

Local school embraces long-distance learning

High-tech tools enhance students' academic experience

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The eighth-grade honors science class at Abrams Hebrew Academy in Yardley, Pa., begins a chemistry lesson with instructor Leslie Cohen Rogers. Several hands go up as she asks about atoms, electrons, and the periodic table, and she praises the students for their correct answers and astute questions. A successful student-teacher interchange — even though Rogers is not physically in the room with the students. She is teaching the class remotely from her permanent post as a chemistry and American history teacher at Kohelet Yeshiva High School in Merion Station,

reassess our science program and determine what to do.”

The challenge was to balance the school's high aspirations with its budget limitations, said Dale Sattin, director of development and communications at Abrams, which has 200 students in preschool through eighth grade. “Out in the suburbs where we are,” Sattin said, “science and math teachers are in more demand, and it's hard for a small school like ours to get great teachers affordably.”

“We saw the opportunity to partner remotely with outstanding science teachers from renowned high schools near Philadelphia as a creative way to offer the higher-level instruction we sought for our student body while remaining within our budget. Our students benefit, and it makes our school more competitive, so everybody wins,” Sattin said.

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technology to ensure high-quality video and audio connections that mimic a live classroom experience.

A few technical bugs were resolved early this year and now, said eighth-grader Nathaniel Waksman, 13, of Yardley, “the system works well. We have a great teacher and we're lucky to have her.” Classmate Becky Dubovsky, 13, of Feasterville, Pa., agreed. “It's interesting and good that we can experience high school material,” she said. “It will prepare us for the future.”

“A format like this definitely requires you to come up with interesting ways to present material,” Rogers said of her remote assignment, but said she relishes the challenge. “These kids are so motivated, and it's a privilege to work with them.”

‘Whole new world’

Other high-tech learning opportunities in Abrams' curriculum are conducted from an even more remote location. “Math by Mail” — an on-line initiative in recreational mathematics designed to develop youngsters' creative thinking and logic — connects Abrams students to instructors at the Weizmann Institute of Science in Israel. Abrams, said Budow, is the first school in the United States to participate in this innovative program; it was so well-received by students when it was introduced last year, “Science by Mail” was added this term.

To facilitate all this long-distance learning, the school's three buildings have all been fully wired for fast Internet connections. Students can tap into a class called “The Israel Experience” through remote biweekly access to an instructor in Israel, and every student in grades five-eight will receive a new iPad this month as part of the “SmartSchool Program,” organized through the Jewish Day School Collaborative of Greater Philadelphia in conjunction with the Kohelet Foundation.

“We usually play games on the iPad, and now we're using it for school,” said eighth-grade student Gabe Berlin, 13, of Yardley. The devices will enable him and his classmates to prepare presentations, access authorized apps, and engage in interactive courses and multi-media. “People need to understand technology,” said



Abrams Hebrew Academy's eighth-grade honors science students review their lesson with remotely located chemistry teacher Leslie Cohen Rogers.

Photos by Susan Bloom



Student Nathaniel Waksman learns about the periodic table through video instruction from Kohelet Yeshiva High School-based chemistry teacher Leslie Cohen Rogers.

Pa. This live video exchange in early October is just one example of Abrams' innovative use of modern technology to expand the school's academic opportunities.

“In measuring the success of our school, we were recently confronted with the reality that our science curriculum wasn't strong enough,” said head of school Rabbi Ira Budow. “We had to

Philadelphia, Abrams rolled out brand-new honors science classes for its seventh- and eighth-graders this term, led by Rogers from Kohelet and Jennifer Goldstein from Jack M. Barrack Academy in Bryn Mawr, Pa. Administrators at the school, which is a beneficiary agency of Jewish Federation of Princeton Mercer Bucks, also invested in cutting-edge Polycom

Gabe, “and this will get us used to using it.”

In addition to these initiatives, Budow said, “we're also in discussions with Technion-Israel Institute of Technology in Haifa to write and implement a curriculum with us starting next year.

“We have a small school, but through our vision and imagination we can make it into an ‘ESTM’ school — Excellence in Science, Torah, and Mathematics,” he said.

Implementing such high-tech

developments is “exciting and it's opening up a whole new world for Jewish day school education,” Sattin said. “It shows that we can instill Jewish values and maintain Judaism while still being a part of the modern world and taking advantage of all the wonderful technology available.”

“This is only the beginning,” Budow said. “I see a new education forming here, one where every student can receive what they need and where we can maximize every child's potential.”

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organizers are shooting high, hoping to bring in \$250,000.

Campaign vice president Karen Anderson, in an e-mail to NJJN, wrote, “Super Sunday is a special day designated for communal charity. We traditionally reach out to our community and ask for their continued support. This year is especially compelling. We all watched on the news, and for many of us just out our windows, the devastation wrought by last week's superstorm.”

The federation and its agencies lent “a helping and comforting hand” to those affected by the storm, said Anderson. “We

served as both first responder and as endurance responder. As the rebuilding work extends over the coming weeks and months, our system will continue to be there for those in need.”

Anderson sent out a call, asking community members on Super Sunday to “step up and be there for one another in not only these trying times, but every day.”

Those interested in serving as a Super Sunday volunteer should contact the federation at mailbox@jewishpmb.org or 609-219-0555.

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