

The Tanakh Standards and Benchmarks Project

What We Have Learned About Implementation and Impact: 2004-2008

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INTRODUCTION

The Jewish Theological Seminary's Melton Research Center for Jewish Education with support from the AVI CHAI Foundation launched the Jewish Day School Standards and Benchmarks Pilot Project on June 30, 2003. Funded initially for two years, the Project was designed to enable Community, Conservative and Reform day schools to enhance the teaching and study of Tanakh. With ongoing, expert leadership from Project Director Charlotte Abramson at the Melton Center, a growing number of these schools are now using standards and benchmarks to improve the teaching and learning of Tanakh. This overview report summarizes what Education Matters[®] has learned from studying the Project from its beginning through the end of the 2007-2008 school year. Put simply, we have learned that when it is implemented with fidelity, the Project positively influences the teaching of Tanakh and supports a collaborative, instructionally-focused culture for teachers, a context in which they continue to work to further improve their practices and students' learning. The findings are encouraging in light of the Project's specific goals for Tanakh. Furthermore, they suggest that a similar strategy, applied to other fields of Jewish Studies, might also enhance their teaching and learning.

BACKGROUND FOR THE STANDARDS AND BENCHMARKS PROJECT

At the Project's inception, there was general agreement that most Jewish day schools did not have a coherent set of goals that guided Tanakh instruction and did not appropriately assess what students were learning class-by-class or year to year. There seemed to be little articulation by schools or by the Associations of what a day school graduate should know and be able to do with respect to Tanakh. According to Rabbi Steven M. Brown, then Director of the Melton Research Center for Jewish Education, "the cry from school people, again and again, is a call for direction and qualitative markers to help guide decision-making and shape learning outcomes for [Jewish day school] graduates."

The Project developers hypothesized that by adopting a standards-based approach schools would have an effective tool by which to a) develop a coherent vision for the teaching Tanakh, and b) build a meaningful Tanakh curriculum with relevant professional development for Tanakh teachers. (See Appendix A for a further elaboration of the project's rationale.) In this context, the Tanakh Standards and Benchmarks Project developed eight standards to guide schools in improving the teaching and learning of Tanakh.¹ (See Appendix B for a list of the eight Tanakh standards.)

What Are Standards and Benchmarks? A standard is an overarching learning outcome that includes a synthesis of knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. Benchmarks specify learning outcomes at each grade-level or in bands of grade-levels (for example, K-2; 3-5) as students work toward achieving each standard. They are written to provide explicit statements about what

¹Education Matters' first evaluation report, *The Jewish Day School Standards and Benchmarks Project, Year I: Creating the Standards Document and Preparing the Pilot Schools*, August 2004, prepared for the AVI CHAI Foundation, includes a discussion of the process by which the Standards and Benchmarks were developed.

is to be taught and learned in any selected content area. Taken together, standards and benchmarks can a), inform the selection of curriculum materials, b) support the design of assessments that effectively measure achievement of the standards, c) provide an enduring framework for students that can withstand teacher turnover, d) provide guidance for the design of teacher professional development programs, e) guide a school in setting priorities with respect to hiring teachers who have the knowledge and skill needed to teach to the standards and f) hold teachers as well as administrators accountable for teaching that enables students to meet the standards.

Schools that adopt standards and benchmarks also adopt a philosophy of teaching and learning, a philosophy that stresses students' deep understanding of a content area as well as their ability to a) make connections between new and prior knowledge, b) problem solve with respect to challenges posed by the material, and c) make connections between the materials and their own lives. Standards based teaching and learning recognizes that there are core bodies of knowledge that students must master in different content areas, but reminds us that mastery of that knowledge is only one of the goals for learners. Learning that includes making connections and deep understanding are major goals, goals that seem particularly compelling when considered in the context of teaching and learning Tanakh in Jewish day schools. However, for most teachers and administrators, this stance toward "teaching for understanding" is new and quite different from standard practice. Therefore, teachers and administrators must learn new instructional strategies in order to implement well a standards-based approach. This learning needs to occur in a collaborative, ongoing, instructionally-focused culture that enables teachers to practice new approaches to teaching, share their experiences, and learn from one another guided by the leadership of the Jewish Studies head.

To accomplish all of these Project goals, the Project Director needed to develop a) a careful plan for selecting schools that had the motivation and capacity to fulfill the Project's requirements, b) an ongoing professional development program for Jewish Studies heads and teachers, and c) a new role for Jewish Education, the Tanakh Educator Consultant (TEC), a coach who could support each school's implementation of the standards and benchmarks. The Project, as a result, was and remains a complex endeavor well-designed to meet these goals.²

What Are the Project's Components? As a first step, the Project Director sought to interest Reform, Conservative, and Community schools in the Project.³ When schools identified themselves as interested, the Project Director spoke with the head of school about the goals and requirements of the Project, what the Project would provide and what the school must provide. To participate, a head of school had to agree to arrange time for teachers and the Jewish Studies

²See Neufeld, B. Final 2005-2006 Evaluation Report: TaNaKH Standards and Benchmarks Project, July 20, 2006, prepared for the AVI CHAI Foundation for a discussion of the development of the TEC role.

