

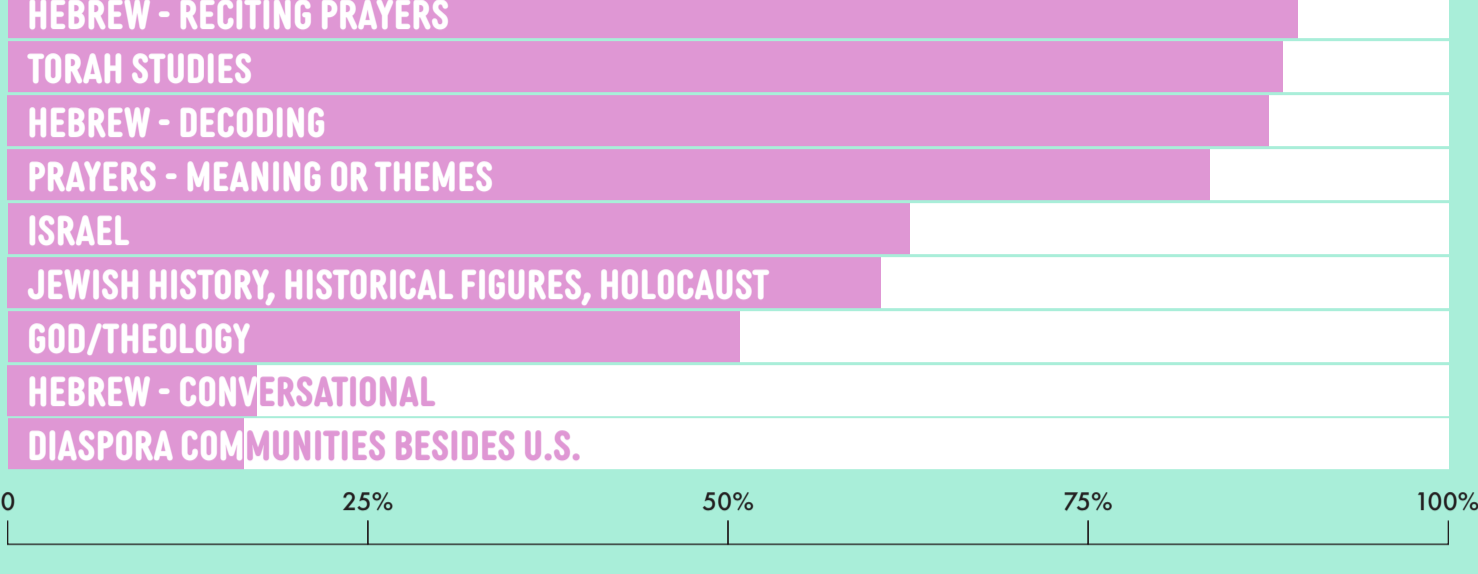
LET'S STOP CALLING IT HEBREW SCHOOL

Rationales, goals, and practices of Hebrew education in part-time Jewish schools

By Sarah Bunin Benor, Netta Avineri, and Nicki Greninger

Although the official name of a part-time Jewish education program might be "Religious school," "Limud," or the like, some persist in calling it "Hebrew school." This leads to an expectation that students will graduate with speaking ability in Hebrew and a perception that the schools are failing in their primary task. This study investigated the what, how, and why of Hebrew education in these settings.

WHAT'S BEING TAUGHT?

