. It has been exciting to watch the children's intellectual development, demonstrated not only by their understanding of the material but even more so by the depth of the questions they are able to frame. Our third grade *MaToK* teacher, Lea Thorbecke, was at first reluctant to learn and then teach this new curriculum. She is now one of its biggest fans and reports, "*MaToK* challenges our students to think above the grade level...and it has brought me to a higher level. The way they ask questions, sometimes I don't have the answer. And those questions bring us in deeper. There is a level of excitement and enthusiasm that is just amazing." Both Mrs. Thorbecke and our fourth grade teacher Peggy Gerson teach *MaToK* in Hebrew and use English only for complex discussions and to help the students connect the Torah text to their own experiences. As Mrs.

Thorbecke notes, "That's what *MaToK* does. We always draw conclusions that relate the Torah to their lives."

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Schools Attuned at Sinai Akiba

My *Schools Attuned* training has had a powerful and pervasive impact on my teaching. It has afforded me a method by which to analyze students' individual strengths and weaknesses. It has given me tools to gather information both from teachers' and parents' perspectives, and directly from the student. It has provided me with specific terminology to discuss my findings and observations with my colleagues (particularly with our *Schools Attuned* mentors, Kathy Clyman and Dr. Andrea Ackerman), with parents, and with students. This terminology, coupled with precise analytical tools, allows me to avoid labels, making the whole process a welcome relief to many parents.

The well-delineated de-mystification process allows me to work as part of a

team with the student and his or her parents, offering them many concrete suggestions from the *Schools Attuned* manual. In addition, the program has had a tremendous influence on my daily classroom instruction. I have learned to recognize, even to anticipate, the varied needs of my students. For example, I try to allow for the students' natural need for physical movement within the blocks of classroom time (even stopping for group stretches or throwing a soft ball around the room as part of a history, math, or spelling review) so that students can fulfill their need to move without disrupting the class. I think that all students benefit from these short breaks for physical activity (I do, too!). I now have a much more developed appreciation of the need to allow for different modalities of learning so that all students have a chance to perform in an area of strength. For those students who struggle with the weight of full assignments, I have devised systems to modify their work, but still have them participate as part of the regular class. I am just beginning to teach the *Mind That's Mine* curriculum as a unit in our fifth grade science class.

I have already found my students to be very excited to learn methods to make their own learning easier and more effec-

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tive. It's not that *Schools Attuned* has made me a fundamentally different teacher, but that has given me the tools to attain my goal of reaching and supporting each student in the way that best meets his or her needs.

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Site, and continuing at the school.

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The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism promotes the role of the synagogue in Jewish life in order to motivate Conservative Jews to perform *mitzvot* encompassing ethical behavior, spirituality, Judaic learning, and ritual observance. The Solomon Schechter Day Schools are affiliated with the United Synagogue and share with it these goals. Combining an awareness of communal responsibility with a strong sense of commitment, the United Synagogue and its affiliated Solomon Schechter Day Schools are a dynamic force within the Conservative Movement.

The Board's Commitment to Meet the Needs of Diverse Learners

As lay leaders and professionals engaged in Jewish education, let us remember the wisdom of the *Haggadah*. The four children remind us that there are many different kinds of minds. We need to find ways to speak to all of those among us to empower them as learners. This issue of *Shibbolely Schechter* focuses on the theme of diverse learners. Those of us entrusted with the future of Jewish education must ensure that our mission reflects an intent to provide learning opportunities for all the Jewish children whose families wish them to benefit from a day school education, including those with diverse learning styles. Commitment of resources, both financial and human, is critical if we are to succeed in this effort.

Today more than ever before, we are finding that more and more children are in need of some of kind of learning intervention. As the parent of two children with diverse learning styles, I can attest to the importance of early detection and appropriate intervention. As a lay leader, I attend meetings and speak with other volunteers and day school administrators, and this topic is one that

always sparks an interest. I am heartened to see that this a concern shared by all of us.

The issues involved in providing a meaningful Jewish education, in both secular and religious studies, for children who have a variety of different learning styles are challenging. Our boards have a responsibility to ensure that resources necessary to provide for teacher education and professional development are set aside for that purpose. Funding to include teacher training for programs like "*Schools Attuned*" is critical. Ideally, there should be a highly qualified learning specialist (or more than one, depending on school size) on staff.

Solomon Schechter day schools have the ability to make a difference for our kids. Our teachers can and need be trained to identify potential learning issues. Even better than that, we can provide them the support and training they need to be better teachers for these children. Teachers' testimonies assert that this kind of professional growth experience has the beneficial result of making them better teachers for all the children in their classes.