³The Project Director made presentations about the Project at Association meetings and at the PEJE conference, for example. She approached schools she knew would be good candidates for the Project to determine whether she might interest them in participating.

head to hold bi-weekly meetings devoted to developing curriculum units based on the standards and benchmarks. If the school could not find time for such meetings, then a school was deemed ineligible for the Project.⁴ But, if the head of school signed a memo of understanding agreeing to the requirements, then the school could join the next Cohort of schools. Each Cohort began its work near the start of a school year.

Heads of schools and Jewish Studies heads then met in New York with the Project Director to further clarify the Project's design and goals.⁵ Early in the school year, participating schools sent a team comprised of the Jewish Studies head and several teachers to a multi-day institute held at JTS and led by a professional developer skilled in standards and benchmarks and knowledgeable about Tanakh. This institute was followed by four on-site, two-day TEC visits to the schools that were designed to support the Jewish Studies heads and teachers in using the standards and benchmarks to create high quality units of Tanakh instruction.

In addition to the on-site visits, TECs had weekly phone conversations with the Jewish Studies heads to support them in leading the bi-weekly teacher meetings. Phone calls were also used to design each of the TECs' school visits so they addressed issues essential to further developing the Jewish Studies heads' and the teachers' knowledge and skill with standards and benchmarks. TECs kept track of their phone conversations and site-visits by completing logs that they sent to the Project Director. The Project Director provided feedback to the TECs that also served as their ongoing professional development. To insure the quality of the Project, the Director visited each school during at least one TEC visit.

Organization of the Overview. This overview report continues with a focus on what we learned about the extent of project implementation and impact at the end of the 2007-2008 school year. We begin with a review of the evaluation study design. Then we summarize the extent to which the Project's components have been implemented with fidelity including attention to school-based factors that influence the Project's implementation. We also summarize the impact of the Project on curriculum and instruction at the schools. In our conclusion, we draw on these findings to suggest one further improvement for the Project in order to increase its potential impact in Reform, Conservative, and Community Day Schools.

DESIGN OF THE EVALUATION STUDY

During the 2007-2008 school year, at the request of AVI CHAI, Education Matters[®] implemented an evaluation study designed to answer questions about the fidelity with which the

⁴Bi-weekly meetings were essential to insure that the Project's work was ongoing and that teachers and the Jewish Studies head were working as a collaborative, instructionally focused professional community.

⁵As the Project developed, the first phase of professional development was moved to the end of the school year prior to the one in which the Cohort would begin its school-based work.

Project was being implemented at a sample of Cohort I and Cohort II schools?⁶ The study also addressed the impact of implementation on teachers' knowledge and skill, the Jewish Studies heads' knowledge and skill, and students' learning. The purpose of the study, in addition to reporting on the fidelity of implementation, was to draw conclusions about the impact and value of the Project.

Research Methods. Education Matters employed a combination of a) telephone interviews with the heads of Jewish Studies departments, b) school visits that included interviews with Jewish Studies heads and teachers, c) conversations/e-mail exchanges with TECs who worked with the schools in the sample, and d) in collaboration with the Project Director a review of a sample of units of study produced by teachers at the sample schools. In consultation with the Project Director we agreed to include the following schools in the evaluation:⁷

- Krieger Schechter: Conservative and uses Matok and NETA
- Bergen Schechter: Conservative and uses Matok
- Chicagoland Jewish High School: Conservative
- Gann Academy: Community
- Tarbut v'Torah: Community and uses NETA
- Jewish Community Day School: Community
- Rashi: Reform
- Pardes: Reform

This sample provided us with a) three Cohort I and five Cohort II schools, b) three Conservative, three Community, and two Reform day schools, c) three high schools and five K-8 schools, and, d) representation from all of the TECs who worked with the project. Furthermore, these schools included variation in characteristics relevant to implementation of the Project. Specifically, they varied in the extent of Jewish Studies head and teacher stability, knowledge and skill, factors likely to influence the extent and fidelity of implementation. And, they varied with respect to the amount of time teachers had available for teaching Tanakh and for professional development with their colleagues. We knew these factors would influence the extent and quality of implementation as well as highlight the challenges that schools face when trying to use the standards and benchmarks.

Criteria for Fidelity of Implementation. In order to proceed with the evaluation, we needed a definition of *fidelity* of implementation. Education Matters and the Project Director discussed the term and agreed that, under ideal circumstances, fidelity of implementation would mean that all key Project components stressed during the school selection process, the Project's

⁶Cohorts I and II were the first two Project Cohorts. As such, they had participated with the Project for several years with and without its direct financial support. Cohort III was beginning its work during the 2007-2008 school year making it too new to study for any long-term project impact. AVI CHAI did not fund an evaluation of either Cohort III or IV. It is supporting an evaluation of Cohorts IV and V during the 2009-2010 school year.

