

CASE  
STUDY



# Zafon Elementary School

## Growing the Station-Rotation Model in Year 3

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This case study describes Year 3 of Zafon School, which ended in June 2015. In the box on p. 12, The AVI CHAI Foundation, funders of the school and of this case study, provides a summary update of developments from July 2015 (when data collection for this case ended) to April 2016.

*The first year was a learning experience, experimenting. This year we were able to build on it. We have teachers who have been here three years. And parents who were skeptical are happier now.*

– Director of Business and Operations



In the preceding case, "Zafon Elementary School: A Station Rotation Model for Supporting 21st Century Learning," we presented the first two years of a brand new school as its staff "navigated the process of taking an externally-designed rotation model, adapting it to fit its own context, and establishing a new kind of blended learning day school." Here, we return to the case of Zafon to document how the school is progressing in Year 3 (2014-2015), as educators navigate the shift from learning how to build a brand new school to being a school that now has, as the administrator above suggests, some experience to build on.

**This is in many ways a case of continuing, of staying on course, with no radical changes to report.** Overall, the year Zafon lay and professional founders spent planning with external consultants before the school opened has served them well, and the school is continuing to proceed according to that plan. Indeed, for many of the staff members, the biggest surprise they reported was just how well that planning, and the design they adopted, have worked. They remain convinced that online/blended learning and the station rotation model provide the opportunity to offer a high quality day school program at an affordable cost. They continue to be committed to the model in general, to the particular facets of routines of rotation in all classrooms and data-driven personalized instruction, and to their "three pillars:" critical thinking, collaborative skills, and strong relationships with teachers. Yet even having those elements more solidly in place, and now having experience with them to build on, represents a change. As the Head of School confirmed, "this was the first year it felt like everything was in place, like everyone knew what he/she was doing."

**This is, therefore, also a case of transition: with the basic structures now in place and a staff which knows what**

**to do with them, the school now faces new challenges of expanding and deepening the work as they grow larger, and older.** A columnist for EdSurge News, looking at blended learning in charter schools, described this phase as "designing 2.0 versions of their school models . . . [when] there is a growing maturity reflected in the blended learning work as these leaders become less preoccupied with connectivity, student logins, and basic troubleshooting and are focusing more on what works for students and teachers." While Zafon is not yet at the five-year point he sees as typically marking this transition, by Year 3 they do seem to be moving into this phase.

The sections that follow document in more detail just what is in place in this year of "growing maturity." The first section focuses on **growing larger**, both in terms of enrollment size and grade span, and of the implications of that growth for physical space, financial resources, and staffing. The issues discussed in this section are about the evolution of school structures and infrastructure and overall school and faculty culture of Zafon – issues that would be more or less the same notable issues found in any start-up school. The second section looks more closely at **growing older**, as both students and faculty become more experienced and comfortable with the model, and shift from learning radically new roles to building classroom practice based on what is now three years of experience. The issues discussed in this section are more about teaching, learning, and classroom culture, with more of a focus on teachers and students. The final section looks to the future, to **new challenges emerging as Zafon approaches what will be a significantly different phase in Year 4**, when they plan to move into a new and larger building, and make more substantial changes to the physical structure and administrative infrastructure of this growing blended learning day school.

## ■ Growing Larger

### Enrollment Growth

Enrollment continues to grow at Zafon, much more quickly than at the other new schools (all high schools) with blended learning models that received funding from The AVI CHAI Foundation. In Year 3, Zafon had reached 182 students. In fact, an administrator reported, the school “had to turn away students due to space constraints.”

While the total number of students is slightly below the 190 they had projected last spring, the difference is due to variations in enrollment capacity by grade level. Because of traditional school enrollment times, and the school’s own

recruitment strategy (including — according to both the Head of School and the Director of Business and Operations — a reluctance to “poach” students already enrolled in other day schools), students are distributed somewhat unevenly across grades from Pre-K to 3rd grade, with one, two, or even three classes per grade. While for reasons of either educational philosophy or efficiency, some new schools have chosen to use multi-age groupings, or flexible pathways where students move up based on demonstrated competencies rather than birth dates, no one at Zafon talked of considering those strategies. Instead, they organize students by age in the traditional grade level structure, and accommodate the resulting variation in numbers of students per grade within the constraints of available classroom space.

