

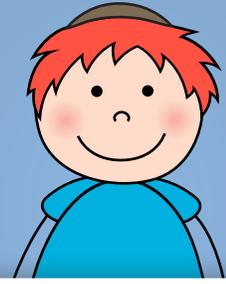
CASE
STUDY



Zafon Elementary School

A Station-Rotation Model for Supporting 21st Century Learning

Dr. Leslie Santee Siskin & Daniel Loewenstein
New York University, Institute for Education and Social Policy
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Snapshot

In the Zafon first grade classroom, several things are happening at once. Along the left wall, four students are sitting at computer stations, each wearing headphones and manipulating a mouse, using Hebrew language software to practice their letters. Some are looking at an image of a room full of items, trying to locate those that begin with the letter "sin," while others match words containing the letter with their pictures. In the center of the room, five students chant the blessing for the state of Israel along with the class's assistant teacher while coloring copies of the blessing at the half-circle desk. Towards the right wall, six students sit at a table with their workbooks open, practicing writing the letter "sin" and words that contain it, while the lead teacher supervises and offers help where needed. She uses a Socratic line of questioning to help one student recall how the letter is written, then quickly turns to another to help him with his penmanship. Toward the front of the room, five students sit decorating sheets with a prayer for Israeli soldiers; one is drawing the blue Star of David of the Israeli flag and another is using the brown-and-green of army uniforms. All the while, the Head of School walks around, checking in on individual students and informally observing how the class is going.

■ Introduction

Zafon¹ is a new Jewish day school that opened in the fall of 2012, with blended learning at the core of its design, and with incubation support from The AVI CHAI Foundation and other funders. AVI CHAI, through its Jewish day school blended and online learning initiatives², seeks to 1) improve the quality of day school education by increasing individualized data-driven instruction and enabling students to develop skills and ways of thinking needed in the 21st century, and 2) to bring down the cost of education. To further that goal, researchers who have been studying the Foundation's efforts, in collaboration with AVI CHAI program staff, have selected four funded schools as case study sites. This is the first case study to be made available. In addition to case studies of three other schools, we will also be publishing a second look at Zafon. Together, these cases reflect the range of the larger blended and online learning grantmaking effort: new and established schools, different geographic areas and grade levels, and different implementation paths and pacing in their progress toward online/blended learning. At the same time, each case reflects the unique context of a particular school and offers a distinctive example of what blended learning in day schools can and does look like in practice.

The case of Zafon is distinctive in four features that frame our analysis. First, it is a *new school*, facing the predictable challenges of starting up — such as hiring a head, developing a budget, locating and renovating space, creating a process for recruitment and induction of staff, developing curriculum (in both Judaic and general studies), and attracting and enrolling students. Like many schools starting up, both public and private, Zafon adopted a phase-up strategy: opening with pre-K through first grade and adding a grade, and new faculty, each year as students progress. In the 2013–2014 academic year, the time of this study, the school housed pre-kindergarten through second grade, with 17 full-time teachers and three administrators serving 162 students.

¹ Conforming to norms of academic research for confidentiality, we have used pseudonyms for all individual schools and staff. This is primarily a matter of research ethics — the intent to protect the privacy of participants. It is also a reflection of the nature of a case, which is based on purposeful study and constructed from the researchers' perspective — the acknowledgement that a case study can only tell part of the story of a real school.

² <http://avichai.org/north-america/day-school-educational-technology>

This case is in many ways a study of implementation, of translating from a design on paper to the delivery of a program in practice.



Second, as a new school, Zafon *began with blended learning* as a core element of its design. Rather than adding online learning into existing routines, norms, and structures, or having to convince skeptical or resistant teachers or parents, faculty and families began with the expectation that blended learning would be incorporated into all subjects, and all grades, for all students.

Third, Zafon represents a case of a *model-driven school*. The school began with an externally developed design, a model created before people were in place or a place was even determined. This case is in many ways a study of implementation, of translating from a design on paper to the delivery of a program in practice. As such, the school faces what educational researchers call the “fidelity challenge”: balancing the imperative to remain true to design principles against the inevitable need to make accommodations to local context and capacity, allowing sufficient “mutual adaptation” for the program to be realized (McDonald et al., 2009; McLaughlin, 1990).

Fourth, and finally, Zafon is model-driven in another sense as well. It was intended from its original conception to serve as a model of what day schools could be in the future, as an *example of both educational and economic potential*. A steady stream of visitors gives evidence of considerable interest in the idea. Blended learning was presented as a key strategy for affordable day school education, and Zafon's tuition levels — at least in 2013–14, with a small staff, few administrators, and rented space — run from about \$8,000 to \$9,000 depending on grade level, well below the rate of other day schools in the region.

This case study provides an overview of Zafon as a new, blended learning and model-driven school. It presents its progress as educators have implemented the model through the beginning stages of its first two years. While it is informed

by the larger ongoing research study³, it draws primarily on two years of fieldwork at the school, with two to three visits each year, interviews with administrators and teachers, and classroom observations across grade levels and subjects. The case study begins with the history and background of the school and then moves to its philosophy, and the organization and operations developed to translate that philosophy into practice. The next section takes a closer look at what blended learning looks like in classrooms, and the final section offers an overview of the school's financial model and the projected estimates, expectations, and plans for the future. Together, these sections tell a story of how Zafon has navigated the process of taking an externally designed rotation model, adapting it to fit its own context, and establishing a new kind of blended learning day school.

■ Background

While portrayals of Zafon in many interviews and documents focus on its model or educational innovation, the motivation behind the creation of the school was, according to the head of school and archival documents, driven by a more pragmatic imperative. A small group of members of an Orthodox Jewish community were concerned about day school affordability, as well as the sustainability of the Jewish day school system. Tuition costs, they suggested, had become prohibitively high and showed no signs of decreasing. This posed a problem, not only for families unable to afford the costs, but also for the future of day schools, which face a long-term threat of lower enrollments or even closures. Yet some of the founders had seen the failure of an earlier experiment to start up a low-cost day school. “Low-cost” became too readily associated in prospective families’ minds with “low quality,” and enrollments stayed too low to maintain a school. In the hope of finding new means to address these issues, community members united to form a board and address the problem together. Through a series of open “parlor meetings” with other members of the community, and with encouragement and supporting seed money from the Affordable Jewish Education

Project⁴, they were able to promote the idea of a new school, to gauge interest and concerns, and even to begin fundraising.