⁷The data presented in the report do not identify individual schools.

initial professional development sessions, and all follow-up sessions were in place during the 2007-2008 school year. The indicators of implementation fidelity included the following:

- The Head of school provides sufficient time for the Jewish Studies teachers to meet bi-weekly to develop units of instruction that include performance assessments.
- The Jewish Studies heads design and lead the bi-weekly meetings. Teachers' regularly attend the meetings and actively participate in the curriculum development work.
- The Jewish Studies heads and teachers collaboratively select standards that will guide the development of curriculum in light of the schools' goals for students with respect to Tanakh.
- Teachers and the Jewish Studies heads grow in their use of and comfort with the language of the Project, for example, standards, big ideas, essential questions, unwrapping, and performance assessments.
- Teachers produce units of instruction based on the standards and benchmarks selected by the schools. These units include big ideas, essential questions, evidence of unwrapping to produce "to do" and "to know" categories, lesson plans, assessments, and scoring guides.
- Teachers use these units of instruction in the school's Tanakh classes.
- Jewish Studies heads use classroom observations and feedback to support teachers in the implementation of their standards-based units of instruction.
- Teachers and the Jewish Studies heads review student work produced by the standards-based units and revise the units and/or teaching strategies as needed in light of the student work.
- The school develops a collaborative, instructionally-focused culture in which teachers support one another in improving their curriculum and instruction. This culture is both a *product of the process of using the standards* and a *necessary condition to sustain its further development and improvement*.

Using these indicators in our research, we concluded that the Project has had a significant, positive impact in seven of the eight schools. In making this claim, we do not suggest that all seven of the schools were fully implementing all components of the Project but rather that a) some of them were well on their way to that status, b) all seven were using significant pieces of the Project's components, and c) all seven could point to evidence of the Project's positive impact on teaching and learning.

IMPLEMENTATION OF STANDARDS AND BENCHMARKS

The Tanakh Standards and Benchmarks Project is an ambitious enterprise that requires a great deal of the Project Director, the TECs, the Jewish Studies heads, and the teachers. The Project engages Jewish Studies heads and teachers in collaboratively developing standards-based curriculum units that include assessments and lesson plans. As such, it requires them to plan

backwards, to start the process of developing curriculum by identifying what students should know and be able to do at the end of their Tanakh instruction. Early in the process of supporting Project implementation, it became clear that most Tanakh teachers and their Jewish Studies heads had little experience with backward design or with any structured approach for developing curriculum, designing lesson plans, and developing formative and summative performance assessments and rubrics. As a result, it was challenging for participating day school professionals to confront their lack of knowledge in these areas and learn a very structured, very different process for curriculum and instructional design.

Nonetheless, the teachers and Jewish Studies heads in the schools in this sample confronted their need to learn and worked hard to develop new knowledge and skill. They are still in the process of translating what they have learned into their classroom practice with the goal of continuing to improve so that their students' learning of Tanakh improves. They are not, as it were, "finished" with learning or with improving implementation. But, they are well on their way to achieving their goals and those of the Project.

Without question, their successes and the impact of the Project on them is the result of their own desire to improve teaching and learning, of very hard work, and of the Project's capacity to help them toward this goal. We turn now to a discussion of what we learned about implementation from studying these Cohort I and II schools. Then, we report on the impact of the Project on teaching and learning.

1. Extent and Fidelity of Implementation. With respect to the extent and fidelity of implementation, in seven of the eight schools a) teachers were working collaboratively to develop units of instruction that were tied to their schools' selected standards and benchmarks, b) teachers were using the units when teaching Tanakh, c) big ideas and essential questions were posted in classrooms and teachers reported using them during instruction to focus students' attention, d) Jewish Studies heads were supporting their teachers' work in multiple ways, and e) teachers and Jewish Studies heads were using the language associated with the Project. The eighth school was not using the Project because a) the Jewish Studies head and most of the school's Jewish Studies teachers were new to it in the 2007-2008 school year, and b) the relatively new head of school demonstrated scant commitment to the Project.

This finding about extent and fidelity of implementation is critically important. Many projects demonstrate little impact not because they are poorly designed but because they are poorly implemented or implemented with adaptations that degrade the original project design. The Tanakh Project, with its ongoing TEC support and related school-based accountability, was avoiding the pitfalls often seen in the implementation of many instructional improvement projects.

Given this positive finding, we need to note that the extent and fidelity of implementation varied within and across the schools.

First, *there was variation around the extent of implementation within schools*. In a few schools only some teachers were using the Project's methods to guide their teaching. Those who were not using them, most of the time, were teachers who a) were new to the schools, and, therefore, b) were not yet familiar with the Project's approach and methods and, c) had not yet developed units of study.

Second, *one school in the sample, to a far greater extent than any other, was implementing all components of the Standards and Benchmarks Project*. The Jewish Studies head in this school was fully engaged with and committed to the Project. She sought multiple opportunities to increase her own knowledge and skill as well as that of her teachers with professional development provided by the Project.⁸ Teachers were encouraged, indeed required, by the Jewish Studies head, to collaboratively develop and implement multiple units of instruction that included most if not all of the required Project components.

Third, and related to the point above, *the quality and extent of support provided by the Jewish Studies heads varied across the schools and influenced the extent and fidelity of implementation*. Overall, greater knowledge, skill, and attention to the Project from the Jewish Studies head was associated with a greater extent and fidelity of implementation.⁹

Fourth, *in one school, themes rather than standards were the primary focus of the curriculum*. Teachers collaboratively selected themes for their classes and then identified standards and benchmarks that could be addressed while focusing on the themes. Teachers and the Jewish Studies head met on a regular basis to develop and review units and lessons; they collaborated with each other outside of regular meeting times; they used the lessons developed; and they used much of the Project's language. However, their approach did not meet the criteria for fidelity established for the Project with respect to choosing standards and benchmarks – not themes – with which to focus the curriculum.

