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## AJC Policy Statement on Jewish Education

Adopted by the AJC Board of Governors  
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### **I. Background**

The mission of the American Jewish Committee includes safeguarding the continuity and ensuring the future quality of Jewish life. The AJC has long recognized the centrality of Jewish education to efforts to ensure Jewish continuity. In 1977 the American Jewish Committee, acting on the recommendations of its Colloquium on Jewish Education and Identity, recommended broad efforts to intensify Jewish education on all levels, including increasing the number of contact hours and years of schooling, creation of realistic goals, introduction of Judaic studies into public and nonsectarian private education, broadening of Jewish studies on university campuses, intensification and broadening of day school education, and greater communal investment in Jewish education broadly conceived. In 1982, the American Jewish Committee reaffirmed its support of Jewish education as communal priority.

Since that time much has been accomplished. The number of students in Jewish day schools has increased to 212,000. On college campuses, there is hardly a university of note that today lacks an impressive array of Judaic studies courses.

Yet Jewish teaching has long underscored the principle that to be a Jew connotes life-time encounter with Jewish heritage—ideally from cradle unto grave. Regrettably, however, for too many American Jews Jewish learning has been reduced to its most elementary levels—often culminating and even ceasing with the bar or bat mitzvah rite of passage.

As presently constituted, Jewish education suffers from paucity of contact hours and from low expectations of output. Moreover, the classroom time usually devoted to Jewish education generally omits the critical years of adolescence, which AJC research has demonstrated are the most crucial years for impacting upon long-term Jewish identity.

To be sure, significant exceptions to these trends exist. Day school education, once considered marginal to the system, now has become a viable option within each of the religious movements as well as under communal or transdenominational auspices. Alumni of Jewish day schools, particularly on high school levels, report continued long-term Jewish identification and involvement underscoring the effectiveness of day school instruction. On college campuses, where once academic Jewish studies was limited to handful of elite universities, today virtually every university of note boasts a substantial Jewish studies program signaling the legitimization of Jewish culture by the canons of American university life. Similarly, the Hillel Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, in recent years, increasingly has enhanced its presence and programs on college campuses.

These trends notwithstanding, the Jewish community continues to agonize over its future continuity. Efforts to enhance Jewish education are critical to that continuity agenda. A literate Jew is simply far more likely to become a committed Jew. Moreover, Jewish education constitutes a potential bridge issue around which

diverse sectors in the Jewish community may cooperate in the pursuit of common goals of enhancing the Jewish future.

## **II. Recommendations**

Based on our research and deliberations, the American Jewish Committee recommends the implementation of the following programs as essential to strengthening Jewish identity:

### ***A. Jewish Education as Communal Priority***

1. Jewish education, broadly conceived, must become a critical priority in the allocation of communal resources for domestic needs.
2. To ensure educational effectiveness, Jewish education must target the entire Jewish family, enabling parents to create a Jewish-supportive environment in which the education of their children can occur. Therefore, emphasis upon adult and parental education is critical for the success of Jewish education generally.
3. No single model of Jewish education will work for all Jews. Therefore it is imperative that the community create a variety of successful models of formal and informal education including day schools, supplementary schools, and community-based schools so as to maximize parental choice in seeking models that best fit the Jewish needs of particular children and families.

As the Jewish community enters the twenty-first century, its greatest challenge lies in confronting the prospect of continued erosion and assimilation. Jewish education remains the primary response to that danger. To collectively meet the challenge of securing Jewish continuity, Jewish education on all levels must be strengthened and enhanced.

### ***B. Cost and Affordability***

Quality Jewish education must be regarded as a matter of right rather than privilege. The entire Jewish community must assume the responsibility for funding Jewish education. We recommend creation of a communal endowment fund established for the express purpose of providing per-student subsidies determined by family income and tuition levels and applicable towards any form of quality Jewish education for children and youth. Creation of such a system would insure the principle of affordability funded entirely by the Jewish community without recourse to governmental assistance. As a symbolic step in this direction AJC recommends creation of a Jewish communal fund to enable children of communal professionals to pursue quality Jewish education.

### ***C. Supplementary Schools***

1. The supplementary school requires considerable enhancement of expectations, greater communal investment in personnel and teacher training, and exploration of alternative programs and models.
2. We must establish the principle within supplementary education of continuing Jewish schooling past the bar or bat mitzvah years.

Notwithstanding the growth of Jewish day schools a plurality of Jewish children continues to receive the bulk of their Jewish education through Jewish supplementary school. In recent years the supplementary school has been suffering from a crisis of credibility and self-confidence. To ensure Jewish continuity, the supplementary school must be enhanced and in some cases rethought so as to enable effective transmission of Jewish heritage.