With additional funding from The AVI CHAI Foundation and others, the planning process began in earnest. The board partnered with The Alvo Institute⁵, a consulting organization specializing in 21st century classroom design and operation, and turned to technology and blended learning as the way to address affordability and sustainability — without reducing quality. They also brought in an educational expert, with considerable experience in day schools, to address curriculum and staffing needs and expectations. Together, the founding families and consultants began the process of developing a blended learning model for Jewish day school education, including plans for instructional design, data use, professional development, evaluation of online products, and more. The results of their collaboration yielded what is referred to as a station-rotation model of blended learning, in which classrooms have different workstations and students rotate among them. In many ways, this model resembles other early childhood classroom designs, with a computer station in addition to stations with wooden blocks or reading rugs, and its familiarity seems reassuring to prospective parents. The design team also focused on economic efficiency, calling, for example, for class sizes of 20 to 25 students, with additional sections to be added only if and when that size could be maintained. Thus, 30 students would produce one class and a wait list, rather than the more common two sections of 15 students each; the former is more likely to produce a financially healthy model, while the latter drives up personnel costs and strains the budgets of many Jewish day schools. On one hand, since Zafon has been classified as an early childhood program in its first few years, and thus has smaller state-mandated class size maximums, the cost savings possibilities through larger classes are limited. On the other hand, having only early childhood classes reduces some of the need for administrators, specialists, and building space, providing other cost savings not available to schools that also house elementary, middle, and/or high schools. Still, school professionals and parents have faith in the model, which is being developed

³ http://avichai.org/knowledge_base/moving-forward-an-interim-report-of-select-avi-chai-blended-learning-initiatives-in-jewish-day-schools

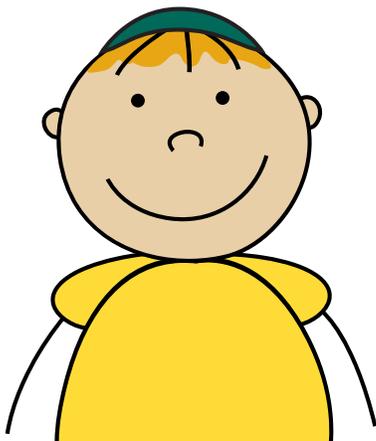
⁴ <http://ajeproject.org>

⁵ <http://thealvoinstitute.com>

not only as a blueprint for creating a new school but also for converting an existing one. Indeed, the founders and early funders conveyed a clear hope that this model would spread.

In 2011, while still in the planning stage, the board hired its head of school, Rabbi Pinn (see footnote 1). Rabbi Pinn brought a combination of useful perspectives to the table: he had taught in a well-respected Jewish high school, giving him familiarity with academic expectations; he had also developed and led day school and summer camp programs, giving him familiarity with start-up processes; finally, the school and camp programs he developed were for students with learning and developmental disabilities, giving him familiarity with the power of individualized and experiential educational opportunities. This background, he explained, allowed him to envision the unique and exciting potential of a school developed for the purpose of personalized learning through the station-rotation model.

In the world of special education, individual student needs and abilities are frequently evaluated, resulting in an individualized education plan, or IEP. Rabbi Pinn recalled, “Part of my job as the director of special services was to explain to the teachers what the unique learning style of every individual child was. What I found fascinating with teaching an honors class is that I experienced the same thing. It just struck me: Why can’t every child have an IEP?” Zafon, with its station-rotation model, represented the potential to give every student a personalized learning plan and experience. He worked with the consultants and board for a year prior to the school opening, learning and refining the model to realize that potential.



■ Educational Philosophy

In addition to the discourse of personalization through blending, and the inevitable debates about logistics, the Head recalled that the founding faculty engaged in lots of philosophical conversation, including “a lot of conversation about, ‘After eight years of a Jewish day school, where do we want them to be in life?’” They chose to focus on marketable skills in the 21st century, with a high priority on promoting independent critical thinking as well as collaborative skills. They also felt that promoting strong positive relationships between students and teachers should play a central role in Zafon’s pedagogy, based in part on a study linking student motivation and achievement to such relationships. The goals of promoting (1) independent critical thinking skills, (2) collaborative skills, and (3) strong positive relationships with teachers formed what Rabbi Pinn refers to as Zafon’s pedagogical “three pillars,” and these, along with the commitment to personalizing learning, are what staff have come to highlight as Zafon’s philosophy and its potential.

In many ways, Zafon’s educational philosophy resembles that of many, if not most, other Jewish day schools. The mission statement includes commitments to academic excellence, the success and happiness of every student, meaningful relationships between teachers and students, and supporting parental involvement in students’ education. On the Judaic side, the school aims to teach toward fluency in Hebrew, provide high-quality Judaic learning, and integrate secular and Jewish studies. On the affective side, the school hopes to instill a commitment to the Torah and its commandments, a dedication to character, kindness, and respect, and a love for the Jewish people and Israel.

Zafon staff also suggested that there are two ways in which the school’s educational philosophy departs from the norm. The first is its firm commitment to data-driven personalized instruction. While many schools support differentiated instruction in one form or another, the extent to which, as well as the means through which, this commitment drives what happens in Zafon classrooms sets it apart. The second consists of its “pedagogical pillars”: independent critical thinking skills, collaborative skills, and strong positive relationships with teachers. While these foci may not be

unique to Zafon, data from interviews as well as documents suggest that school personnel *perceive* the school's prioritization of these goals as distinctively different. The question then was how to build the environment to realize those goals — finding a physical space, creating a schedule, and then recruiting and supporting the faculty to provide the program.

