

Schools set goals, then plan a path

by **Suzanne Pollak**

Special to WJW

Third-graders at the Jewish Primary Day School in Washington, D.C., are learning about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. While that is nothing special, the lesson is being taught in a very different way that, the school's director of Hebrew and Judaic studies, Sharon Freundel, says, "actually makes a whole lot more sense. It is the gold standard of 21st-century education."

In the past, this lesson was taught with the goal of the students gaining familiarity with the Bible. Now the goal is to have the students "analyze the practices of the people of Sodom, Lot's behavior, and the tasks of the angel," said Freundel. The lesson includes "thought and reflection," she explained.

JPDS, along with Geshur Jewish Day School in Northern Virginia, was chosen to participate in a pilot program to improve Jewish education nationally. The idea of the Standards and Benchmarks Project, which is administered by the Jewish Theological Seminary's Melton Research Center for Jewish Education and funded by Avai Chai, basically is to work backward.

Normally, Freundel explained, les-

sons are taught, workbook pages are completed, and then teachers design tests to review what was just learned.

Under the Standards and Benchmark program, "you figure out what you want the children to know first," she said recently in a phone interview while in Israel.

"You figure out the final destination and then figure out the path you want," Freundel said, likening it to a driver programming his GPS.

"You don't set a GPS without a final destination," she said.

The Standards and Benchmarks program was launched in June 2003 and, so far, 35 schools have been involved, according to Rabbi Alvan Kaunfer of Rhode Island, one of the program's trainers at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

The program involves only Bible studies, he said. There are eight standards that students are expected to achieve by the time they graduate. One standard wants students to "become independent and literarily astute readers of the biblical text in Hebrew." Another standard has the students gaining "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."

The benchmarks are more specific

and spell out what is expected in each grade.

"The big difference is the way the students are assessed in this program. We really bring the whole unit together," Kaunfer said. He gave the example of the story in Exodus about the midwives who refuse to kill the oldest boys in Egypt.

"They were ordinary people who did extraordinary acts," he said. When it comes time to seeing what the students learned from that lesson, a teacher might tell the students to pretend they are editors of a magazine about to give awards for heroes of the year.

That assessment "with a real-world application" will show the teachers if the students really grasped the lesson, he said.

"The teaching is more focused. There is more clarity in what the children are learning. There are clear directions and goals," he said.

Under this program, teachers "are thinking of the whole process of teaching in a whole different way rather than teaching from lesson to lesson."

Zvi Schoenburg, Geshur's head of school, is "very, very pleased to be part" of this pilot program.

Torah teachers at the Fairfax school "are learning how to adjust and shape their instructional units. We are still

using the same contents. We are using the Benchmarks and Standards to make sure our program is of the highest quality. It's adding an element of excitement for our teachers."

After being selected to participate, the two schools committed to attending eight days of workshop as well as paying a \$5,000 participation fee.

"They teach teachers to regard the big picture and ask yourself what are the essential questions. What is the big idea, the enduring lessons," he said. From there, the teacher "sort of builds backwards" to plan the lesson.

Schoenburg said he considers it "an honor and a privilege."

Charlotte Abramson, director of the national Standards and Benchmark program, said that JPDS and Geshur were selected because of their dedicated teaching staff. She said she has known Schoenburg for years and called him "a serious educator. He has a vision."

Both schools are just beginning to implement the program in their Jewish studies classes. That will continue for the next few years. After that, the goal is to incorporate it into their general studies programs as well.

The two schools are the only Washington-area schools participating in the Standards and Benchmark program. Krieger Schechter Day School in Baltimore also participates.



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