Table 1: Overall Growth

	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
Enrollment	116	162	182
Tuition	\$7990 Pre-K \$8990 K-1	\$7990 Pre-K \$8990 K-2	\$8310 Pre-K \$9350 K-3
Teachers (FTE)	12	16	20
Administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Head of School</li> <li>• Director Business &amp; Operations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Head of School</li> <li>• Director Business &amp; Operations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Head of School</li> <li>• Director Business &amp; Operations</li> <li>• Curriculum Coordinator (1/2 time)</li> <li>• Psychologist (1/5 time)</li> </ul>

Table 2: Enrollment and Staffing by Grade

Grade	Students	Classes	Teachers
Pre-K	24	1	2
K	38	2	4
1	65	3	9
2	37	2	4
3	18	1	3
TOTAL	182	9	22 (representing 20 FTEs)

Both the Board and the staff are pleased with the growth, and even a little surprised. The Director of Business, who deals directly with enrollment and budget projections, said, “no one expected us to grow like we did,” and reports being rather “surprised at how many parents were willing to give us a shot, and to take a chance.” For the most part, she credits their willingness to the attractiveness of the model: “the lower tuition, the blended part. It was the best of both worlds.” Breaking it down a bit further, her analysis suggests, “one third are coming for the price, one third for the model, and one third just like us.” She also, in part, attributes the willingness of families to “take a chance” on a new school to the fact that Zafon started with early elementary grades. Parents can reassure themselves that “if we mess up, OK, the kid will make it up. If they were in 10th grade, they will not, and might not get into college; the risk is much higher.” She also suggests that for high school families, the “large social factor makes a huge difference in choosing,” since adolescents want to move with their friends, or go where there are enough other students to be confident that friendships will flourish. But as an elementary school beginning with the early grades, and with an active Board and then current families spreading the word about the new school, enrollment has grown. And while a few students have found this model not to be a good fit, retention of the students and families who did “give [it] a shot” has been steady. The school reports only three non-returning students this year. Moreover, projections at the end of Year 3 show that growth is expected to continue. A Board communication proudly reports that enrollments for Year 4 effectively will have doubled, from the original 116 students to 230.

## Physical Space

As of Year 3, Zafon is still in the same building, although some classes and teachers have moved rooms to allow larger classes to occupy the largest rooms. Inside the classrooms, additional chairs and tables are easily accommodated, and the stations have enough space between them to allow an open feeling and easy movement through rotations, or even whole-class choral performances. Teachers who have taught a grade for more than one year have begun to accumulate larger quantities of their own materials, whether grade-level books in bins for a class library or a large birdcage in which caterpillars can develop into butterflies. [In one

case, the incubator used by the pre-K class for their project on the life cycle of eggs-to-chicks could not be easily accommodated upstairs, so it remains downstairs in another classroom — where it can be visited regularly near hatching time, but also viewed (and appreciated) by another class.]

Common spaces, however, are clearly showing the effects of the larger student body. With 182 students (now including physically larger 3rd graders) and 20 teachers on site at once, the crowded hallways and narrow stairways students navigate as they move between rooms for music, recess, or lunch require careful timing and well-ordered single-file lines. Outside, the playground provides only a very small space, and offers equipment better suited for smaller children than 3rd graders. They have made use of the parking lot for more sports-oriented activities, and for a class performance of a flag dance. Still, it is readily apparent that they have reached the limits of the rented building their plans projected would be adequate for the first few years. Accordingly, in Year 3 they undertook a capital campaign to move to a new and much larger building next year.

## Financial Resources

More students also mean more tuition dollars coming into the school, and the Board reported that the school in Year 3 is “financially healthy.” Where in the first two years considerable funding from foundations and donors was essential to meeting the “gap” between income and expenses, this year they calculated that 94% of the operating expenses are now covered by tuition revenues, well above the percentages commonly reported for existing day schools (Prager, 2005; Held, 2014). This is not only because there are more students bringing in tuition, which this year was \$8,310 in pre-kindergarten and \$9,350 in elementary grades. It is also because the (a) larger size allows them to realize greater efficiencies, even with the cost of hiring three additional teachers and a slight increase in administrative staff, and (b) proportionally fewer students are receiving tuition assistance in Zafon as compared to existing day schools. While the tuition has risen this year to slightly above the \$9,000 they had originally proposed, the cost per student has steadily decreased: \$11,900 in Year 1; \$10,300 in Year 2; down to \$9,700 this year. Approximately 1.5% of the overall budget, or just under \$20,000, is allocated for

financial aid, which the school has been able to raise through dedicated donations and its own fundraising events. That figure is substantially below the 10-20% they see in other day schools in the area, administrators say. It is unclear whether this is because the tuition is low enough to be affordable for all interested families to pay full price, the tuition assistance packages are not sufficient to support families that cannot pay full tuition so they enroll elsewhere, or for some other reason.

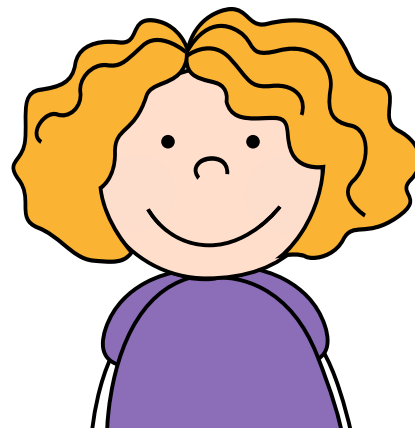
While the annual financial report was not yet available at the time of our study, all preliminary reports suggest that in Year 3 the school was remarkably close to reaching its goals for self-sufficiency — a significant accomplishment for a new school in a relatively short period of time. However, the space constraints of this building, and the decision to purchase a larger building to accommodate the larger student body will interrupt that trend next year, at least temporarily.