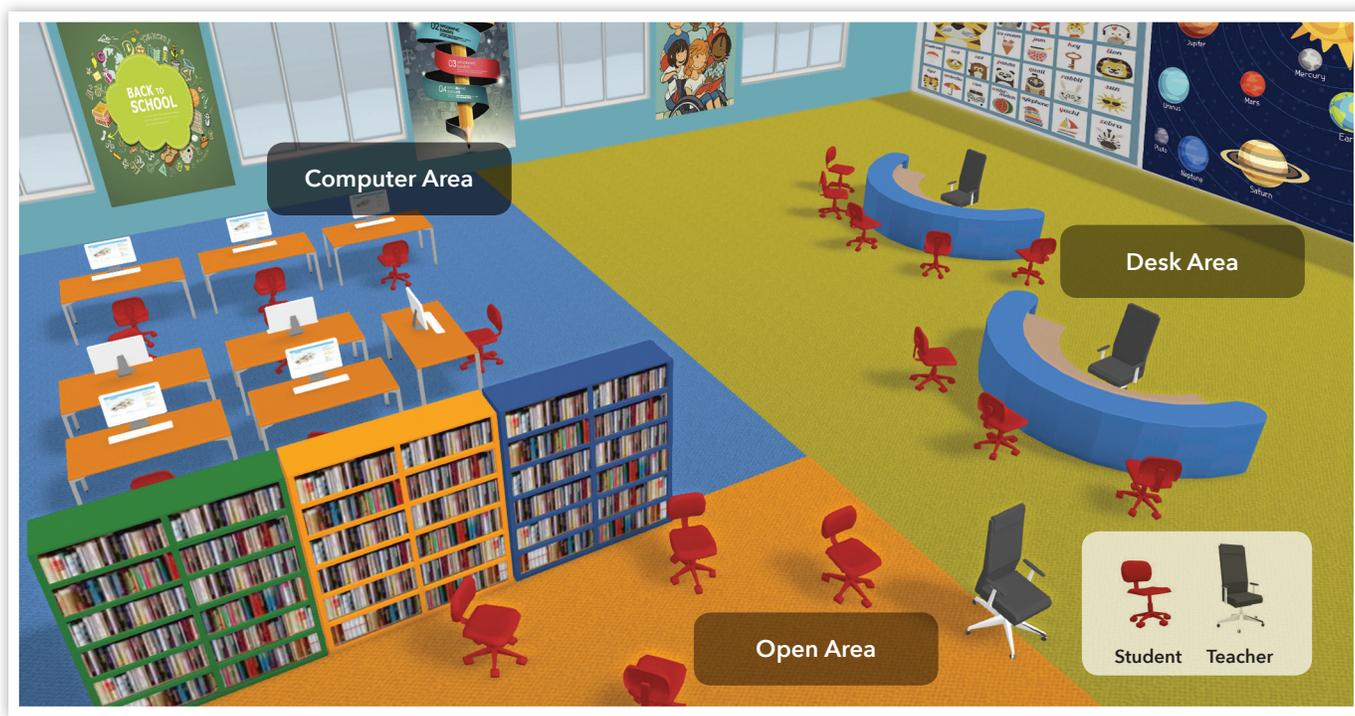
■ Organization and Operations

Physical Space

Zafon was able to locate and rent a facility, formerly used as a school, that with some renovation and repainting could become adequate to house the number of students expected to enroll — at least for the first few years. It is located in a large suburban community in the northeast US with a growing Orthodox population, in a neighborhood that is mostly residential, although the facility is in a somewhat more commercial area. Zafon blends well into its surroundings, looking from the outside more like a suite of offices than a school. The facilities include two buildings linked by a short walkway, with a small playground

area between them and a parking lot behind. The smaller building has two rooms housing the school's two first grade classes, while the larger building's two stories contain everything else, including pre-kindergarten, kindergarten and second grade classrooms, a lunchroom, and offices.

Classrooms at Zafon are busy places filled with furniture and objects of multiple shapes, sizes and colors, as is often the case in early childhood education. The walls are covered with posters of daily schedules, class policies, Hebrew and English calendars, charts of students' responsibilities and examples of their work, and educational materials such as pictures representing Jewish holidays or alphabet charts. Towards the entrance of each room are spaces for student belongings, whether cubbies, a designated area of the floor, coat hooks, or some combination of these. Classroom cubbies or shelves divide the room and line the walls, containing books and blocks, art supplies, boxes of toys and more. With so much going on, there is still a clear order and arrangement to the rooms. From a floor-plan perspective, every room essentially has the same three main areas, each clearly distinct from the others and designated for a particular purpose.



There is an open, carpeted area in which whole-group activities take place, or which students might use for independent reading or work. There is also an area that houses the computers, arranged in some classes side-by-side along a section of wall and in others in back-to-back rows, occupying one of the room's corners. Finally, there is also a large area for the two half-circle desks. Generally teachers sit or stand at the center of a half-circle, with a group of students fanned out around them; this allows the teacher to see what everyone is doing from one location. This area is mostly used for small-group instruction or project-based learning. This arrangement, quite different from the desks-in-rows model, enables the rotation system to function effectively.

Daily Schedule

Upon arrival to their classrooms, students have some time to adjust and settle in, and then begin the day with chorally recited *tefillah*, prayer. This is followed by a period of whole-group activity, which includes morning routines and procedures, such as a review of the time, day of the week and date in English and Hebrew, along with circle time or a similar form of whole-group instruction. The morning whole-group instruction can consist of either general or Jewish content, depending upon the particular class, and may be linked to the rotation to follow, or may simply stand alone. The general studies curriculum is aimed to align with Common Core standards, and both teachers and administrators report that “parents have high expectations for academics.” Lessons generally focus on reading, writing and math. As is common in early grades, other subjects like social studies or science are often integrated as well, as students learn about occupations and roles of community members, observe the growth of seeds to plants, or even “think like a scientist” as they consider cause and effect in the consequences of classroom behavior. The Judaic studies curriculum includes Hebrew language, *parshat hashavua* (the weekly Torah portion), *brachot* (blessings), Israel and Shabbat and the holidays. Here too, the Head explained, expectations are high: “To be fluent in *Ivrit* by third grade, that’s an unofficial standard and we are expected to maintain that . . . all those expectations, at that pace. There is no official Common Core, but we are expected to be on that par.” To some degree, general and Jewish studies also blend

together as teachers find and foster connections, as one teacher explained: “That’s why I teach first grade, because generally the concepts being taught are kind of in cahoots with Jewish thinking: community, responsibility, maybe not inherently Jewish but in line. So I do Thanksgiving and *hakarat hatov*, pilgrims, wandering, and religious freedom.”

Tefillah and the whole-group period take approximately an hour, after which the 80-minute rotation period begins. Students divide into groups and move to their stations, or “learning environments.” Typically one group will go to the computers and two will go to the desk area, one group to each desk, for either small group instruction or project-based learning. However, the number and types of stations and activities used in any given rotation can and does vary both from room to room and from day to day. Generally groups will work at their stations for 20 minutes, rotating a total of four times. The lengths of rotation periods, as well as the length of the block as a whole, are somewhat flexible (five minutes more or less) and left to the judgment of the teacher. Groupings and timing were fixed in the original design, but teachers found that for instructional reasons and individual attention spans, 20 minutes was not always the optimum interval. The mechanics and evolution of Zafon’s rotational model are discussed in greater detail in the section How Blending Works.

Students have recess after the rotation, followed by physical education, music or art. The former is given twice a week, while the latter two are each given once. Part-time specialist instructors who come in for those “specials” provide time when “teachers can meet and collaborate.” Students then eat lunch, which serves to divide the day between general and Judaic studies: classes that worked on one in the morning will switch to the other after lunch. This switch does not involve changing classrooms, and in only one case involves the changing of a teacher; one class lacks a teacher fluent in Hebrew, so a fluent teacher trades classes. A fluent Hebrew speaker is present in every class for at least half the day, to promote student learning by teaching Jewish studies *Ivrit b’Ivrit*, Hebrew exclusively in Hebrew (although sometimes with young children, immediate needs supersede). The afternoon follows a similar schedule, involving whole-group activity, another rotation block, and a brief period for packing up and saying goodbye.

Several classroom policies and features are meant to promote the pedagogical pillars. For example, the policy that students with a question should first ask themselves, then their friends, before asking a teacher is intended to promote both independence and collaboration. It also allows teachers to have more focused time with their small groups. Again this is not a policy unique to a blended classroom or to Zafon; it is one of the standard “cooperative learning” rules invoked in many classrooms that put students in such groups for a myriad of different pedagogical reasons. The absence of dividers between computers is also intended to facilitate collaboration, a choice that was seriously debated among staff before classrooms were fully operational. The rules governing transition processes during rotations were developed with input from students in order to promote critical thinking (“like a scientist”) and give them a sense of ownership in the class — again, a relatively common practice among teachers committed and able to create student-centered classroom cultures. They engaged in collective discussions about “what might happen if” — if you run, for example, or if you don’t push your chair in. As one first-grade teacher explained, “We don’t have rules in our classrooms, we have responsibilities” that students are responsible for deciding and for maintaining. Classroom observations indicate that teachers do refer to these rules and responsibilities, and both teachers and students do rehearse the question-asking procedure frequently. A core assumption of Zafon’s efforts to promote attainment of its pillars is that these types of practices, such as consulting oneself, then friends, and only then the teacher, will in fact lead to the kind of independent and collaborative 21st century skills Zafon envisions for its graduates.

