

## Spreading resilience

Local day school educators get boost from Hidden Sparks program

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Sheila Barbach, left, and Lily Howard Scott

In the best of times, teaching is hard. Teachers in the classroom are always on — actors improvising before a demanding audience.

So any help that can come their way is warmly welcomed.

A bit of that help came earlier this month, when Hidden Sparks held an online retreat that brought together nearly 100 educators from across the country, including several from New Jersey. Hidden Sparks was founded in 2006 to help Jewish day schools better educate struggling learners who were falling through the cracks. The core of its efforts are onsite training and coaching, but it also offers occasional seminars as well as online resources.

Several local schools were among the 45 Jewish day schools participating in the retreat — the Gerard Berman Day School in Oakland, Golda Och Academy in West Orange, the Solomon Schechter Day School of Bergen County in New Milford, Tenafly Chabad Academy in Tenafly, and Yeshivat Noam in Paramus.

Teachers on the online retreat got to choose from 11 different seminars that, using best practices for Zoom education, included breakout rooms for small group discussions.

Sheila Barbach, Gerrard Berman’s general studies principal, chose a workshop facilitated by Dr. Aviva Goldstein, an Israeli psychologist.

The theme was “nourishing ourselves, nourishing our children,” Ms. Barbach said. “It was about how teachers can take care of themselves, and feel nourished enough to be able to take nourish our students.

“It was very timely for the reality we’re all in of teaching during the pandemic. Her presentation was on personal growth during challenging times. We talked about resilience and how we can recognize it in ourselves. We were introduced to a technique that teachers can use with themselves, with other staff members, and with their students to reflect on a period of time.

“We reflected back month to month from when the pandemic started. We started with Purim last spring. And for each month she gave us guiding questions about the month: What scared you? What satisfied you?

“Then we brainstormed ways we could use this with our students to reflect on the tough time they have been through. They’re carrying so much with them.

“Resilient, optimistic people acknowledge that they’re stuck in a difficult moment of time, but it won’t always be forever. Our job is to help children understand that it’s difficult now, but it won’t always be like this. And to remember that there were times when we could push through and see our inner strength. And that there were in the course of the year moments of joy.”

Diane Kleinman teaches second grade Judaic studies and Hebrew at the Golda Och Academy. She had studied with Lily Howard Scott, a Hidden Sparks learning coach, at an earlier program and “couldn’t wait to learn from her again.”

Ms. Scott’s session was about using writing to deal with covid and the intense emotions it evokes. “She had so many wonderful formats for giving feedback,” Ms. Kleinman said.

One technique that Ms. Scott suggested to the teachers to help capture the emotions was what she called creating a “story mountain.” Draw a bell curve, Ms. Kleinman said. “The fat part in the middle is how we’re doing now.” Focus the story on “how we’re coping now,” with less emphasis on how things were before and on “what we’re looking for in the future.”

“There’s another technique she taught that’s useful when teaching children literature, called ‘windows and mirrors,’” Ms. Kleinman continued. “You look for a window and a mirror in a story. The window is where it gives you a window into someone else’s life and experience. It’s something you learn about their life that gives you a new perspective. The mirror is where my life is reflecting what I’m hearing about our life, the way we have something in common.”

Ms. Kleinman said this is a technique she can use when studying Hebrew with her students.

“We can reach about a child in a virtual classroom and see if we can make a connection — is that child’s life similar or different? It’s something I can pick up the next day and use in the classroom.”

Ms. Kleinman said that as a frequent participant in Hidden Sparks programs, “it’s nice to see familiar faces again and check in on how everybody is doing. The sense of community that Hidden Sparks has been able to foster has been very positive.”

Most of Ms. Kleinman’s students attend school in person. “I have a great group, who are enthusiastic, great participants,” she said. “They all know the importance of being safe — that only if we stay safe can we meet in person. The kids understand that and they work with it.”

Staying safe includes wearing a mask.

“One of the most difficult thing is hearing those little voices when they’re muffled through a mask,” Ms. Kleinman said. “I feel horrible every time I have to tell them to talk a little louder.”