## Staffing Growth

More students, and the addition of a third grade, meant the addition of three new teachers to what is now a faculty of 20 FTEs (Full Time Equivalents). Two are full-time classroom teachers; one is a “floater,” an assistant teacher who fills in as needed so teachers have “breaks” or preparation time, or when they are absent. Administrators continue to report that finding qualified candidates is not a problem. The hiring process was similar to what they had used in the first two years, but with additional faculty involvement. It is a lengthy process that takes a considerable amount of staff time. As the Head described it, for one candidate he “talked to her supervisor, to someone I respect. Then I talked to her four times, and she did a model lesson here. It’s sort of a ‘measure twice/cut once’ approach. We also had her meet with some of our teachers.” With that deliberate approach, new teachers say they had a good idea of what to expect when they began, and over the three years of its existence Zafon’s retention rate for teachers has been strong for a new school. Just one teacher, according to an administrator, “couldn’t adapt to our model” and left. The only other faculty departures, the Head reports, were two teachers who moved out of the area, one who “moved up the career ladder” to become an administrator in another school, and one teacher who “didn’t want to work full time” but continues to serve as a substitute.

Faculty continued to take on responsibility for induction, helping new teachers learn the model and the culture of the school. Weekly faculty meetings, pairing a new lead teacher with an experienced assistant teacher, or the “luck” of hiring a “friend” of an experienced lead, all were cited by new teachers as contributing to easing the challenges of learning to teach in a new and different model. This year, too, the school used a floater (or on occasion the Head of School), to cover classes so that faculty could do what they call “peer observations.” This allowed time for both new and experienced teachers to choose two classrooms, spend half hour sessions observing, and then to meet as a full faculty comparing notes, discussing what they had seen, and what they might use in their own practice. All staff reported this was a valuable use of their time, even though it was sometimes difficult to find the time to actually do it. While every teacher was asked to do two observations, several found time to do three or four, possibly evidence of teachers’ initiative to collaborate, grow, and improve. One teacher talked of making time to “sneak in” whenever she could to observe in one classroom whose two teachers “are the best I’ve ever seen, just fantastic. So many things they are doing at once, their routines, and the way they run it impresses me.”

Further professional development, in the form of ongoing coaching or consulting during classes, became available when the Head of School discovered — after considerable personal research — that the school could qualify for additional Special Needs services from the public school system. So this year occupational, behavioral, and speech therapists visit the school once a week to observe classes and consult with teachers, although they do not provide direct services to children.



## Administrative Growth

This year was also a “big year” in terms of recognizing the need for greater administrative support, which, as we reported in the original case study, was a highly demanding and even “daunting” job for a single Head of School and a Director of Business & Operations. The growing numbers of students, faculty, and grades compounded the ongoing demands for managing, hiring and induction, supervision and professional development, data analysis and evaluation of online tools, recruitment of new families, and daily administrative tasks. Even without the introduction of a capital campaign, the list grew increasingly demanding. Zafon was outgrowing not only its physical structure, but also its administrative infrastructure — two problems not uncommon for “start-up” schools.

The Head and Board continued experimenting to develop an administrative plan that would be both effective and affordable, without being exhausting. While in the first years one lead teacher had also been named as Blended Learning Coordinator, they found that role too “amorphous,” too limited in both time and administrative authority to meet curricular or support needs, and “some things just weren’t getting done.” This year they expanded the administrative team by three, including two dedicated, but part-time, administrative leadership positions.

First, they added an administrative assistant to help handle schedules, take on some correspondence needs, and answer phones and the security buzzer at the door. Second was a Curriculum Coordinator, hired when they identified what the Head described as a “rock star teacher” who wanted to move into administration — but also planned to move away at the end of the year. That allowed them to make a “low risk decision” for a one-year, half-time administrator (and half time teacher), without worrying about making a commitment they might not be able to continue to fund. The new position provided someone who was able to collect and review lesson plans, lead a committee to revise report card procedures, and investigate and introduce new materials in areas like social skills and spelling.

The third new position created was for a school psychologist, someone who had helped with curriculum design and overall consulting from the beginning as a volunteer. In Year 3, she

joined the staff on a “very part time basis,” coming one day a week to help with curriculum planning, organizational structure and instructional support. This new role also allowed her to come in like “a consultant; she observes classes, teachers can ask her questions . . . on things like behavior modification, or tweaking what they do.”