Faculty and Staffing

In its second year (2013–14), Zafon had 18 teachers on staff, 17 of whom are employed full-time. The school has formal requirements for teachers, and has developed a formal process for hiring. Lead teachers are expected to have a Master’s degree, as well as previous teaching experience (all have five to ten years), and assistants must have a college degree. Additionally, all Jewish studies teachers must be fluent in Hebrew. Even with those requirements, they reported “no shortage of applicants” who meet their criteria, at least on paper. However, the Head emphasized, the more important qualifications have to do with teachers’ attitudes and versatility — things

one cannot evaluate easily from transcripts or applications. Accordingly, the hiring process invests considerable time in interviews, school visits, a model lesson, and extensive conversations about reflection and comfort with the uncertainties of innovation. Rabbi Pinn believes that the time is well spent, since “for any model, if openness and collaboration and the culture aren’t there, it won’t work.” Openness to collaboration, for example, is gauged through observation during the visit, and through direct questions such as, “How do you feel about being videotaped and having the whole faculty watch it with you?” There are many aspects of Zafon’s blended learning system specifically, as well as the more general challenge of working in a start-up school, that call for a certain degree of flexibility and openness to new ideas. It is also important to note that substantial technological expertise is not required, so long as a candidate is open to learning.

Even experienced teachers talked of being open to new ways of working as an essential aspect of teaching at Zafon, describing the school environment as “revolutionary” and “cutting-edge.” Indeed, the distinguishing features of this school — being new, blended, model-driven and a pilot site for a potentially scalable model — all play out in teachers’ roles and responsibilities. Coming into a new school just starting up, especially in the first year, entailed considerable involvement in establishing roles, routines, policies and procedures. Teachers talked of “constant meetings” and “endless conversations in the beginning,” and how it was “exciting to be part of something groundbreaking . . . it’s also scary.” As a first-grade teacher in the first year explained, “As a start-up school, I kind of take up whatever needs to be done, even things like salting sidewalks or shoveling snow. I love that, and it’s great to be able to show the kids.” With all the excitement and ownership that comes with this start-up environment, there is also the possibility of teacher burn-out, dissatisfaction, and the resentment that comes from unequal distribution or uncompensated work, as has been documented in many cases of charter schools and entrepreneurial teachers, for example, who at first celebrated their freedom from state mandates and organized labor, only to then have to manage rapid teacher turnover and moves to unionize (Johnson & Landman, 2000).

At Zafon, teachers were not only helping to start up a school; they were also learning new pedagogies of blended

learning. And even with strong backgrounds in reading and special education, they talked of being “kind of shocked” by the changes in teaching demands, and of the “steep learning curve” in their first weeks. The emphasis on data, diagnosis, and differentiation meant a “dual role that the teacher has in the classroom now, [where] you’re also the resource room, all the faculty are. So there’s a lot to consider and I won’t even know my questions until they come up, and then I will need the answer right now.”

Having a structured model to work from was helpful, but even the structure of rotation took time to learn. In the fall of year two, in a new teacher’s classroom, getting students into their groups, to their assigned stations, and ready to work took more than seven minutes. In contrast, observation in a second-year teacher’s class showed students walking into the room, looking to the color-coded chart to identify their stations, and starting work — all in less than one minute. Modeling possibility as a test site for a replicable model means having teachers open and willing to observe and share problems and practices that work — which they do in the collaborative meetings that the Head calls “the best professional development.”

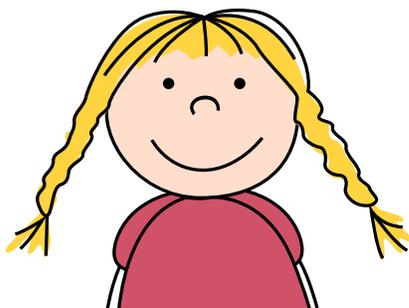
Teachers also expressed the goal of being a model school in a broader, more communal sense. One teacher with decades of experience took a large cut in salary coming to Zafon, because she believed in the great potential of the educational model. Another shared her belief in the importance of the affordability mission of the school, which she views “as for the greater good.” These and other statements portray a faculty convinced of, and excited by, the innovative potential of the model in general, and Zafon in particular.

In addition to its teachers, Zafon also employs an administrative staff consisting of a head of school, a director of operations and a school nurse/secretary. The role of head of school is a highly demanding one in any school, requiring an extraordinarily diverse skill set and tremendous intellectual, emotional, and physical stamina. In a start-up school, the demands are quite different, but likely no less demanding. Beyond standard administrative duties, the Head holds frequent meetings with “every teacher, every grade, and with the full faculty every week.” He also spends a significant amount of every day observing classes and reviewing student progress, representing the school to parents and prospective

families, and researching and evaluating blended learning products. The responsibilities of the head in an established school are much the same; however, in a larger or more established school, the head is more likely meeting with principals, coordinators, or department heads. At Zafon, Rabbi Pinn is meeting directly with teachers. While he may not have the board, community, and management roles that a school leader in a larger school has, he is, instead, “building the airplane while flying it.” Because the school is interested in being a model, he is also very involved in the discussions and activities of the broader blended learning world, contributing to forums, giving webinars, and participating in panel discussions. The workload is indeed daunting for Rabbi Pinn, even given the considerable enthusiasm he brings to the task. This was not unanticipated; even prior to the school’s opening, the design team discussed the heavy burden this model would place upon an administration kept small in the interest of affordability. As the school and staff would grow, the challenges would change and increase. Over time, the team hoped, a more distributed leadership model would emerge. The model places certain responsibilities on experienced teachers who spend a significant amount of their time in the classroom, and thus are more attuned to the daily issues in the classroom. They can serve as mentors to the more junior teachers, and can work as a team with the principal in terms of grade-wide or subject-wide matters within the school. This aligns with, and depends on, the assumptions of the hiring process — that the success of the school is linked to a collaborative culture developed between and among the administration and faculty. A teacher who has previously served in administrative roles suggested that in these first years, this is “typical startup stuff”: leaders of new organizations often bear much of the weight. As the organization grows and teachers become more experienced, it becomes easier to distribute responsibilities. That distribution is beginning to be enacted more formally with the designation of a first-grade teacher as blended learning coordinator. She holds degrees in both elementary and special education and had taught for several years prior to joining Zafon. Her responsibilities include helping other teachers learn to use or adjust to the school’s blended learning system. She also receives special training that she can bring back to the rest of the faculty — another example of collaborative learning. While in the first two years much of her time, and other teachers’ time, was taken up with immediate needs inside the school,

both administrators and teachers see this as a growing role, and one that will help meet a field-wide need in the future.

