

## #OnwardHebrew: In the words of education directors

*BONUS: Complementary resources are offered in green font after select comments.*

### What are the forces that help create #OnwardHebrew success?

- **“I started with ‘why’** – why is Hebrew important to the synagogue and our program? Then I considered how to bring our learning in line with that.”
- **“It’s important to (re)define success.** In the past, when children reached sixth grade, they were expected to decode many Hebrew prayers smoothly without many mistakes. Not chanting, not reciting, but letter-vowel decoding.”
  - “What was seen as successful in the decades old Hebrew programs, needs to be reassessed.”
  - “Wherever the kids get with the Hebrew is fine!”
- **It is helpful to bring various stakeholders into the conversation** prior to adoption of #OnwardHebrew and keep that conversation going through the years.



- “I started by bringing my cantor into the #OnwardHebrew conversation to talk about what a ‘shifted’ program could look like if we moved decoding to fifth grade. Then we brought other stakeholders in – clergy, committee members, faculty, parents.”
- “We had a two year Hebrew task force process to decide the direction of our Hebrew program.”
- “Getting the cantor on board with this was key. Together, we watched the [ACC webinar recording](#) of Cantor Leigh Korn and Rabbi Nicki Greninger. Then we talked.”
- “We looked at data from in-house surveys and created a next-step study process.”
- “Even when you think you’ve baked something into the system (e.g., #OnwardHebrew), you have to be relentless in sharing and resharing stories of success with stakeholders.”

- **The education director's attitude and actions impacts success.**



- “We adopted a culture of “yes,” even before the pandemic. We always work to figure out how to say yes in the broader program, as well as specifically related to Hebrew. That has made a huge difference overall – enrollment is up and on days when we are closed, some parents tell us that their child is upset they can’t go to our program.”
- “I am committed to #OnwardHebrew so whatever gets thrown at me, I just keep figuring it out.”

- “I’m always striving to be a better leader for the teachers. I’m always looking to make things more engaging.”
- “I was brought in to make serious change in the educational program. They hired me in March, kept the current director on to run the program until the end of the school year. This gave me time to observe, run focus groups, have conversations with different stakeholders and make decisions. I had several meetings with parents and others to explain what the new year would bring and they simply said “okay;” they were ready for change both in Jewish studies and Hebrew. Eight years later, #OnwardHebrew is still firmly in place.”
- “Messaging is important to me. I want the children to learn and own the *t’fillot*, whether via decoding or not. I tell the children, ‘If you remember anything, it’s that B’Mitzvah is not a Hebrew test. It’s about you leading *t’fillah* and taking your place in the community.’ Yes, I want children to pronounce the prayers correctly and understand that these are words and not gobbledygook.”



- **“Begin with low-hanging fruit.** We started with Jewish Life Vocabulary since it wouldn’t upset the applecart.”

- **“I searched for ways to talk to parents** about #OnwardHebrew because at first some felt that it was a lazy way out. I told them that my colleagues around the country are doing it and it’s working.” [[See this blogpost for a director’s approach on talking to parents.](#)]
- **Hebrew Through Movement brings excitement and energy** to an educational program.
  - “The children enjoy it and show amazing progress!”
  - “HTM has always excited kids. They retain a lot from year-to-year.”
- **It is helpful to align and integrate elements of #OnwardHebrew and other parts of the program.** Jewish Life Vocabulary easily leads the way in this alignment process. Below are examples of places it successfully connects to other learning:
  - Values-based curriculum ([La-bri’ut: To Our Health and Wellness](#), as well as others)
  - Yearly themes (e.g., a synagogue with an anti-bias curriculum introduced words like *Sh’ma*/listen, *ahavah*/love, *ger*/stranger, etc.)
  - Conversations – “It is so natural to infuse Hebrew words into one’s English sentences.”
  - “Specials” or *hugim*

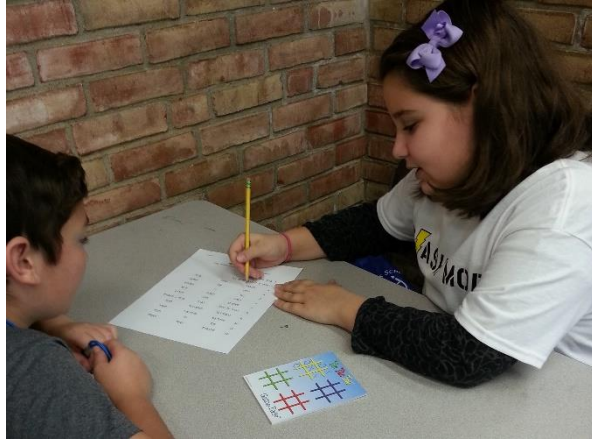
But there are also synagogues that widen their #OnwardHebrew community **by introducing elements in their weekday early childhood program** that they continue/expand into their K-7 part-time one.

- “We think of the educational program, including the weekday early childhood center, as ONE. We hired an Israeli to teach Hebrew Through Movement to PreK and K during the week, as well as PreK-3 on Sundays.”
- “HTM is introduced in our weekday early childhood program to children beginning with the toddler classes and continuing through PreK. Quite a few of these children continue into our Sunday program, bringing their previous learning with them.”



- **One-on-one learning of decoding.**

- “I worked at another synagogue where children learned in small groups,



but since not all children were available when the groups met, some worked one-on-one. I saw that the individual set-up worked well. The painful reading/decoding disappeared, as well as statements like, ‘ugh, it’s time for Hebrew!’ So in my

current synagogue, all of our learners meet one-on-one as a result.

- “If parents wish, our teachers can schedule one-on-one learning year-round including during: winter or spring break; seasons when school activities (sports, drama/theater, chess club, an after-school trip, etc.) would have conflicted with Hebrew classes; and summer. We are sold on this forever!”

- **And if not one-on-one, then in a small group.**

- “It’s hard to hide in a small group.”

- **Teacher collaboration**

- “We have multiple teachers planning together.”

- “Our set-up is a multi-age classroom with a teacher and two teacher assistants (one is the HTM teacher and both assistants work one-on-one with children as Hebrew specialists).”



- “If a teacher isn’t comfortable handling a piece of #OnwardHebrew (like JLV or classroom-led *t’fillah*) they can join their classes together with someone who will help them.”