These new administrative positions represent, in large part, reactions to the growing size of the school. As the Head explained, they “took some time-consuming, but necessary, responsibilities off my plate,” and reduced the need for his “micro-management.” But they also reflect the transition phase. In the first years the focus was on starting up, and on establishing the technology, the tenets of Jewish education, and the tone and “pillars” of the school. As the school grows older, with those basic structures now reasonably in place to build on, Zafon is not only creating new positions, but also committing new roles, time, and resources to focus on teaching. By the end of Year 3, the Head and the Board were in conversation about how to continue and expand the psychologist’s role to a full time position for Year 4, although the specifics of her role and title were yet to be determined, and how to continue to staff the position (or positions) of Curriculum Coordinator for both general and Judaic studies.

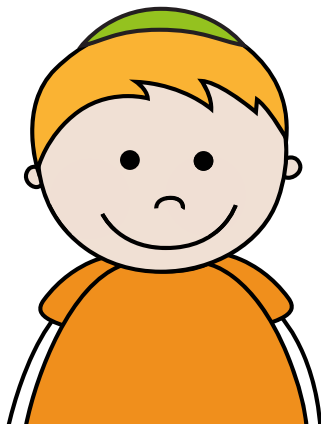
## ■ Growing Older

### Classroom Routines

As the school and the students grow older, they grow increasingly familiar with the rotation model (not necessarily “blended learning”), and with the routine of movement inside classrooms from station to station. We note here that “rotation model” describes the way time and space is organized in a classroom. Activity at a station might be workbook time; coloring; small group work with a teacher; and to a much lesser extent — especially in Judaic studies — the computer. Indeed, for most students this is what they expect of school, and the only kind of classroom they have ever experienced. While early visitors worried that the rotation movement might lead to either “bedlam” or “boot camp,” students have settled into the routine with comfort, and in casual order. Teachers, too, have gotten familiar with the practice, and shared in a faculty work session what they had found to be strategies for

efficient movement. According to one, “getting from station to station in between rotations was a big time waster. We got ideas from teachers, like countdowns or songs, but it took a lot of effort. Time is really important in this model.” While each teacher chooses her own approach, *every* classroom observation in Year 3 saw rotations accomplished in less than two minutes — a significant reduction from the seven minutes observed the first year. Indeed, in one classroom without a visible clock, students anticipated with remarkable accuracy when rotations would occur, packing up their materials a minute ahead of the switch (though having permission to snack at one station may have reinforced their awareness).

Once students are at the computer stations, logging in and starting work also happen much more quickly, and with remarkably few logistical problems. They are more familiar with the equipment. In addition, this year, while each has a unique login based on his or her name, all students have the same password — eliminating the problem of some who forgot theirs, or couldn’t find the piece of paper where it was written. While there have been occasional mishaps (a student with similar name mistyping and logging in as someone else, or one who somehow managed to minimize the screen without knowing how he did it, or how to undo it), teachers are no longer distracted by having to spend time setting up every station change. Still, independent work is somewhat limited by the young age of the children, and teachers do have to keep a watchful eye out for students who might be having difficulty, or be engaged in extraneous distractions. So even while focused on working with a small group, each teacher has to constantly monitor the whole room throughout the rotations. As one noted, “Every student needs attention from the teacher. But some need it more than others.”



## Familiarity with the Programs

By now, teachers feel quite familiar with i-Ready, the program that Zafon continues to use as their primary online instruction tool. The diagnostic data it provides helps them determine which students need what kind of academic attention, with detailed information about individual reading and math skills. Rather than giving a percentile score, or an overall level, i-Ready identifies very specific skills that students have, or have not yet, mastered: “establish one-to-one correspondence by moving, touching, or pointing to objects,” for example, or “combine sets to form a set of equivalent size.” That information then guides instructional decisions so teachers can quickly make appropriate adjustments in pace, opportunities for practice, or placement in small groups.

Since data are reviewed regularly, these adjustments are frequent, avoiding the danger of internal tracking that traditional reading groups so often produce in traditional classrooms. At Zafon, a teacher explains, groupings are fluid, informed by the data, and based on a particular task or skill at a particular time: “It’s different every day: sometimes by spelling, some by who is ahead in the work, some by social groupings. It changes all the time.” In fact, in some classroom observations, the groupings changed between morning and afternoon.

Students have also grown accustomed to i-Ready, which is used for reading and math, and TaL AM for Hebrew. They have become quite familiar with the ‘look and feel’ and formats of the programs. This has advantages, in terms of getting to content activities quickly, and knowing how to proceed with assigned tasks. But particularly in the upper grades, teachers are concerned about growing boredom (“kids have said straight out they’re bored”), and about what to do differently when students are not reaching mastery after repeated tries.

