

Around the Community

Nearly 100 Jewish Day School Educators From 9 States Join 'Hidden Sparks' Program To Address Mental Health During Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a negative toll on so many aspects of everyday life, including anxiety of students and in the classrooms. Hidden Sparks, by focusing on training teachers with the tools to supporting students in mainstream

Jewish day schools, recently convened a virtual conference to address this challenge. Nearly 100 Jewish educators from nine states came together to collaborate on developing their skills and toolboxes for creating positive and stable experiences for their students.

Participating educators were able to

choose from 11 lecture options that gave them tools in a variety of areas like topics like art therapy exercises in the classroom to teacher's self-care and personal growth. Topics included *Recognizing Anxiety in Myself and Others*, *Guided Relaxation Exercises*, *Building a Positive Psychological Toolbox* and *Personal Growth in Difficult Times*, among others.

The participating educators hailed from 45 Jewish day schools in New York, New Jersey, Maryland, Arizona, Florida, Illinois, Missouri, Texas and Rhode Island. They span the religious affiliation gamut from those identified as serving a non-denominational community to those serving Hassidic students.

They heard from leading education experts including Rona Novick, Ph.D, dean of the Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration at Yeshiva University and co-educational director for Hidden Sparks; Lily Howard Scott, MS, Hidden Sparks' Social Emotional Learning Coach; Hidden Sparks coaches from across the country, school and clinical psychologists, and an art therapist.

Throughout the past year, Hidden Sparks has remained in constant communication with Jewish day school educators, monitoring the impact that the pandemic has had on both the teacher's personal psyche as well as those of their students and the affects on their overall classroom experiences. The seminar's focus on mental health was specifically chosen in response to those findings, in order to provide edu-

cators with the tools they need not only for both themselves and their students.

"Fortunately, many of yeshiva day schools have managed, through careful planning, to stay open for most of the year, but this whole period has been very challenging for our teachers," said Hidden Sparks Executive Director Deborah Berg. "It was very clear to us that our retreat this year had to be focused on strategies for teachers' self care. We want to expand to *how do I bring these strategies into my classroom*. There has been a focus on academic learning loss, but in reality there have been so many other kinds of loss that we have experienced through this time, and we recognize that important self care strategies and health sensitivity are for teachers and students."

Founded in 2006, Hidden Sparks is one of the leading nonprofit organizations dedicated to helping teachers and educating struggling learners. Through professional development programs, on-site coaching for teachers, it helps educators deepen their understanding of new approaches for teaching all learners, particularly those who are struggling. With 110 participating day schools across the US as well as schools in Israel, educators trained by the Hidden Sparks curriculum, the organization impacts thousands of students on average annually. For more information please visit: www.hidden-sparks.org.