In terms of other kinds of professional support and development, Zafon generally takes a cost-conscious approach. For example, they consider a long list of factors in determining what software to purchase, one of which is how intuitive and user-friendly it will be: the more user-friendly, the lower the burden on teachers and the less training will be needed. Zafon provides professional development in a number of less conventional, and less costly, ways. First, they express pride in the ability of Zafon's faculty to work together to address needs as they arise. Like their students, they first 'ask a friend' before turning to an expert. "We used to think we needed someone to teach the teachers," the Head said, "but with discussions, they teach themselves." The collaborative efforts of Zafon's teachers are so productive, he explained, they replace a great deal of what would normally be achieved through traditional professional development, which "saves thousands." He also stressed that this is only possible because he has "great teachers" and a committed blended learning coordinator. They have also found opportunities for "collaborative PD" with other schools in the area interested in blended learning or differentiated instruction. Sometimes one will host a professional development event — a training session, for example — and invite others to attend, which is "not only collegial, but cost-effective." Even visitors who come to the school to learn provide an opportunity for external insights that can be "very enlightening." They have also been able to make use of the webinars, speakers, listserv communications and conference opportunities — and even a bit of individual consulting support — available through the Digital Learning Network, which AVI CHAI also supports. Additionally, AJE (Affordable Jewish Education Project) staff came to share their expertise. The school and the teachers have been resourceful, utilizing a variety of different opportunities to grow professionally.



■ How Blending Works

Definition

Blended learning, frequently defined as the integration of face-to-face and online learning, is a very broad term that is put into practice in very different ways in different schools, classrooms, and subjects. The Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation, formerly Innosight, has published several papers about blended learning, creating a taxonomy of common varieties⁶. Using those classifications, the blended learning model used by Zafon falls under the parameters of the "station rotation model," a subcategory of the broader "rotation model" of blended learning. The Institute defines the rotation model as "a course or subject in which students rotate on a fixed schedule or at the teacher's discretion between learning modalities, at least one of which is online learning. Other modalities might include activities such as small-group or full-class instruction, group projects, individual tutoring, and pencil-and-paper assignments." The station-rotation model specifically refers to a model in which students rotate among stations within one classroom.

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Zafon's designers and administrators talk about blended learning along the lines of the Institute's taxonomy, and refer to the approach at Zafon as a station rotation model. They have also spent a considerable amount of time talking together about what they want the online component to provide and what the technology is not useful for. As a first-grade teacher put it, "I'm not putting them on the computer to learn about community, or to learn values. That's the human element. When people worry that you're replacing teachers with computers — you can't. That's the human part."

⁶ <http://www.christenseninstitute.org/blended-learning-definitions-and-models>

But the “online part” adds something they see as “unique.” For many, blended learning means learning that is more personalized and efficient. One teacher defines it as “teaching tailored to the specific child,” involving “groups based on knowledge level.” Another sees it as “the combination of typical ‘old-school,’ teacher-led, frontal [teaching] . . . and integrating technology to make the teacher and student learning more efficient.” They define blended learning in an instructional sense (the blend of “old school” modes of instruction, like frontal teaching, with newer modes like technology and rotations), as well as in a diagnostic sense (the blend of classic and new methods of gathering data and assessing student learning). Both senses of the term are evident in daily practice at Zafon.

In the Classroom

As a blended learning school, Zafon faces not only the dual curriculum challenge of Jewish day schools, providing both general and Jewish studies; it has to incorporate a third curriculum, in technology skills. Students need to know not only the sound and shape of both “s” and *sin*; they need to know where to find it and how to use it on a keyboard. While it may seem that students today are all digital natives, teachers quickly found students in the early grades who might be familiar with screens, but reached to swipe and move objects with their hands. Use of a keyboard and mouse, how to log in and save, and what to do when a screen freezes are all skills that needed to be taught. Some of these are taught directly; as a teacher explained, “Here we begin training at a really young age. Not just keyboard, but things like internet etiquette, safety, and filtering.” Other skills are learned more indirectly: In a pre-K classroom, for example, students were completing a puzzle activity on the computer. A common early childhood activity, doing it on the computer instead of with wooden pieces seemed like an odd choice — until the teacher explained that a key part of the lesson was learning to click and drag. The normal routine of the station rotation model depends on students being able to spend computer station time largely working independently, so they all need to develop those skills.

The station rotation model is implemented at Zafon through the use of different areas, or “learning environments.” As described previously, classrooms provide three distinctive

spaces: an open area, desk area and computer area. After the whole-group period, students move to their assigned learning environments, typically displayed on a chart or chalkboard. In first and second-grade classes, students generally have mastered the routine after a few weeks of practice, moving to their stations without help and mostly without incident. In younger grades, the continuing need for a teacher to help move things along seems more common. Generally groups will work at one station for 20 minutes before being directed to rotate to the next, rotating four times for a total of 80 minutes of rotation time. Often, they will visit a “desk area” twice, once with the lead teacher and once with the assistant teacher. In practice, on some days, some students may spend very little time online. As the Head clarified, “Many are only spending 20 minutes a day on computers. We need to differentiate that as well; some need more, some less.”

Originally this system was intended to be standardized across classrooms and grades. Over time, teachers found the rigidity too constraining, and a certain degree of flexibility or “tweaking” was incorporated into the model. Teachers now have a greater degree of control over time allotment, student grouping and the number and type of learning environments in a rotation. Sometimes, they don’t even include the computer station in the rotation if it is deemed unwarranted. As the Head explained, “A teacher might want an environment for free play, for library time, or for educational games; so the teacher has to tweak it herself, to fit what that class needs.” One teacher appreciated that flexibility when she chose to spend more time teaching her class, as a whole group, about Holocaust Remembrance Day. Another pointed out that particularly in the beginning of the year, enforcing the schedule prevented the class — and the teacher — from spending enough time rehearsing the routines that were necessary for a smooth rotation. On most days, however, and in most classrooms, the schedule follows the standard model.

Data-Driven Instruction

At the computer station, students log into their own unique accounts, load whichever program they will be using, put on headphones and get to work. Many of the software programs used at Zafon contain activities that instruct as well as assess, and these generally serve to either prime students for lessons they will learn in whole or small group instruction, or provide

a review of lessons already learned. However, the role of educational software — consistently reported as most significant in interviews with teachers (and one of Zafon’s most important criteria for choosing online content providers) — is to assess and provide detailed diagnostics and feedback. Whether in a game or a lesson-then-assessment format, the software assesses students’ progress by gathering information from their responses. Some sophisticated programs have “adaptive capabilities,” using the information obtained from each answer to select appropriate follow-up questions or tasks. The program then compiles the data in a format the teacher (and in some cases parents) can view. Better programs will do this in visual displays that provide specific, instructive, easy-to-read feedback. One program displays two columns, listing the skills a student has mastered and those the student should pursue. Another program identifies similarities in needs and abilities across individual students and suggests student groupings. When the school changes providers, which it has done at least three times, it was often to get better data. As the blended learning coordinator noted, “Each [program] is better than the last,” but they are still searching for even better. Teachers are not only learning to use data; they are also becoming more demanding in their expectations for fine-grained and usable data. They express dissatisfaction “if I know they know 70%, but I don’t know which ones they don’t know.” Ideally, the data provide a clear picture of individual student needs, and guide the pace and focus of learning environments, including small-group work, independent work, and even subsequent computer work. A group of students identified as all struggling with the same math concept, for example, might work together with the lead teacher, while advanced students will move onto the next unit independently.