On the Judaic studies side, teachers emphasize the ideal of *Ivrit b'Ivrit* (Judaic studies material taught entirely in Hebrew), but they do not fully utilize the method because, teachers report, students’ vocabulary is not well enough developed. In general, they find students are capable of understanding the ideas (in a TaL AM *Chumash* (Bible) lesson, for example), but struggle with the vocabulary. With Dah Bear, they say, vocabulary

practice is good, but it's not differentiated enough and not instructionally engaging. Teachers find the data provided by these programs useful, and it helps them understand how students are doing. In much the same way as teachers use the data in general studies, they use it to inform how to group and pace students in Hebrew, as well. But if teachers need additional resources (e.g., students often find the Hebrew roots difficult), teachers have to generate their own worksheets. There simply are not yet adequate blended learning Jewish studies resources to use in early elementary school.

They are not looking to replace the programs; as the Head explained, they are constrained by the financial cost and the cost of "time in terms of retraining everyone." Instead they are looking for ways to supplement the programs with alternatives. This year the school added another literacy skills program, Lexia, as an option in some classrooms to "give that extra help and support." But primarily, both administrators and teachers report, if there are difficulties (even if they result from inadequacies in the digital materials), "it's the teacher's job to help."

## Growing Resources

With so many online providers of varying quality, relevance, and ease of use, for teachers to find programs and platforms that really "help" is a daunting task. In fact, a [recent post by EdSurge](#), a leading technology advocacy group, called it an "excruciating" process, where you "kiss a lot of frogs." During their planning year, the Zafon faculty had developed a template of what to consider when looking at providers, but as they have grown (and grown more experienced), they have continued to adapt and refine their criteria.

Some teachers, as the Director quoted above observed, now "have been here three years" and are quite familiar with that process. They have begun to build up banks of online resources, teaching materials, and learning activities to "help and support" students beyond what i-Ready can offer. In interviews, they talk frequently and with sophisticated criteria about what they look for in supplementary programs — and the compromises they find themselves making. Some are about the technical capacity of the program: "Compass (for math) was more engaging, but it wasn't adaptive." By

"adaptive" the teacher referred to programs that offer new tasks or questions based on the prior performance of the particular student. Some are about the content: as the Judaic studies teachers explained: one "teaches [Hebrew] skills, but has too much English;" another "teaches the ideas, but not enough vocabulary skills;" a third has "nice, cute games" but is "weak on ideas." Most compromises, however, are due to cost: "Ideally, I would like DreamBox for math, i-Ready for reading, and Compass in my back pocket for enrichment." Several teachers would like to bring back DreamBox, which they used the first year, as an additional option, but understood the cost of having both programs as too high — at least this year.

While in the first years, most references to new resources cited the Head as the "finder," this year faculty members have been spending more time together sharing ideas, both in the structured Monday faculty meetings and informally at lunch or during breaks. One explains that now "it's really a group collaboration, where teachers' voices are important." One teacher brought in a social skills source she had used at another school; another offered a spelling game; still another suggested a science program. Across interviews, the number of supplementary online resources mentioned has grown substantially, almost literally running from A to Z: BrainPOP, Compass, Dah Bear, Envision Math, Game Goo, Open Circle, Raz-Kids, Scholastic News Interactive, Science A-Z, Spelling City, STAR Assessments, YouTube, Wizards and Pigs, and several sites with holiday activities. In most observations, however, most students were working on i-Ready or TaL AM when at their computer stations.

Teachers are also working to build up more traditional teaching materials, since in a blended learning school, standard tools are not displaced by online activities; the two are complementary. While incubators, bird cages, and musical instruments have been added to the list of available resources in individual classrooms, the most common tool mentioned across interviews is perhaps the most traditional: "we need more books," or "the school is lacking books." Teachers may not have as many books as they desire, but they have been steadily accumulating, or borrowing, books to build classroom libraries. In one classroom, the teacher proudly displayed dozens of books arranged by reading level in bins along the wall: "We have a leveled library! That's what we



really tried to do last year, and now we have it.” Her own classroom library (the school does not have a school library), however, is not adequate for her two-month unit on biography, when students will be researching, writing, illustrating, and producing their own books. Each student chooses a character to research, whether Van Gogh, Frida Kahlo or Bruce Lee (“who knew that second graders even knew who they were?”). Still, having the agency to choose matters, since it is “so important that they are really interested in the character; otherwise it doesn’t end well.” That makes the materials they will need rather unpredictable: “last year, it was a lot of scientists; this year a lot of athletes.” So, the teacher explains, “I spend a lot of time in the library.” For a new school with limited funding, the public library is an invaluable resource.