Fifth, *teachers in all seven of the schools had developed units of instruction but their completeness and coherence varied*. Most units reviewed identified the standards and benchmarks that were the focus of the unit and indicated the “to know” and “to do” categories. Most also indicated some examples of assessments, although in more than half the units these were not fully developed. Units tended to lack scoring guides for the assessments and, when they were included they did not always match well the desired outcomes for the unit. Units tended not to have associated written lesson plans.

The extensive research base on school reform/program implementation in public schools consistently reports that schools require three to five years to make the kinds of changes required

⁸We refer to all Jewish Studies heads and all teachers as *she* to preserve confidentiality.

⁹One school did not have a Jewish Studies head during the 2007-2008 school year. Teacher leaders, with the support of the head of school, led the collaborative work of developing units of instruction. The school hired a Jewish Studies head for the 2008-2009 school year.

by the Tanakh project. After only two or three years, therefore, the findings from Cohort I and II schools lead us to conclude with confidence that the schools are making progress and are committed to continuing the work of implementing Tanakh standards and benchmarks.

2. Factors That Influenced the Extent and Fidelity of Implementation. Examining the data closely, we learned that three factors most influenced the extent and fidelity of implementation in these schools. These were: a) the role the Jewish Studies head took in leading the Project, b) the contribution of additional (post-year one) professional development support from the TEC, and c) school-based factors other than leadership, for example the time available for teaching Tanakh, and teacher stability and/or turnover.

a. Jewish Studies Head Leadership. The most significant factor to influence the extent and fidelity of implementation of the Project was the Jewish Studies head's skillful leadership of it. Jewish Studies heads were not equally effective in implementing their leadership role with the Project due to variations in their own knowledge and skill. However, all of the Jewish Studies heads in the seven implementing schools contributed positively, albeit to varying extents, to the Project's progress. All but one of them made good use of the supports available to them from the TECs' ongoing availability by phone and e-mail.

Teachers in schools that had effective Jewish Studies heads identified multiple actions associated with that positive leadership: a) providing time to meet and work collaboratively on the Project, b) demonstrating enthusiasm and encouragement, c) conducting classroom observations and providing feedback, and d) attending to development of units of instruction. Teachers reported that effective Jewish Studies heads became actively engaged in their teaching of Tanakh as well as in their development of the units and their associated lesson plans. This involvement extended to participating in the review and revision of the units and their associated assessments after they had been taught.

Jewish Studies heads in schools that were implementing the Project's components with fidelity took an active role in guiding new teachers toward using the Project. Needless to say, this was essential if whole departments were to work collaboratively toward the same standards-based goals for students using the same pedagogical approaches. It was also essential because three of the schools in the sample experienced considerable teacher turnover.

In multiple ways, effective Jewish Studies heads played a significant role in the further development of the Project at their schools. Without their leadership, the Project would not have advanced as much as it did. When the Jewish Studies head was less skillful in leading the Project, more experienced as well as new teachers noted that they did not feel sufficiently supported in the development of a coherent, high quality curriculum based on the standards and benchmarks. New teachers, in particular, were largely left to their own devices or dependent on colleagues who were willing to help them learn to use the standards and benchmarks processes.

b. A Second Year of TEC Support. Jewish Studies heads, heads of schools, and teachers valued the professional development provided by the TECs during their first year in the Project.

From their perspective, however, one year of funded TEC support was not sufficient given the complexity of learning how to use the standards and benchmarks and the new approach to teaching and learning.¹⁰

What did the Jewish Studies heads and teachers gain from an additional year of professional development from their TECs? Fundamentally, TECs a) provided them with expert, needed feedback on the units they had developed and used and on the new ones they were developing, b) reviewed the components of standards-based curriculum design, c) helped teachers and Jewish Studies heads focus their work in light of the standards they had chosen, d) introduced new teachers to the work of the Project, and e) created enthusiasm for the Project among new teachers and reinvigorated those who were already involved. TECs offered these supports whether on-site or via scheduled telephone conversations. On-site support was preferred in that it enabled the TEC to provide more complex support to a range of teachers and the Jewish Studies head.

All of the schools made good use of the additional TEC support they were able to garner during the 2007-2008 school year. Given that most of the schools do not have the financial resources to hire the TECs on their own, however, the absence of second-year support for this needed professional development reduces the Project's potential extent and fidelity of implementation.

c. School-Based Factors Associated With Implementation. In addition to the Jewish Studies heads' leadership of the Project and a second year of TEC support, three school-based factors influenced the extent and fidelity of implementation.

1. Time. As reported by the teachers and Jewish Studies head, *time – or the lack thereof – influenced participation in TEC-provided professional development and the scheduling of Jewish Studies faculty meetings.* Some of the time-related challenges were associated with the inability of the schools to find qualified substitutes to cover for Jewish Studies teachers on the days the TEC was on site. Other challenges arose in schools that had part-time teachers who were not on campus each day or who worked only half of the day. Teachers with such schedules were not always able to leave another job, for example, to participate in TEC-provided full-day professional development. However, all seven schools were able to provide teachers with coverage during some part of the TECs' Year I visits.