In our network of Jewish day schools, we must honor our tradition and be committed to a culture that supports a diversity of learners. As board members and educators, we need to make sure that our schools have the capacity and the expertise to meet the needs of all types of learners whom we welcome in

our schools. While we recognize that most of our schools will not be able to meet the needs of every child, we must strive to be as inclusive as possible while still being fiscally responsible. This issue of the newsletter can serve as a prelude to the wealth of resources and experts that we are endeavoring to bring together at the coming SSDSA Biennial Conference that will take place in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, in December 2004.

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MaToK: Mivtza TaNaKHi Konservativi

Does your Board of Directors know about the Solomon Schechter Day School Bible Curriculum? We feel that it is important for the readership of *Shibboleth Schechter*, especially Board members who may be unfamiliar with the specifics of curriculum development, to have the opportunity to learn about this significant program that exemplifies many of the core educational values and approaches of Conservative Judaism.

As Conservative Jews, we are blessed with a mandate to study Torah from many different points of view:

- We strive to understand Torah within its own historical context.

- We see it as the master story of our people.

- We derive from it the roots of what flourishes into a Jewish way of living (*halakhah*—Jewish law)

- And, in a totally unique way, the Torah is the meeting place of God and the Jewish people.

As there are many perspectives on Torah, so there are many ways of studying it. *MaToK* emphasizes a literary approach to TaNaKH, in which students learn to apply carefully taught skills that alert them to the fine nuances of the text, and stimulate them to raise their own questions. The students thus learn more deeply and, increasingly, autonomously. Often, the students' questions are those that are addressed in the traditional commentaries and Midrash.

There is a fine fit between our understanding of the Torah as "speaking with many voices" and our understanding that students learn in many different ways. Although the Torah is a written document, and is therefore most accessible to those who learn verbally and visually, it can be made accessible to all kinds of students, since we capitalize upon the entire range of "intelligences." Those who learn through movement, relating to others, introspection, music and logical thinking can thus find Torah study interesting, enjoyable, and spiritually fulfilling.

These, after all, are the ultimate goals of Torah study.

Now in its fourth year of pilot testing, *MaToK* is currently being utilized in

Grades 3, 4, 5, and 6 in thirty-nine Solomon Schechter Day Schools across North America.

MaToK is a ground-breaking joint project of the Department of Education of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, and the Melton Research Center for Jewish Education of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. *MaToK* is made possible by a generous grant from the Jim Joseph Foundation.

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Dr. Saul Wachs, SSDS consultant on *tefilah*, engages children in a discussion about why we pray.

Teachers' Comments from the Field

When I learned that our school, Cohen Hillel Academy, had been selected to be a pilot school for the United Synagogue's new *Humash* curriculum I looked forward with anticipation to learning more about the materials. On a wintry day, three colleagues and I set out for a hotel near New York City to receive training in the new curriculum. At the time I was teaching 4th grade as well as working in administration. Attending the three day learning session with my colleagues was a critical part of the successful implementation of the program. At the time, only *Sefer Bereisheit* was available and only sections of it. One of the most exciting parts of bringing *MaToK* to our school was the opportunity to study with my colleagues not only at the conference, but also once we'd returned home. Initially, we only had sections of *Humash* which are taught in 4th grade. The other 4th grade teacher and I were charged with excitement and spent many hours planning how we would teach our students about Yosef and his brothers (the piece of text which had been prepared for our use).

We are now using *MaToK* curriculum in grades 3-6. *MaToK* has changed the way we teach *Humash* in our school on a number of levels. First, it has given concrete tools to teachers as to how to teach

the skills necessary to understand a text. The detailed lesson plans walk even the newest teacher through the methodology. As someone who mentors teachers, I am always aware of the fact that teachers come to *Humash* study from various comfort levels and even different knowledge bases. With guidance from fellow teachers and administrators even an individual with a more limited knowledge base can use the *MaTok* curriculum effectively.

Another advantage of the *MaTok* curriculum involves helping children to see the connection between Biblical Hebrew and modern Hebrew. The differences between the two are often confusing for students new to the study of *Humash*. *MaTok* follows a very logical progression as students become more familiar with the differences and similarities. The way that *MaTok* handles *dikduk* (grammar) is also a strength of the program. We find that the parallel learning between our Hebrew language programs (*Tal Sela* and *Madregot*) and *MaTok* allows students to connect their learning. As one of my students once remarked, "Morah Polis, we had that same *shoresh* in our Hebrew story! Did you plan that?!"