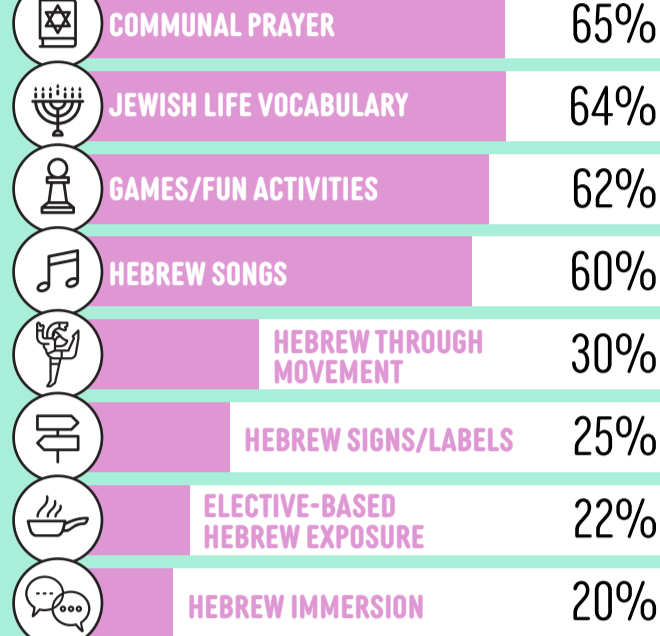


HOW IS HEBREW TAUGHT?

(Moderate or Great Amount)

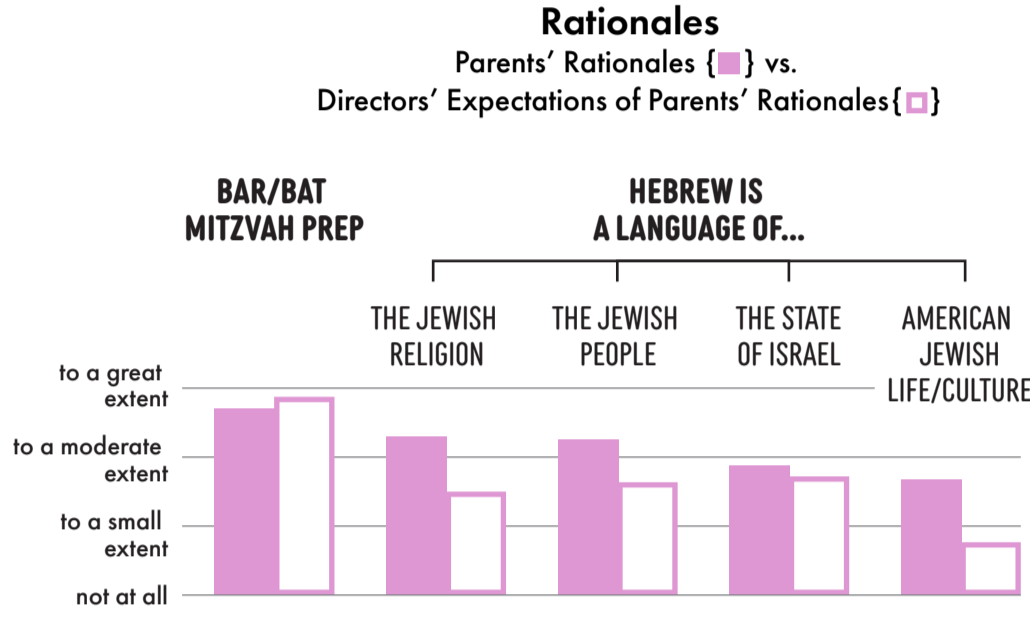
Schools exhibit great diversity in approach and orientation.

- Most emphasize decoding (sounding out letters to form words) and recitation of Liturgical and Biblical Hebrew without comprehension for the purpose of ritual participation.
- Most schools also **infuse Hebrew** - incorporate Hebrew words, songs, and signs into the primarily English environment - with the unstated goal of fostering a **Hebrew "metalinguistic community"** that values and feels personally connected to the language.
- While Modern Hebrew is incorporated, only a small percentage of schools teach Modern Hebrew conversation through immersion.