Schools also varied in the extent to which they could hold regularly scheduled Jewish Studies faculty meetings that focused on Tanakh. If a school were organized so that the same teachers taught general and Jewish Studies, there was never a time when Jewish Studies teachers as a group could meet on a weekly or bi-weekly schedule. In such schools, the Jewish Studies head

¹⁰We agree that one year of TEC support is insufficient to fully enable Jewish Studies heads and teachers to successfully implement this Project. And we note that AVI CHAI began funding half of the cost of a second year of TEC support with Cohort III schools if those schools could also fund half of the cost of the TEC. While this was a distinct benefit to schools with the requisite financial resources, those without such resources were unable to take advantage of this opportunity.

might meet on a regular basis with grade-level teachers, for example, or teachers who taught sections of the same course and who had common planning times. Skillful Jewish Studies heads, sometimes with the support and advice of their TECs, were able to develop alternate meeting strategies in order to support teachers' learning. Time was in short supply in many of the schools, however, regardless of how well and extensively they were implementing the Project.

As a result, in six of the seven schools that continued their work with the Project, *teachers reported devoting a great deal of their own time to the development of units of instruction.*¹¹ Some worked after school; some stayed at school longer than their part-time appointment required; some used summer days to develop curriculum units. Finding time for this work was challenging. Finding time to develop units with colleagues, the arrangement all of the teachers desired, further challenged teachers. Without question, teachers devoted their own time, mostly without pay, to develop their units. In only a few schools were funds available to pay teachers for their time. As a result of the challenges posed by time constraints, some schools developed fewer units than did others. However, all of the schools developed multiple units during the 2007-2008 school year and realized that, in the future, as their curriculum became more fully-developed, they would not have to spend so much time developing new units.

Finally, the schools in this sample varied greatly in the amount of time available for teaching Tanakh. Schools allocated between two to three short periods each week to four or five weekly, full-length classes to Tanakh. Variation occurred in high schools as well as in K-8 schools and across denominations.¹² Teachers and Jewish Studies heads pointed out that it was difficult for them to develop an effective instructional program with significant learning goals for students with scant time available for their subject. Nonetheless, our data lead us to conclude that regardless of the amount of time available, teachers and Jewish Studies heads used the Project to improve their use of that time.

And, it is encouraging to note that two of the schools in our sample that began the Project with quite limited time for Tanakh have increased the amount of time devoted to the subject in the last two years. The increased time coupled with teachers' work developing standards-based units improved the schools' teaching of Tanakh even if their program did not yet include the amount of time they would like to dedicate to this area of Jewish Studies.

2. Teacher Turnover. Significant teacher and Jewish Studies head turnover negatively influenced the extent and fidelity of implementation. Three of the implementing schools in the sample experienced turnover in half of their teachers. Teachers who remained were committed to the standards and benchmarks Project; those who were new needed time to develop their

¹¹In the seventh schools, teachers' professional development focused on Hebrew during the 2007-2008 school year and their work in Tanakh focused on revising, with their colleagues and the Jewish Studies heads, units developed during the previous school year.

¹²The Schechter schools in the sample tended to have sufficient time devoted to Tanakh according to teachers and Jewish Studies heads.

understanding of the Project and then develop their own units of study. Thus, the extent of implementation was limited by the time needed for the new teachers to participate in professional development and complete the required curriculum development. Extent of implementation was also limited or enhanced by the role the Jewish Studies head played in supporting new teachers' in their development with the Project. From what we have seen, a school that has developed a collaborative, instructionally-focused culture, at least within the Jewish Studies program, and has a Jewish Studies head who effectively leads the Project, has more capacity to bring new teachers into the Project. This, of course, is not surprising; it is, rather, heartening. The finding suggests that the well-implemented Tanakh Project can withstand some of the negative challenges associated with normal teacher attrition.

3. *Scheduling Classes at the High School Level.* High Schools can design a coherent, standards-based scope and sequence for their students but they often face challenges implementing it in light of the idiosyncratic outcomes of a) priorities associated with creating students' course schedules, b) school policies related to mid-year and mid-high school admissions, and c) students' knowledge and skill of Jewish Studies and/or Hebrew when entering ninth grade.

First, in order to retain their students, Jewish high schools must provide them with opportunities to take high level general studies classes that increase their odds of being accepted at desired colleges. To accommodate students' and parents' requests for these courses, many schools place priority on developing their schedules around them. These general studies scheduling priorities in what are small Jewish high schools can play havoc with scheduling students into appropriate Tanakh classes based on the school's standards-based scope and sequence.¹³

Second, At two of the three high schools in our sample, we were told that admissions policies created challenges for Tanakh teachers.¹⁴ For example, some schools admit students at almost any point during their high school years. As a result, students may arrive unprepared to participate in the school's Tanakh curriculum. Students who may begin in a Jewish high school mid-high school or mid-year but have no prior day school background may be unable to participate in a Tanakh course that assumes students know some amount of Hebrew or have some background in the subject. Schools struggle to develop and/or adapt courses to meet these students' needs. At times, the changes they make compromise the standards and benchmarks approach they are trying to use.