No program can provide all of the information teachers might need for instructional purposes, and teachers say they consider the diagnostic information provided by a program in conjunction with their own knowledge of students’ academic abilities as well as other relevant information. One told of a surprisingly low score, which might have suggested remedial needs — until they put that score in the context of their own awareness of a sibling bar mitzvah the night before. Zafon teachers, however, are consistent in reporting that the

Ideally, the data provide a clear picture of individual student needs, and guide the pace and focus of learning environments, including small-group work, independent work, and even subsequent computer work.



programs they use do provide information they could not get in other ways, or as quickly. In other schools, explained one, she would have to call in a specialist or psychologist for the kinds of diagnostic information readily available to her from the i-Ready software. A teacher stated that the kind of data she gets in minutes might take weeks to collect in other schools:

You can assess and diagnose what children need. The different paths I can take are just kind of natural for me now, with my background and experience, but the technology gives us the information, and makes suggestions. There is a wide range of materials you can get online. Within the rotation, you can do it. To remember last year, and then look at now – it’s working.

Without the need to spend hours diagnosing skill levels, or grading and analyzing assessments, teachers report their time can be used more productively. Preparation can be spent reviewing the needs and abilities of each student and rearranging groups to maximize the effectiveness of a rotation.

Building upon this, another way of thinking about the model is in terms of the third pedagogical pillar, fostering meaningful relationships between students and teachers. The idea, they say, is simple, and based on the research they did in their planning year: Students who have teachers that spend time with them in small groups, and affirm their individuality by meeting their specific learning needs, develop strong and meaningful relationships; those social and emotional relationships are a key enabling factor for student learning. Teachers report that, in giving them diagnostic knowledge about individual students as well as time to focus teaching in small groups, the technology provides the opportunity to “assess and diagnose what children need” and to arrange

Table 1: Online Content Providers by Grade Level

Grade Level	Software for Secular Studies	Software for Jewish Studies
PK	Brain Pop Jr (Math, Science, Social Studies) Reading Eggs	
K	i-Ready (English and Math) RAZ (Reading A to Z) Reading Eggs	
1	iReady RAZ Spelling City	TaL AM (Ariot)
2	iReady RAZ Spelling City	

their lessons along “different paths.” As another teacher affirmed, this kind of individualized attention and focused time enables “that whole social emotional aspect. Unique in blended learning, teachers have the opportunity to treat that properly, but it is also a real responsibility for us.” Committed and effective teachers who do not use technology or blended learning will talk in much the same way about what happens in their classrooms. Perhaps what is different in a school like Zafon is that the classroom structure, routines, and technologies are standardized so that personalization is demanded of, and is accessible to, most if not all teachers on the faculty.

Online Content

In light of the daunting number of online content providers currently on the market, Zafon designers and the Alvo Institute⁷ together created a rubric for evaluating providers based upon the relative importance and quality of different features (including such criteria as ability to export data, a parent portal, gaming, and culturally/religiously appropriate avatars). They invested considerable time and energy into ranking the importance of these features, and examining the programs accordingly. As one Zafon planner recalled, “One of the most important things we did was that research.

⁷ <http://thealvoinstitute.com>

I had thought maybe it was wasting time, but it saved so much time later on.” This still remains a work in progress, a reality that will undoubtedly continue as teachers provide increasing feedback as the school grows and adds upper elementary grades which will need new curricula, and as new and improved products continue to appear in the market.

Zafon’s primary software in 2013–14 was i-Ready, which offers instructional and diagnostic tools for both reading and mathematics. i-Ready offers fully online as well as blended options, and provides a set of classroom resources and activities for teachers, like Zafon’s, using the blended option. A consultant brought in by AJE provided training in i-Ready to Zafon’s teachers, which they found “incredibly helpful.” In addition to i-Ready, the school also uses a number of programs as supplements. Reading A to Z (RAZ), for example, gives teachers access to many small, easily printable books of different reading levels. TaL AM⁸ publishes curricula for Hebrew language arts and Jewish studies for grades 1–6, with companion software for some of their curricula. Zafon teachers use the TaL AM curriculum for face-to-face instruction, as well as the software in its first-grade classes. For a list of software used, see Table 1.

⁸ <http://www.talam.org>

The staff found TaL AM to be a rare example of Jewish studies content meeting their standards for quality. In fact, as referenced earlier, Zafon educators have been searching to find software that brings to Jewish subjects the range of features offered in general studies. If in the world of general studies the challenge lies in sorting through too many options, they suggest, in the world of Jewish studies the problem lies in not having enough. In particular it has been difficult to find programs with the diagnostic capabilities, adaptive algorithms, and differentiated materials they see as essential to the goal of data-driven personalized instruction.

Some less systematic approaches have been taken to bring online content into Judaic studies, where they have found fewer resources available. One class, for instance, was working on an online general studies unit framed around the theme of friendship. The teacher found ways to connect that to a lesson in Jewish studies, about the four different kinds of plants gathered and brought together on the holiday of Sukkot, and the *Midrashic* interpretation that these represent distinctive types of people whose different attributes can be brought together in unity.

Administrators and teachers do continue to monitor the world of online Jewish studies offerings and have established working relationships with a number of providers. Through such connections, Zafon is exploring the possibility of piloting new *Tanakh* (Bible) study software in the near future. Overall, though, they are waiting and watching.

Choosing hardware, like choosing software, took considerable time and “due diligence” to explore the options available and determine what would work for young children, and for the learning environment they were envisioning, since “every decision, even a small one, has issues.” To find a mouse small enough to fit a four-year-old’s hand, for example, they “had to do a deep dive searching.”

For instance, every classroom has seven or eight Dell desktop computers. They debated whether to have dividers between computers — but decided that would work against their goal of “want[ing] students to support each other, to be able to work both independently and as a group.” In the end, they decided against dividers, bought headphones for each child, and stocked up on sanitizer. They consulted with

Choices had to fit not only the physical needs of young children, but also the cultural norms of the school’s philosophy and mission.



other schools as well, talking of the “need to have conversations with others who have gone through it, and then if someone recommends something — hear why they did it.” When several other schools adopting blended learning with wireless connections experienced difficulties, including bandwidth and connectivity problems, Zafon staff took these incidents as cautionary tales, and decided against wireless internet for the school, choosing cable connections instead.

Adjusting and Adapting

Zafon opened its doors with a well-articulated model of blended learning already in place, the result of their year of research and planning. But no plan can fully anticipate the logistical needs of a particular place, staff, student and parent body or the needs of a program as it moves into the early delivery stage. Issues emerged right from the very beginning, requiring teachers and administrators to constantly be “thinking like scientists”: observing the model in action, attending to reactions, and deciding whether and how to adapt. In terms of implementing rotations, we have discussed above the original vision of a set schedule and the emerging understanding of the need for flexibility. Adaptation from the formal guidelines seemed warranted, whether in terms of the balance of whole-class instruction and rotation time, the amount of time spent at stations, the number or type of stations used in a rotation, or the arrangement of groups. Incorporating this lesson into informal policy, Zafon now encourages, in Rabbi Pinn’s words, “conscientious flexibility” with room for “tweaking” but “within the framework of our own model, of our pedagogy.”