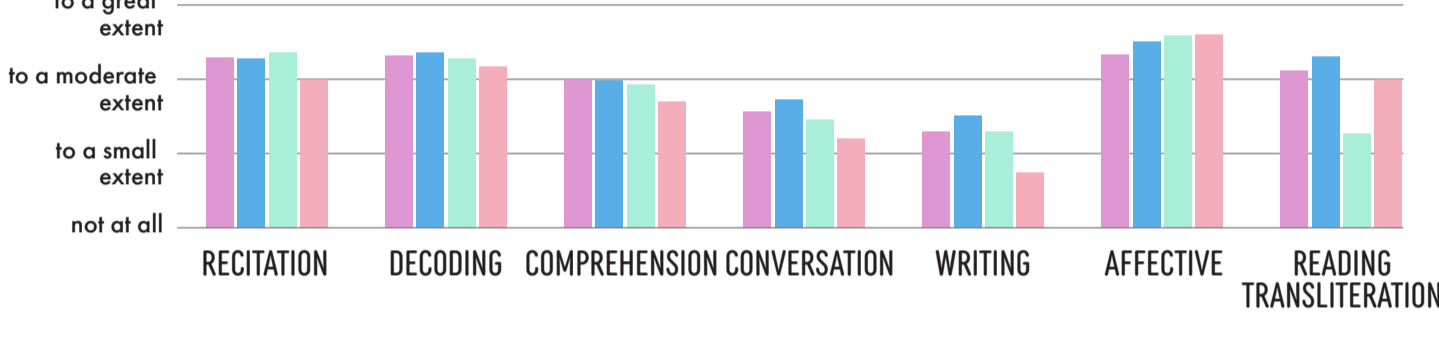
School directors, clergy, teachers, parents, and students have diverse rationales and goals for Hebrew education that can create tensions.

School directors believe parents are only or primarily interested in bar/bat mitzvah preparation. This is true for many parents, but some parents also have other goals for their children, including gaining conversational Hebrew skills. Parents and students value Hebrew for reasons besides bar/bat mitzvah more than school directors and clergy expect them to.



Goals

Parents (■), Teachers (■), Clergy (■), and School Directors (■)



- Recitation and decoding are more important than comprehension, conversation, and writing.
- Affective goals - like associating Hebrew with Jewishness and feeling personally connected to Hebrew - are the most important for school directors, teachers, parents, students, and clergy.
- School directors express less interest in some Modern Hebrew-related goals than parents and other constituents, perhaps reflecting their more realistic sense of what is possible with limited contact hours.

CHALLENGES OF TEACHING HEBREW LANGUAGE

TIME



On average, schools spend 3.9 hours per week with 6th graders, including 1.7 hours on Hebrew. Multiple stakeholders consider this limited time the most significant challenge.