¹³For a more detailed discussion of scheduling issues as well as the next two points related to high schools see Neufeld, B. FINAL TaNaKH EVALUATION REPORT: 2007-2008, July 2008, prepared for the AVI CHAI Foundation.

¹⁴The policies we note create challenges for other departments, as well. Our focus in this report, however, is on their impact to implementation of the Standards and Benchmarks Project.

Third, we were told that some students begin ninth grade, with little knowledge of Tanakh or Hebrew despite the fact that they attended day school for most of grades K-8. This, too, poses challenges for teachers who are attempting to create a finite number of courses and sections of Tanakh with which they can meet all students' learning needs.

These high school-specific factors are worth recognizing because they pose challenges to the overall impact of the Project and, most importantly, to the any high schools' ability to provide the standards-based curriculum they are working to develop. They are not, however, factors that can be changed or improved by the Project.

A Reminder About Implementation. Because we have ended this section with a discussion of school-based factors that may limit the extent and fidelity of implementation of the Tanakh Project, we want to remind readers that we began the section reporting that in seven of the eight schools the Project was being implemented with fidelity by which we meant that a) teachers were working collaboratively to develop units of instruction that were tied to their schools' selected standards and benchmarks, b) teachers were using the units when teaching Tanakh, c) big ideas and essential questions were posted in classrooms and teachers reported using them during instruction to focus students' attention, d) Jewish Studies heads were supporting their teachers' work in multiple ways, and e) teachers and Jewish Studies heads were using the language associated with the Project. This is a significant and meaningful outcome for a complex Project that provides schools with just one year of formal professional development. The fact that school-based factors influence the extent and fidelity of that implementation does not minimize the finding. Rather, the articulation of the factors can help the Project develop "next steps" designed to address those factors that are amenable to change.¹⁵

2. Impact of Implementation. Across the seven schools, regardless of any challenges with time or understanding or with the Jewish Studies head's role, teachers reported that the Project was having a significant impact on their knowledge and skill as teachers and on their students' learning. Jewish Studies heads agreed with their teachers.¹⁶

With respect to becoming more skillful, teachers reported that the Project's curriculum development process required them to be clear with themselves and their students about *what* they were teaching and *why* they were teaching it. The standards-based approach also required them to plan more fully and be more structured in their teaching. Teachers considered this to be a benefit of the Project noting students' positive responses to having a clear idea of what they were learning, why they were learning it, and the direction that lessons would take. This finding was a

¹⁵With this point in mind, we note that the Project Director proposed and the AVI CHAI Foundation funded the development of Instructional Leadership Institutes beginning in the 2008-2009 school year to further support the learning opportunities provided to Jewish Studies heads given their centrality to high quality implementation of the Project.

¹⁶Although we have no direct observational data to support teachers' and Jewish Studies heads' conclusions about the impact of the Project, the detail with which they describe its impact leads us to trust that their comments reflect actual changes.

surprise to some of the teachers, especially those teaching high school who expected their students to prefer a “looser” approach to curriculum and instruction. A small number of teachers were also able to articulate the shift they were making from a focus *teaching* to a focus on *student learning* as they talked about the impact of the Project on their instructional practices and orientation.

Jewish Studies heads, all of whom recognized that they and their teachers still had a long way to go to fully implement the Project, also reported on the positive impact they saw by the end of the 2007-2008 school year. They reported that teachers understood much of the rationale for the Project and that they were all talking the same language and, where appropriate, sharing the same lessons. Jewish Studies heads reiterated what teachers reported about the positive impact of the structure of units and lessons on students’ feelings about their Tanakh classes and about their learning. They also reported positively about the impact of having curriculum-specific assessments that provided them and students with feedback about whether they were achieving the goals of their Tanakh classes. The next step, several pointed out, was to figure out how to re-teach the material to students when assessments suggested they had not mastered it.

3. Summary: Extent, Fidelity and Impact of Implementation. The Tanakh Standards and Benchmarks Project is an ambitious enterprise that requires a great deal of the Project Director, the TECs, the Jewish Studies heads, and the teachers. The Project engages Jewish Studies heads and teachers in changing fundamentally what they teach and how they teach. By requiring them to go through the process of developing curriculum units that include assessments and lesson plans, it highlights what they know and can do and what they still need to learn. Over the years of Project implementation, it has been clear that Tanakh teachers and their Jewish Studies heads, for the most part, had little experience with developing curriculum, designing lesson plans, and developing formative and summative performance assessments and rubrics. It is always challenging for professionals to confront their own lack of knowledge. This was as true for the Tanakh Project’s participants as it would be for any set of teachers confronted with the limits of their knowledge and skill.

To their credit, the teachers and Jewish Studies heads in the schools in this sample accepted the challenge of participating in the Project and learned a great deal. They are in the process of translating what they learned into their classroom practice with the goal of continuing to improve themselves so that their students’ learning of Tanakh improves. Without question, their successes and the impact of the Project on them is the result of their own desire to improve teaching and learning, of very hard work, and of the Project’s capacity to help them toward this goal. Given the short life of the Project to date, these are significant and meaningful accomplishments.