Teachers reported several technical and logistical issues in the course of implementing the rotation system, particularly in the beginning of the year. Some days the physical shifting from station to station would proceed slowly or haphazardly, and cut into the time allotted for work at each station, which was never very long to begin with. Many aspects of the

system were new to teachers, even while the basic premise of the station rotation model was generally not, and the “steep learning curve” also caused delays and limited the system’s effectiveness. One of the most significant changes the Head made was to revise his expectations. Teachers have resigned themselves to this perspective as well. One teacher pointed out that “the first month of school is about rehearsing anyway.”

Some of the early technical issues with the system were easy to fix. For instance, teachers reported that initially many students had difficulty with log-in procedures, which wasted time and required teachers to leave their stations to help. They decided to distribute index cards with each student’s username and password, which students kept until they no longer needed them. Not surprisingly, instructional and classroom management problems have been more difficult to address than technical ones. As part of the pedagogical emphasis on collaboration, students are encouraged to seek the help of their peers if they have a question, which means they may turn and talk to each other during their independent computer time. But distinguishing between conversations that are appropriate requests for help and those that are simply students off task is difficult, especially for a teacher across the room and engaged with another group. So too is distinguishing, from a distance, whether a quiet child is actually engaged in computer work — or just staring at a blank screen. The solution to these types of issues is not as readily apparent, and the “learning curve” for teachers is considerably steeper. The follow-up study of Zafon will continue to look at this issue.

In terms of the utilization of diagnostics and feedback, experience imparted two important lessons to the faculty. First, as one teacher observed, some programs offer “extremely detailed feedback, and it’s sometimes hard to sort through it.” Instead of trying to synthesize every bit of feedback into a meaningful whole, teachers say they eventually learned to “read between the lines” and know what to look for. Second, several teachers reported discovering that many circumstances interfered with the reliability of the diagnostic tools. These ranged from personal factors (the student who had celebrated a sibling’s bar mitzvah, or one who was just having an “off” day), to technical issues (defective headphones leading a student to guess answers, or one using the wrong account because someone else forgot to log off). Accordingly, they do not rely exclusively on software reports, but rather consider them in light of these other factors. They

did not suggest that this mitigated the usefulness of the feedback, or detracted from the emphasis on being “data-driven” — instead it allowed them to recognize themselves as important drivers as well. Here, again, technical issues are more easily resolved than teaching challenges, and while teachers could readily use diagnostic data to adjust the pace for different students, “knowing what they don’t know” does not connect easily or obviously to knowing *how* students might learn better, or how they themselves might teach differently. Even experienced teachers, who may have a range of activities and approaches in their repertoires, find that taking advantage of the instructional potential of blended learning requires considerable time and effort.

Several minor technical issues — such as firewall settings, connectivity problems, and defective headphones — arose and were dealt with quickly. More significant and instructionally consequential challenges emerged with regard to online content providers. Once teachers began using the programs with actual students, they were able to get a better sense of how useful they were and whether the combination of features provided what they needed. In the first year, Zafon used DreamBox for math and Compass Learning for English, but neither offered quite the right mix they were seeking. DreamBox is a video-game style program, and while it provided a powerful way to personalize learning, DreamBox is internally adaptive — the student’s success or failure on one task determines what the program will offer next. The teacher cannot assign or determine the order of lessons which some teachers found to be a hindrance to the effective integration of face-to-face and online learning. On the other hand, some felt that Compass lacked the adaptive capacity to let students progress independently, and required too much teacher direction. i-Ready offers adaptive technology, but also allows for more teacher control, and is structured in a lesson-then-assessment style, rather than a video-game style. In the second year they shifted to i-Ready, though in the future, and if funding were available, they would bring DreamBox back to use in a complementary way. Thus the implementation of software can cycle back to inform the system, highlighting needs that had not been anticipated and leading to midcourse corrections. It is unclear what impact the essential process of trial and error has on overall student learning.

■ Financial Model and Resources

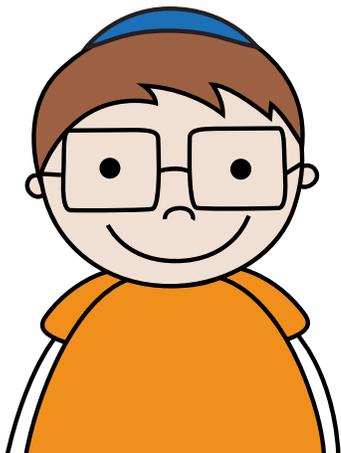
In line with the original hopes of Zafon's founders that the school would serve as a model of an affordable Jewish day school, Zafon's cost per student is among the lowest in the area, even below the per student cost estimates of nearby public schools. Tuition charges are aimed at about 40% below those at other Jewish day schools, and a scan of websites suggests that they have met that goal: in their first year, Zafon tuition averaged \$8,600, while five other day schools (for the same grades) reported tuition averaging \$12,000, \$12,500, \$13,000, \$14,500, and \$17,750, with fees adding another \$1,500, \$3,000 or even \$4,000. The school has committed not to raise tuition beyond the rate of inflation, and they increased tuition by approximately 2% for year two. Zafon has also committed to providing need-based financial aid, but through fundraising, and not as a part of the school's operating budget. This financial plan requires, as administrators explain, keeping the budget lean, and constantly looking for "efficiencies."

Like most new schools, Zafon cannot yet sustain itself through its own revenues, and relies on external funding for a portion of its operating budget. As of this writing, the school seems on its way toward self-sustainability. For the first school year, with 116 students enrolled, Zafon's annual report showed the average tuition (which varies by grade) was \$8,600, while spending per student amounted to \$11,900, leaving a \$3,300 per student "gap" (i.e. the portion of spending per student not covered by tuition) to be filled through fundraising. Operating expenses included salaries and benefits (70%), facilities costs, educational materials, insurance, consulting fees and various other small expenses. The total operating

expenses for the year were approximately \$1,388,000⁹. Tuition revenues totaled \$995,000, and donations added \$354,000 (approximately \$270,000 from national organizations including The AVI CHAI Foundation, AJE and the Orthodox Union, and almost \$80,000 from individual donors). The total income for the year was \$1,365,000.

For the second year, with 162 students enrolled, the average tuition was \$8,800, bringing in approximately \$1,425,500, while operating costs (primarily salaries and benefits) rose to \$1,676,000 (figures are taken from end of year fiscal filing). Between the increase in number of both students and faculty, and "efficiencies" they were able to realize, their annual report estimated total spending per student for the year of just under \$10,300, leaving a \$1,500 per student gap, a considerable decrease from the previous year. Accordingly, the need for contributions and grants from outside sources also decreased, with approximately \$272,000 brought in from external foundations and donors, and a local fundraising event raising an additional \$76,000. This trend is promising, and the school anticipates that it will continue, "with the 'gap' ultimately being eliminated over the next few years such that tuition reflects the actual cost per student" (2013 Annual Report). Projections at the end of Year 2 put student enrollment at about 190 in Year 3, 240 in Year 4, and 280 in Year 5.