### ***D. Continuing Jewish Education***

1. Successful models of adults Jewish education, particularly the Wexner Heritage program, the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School, and the Boston MEAH (100 hours) program need to be replicated for a broader cross section of American Jews.
2. AJC chapters must play a particular role in adult education for their own members. Particular success in recent years has been attained through the adult Jewish history curriculum developed by AJC. Programs along these lines merit further development and utilization within AJC chapters. Efforts within AJC should include staff and professional education as well as programs for AJC leaders and members.

### *E. Jewish Day Schools*

Day schools today are considered the jewels within the Jewish educational system. The 1995 Report of the North American Commission on Jewish Identity and Continuity characterized day schools as "arguably the most impactful single weapon in our arsenal for educating Jewish children and youth." The 1999 United Jewish Communities report of its task force on day schools notes that "virtually all segments of the community agree that the day school is the most effective form of Jewish education, and that it will continue as such for the foreseeable future."

Existing research on Jewish day schools both in the United States and in other Jewish communities demonstrates relatively low levels of mixed marriage and high levels of communal involvement among their adult graduates. This has been particularly the case among those who pursue day school education through the high school years. Moreover, those high schools that have studied their alumni, over succeeding years, report both continued Jewish communal involvement and full integration into American society for the overwhelming majority of graduates.

The major complaints about day schools relate less to the quality of education provided than to the capacity of middle-class parents to afford tuition. The Jewish community has consistently opposed governmental funding for private Jewish education. It is crucial that opposition to governmental funding be accompanied by sufficient Jewish communal funding so as to enable any Jewish child who chooses to do so to afford Jewish day school education. Therefore we recommend the following steps:

1. We believe the Jewish community must be challenged to ensure the affordability of day school education for all Jews who desire it.
2. We reaffirm AJC opposition to governmental vouchers. AJC should undertake research analyzing the effects of day school education upon intra-Jewish relations and inter-communal relations.

### *F. Adolescence*

As stated earlier, AJC research has demonstrated the critical nature of the teenage years for formative Jewish learning and experiences. To strengthen Jewish education on secondary levels, we recommend the following:

#### *1. Secondary Education*

1. The community must establish the principle of continuing Jewish education on secondary levels.

Precisely at the moment when Judaism as a culture can begin to be appreciated, students leave school on the assumption that Jewish education represents a pre-bar mitzvah activity rather than a lifelong commitment.

2. We urge advocacy efforts to enable the non-Orthodox movements to provide quality Jewish day school educational models on adolescent models. Secondary schools remain overwhelmingly under Orthodox auspices. Only a handful of Conservative and Reform day schools exist on the adolescent level. A critical challenge to the non-Orthodox movements lies in the creation of day schools servicing adolescents.

### *2. Funding for Adolescent Education*

Greater communal funding should be awarded to those who pursue Jewish education through the high school years. If the communal budget does not permit subsidizing all forms of Jewish education, we recommend targeting of subsidies toward programs geared to adolescents, including summer camp, informal education, and formal high school education.

Initiatives such as those proposed here will encourage greater continuity in Jewish education past bar or bat mitzvah.

### *3. Hebrew Language Instruction*

We recommend advocacy for the inclusion of Hebrew language instruction within American secondary school language curricula.

Of particular concern in recent years has been the decline of Hebrew-language literacy among American Jews. Even the best of Jewish educational institutions report a decline in Hebrew language literacy. This trend signals both a loss of a key lens upon Jewish heritage as well as a broader gulf with Israeli society.

### *4. Israel Experience*

Experience has indicated that successful Israel programs have been a direct function of sustained contact with Israelis, formal study components, and extended length of time of participation in the program.

Programs offering a free trip to Israel as the birthright of every American Jew signal both new philanthropic norms and a statement of Israeli responsibility for securing Jewish continuity in the Diaspora. We caution, however, that such programs not be regarded as a "magic bullet" or cure-all to Jewish continuity. Rather they represent but one step within a spectrum of initiatives to strengthen Jewish commitment of all American Jews. Transformative experiences, no matter how well executed, may never substitute for formative Jewish education.

### *G. Intra-Jewish Relations*

We urge AJC chapters to make Jewish education an agenda item for intrareligious dialogue and coalition building for advocacy purposes within the Jewish community.

Jewish education constitutes a potential bridge issue between the diverse Jewish religious movements. All Jews have a stake in quality Jewish education as a vehicle of securing Jewish continuity. At a time of increased polarization within the Jewish community, the concepts of Jewish unity and peoplehood may be significantly strengthened through common efforts to enhance Jewish education.

## **III. Conclusion**

In a recent column in the New York Jewish Week, Chancellor Ismar Schorsch of the Jewish Theological Seminary wrote: "In a society of unprecedented individual freedom unmarred by any trace of organized anti-Semitism, the Jewish community will thrive only if it is prepared to invest massively in serious, sustained Jewish education. A Judaism without walls can endure only if individual Jews are saturated with Jewish memory and music, texts and traditions, values and beliefs. A well-formed Jewish identity in our children is the best bulwark against their diluting Judaism or turning a cold shoulder to the Jewish community as adults."