CONCLUSIONS

What can we say, based on these data, about the impact and value of the Tanakh Standards and Benchmarks Project? Most important, we can say that the Project is being implemented with fidelity, is having an impact on Tanakh curriculum, on teaching, and, from the perspective of teachers and Jewish Studies heads, on students' learning. What is more, Jewish Studies heads and teachers value the focus of the Project and the professional development support that accompanies it.

The findings about school-based conditions that are conducive to fidelity and high quality Project implementation are clear: a skilled, knowledgeable, committed Jewish Studies head is the most essential school-based factor linked to high fidelity implementation of the Tanakh Standards and Benchmarks Project in the schools studied. Skillful leadership of this Project, includes a) insuring sufficient, consistent meeting time with teachers, b) making good use of that time, c) encouraging teachers to persevere in the hard work involved in changing their perspective on teaching Tanakh and developing their own standards-based units of instruction, d) providing teachers with feedback on the units and on their teaching of them, and e) understanding the value of a collaborative, instructionally-focused culture and supporting its development for the Tanakh Project and for all areas of Jewish Studies. Skillful Jewish Studies heads must also be eager to learn and use what the Project has to offer and they must be provided by their schools with sufficient time to devote to the Project. Previous sections of the report have identified other school-based factors that influence implementation but none, in our view, is more significant than the knowledge, skill, and capacity of the Jewish Studies head.

We have not said much directly about the quality of teachers needed to implement the Project with fidelity, but needless to say, teachers are essential to its outcome. The teachers interviewed for this study have demonstrated their commitment to the Project and their increasing knowledge and skill in what they have said in their response to our questions. Given that in most schools we interviewed all of the Tanakh teachers, the responses presented in this report are not biased toward only the most effective teachers. They represent all of the teachers in these schools.

During the first year or two of the Project's implementation, it seemed as though teachers with deep knowledge of Tanakh were essential to fidelity of implementation. Certainly, knowledgeable teachers contribute greatly to its success. But we have learned that high quality Jewish Studies heads can support their teachers in learning Tanakh along with learning to teach with standards and benchmarks. Learning Tanakh can become an integral part of implementing the Project. School-based learning can be supplemented with local area university-based learning as well as study opportunities in Israel.¹⁷

¹⁷Schools in our sample that have been able to implement these learning opportunities are only those that have the financial resources to support them. Most schools cannot provide such learning opportunities because they lack the financial resources.

This kind of targeted learning of Tanakh may not be the ideal preparation for Jewish Studies teachers, but we consider it a valid, valuable, and effective approach to a) using the standards and benchmarks, b) improving the teaching of Tanakh in a good number of day schools that do not have teachers with deep Tanakh knowledge, and c) supporting the range of schools that sincerely want to improve the teaching and learning of Tanakh.

Finally, we have learned that it is not always possible to determine which schools, which Jewish Studies heads, and which teachers will definitely succeed in implementing the Project with fidelity and to good effect. It is possible for the Project Director to select schools for participation based on criteria that *ought* to lead to successful implementation and it is possible for her to select schools knowing they might not be quite ready. But we have learned in the last few years that schools that appear to be good candidates for the Project may experience school-based changes – the loss of a Jewish Studies head, a change in the Head of school – that alter conditions sufficiently to challenge the Project’s implementation. And, we have seen schools that faltered in their first year of implementation regroup and develop extensive implementation with high fidelity in their second and third years. This suggests the importance of keeping two points in mind.

First, there is no perfect way to select schools that will insure their success with the Project. The Project Director can do her best, but there will always be some degree of uncertainty in the school selection process. This is to be expected; it is not a flaw in the Project or the Project Director. Furthermore, even schools that experience some significant negative change, may continue to implement the Project. We noted the presence of one school in our sample this year where teacher leaders were carrying the Project forward. Strong leadership from a Jewish Studies head would likely have led to greater progress. But the school made progress as a result of the support of the Head of school and the commitment of its teachers.

Second, it is not possible to know, in the first year of implementation, whether a school will succeed with the Project over the longer haul. One year provides insufficient elapsed time to make this judgment. And, even if it is clear that a school will succeed, it cannot be ready to sustain the work of implementing standards and benchmarks with only one year of funded professional development support.

Given that we know it will take more than one year for all schools to become sufficiently knowledgeable to use the Project’s processes effectively let alone learn enough to sustain them without external support, and given that we know curriculum innovation takes three to five years, the data collected from the schools adds evidence to the argument that the Project should be funded with no less than two years of professional development support for the schools. We are saying this not simply because the schools want a second year of formal support but because this is what it will take to create the greatest impact with Project the AVI CHAI Foundation is already supporting to good effect. This is what it will take for schools and for the larger day school community to reap the benefits of this well-designed, well-led and well-implemented Project.

From our perspective, there is another way in which the findings from this evaluation study can be used to enhance Jewish Studies in similar day schools. The Tanakh Project is designed as a high quality professional development program focused on teaching and learning Tanakh. There is every reason to believe that similarly designed standards and benchmarks professional development Projects focused on other areas of Jewish Studies could likewise improve their teaching and learning in Reform, Conservative and Community day schools. No doubt it would be challenging to develop standards and benchmarks for teaching these other areas. But, the outcomes from the Tanakh Project suggest the effort would be worthwhile and would contribute mightily to improving the quality of Jewish Studies in these day schools.