Finally, the fact that *MaTok* lessons are set up to encourage higher level thinking and deep theological conversations bring rich texture to class conversations. This permits students to enter a realm of depth and beauty that are often not explored until later years. In conclusion, to quote one of my teachers, "*MaTok* has helped us to sort through the sea of Torah. This is something we never had before."

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Hot● Button Topics from the SSDS Listservs

In this issue of *Shibboleth Schechter*, we are starting a new feature. Many lively and highly relevant discussions take place on the nine listservs we now manage. When questions recur over a period of months it is clear that the topic is of high interest to numerous schools. We'll endeavor to summarize a "hot button" issue and add to the discussion points that it generated in a column of this newsletter. Subscribers can also do a search of the archives of the listserv in which they participate by clicking on www.uscj.org/archives/listserv/html. (Add the particular name of your listserv, e.g. *ssds-prez* or *ssds-business*.)

The status of the Parents' Association in the school has been the subject of several discussions. By-laws, Board representation and financial reporting have been the major issues.

The clearest and most direct statement of the optimal structure for the Parents Association that I could find is on the website of ISACS (Independent Schools Association of the Central States.) Here's what it says: (italics are quotes from the article that Pat Bassett authored in 1997. Interspersed comments are those of the editor.)

"The parents association should be the organization for parental voice and support of the school, seeing its mission both as developing a positive and welcoming climate for all parents and as working closely with the school in meeting its current needs."

Most Schechter schools would agree and they endeavor to work this way.

The ISACS statement continues:

"A representative from the parents association is often appointed to the board by the board and serves as the board's communicating link back to the parents association."

So far so good, in terms of general board practice in most of our member schools. However, many schools depart from the next set of recommendations and run a number of risks as a result.

"Any fundraising by the parents asso-

ciation must be coordinated by the development office of the school and approved by the board so as to remain focused on the primary needs of the school and so as not to interfere with normal annual giving and other fundraising events. The parents association should exist at the pleasure of the board and report to the board; the board should send a board member to the parents association meetings."

My impression in culling the archives is that in several of our Schechter schools, coordination does not consistently take place regarding fundraising activities. There has been no online discussion as to whether a board member attends the meetings of the parents association.

The most important areas for concern follow:

"Since the parents association exists at the pleasure of the board and since the parents association raises funds in the name of the school (using the school's tax ID for charitable fundraising purposes), any monies raised and accumulated by the parents association should be recorded and tracked on the school's books (by the school's business officer). Both fundraising projects and expenditures of funds (over some minimal level, such as \$250) should be authorized by the school prior to any announcements by the parents association of goals and plans."

We are aware that in some SSDS member schools the Parents Association needs to be reminded that the annual funds raised (often significant dollars) must appear on the school's books and be subject to the school's annual audit. Further, in order for contributions by individuals to the Parents Association to be legitimately claimed as charitable donations, the PA must have the authorization of the school to issue (or see to it that the school can issue) receipts for these charitable donations.

ISACS recommends institutionalizing the relationship between the board and the parents association in order to maximize the constructive role of the PA in furthering their commitment to advancing the cause of the school and contributing to a positive school climate. ISACS "counsels its schools to develop a parents as-

sociation mission statement and set of by-laws, in conjunction with the school administration and approved by the board of trustees. A regular newsletter from the PA is also advised to keep all parents abreast of events and developments."

A sample mission statement for the parents association and a set of by-laws is available (free of charge) on the website www.ISACS.org. Click on Resources and then Monographs and enter the key words "parents association."

Is your school taking full advantage of the opportunity for brainstorming, problem-solving, sharing and deliberating with colleagues from across our Schechter network in 19 states and 2 Canadian provinces? Make sure that the appropriate people have subscribed so that they can benefit from these extraordinarily helpful online conversations.◆

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The listservs that we offer our member schools are:

- roshnet@uscj.org** for Principals and Heads of Schools
- ssds-prez@uscj.org** for Board of Trustees Presidents
- ssds-business@uscj.org** for Business Managers and the CFO
- ssds-development@uscj.org** for Development Directors
- ssds-admissions@uscj.org** for Admission Directors
- ssds-counselor@uscj.org** for the Director of Guidance and Counseling
- ssdsa-directors@uscj.org** for the Directors of the SSDS Association
- ssds-Judaicstudies@uscj.org** for the Directors of Judaic Studies and/or the campus rabbi
- matok@uscj.org** for teachers using the *MaToK* program in their school