



LONG ISLAND

Change comes to LI school

Educator brings 'revolution' with team teaching

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Shimon Waronker, who has sought to transform education in several New York City public schools with a combination of private school practices and his own techniques, is bringing his self-styled "revolution" to a small academy in Suffolk County.

As the new head of school for The Jewish Academy in Commack, Waronker plans to eliminate the traditional model of teachers talking to rows of students and fully implement his program with the start of the 2016-17 school year.

His method includes a focus on team teaching in open classrooms where educators share a large space with several classes of students, as well as techniques that foster discussion — such as the "Harkness table," the time-tested approach at Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire advanced by philanthropist Edward Harkness in the 1930s.

He also keeps students with the same teacher for several years, as alternative Waldorf schools do, and designates master teachers to mentor less-experienced colleagues, as well as increasing salaries and instituting merit pay.

Waronker, 47, a protege of former New York City schools Chancellor Joel Klein, acknowledges that many parts of his approach are not original ideas. What he has done, Waronker said, is combine "best practices together under one roof."

The 55-student academy for kindergartners through eighth-

graders gives him the opportunity to see how the model works in a suburban classroom.

"We must destroy the Prussian industrial design. It must be in the ash heap of history," Waronker said, referring to the one-teacher education model designed in the Kingdom of Prussia in the 1750s and instilled in American classrooms in the 1830s and 1840s. "The kids going to public schools in the suburbs are suffering from the same system design that the kids in the urban schools are suffering."

A former U.S. Army intelligence officer who is a Hasidic Jew, Waronker attracted attention in education circles a decade ago when he took over a middle school in the South Bronx that was listed as one of the most violent in the city. He was able to reduce violence, so much so that the school earned an "A" on its city-issued report card for the first time.

He later created a nonprofit — the Brooklyn-based New American Initiative — that spread his ideas to three other schools in the Bronx and Brooklyn. Initially a Spanish teacher in a public school in Brooklyn, Waronker had studied at the New York City Leadership Academy, which Klein and then-Mayor Michael Bloomberg founded in 2003 to train promising candidates for school principal's posts.

After heading JHS 22 in the South Bronx for four years, he went to Harvard University for his doctorate. There, among other graduate students, he devised his education method.

"He's a bold and intelligent leader," Klein said. "What he's trying to do now is exciting, because it's not small, incremental or marginal."

Still, he added, "I think Shimon has a model that is worth looking at, but I don't know



Shimon Waronker, 47, the new head of school at The Jewish Academy. ■ Video: newsday.com/commack

that it's the answer. I think history will tell us that."

Waronker said the one-teacher education model, as adapted to the United States' evolving industrial society by about 1920, hasn't been updated in a century. He considers it an autocratic framework that does little to develop creative thinkers, learners and leaders.

"We need relationships and love. If we lack both, we shrivel up and die," he said. In schools of the old style, "you're just a number. There's no relationships. You're a nobody. That fundamentally destroys the human spirit."

A typical classroom in one of his schools will have three groups of about 20 students, each gathered in different parts of a large room, with a teacher presiding over each group. An experienced "master teacher" floats among the three groups,

observing and sometimes taking over the class.

The team of four teachers meets each morning before school starts for 90 minutes to talk about what worked, what didn't and what they can do to improve.

Some Long Island education leaders said they applaud parts of Waronker's approach and noted that many public schools have moved in the same direction.

"The old industrial model . . . is so dated that we need to push away from it," said Roberta Gerold, superintendent of the Middle Country school district and a past president of the Suffolk County School Superintendents Association. "In many schools, you see what he is talking about already in place."

"You hardly ever go into a classroom anymore and see the

straight lines of kids staring straight ahead while the teacher talks and they take notes," she said. "That's not the norm anymore, at least in the schools that I know."

Waronker said his faith helps motivate him to bring quality education to all kinds of people.

The most influential leader of the Chabad Lubavitch movement, the late Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, who died in 1994 and was known as the Lubavitcher Rebbe, was "an advocate of better education for all," Waronker said.

"The rebbe said, 'I don't want followers, I want leaders,'" Waronker said. "I want folks who are going to go out there and change the world, make this a better place, create a heaven on Earth. That's our job."