Next Steps for the Evaluation. Since its inception, the Director of the Tanakh Standards and Benchmarks Project has used her own knowledge of its implementation and the evaluation results to further strengthen the Project. To this end, beginning with Cohort IV, the Project's design included an Instructional Leadership Institute (ILI), professional development focused on enhancing the knowledge and skill of the Jewish Studies heads who are so essential to high quality implementation. With funding from AVI CHAI, during the 2009-2010 school year Education Matters will collect data on the implementation and impact of the ILI. This work will involve attending the ILI in February 2010 and collecting data from a small sample of schools in Cohorts IV and V, those schools whose Jewish Studies heads participated in this professional development. In addition, with the goal of understanding the sustainability of the Project, Education Matters will return to a small sample of the schools involved Cohorts I and II to determine the status of the Project in their schools. The data from this evaluation study will be added to what we have already learned to create a final, summative report on the design, implementation and impact of the Tanakh Standards and Benchmarks Project.

Appendix A: Rationale for Tanakh Standards and Benchmarks¹⁸

Development of sophisticated standards and benchmarks for Jewish studies is efficacious for a variety of reasons. School staffs can:

Use benchmarks to describe the knowledge and skills they want their students to acquire, aligning themselves with other day schools of Jewish studies excellence who take their Jewish studies mission as seriously as their general studies mission.

Promote K-12 coherence by using the power of carefully constructed core-concept benchmarks to help make connections and relate linkages that make sense in a larger context of "big ideas." Research shows that this approach helps learners make a personal meaning and retain learning more effectively than the often disjointed, unfocused, haphazard presentation of skills and knowledge in schools without benchmarks.

Refer to benchmarks to design curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Decisions on what to teach, how to teach, and how to evaluate are among the most important choices educators make. Benchmarks can give coherence and rationality to this process.

Benchmarks can also enhance the day school movement in some other powerful ways:

A nationally recognized list of benchmarks could inform teacher preparation and continuing professional-development efforts. It will help define a basis for teacher content knowledge and create a shared professional literature on which to base creative learner-centered instructional strategies. Thus, teachers in one school or community seeking to design instruction to move their students to mastery of a given set of benchmarks can share that successful effort with all others in the profession using the same core literacy set of benchmarks. This enhances faculty self-esteem and raises the level of the profession by creating a professional culture of teachers helping teachers.

Appropriate use of benchmark and performance-based assessments can help improve learning for all students, setting high standards for all, not just the elite, thus creating a more universal and democratic Jewish-communal policy.

Families are more mobile than ever, with students constantly moving from school to school as families often look to relocate to an area where there is a strong, excellent day school. Shared competencies and benchmarks can help students make these transitions.

A seriousness of purpose in Jewish studies, with well-articulated, nationally accepted standards, can enhance the status of Jewish studies in the eyes of constituents and put everyone in the school community on notice that the school adheres to high standards in both general and Jewish studies. Presently, because only general studies is the focus of testing (standardized state and national exams, SATs, achievement tests, and advanced-placement examinations), Jewish studies is often relegated to second-class status.

¹⁸This text can be found on the project's website at www.jtsa.edu

Even if a school, because of denominational or ideological reasons, or as a result of a specific mission and vision, doesn't wish to embrace a specific standard and set of benchmarks, the staff would be well-served with a comprehensive list of important core concepts, texts, and Jewish values that can be adapted for its own purposes. Few schools have the time, expertise, or structure to permit the development of this master list of elements, which go into being a literate, understanding, striving, practicing Jewish person.

Publishers and centralized curriculum and instruction-preparation teams can have a much clearer sense of what the field requires for given grade levels, thus creating a more efficient research, development, and marketing enterprise for the creation of educational materials for use in Jewish studies, where a paucity of quality materials is currently the norm.

Appendix B: The Tanakh Standards¹⁹

Standard 1: Students will become independent and literarily astute readers of the biblical text in Hebrew.

Standard 2: Students will be engaged in the learning of ancient, rabbinic, and modern modes of interpretation of the biblical text and will see themselves as a link in this ongoing chain of interpretation.

Standard 3: Students will appreciate Tanakh as a multivocal text with a complex history of development.

Standard 4: Students will view Tanakh as the formative narrative of the Jewish People – past, present, and future.

Standard 5: Students will, through the study of Tanakh, understand and value that the Land of Israel informs and shapes the historical, theological, and sociological experiences of the Jewish People.

Standard 6: Students will develop an appreciation for the sacredness of Tanakh as the primary record of the meeting between God and the people of Israel and as an essential text through which Jews continue to grapple with theological, spiritual, and existential questions.

Standard 7: Students will understand, through the study of Tanakh and its interpretations, the role of mitzvot in the shaping of the ethical character and religious practices of the individual and the Jewish People.

Standard 8: Students will develop a love of Torah study for its own sake and embrace it as an inspiring resource, informing their values, moral commitments, and ways of experiencing the world.

¹⁹For a list of the standards and related benchmarks that can guide the development of curricular units, go to http://www.jtsa.edu/William_Davidson_Graduate_School_of_Jewish_Education/Melton_Research_Center_for_Jewish_Education/Melton_Standards_and_Benchmarks/Standards_and_Benchmarks_Introduction.xml