



Assuming Board Leadership Amidst A Pandemic

By Jonathan Weiss

In July, I had the fortune of assuming the role of President of the Board for Hillel Torah, a Modern Orthodox Day School in Skokie, IL. Even in “normal” years, I imagine there’s a steep learning curve at the outset of taking on this responsibility. Of course, this is far from a normal year. Despite preparing myself for the challenge of navigating the intricacies of process, discussion, and decisions amidst a pandemic, the experience itself has been illuminating, portending to what the next couple of years in the role might entail.

Some early lessons learned:

- **Empathize.** Parents, administration, teachers and students are all grappling with the uncertainty of school’s reopening. Opinions range from “We absolutely must be in-person with minimal modifications” to “It’s irresponsible to do anything other than 100% virtual learning.” Emotions are running hot. More than anything, people just want to be heard. Listening, and I mean truly listening—not telling people how they *should* feel—is the recipe for success.
- **Frame the situation.** We often think of our decisions as being choices between right and wrong, or good vs. bad. But when it comes to how best to educate our children during a pandemic, our options are between bad and less bad. Once we acknowledge that no matter how we go about this it’ll be far from ideal, we can then stop talking past each other and figure out how collectively to make it work.
- **Prepare to adapt.** Safe, responsible reopening for in-person learning amidst a pandemic requires a detailed plan with myriad protocols and contingencies. Yet information and guidelines may constantly change on us, and no matter how carefully we prepare, we will inevitably learn new things as we execute the plan day in and day out. We must maintain flexibility and a willingness to adapt, similar to how we’ve had to do so over the last half year since this virus entered our lives.
- **First debate, then communicate as one.** Boards are comprised of a range of perspectives and people, often Type A personalities who are confident and outspoken. This can be challenging, but is also healthy and necessary. Embrace

the debate, seek a diversity of viewpoints, and help bridge gaps when possible. Once reaching a consensus, it's critical for the whole board to speak in a collective and cohesive voice, instilling confidence in the community.

- **Don't lose sight of longer-term strategies.** It would be easy to press the "hold" button on longer-term strategic ventures, with so much time and energy being spent on COVID-19 plans. Nobody would fault us for it. But the world doesn't halt due to this virus. It's important to maintain "zoom-in, zoom-out" perspective whereby we simultaneously deal with the here-and-now around the pandemic while still progressing against our goals of the future.

In short, the same skills and strategies used to govern our schools during normal times can stand us well more than ever during our COVID year.



Jonathan currently presides over the Board of Directors at Hillel Torah, a preschool through 8th grade Jewish day school in Skokie, IL. Having served on the Board for 4 years prior, he began his role as President this past July. Professionally, Jonathan works in consumer insights and consulting for a range of companies and industries.

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