## Growing into Content

Growing the school a grade at a time means that in this third year, with 3rd graders now in the building, the school is experiencing a bit of a culture shift as teaching academic content becomes more of a focus. In the beginning, an upper grade teacher recalls, “it was predominately an early childhood focus.” But in Year 3, “the elementary now outnumbers the preschool. It hasn’t yet made the culture overall as different, but it’s getting there.” She explains that “the logistics are different,” from larger students in hallways to scheduled breaks for teachers, but the largest difference is the increasing curricular demands of academic subjects. In the early grades, specific topics like changing seasons or community do appear, but in the curriculum plan for the school, the stress is on learning skills: “represent numbers up to twenty,” or “decode and blend sounds.” These skills are easily reinforced in online instruction, and subjects often blend together in teacher led lessons, whether reading and social studies in a unit on community workers; math, science and art in a gardening project; or math and science in calculating the time for the hatching of butterflies. In the upper grades, however, the need to focus more on individual academic subjects begins to take a higher priority, and curriculum plans place more emphasis on specific topics to be covered: “the human body, weather, sound, life cycles, and animal adaptation” in 3rd grade science, or poetry and expository pieces in writing. While i-Ready provides curricular direction and assessment in literacy and numeracy skills, teachers themselves become the primary

sources for the content. A third grader is expected to have a deeper conceptual understanding of themes and topics, a more complex Jewish identity in formation, and the ability to reflect on her or his own learning. The current resources in use by the school can neither teach nor assess these things.

In this area, as in the search for supplemental resources, time invested in teachers working together to share ideas and materials plays a key role. Every subject needs to be covered in every classroom, but not every teacher is equally skilled or experienced in every subject. One teacher, for example, admits that science has “never been my forte,” so she explains that another lead teacher with stronger expertise “sets up lesson plans, and my assistant teaches it.” Other teachers, while not borrowing lesson plans, do talk of sharing ideas for online activities (BrainPOP Science) or illustrations (a YouTube “beautiful video” on the life cycle of chickens) to enhance the learning opportunities they themselves could provide. Across the school, teachers say they are still searching for complementary online resources, but as the Head concluded, “There are full online courses, but we are trying to stick with blended, and have not seen one that would fit well enough with the model. [ . . . ] For many subjects, the content is just not available yet.” In some cases, teachers do use what is available, even though it is not sufficiently strong in academic content. In one class, for example, a student uses an online program to reinforce the skills and vocabulary of poetry, moving around a maze to encounter goblins reciting phrases he has to identify as alliteration, rhythm, or rhyme. But while he correctly chose the right “potion” to vanquish the goblin that said, “Happy horses have hip hair,” he also quite correctly commented “it’s not really poetry.” While the game may help with recall of the vocabulary term, it does little to teach him how alliteration works as a powerful tool in real poetry. Finding online providers that can provide sophisticated instruction in poetry or other academic content areas, particularly Judaic studies, remains an ongoing quest.

## Growing Toward Ambitious Teaching

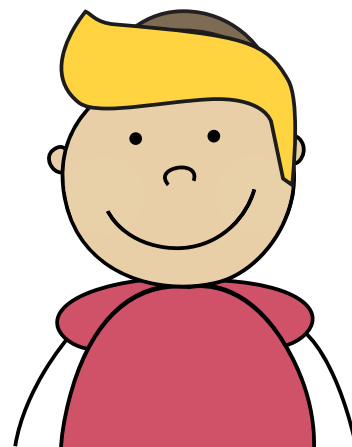
Building a school that provides 21st century learning, which Zafon has adopted as a primary goal, takes more than covering content, and more than using 21st century technology. To “educate students to be active learners, analytical thinkers,

and problem solvers,” as their promotional materials claim, involves teachers developing the mindset, and the techniques, to take on what has been called “teaching for understanding,” or “ambitious teaching” (Lampert, Boerst & Graziani, 2011). While different organizations and researchers define the terms somewhat differently, they are generally characterizing a desired shift from teaching focused on content coverage and recall to the facilitation of higher order skills such as exploration, explanation, critical thinking, application, and connection to authentic, or real world, problems. Zafon teachers talk, in interviews, about the “Four C’s,” identified by the National Education Association (2010) as fundamental elements of such 21st century learning: 1) Critical thinking and problem solving, 2) Communication, 3) Collaboration, and 4) Creativity and innovation. One early childhood teacher adds a fifth C as the most important: “Curiosity, that’s the most important, because if you have curious students everything else is easy.” They say they also talk together in weekly faculty meetings that often focus around a related element or “theme,” such as “how to get students to be more reflective.” They did not, however, describe a concerted effort or a common framework to help them move toward such teaching.

