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Hebrew studies in Woodcliff Lake step into digital age

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WOODCLIFF LAKE — One borough-based Hebrew school is going digital.

Temple Emanuel of the Pascack Valley, on Overlook Drive, is among the first after-school Jewish and Hebrew studies schools in the state to allow two grades of students to take part in a hybrid online/in-person class and use tablets as part of their religious educations.

Instead of heading to the temple twice a week, the school's seventh-graders are working from home on their laptops once a week and coming in to a traditional class the other day. Meanwhile, the temple's fourth-grade students are working in class with Google Nexus tablets, scribbling on screens and recording Hebrew chants, piloting the program with another temple in River Edge.

The seventh-graders began their program in January and the fourth-graders in the fall; both programs are proving successful to teachers and students.

And while it may be an after-school, religious educational program that is instituting online and technological learning, the changes come as the Pascack Valley Regional High School District, which already offers each student in its grades a laptop, has implemented a "virtual school day" to replace traditional snow days. The district takes students from Woodcliff Lake, Montvale, River Vale and Hillsdale.

Ben Glazer, a 13-year-old Temple Emanuel student who lives in Ridgewood, said he enjoys learning from home because the program allows him to experience lessons taught by teachers and experts based in Israel. Glazer can still connect and talk with his peers, as the class comments together on a discussion board and can check in with video.

"I'm learning more," said Glazer, adding that the program allows him to interact directly with historical sites and objects.

Amy Glazer, his mother, was at first hesitant about the program. But after seeing her son working and enjoying the program, she has since become a fan.

"This is a really great way for him to explore and experience Israel at a much more elevated level," Amy Glazer said.

Sarah Rimland, a 12-year-old student from Upper Saddle River, said she likes that the online program allows her to connect with teachers outside her classroom.

"I think we learn more and we're getting the perspectives of different people," Rimland said.

Rabbi Shelley Kniaz, director of the temple's congregational education, said the online program is funded through a grant, while the Google tablet program is supported by an Israeli technology firm and private donors. Other complementary Jewish schools also are interested in how the programs pan out, she said.

"[The students] like the technology, they liked the depth of the subject matter and the interactive character of the activities," Kniaz said.

Most of the 20 seventh-graders work from home — starting promptly at 7 p.m. while their Israeli teachers start at 11 p.m. their time — though a handful come to the temple to work on the school's laptops. Meanwhile, all the fourth-graders operate their Google tablets while in class with their teachers.



Ian Solomon, 10, and teacher Lois Kittner reading the prayer book on a Google Nexus 7 tablet.

For the seventh-graders, having one class electronically and one class physically allows the students more flexibility, especially since all classes are recorded, and the ability to interact with peers face-to-face, Kniaz said.

And for some students who may be too shy to speak up in class, they have instead found it easier to connect electronically to share their thoughts than in a traditional classroom setting, she said.

Smadar Goldstein, founder and co-director of Jerusalem Ed-Tech Solutions, which has 15 Israeli-based teachers who work with the Woodcliff Lake students once a week, said the implementation of her program at Temple Emanuel represents the first time such a program is hitting Hebrew schools in the state. Her program has been implemented at similar schools in Vancouver and Chicago. She also works with Jewish-based, Catholic and public schools around the country and has an online-only Hebrew school primarily for Jewish students who live in areas where no religious school exists.

Goldstein said she thinks students are more engaged through interactive, electronic and online learning systems — using devices they are already familiar with — than by sitting in a traditional classroom.

Goldstein attributes the interactive forums with allowing the kids to be expressive and comfortable sharing their thoughts, which otherwise might get swallowed in a classroom setting. And classes don't begin until every student has a "tech check" from the company's tech director, who checks students' laptop connections, headphones, videos and microphones to make sure the technology is good to go.

"We can do so much more," Goldstein said. "We can interact so much more deeply with a device."

The 18 sixth-graders at Temple Avodat Shalom in River Edge also are piloting the tablet program, developed by the Kehillah Partnership, along with Temple Emanuel's fourth-grade students.

"I think it's worked really well. The kids are definitely more engaged with the material," said Rabbi Paula Feldstein, rabbi educator.

The success of both programs has led officials to consider formalizing them next year and expanding them to other students, Kniaz and Feldstein said.

The tablet program primarily focuses on Hebrew instruction and allows the students to write, draw and type their worksheet responses in Hebrew or English. The students can record their Hebrew chants and prayers for their teachers to review. The tablets also have video instruction capabilities and Jewish-learning games.

"This is an after-school activity — it's not the main part of their life and we need to make it as compelling as possible," Kniaz said.

Feldstein also said that she sees a learning curve of getting accustomed to the technology — and often the children are teaching her new things about the devices. Sometimes, she notices students getting caught up in the technology, but Feldstein works to keep them focused on their learning goals.

"That's certainly doable but we need to keep it in our minds all the time," she said.

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