Outside of annual operating expenses, Zafon also incurred start-up costs of about \$600,000. This money was used for the consulting fees of the Alvo Institute, pre-opening rent and renovation, pre-opening salaries and benefits for administrators, and legal fees. These start-up costs were paid for through donations, again from national organizations such as The AVI CHAI Foundation and AJE, as well as 85 private donors. While those start-up costs and infrastructure building are in some ways one-time expenses, as Zafon grows it will soon exceed the capacity of the facility it currently rents, and a considerable capital expenditure will be required in the near future. It is hard to imagine how those costs will not have an impact on tuition.¹⁰



⁹ Because figures are drawn from both the school's Annual Report and their federal tax filing, which are calculated somewhat differently and reported at different times, there is some variability in the amounts.

¹⁰ The follow-up study of Zafon will continue to look at this issue.

■ Looking Forward

While Zafon staff are beginning to look forward to the future, and to the continuing growth they anticipate, they are also looking back across their past — even though it is only two years — with a considerable sense of accomplishment. They have been able to start a new school, staff it, and populate it with students. As a proud staff member reported, “This is a brand new school; many have not been able to do that. We expected 50, and got 116.” Indeed, many new schools have been unable to meet, let alone exceed, their target enrollments in the first few years (Miller, Gross & Lake, 2014). Zafon has also met its own expectations of what a blended learning school could be. Teachers are enthusiastic about what technology adds to their classrooms, and are reassured that it does not displace what they see as the essential “human” side of teaching. The model gave them a structure and a framework to build on, and while the learning curve was steep, they appreciate the data they can “leverage” for student learning, and the personalized attention they can give in small groups, even in larger classes. As the Head of School explained, it has been “a tremendous learning experience. We’ve accomplished a lot, and I’m more convinced now than I was before about the opportunity to differentiate, and to have personalized learning, as well as to be cost effective.”

A key part of the learning in the first years was about how to start a school, and to make it operational — painting walls and arranging furniture, finding a mouse to fit small hands, setting up organizational infrastructure (“there should be a checklist of all the committees a head of school should have when starting a school”) and “constant meetings” for faculty. The lofty mission statement was sometimes subsumed by the immediate needs of logistics. The Head reported, “That was the irony . . . We had a meeting, for parents, to talk about this earth-shattering blended model, but we spent half the day on the bus schedule.” But by the end of year two, the bus schedules were set, classrooms were operating, and both staff and a sufficient number of families were convinced about the opportunities the new model afforded.

With many of the start-up stresses resolved, Zafon is beginning to enter a new phase, and preparing to encounter a new set of challenges: growing in size, growing up to higher grades,

capitalizing on the potential of blended learning for deeper learning, and realizing the premise of the model in providing high-quality education at a lower cost. First, they are growing, adding new students and new faculty who will have to be familiarized with the model and integrated into what has become an established culture. As many new schools have discovered through those early “constant meetings,” founding faculty can become invested in rules and responsibilities that they helped to develop. Those rules can seem arbitrary and constraining to newcomers unless the school makes a serious investment in induction and socialization. Yet devoting time for those processes is harder to manage with larger numbers. As the founding faculty acknowledge: “We can still maintain our warm relationships and work all together to make those decisions. But it will get harder.” Even administrative routines, such as the Head of School visiting every classroom and meeting with every teacher every day, will become unworkable at larger scale — without a larger administrative staff. Zafon is just beginning to reach the point where it will require new structures and staff roles, and wrestle with new kinds of operational questions. As the Head explained, they are asking those questions of themselves: “How do you maintain innovative activities and an entrepreneurial environment — without becoming bureaucratic? Do you want to change every year, to have to retrain faculty? How do you balance being new and innovative with being established?” Finding and maintaining that balance as they shift from being a brand new school to “being established” — albeit only in some grades, and only with some experienced staff — presents a considerable challenge not only to leadership but also to the full faculty.

At the same time as they are growing in size, Zafon will also grow “up,” adding new and higher grade levels each year. This phase-up strategy has several advantages: politically, it enables them to avoid being seen as “poaching” students from other schools; pedagogically, it lets the new grades begin the year with students who are already familiar with the model and the rotation routines. But each new grade requires not only a new teacher, but also a new curriculum and new computer programs. Moreover, as they reach upper elementary grades, in a school with high expectations for academics, the demand for content moves beyond the literacy and numeracy skills their current software has been

well suited to provide. They will have to find, or to develop, resources for stronger science and social studies that will suit their own philosophy, meet the demands of the Common Core, and fit the values of a day school. While staff are confident that general studies materials will be available for the higher grades, they are less confident about the Jewish studies side, where blending has been more of a challenge and high-quality materials harder to find. Developing strong curriculum for the higher grades will be, again, a considerable challenge for both administration and faculty.

Another key challenge, primarily for faculty, is deepening the academic strength for all grades. While Zafon staff have made considerable progress in using diagnostic assessments for personalized instruction, much of that progress has been in the first levels of what researchers call “data wise” strategies: learning how to “dig into the data” (Murnane & Boudett, 2005) and using it to make adjustments in pace, opportunities for additional practice, or placement in groups with similar skills. Both the rotation model around which Zafon was designed and the software programs they have chosen are well suited to such structural uses of data. Moving into the next stage includes careful and collaborative examination of instruction (both teacher and software-designed lessons) and developing action plans that include not only different timing but different teaching strategies and a wider array of opportunities for “deeper learning” (Hewlett, 2014). This is a complex and challenging task for any faculty, complicated even further in a school where every year will bring new teachers who are just beginning.

Finally, as they grow in size, add new people, and develop new subject matter, they have to continually incorporate what is new into an existing model — without departing too far from the design on which the school is based. Despite the many adjustments, or “tweaks,” Zafon has made since

it began, staff emphasize that the core mission and model have remained constant, and that none of the tweaking thus far has constituted a significant deviation. Indeed, teachers have reported that tweaks — such as their ability to regulate aspects of rotation or alter expectations regarding student readiness — are actually strengthening the model. This suggests that the limited flexibility approach has been enough to successfully allow the model to bend without breaking. However, a key part of the design, and a critical goal of the original founders, was to develop a model in which blended learning made Jewish day school more affordable. There is less room for flexibility on the financial side, and Zafon is just approaching the time and the size where that aspiration will be fully tested. While the school has thus far been able to attract the additional funding it needed and to achieve enrollment targets, the question of whether it can become financially self-sustaining remains open.

This case study only looks at the first two years of Zafon’s beginning. Indeed, it covers only a small slice of all that was involved in starting a new school with blended learning at its core, designed around a model and to serve as an example of what day schools might become in the future. At this point, it only houses half the grades and students called for in the design; it still has far to go in developing a larger school with upper level grades and subjects. Given that the first class will not graduate till 2020, it is a long way from knowing whether it can accomplish the goals that the founding educators set with their key question: “After eight years of a Jewish day school, where do we want them to be in life?” The trajectory thus far suggests that there will be new “tweaks” to the model, new programs for teaching and learning, new strategies for organizing and supporting teachers — and new challenges that they cannot yet anticipate. At this point, however, they are convinced that this model has given them a strong base, and are confident that it will take them far.

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