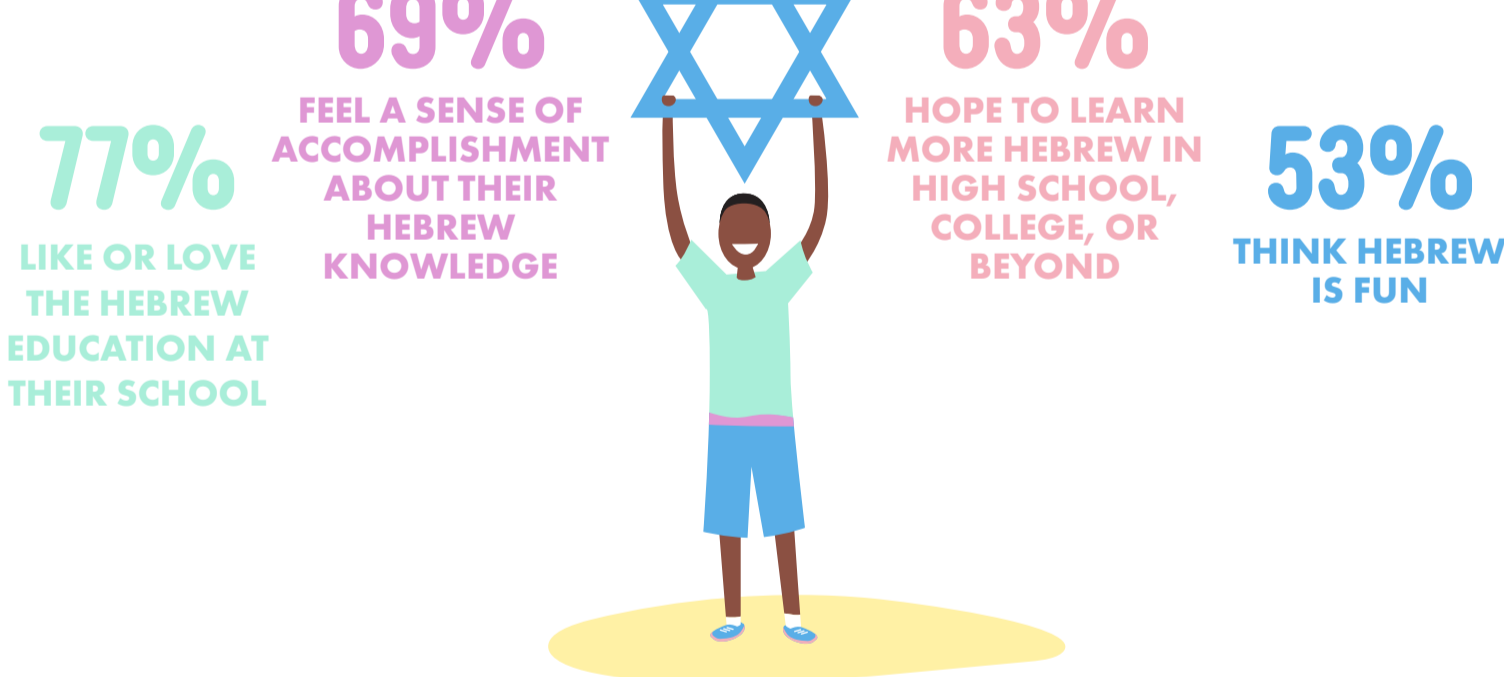
TEACHERS



Many schools have trouble finding teachers with sufficient Hebrew knowledge and/or pedagogical skills for teaching Hebrew.

STUDENT SATISFACTION

Students generally express positive feelings about their school and learning Hebrew, and their responses suggest that schools are generally succeeding in affective goals more than school directors believe.



TRENDS

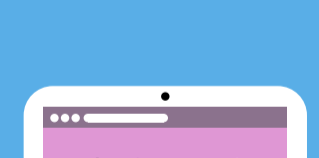


Schools have made changes or expect to make changes in opposite directions. Some are adding more **Modern Hebrew** instruction, and others are shifting to focus solely on **Textual Hebrew**.

Several organizations, companies, and initiatives provide **support and resources** for Hebrew education in part-time Jewish schools, but many school directors and teachers are not aware of such resources.

#ONWARDHEBREW

Hebrew Through Movement and other elements of #OnwardHebrew have become popular, and many school directors consider them successful.



Online Hebrew learning is gaining some traction, including gamified activities and one-on-one Skype/Facetime tutoring sessions (this study was conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic). School directors generally feel that these individualized and technologically based approaches are effective.

RECOMMENDATIONS

SCHOOLS SHOULD

- Encourage your community to stop calling it "Hebrew school," except where Hebrew language proficiency is the primary focus.
- Engage in collaborative visioning with all stakeholders about Hebrew education.
- Make students' connection to Hebrew an explicit goal. Infuse more Hebrew through fun activities, songs, and signs, and focus on building a Hebrew "metalinguistic community".
- When teaching decoding, spend less time in large groups and more time in one-on-one and small-group configurations.
- With parent buy-in, consider offering a small amount of gamified homework.
- Offer multiple tracks or an enrichment option for families interested in conversational Hebrew.



Nationwide and regional educational infrastructure should offer more funded online training for teachers, information sharing, and consulting and training for school directors.

About This Research

This study investigated how Hebrew is taught and perceived at American part-time Jewish schools (supplementary schools, religious schools). **Phase one:** survey of 519 school directors around the United States, focusing on rationales, goals, teaching methods, curricula, and teacher selection. **Phase two:** classroom observations at 12 schools and 376 stakeholders surveys at 8 schools with diverse approaches - focused on how teachers teach, use, and discuss Hebrew, how students respond, how students, parents, clergy, and teachers perceive their program, and these constituencies' rationales and goals for Hebrew education.

For the full report visit <https://www.casje.org/HebrewEdPartTime>