While Zafon is not, by design, a project-based learning school, teachers use projects as a common instructional strategy to provide lessons more aligned to 21st century learning. The biographies described above, where students choose their own subjects, conduct research over two months, write and illustrate their own ‘books,’ and then share their work with other students and staff is one example of an ambitious project that offers opportunity for critical thinking, communication, and creativity. The project on the life cycle of butterflies, while not including creativity or student agency in project choice, did allow for extended exploration and collaboration. Moreover, it took advantage of ‘critical thinking and problem solving’ when a fallen chrysalis and damaged wing provided an opportunity for connecting academic learning to ‘authentic’ problems of special needs and inclusion. In another project, students had to construct a Creation scene with Legos symbolizing one of the seven days of Creation, and then communicate to the class not only how they designed and built it but also how it connected to the larger Bible lesson they had been studying. Indeed, a fundamental hope for

blended learning is that it will use the strengths of online instruction (diagnostic assessment, skill building exercises, and practice in information retrieval and recall) while freeing teachers to engage with students in “deeper learning” activities that encourage students to not only recall facts, but to relate what they are learning to real world contexts, and to apply their knowledge in new settings (Hewlett, 2013). It is important to note that while finding high quality and content appropriate blended learning digital resources and being able to teach for understanding and facilitate deeper learning, as described above, are two completely different things, both are critically important in a blended learning classroom. While opportunities for such deeper learning were not evident in every lesson, or even in a majority of lessons, both teachers and administrators did describe these projects as something both they and the students value, and something they would like to do more often.

Indicators of ambitious teaching, and deeper 21st century learning include not only the kinds of assignments and projects students take on, but also the kinds of questions teachers pose in classroom conversation. Shifting from fact recall to the open ended, probing, and exploratory questions that allow for real world connection and application is a more difficult challenge than adding projects. Across classrooms, and across subjects, our observations found a predominate pattern of recall prompts, even in the small group teacher lead rotations. Teachers frequently asked students to fill in the blank: “Who were they,” “What did Abraham do first,” “How many continents are there,” or “Do we go through metamorphosis?” Occasionally questions took the form of a multiple-choice item: “When did Abraham



get circumcised? The eighth day? Thirteen, the age of bar mitzvah? Or 99 years old?” Even a clever group exercise, where students did a “scavenger hunt” to find science facts posted on cards around the room, was a physically active version of the kinds of information retrieval activities used in software programs. Students retrieved the information from a “Fact Card” stating, “Frog eggs are not hard like bird eggs. They are wet, soft, and squishy. They feel like jelly.” But when they correctly identified frogs as the “animal that has squishy eggs,” the teacher moved on to the next “fact,” rather than building conversation about how that would feel, or how it might be an advantage in an aquatic environment. Again, asking more sophisticated questions, which require more sophisticated answers (as opposed to factual recall) is a staple of good teaching practice. We are not claiming that recall questioning is all we saw (in fact, such questioning is prevalent in many schools), but it is worth noting, since tools such as iReady also are limited to such questions and, therefore, less sophisticated and less challenging teaching. Despite the efforts of 21st century and deeper learning advocates, blended learning models, such as Zafon’s, might be particularly vulnerable to less complex pedagogy and therefore learning, not only on the digital resources side, but also on the teacher side. Where “time is really important in this model,” short answer questions encourage efficiency. Where student assessments rely largely on information recall and retrieval, as they do in i-Ready and other programs, using that form ensures that students are prepared for the format they will encounter. Indeed, assessments, whether online or on paper, that stress retrieval and recall are likely to produce instructional practices that align with those strategies, as decades of educational research have demonstrated (Black & William, 1998). An “irony” of online/blended learning implementation, then, is that teaching can become increasingly “information-centric” (Resnick, 2002). When online assessments that matter take such form, as they do at Zafon, it is prudent for teachers to ensure that students are familiar with the structure, but it is also problematic in terms of the goal of 21st century learning. While teachers are sharing ideas and resources for ambitious projects, we did not observe professional development or exchanges around strategies of questioning for deeper learning. That might become more of a focus as the school matures further, and

the peer observations Zafon has begun to use would be well suited for such professional development. This question, illuminated by the case of Zafon, is a key question that researchers, practitioners and funders are currently pursuing.

## ■ Going Forward

In many ways, this has been a relatively stable year at Zafon. Enrollment growth has been steady, and new staff have been readily hired and inducted into both the model and culture of the school. Zafon experienced the predictable start-up challenges of being a new school. Teachers and students are steadily growing more comfortable with the educational model as well as with the movement of station rotations, and with the hardware and software used in blended learning. While they speak with confidence about the model, they are working to improve and build on it: to add more online resources, to develop more projects, and to strengthen teaching toward 21st century learning. Whether the model offers a superior educational experience is still unknown; the answer to that question will be as much about the quality of digital resources and teachers’ abilities to effectively utilize them as it will be about the persistent questions about good pedagogy in the 20th century.

Zafon is also anticipating new changes and arrangements, with further “building” consistent with their original plan and with their now established growth trajectory. With a model based on growing by a grade each year, for the next five years there will always be a new grade to staff, and a new curriculum to design. So this year they are planning forward, as the Head says, with “strategic planning, what the model will look like for higher grades,” and “what is 4th and 5th grade going to look like.” Because of the variations in grade enrollment, for the next few years there will also be less dramatic but still consequential and disruptive changes that ripple through existing grades, teaching positions to be rearranged, and classroom resources reallocated. After the teacher worked so hard to finally establish her leveled classroom library, for example, she knows that “next year there will be three 2nd grades, so I’ll have to split it.” There will also be new software to consider, both in instructional programs and in assessment. The school has been looking

hard at one in particular, and talking with administrators at other schools who have experience with MAP testing. Utilizing the Measure of Academic Progress assessments would allow Zafon to benchmark students' progress against a national standard on a range of skills. The Head says they considered this to be essential in their original plan, but "wanted things to settle down first." At this point, after three years, they have decided the school has settled enough to be ready. The Head has been exploring implementation issues with other schools that use the assessment, and they hope to incorporate the new tool next year.

The decision to move to a new building that will allow for anticipated growth through the 8th grade will unsettle the school next year, at least temporarily. It has not had major financial implications for this year's expenses, apart from the considerable time invested in making the decision, finding a location, designing renovations, creating and communicating the plans to constituents, and starting up a new capital campaign. These are certainly not minor costs, even if they are not reflected in budget reports. But a new building will have major fiscal repercussions next year, in two very different ways. First, there will be the purchase and renovation costs associated with taking on new space, although they estimate that the new mortgage payments will be less than the current rental payments. Second, and perhaps surprisingly, there will be a considerable increase in rent. Next year's students will not fit into this year's building, but the new building will not be ready when the school opens in Fall 2015. So they have renewed the lease on this building for six months, and arranged for a short-term rental for two pre-K classrooms in a nearby facility. This means they are, the Business Director acknowledges, "guessing we will not break even next year, though we think the year after. Though there are so many unknowns, especially when dealing with construction."

Even with the unknowns, staff members are excited about the new facility, and about the growth that the need for larger space represents. They anticipate that the temporary conditions in the fall will be, as one teacher forecasts, "a bit of a nightmare, but it won't last." Beyond that temporary

disruption, they see better conditions on the horizon, with more classrooms and larger communal spaces. Moreover, the location of the new building is an added draw; because it is in the heart of the community where most families live, many students will be able to walk to school. Since the news of the new building was made public, attendance at open houses for prospective families has increased. At one, setting up 100 chairs in advance meant that some prospective families had to stand at the back; the Head reported that 60 of them signed up for next year.

The capital campaign itself provided encouraging evidence of the commitment that current families have made to the continuing growth of Zafon. By June of 2015, enrolled family participation in the campaign had reached 80%, and the Board was still hoping to achieve 100%. The majority of their reported 188 donors were 172 individuals or families who had given \$10,000 or less. Some families, calculating what they were saving with a tuition cost of 40% less than neighboring schools, gave \$5,000 or \$10,000; some pledged \$100 a month. But, as an administrator reported, "we were willing to take \$18," and one student "brought me \$3.00 from his piggy bank, and said 'I want to help.'" Still, without considerable help from their primary funders and Board, they would not have been able to come close to the \$2,000,000 they were seeking. At the time of this report, the campaign was still underway, but enough capital had been raised to allow them to go ahead with the purchase.

Settling into their new building, locating new software that meets their standards, continuing to build new curriculum, and strengthening teaching for deeper 21st century learning will all be challenging tasks for the coming year. Indeed, while the year may have felt more "settled" than the first phase, it is important to remember that Zafon is, at this point, only halfway to becoming the pre-K-8 blended learning/ station rotation day school that its plans call for. Still, the steady growth of the school and the alignment between the original plans and the realities of these first few years suggest that Zafon is making purposeful and steady progress along its intended path.

Since the case study ends at the end of the 2014/15 academic year, The AVI CHAI Foundation wanted to provide a brief update on Zafon as of April 2016. We hope to report on the school again over the next few years.

In 2015/16, Zafon changed its administrative structure, with its Head of School becoming *Rosh Yeshiva* (a new position) and hiring the school psychologist mentioned in the case study to fill a new Principal role. This past academic year (2015/2016), the new Principal focused on educational matters and on management of staff and the new Rosh Yeshiva was responsible for recruiting and the overall Jewish life of the school.

The new building was not ready for the 15/16 academic year, causing the school to have to carry two properties at once. In addition, the school rented space in a nearby local public school for Zafon's preschool. The school's deficit increased by about \$120,000, which is being covered with donations. Half of the new building will be done in May 2016 and the balance should be completed in July to be ready for the 2016/17 school year.

The purchase and renovation of the new building project will cost \$12,900,000. The school raised about \$2.5 million in donations, and took \$10.95 million in loans. They raised close to \$600,000 in pledges from the parent body.



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