



## Spotlight on: *Congregational and Communal Jewish Education*

### I. A Brief History and Rationale for Congregational and Communal Jewish Education

The first Jewish schools were established in America during the 18th and early 19th centuries by the Spanish and German immigrants and were housed in and organized by the various synagogues. In the 1880s, the East European immigration brought with it the “heder” and the “Talmud Torah.” These programs, which allowed Jewish children to study Judaism for a number of hours per week as a “supplement” to their attendance in public schools, developed as a communal response to challenge of educating the children of poor immigrants; they were by and large unrelated to the synagogue at the time. By the turn of the 20th century, synagogues began sponsoring their own heders and Talmud Torahs. Unfortunately, students in these private synagogue heders did not receive the same quality education available at community Talmud Torahs, due primarily to the poor training of the teachers and the lack of depth of the curriculum.

As new synagogues were founded in the early 20th century, many of them organized their own supplementary school programs. By 1928, the majority of Jewish educational supplementary school pupils were enrolled in synagogue programs as opposed to free standing ones. This trend continued at a rapid rate, particularly due to suburban migration in the 1940s and 50s. The communal Talmud Torah eventually all but disappeared by 1960. Kallen (1924) argues that the Jewish supplementary school was introduced in the 1920s in the spirit of cultural pluralism, with the intention of providing a balance of Jewish education and culture equal to the dominant American values and culture taught in the public school.

In 1962, the peak year of Jewish school enrollment in North America, there were an estimated 540,000 children enrolled

in Jewish supplementary schools. Today, we estimate that there are approximately 300,000 students enrolled in part-time congregational or communal school programs. This still represents the largest sector of the Jewish educational network. At least 65% of all students receiving some formal Jewish education are enrolled in congregational or communal Jewish education programs and most experts argue, that for at least the foreseeable future, the majority of students will continue to be educated in this setting.

### II. Challenges of Congregational Education

Most of the research conducted over the last 40 years has pointed to the “failings” of this educational system, although recent years have seen a number of studies that paint a more positive picture. The basic critique of so-called supplementary education is that it has failed to instill high levels of Jewish literacy and long-term positive attitudinal identification among students. Change proponents argue that significant attention needs to be paid to the following areas:

- curriculum;
- teacher recruitment, retention and development, particularly in the areas of pedagogy and classroom management;
- funding levels;
- lay and professional leadership; and
- developing different structures and modalities.

Although the congregational education “system” is perceived by most in the Jewish community as being mediocre, at best, pockets of excellence have been noted in the last decade, with much emphasis being placed on developing a systemic approach to improving the quality of congregational and communal Jewish education. A growing number of change initiatives are being proposed, funded and implemented, producing evidence of positive results. Yet, the highly de-centralized nature of the congregational school system makes it difficult to identify, adopt and adapt promising models and programs.

The literature undergirding these change initiatives includes several works that have received wide attention in recent years:

- A. In 1992, Barry Holtz and the Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education, published a report called the *Best Practices Project in Jewish Education on Supplementary School Education*. A group of researchers visited a group of identified “excellent” supplementary schools to try to determine the common patterns and practices used in these schools that helped them achieve success. The goal was to inform the larger Jewish community about these practices so that other schools could adopt, adapt or replicate these practices.
- B. In 1995, Isa Aron, Sara Lee and Seymour Rossel published *A Congregation of Learners — Transforming the Synagogue Into a Learning Community*. The authors argued for a new model of supplementary school education in which the school was part of the larger learning community of the congregation.
- C. In 1997, Joe Reimer published *Succeeding at Jewish Education — How One Synagogue Made it Work*. Reimer spent more than two years as an observer within a synagogue, studying the afternoon religious education programs for children, families and adults and offered his insights into what makes congregational education succeed.
- D. In 2000, JESNA published *A Vision for Excellence*, the report of its national Task Force on Congregational and Communal Jewish Education. The Task Force, in an effort to guide improvement in congregational and communal schools, developed seven broad systemic strategies. They address the larger issues of vision, financial resources, institutional commitment and personnel.

### III. Where We Are: Findings of a Joint JESNA/ECE Research Project

In an effort to gauge how the field has progressed and to see if previously noted “best practices” withstood the test of time, trained observers from JESNA and the Experiment in Congregational Education (ECE), perhaps the leading national synagogue change initiative, visited nine “traditional” (“traditional” was defined as schools which meet on one or several weekday afternoons and on Shabbat or Sunday mornings) schools in the spring and fall of 2001. These “excellent” schools were recommended by national educational denominational leaders, professional associations for Jewish educators, the Association of Directors of Central Agencies (ADCA), JESNA board members and JESNA and ECE staff. Among the criteria used for selection were:

- Schools from different denominations
- Large schools and small schools
- Geographical diversity
- Schools which had a noteworthy aspect of their program, like
  - Relationship with its day school
  - Collaboration among major stakeholders
  - Curriculum
  - Professional Development
  - High School
  - Integration of Youth and School programs
  - The educational leader
  - Teaching of Hebrew

What follows is a summary of some of the characteristics observed in these schools, organized according to the criteria for “best practices” in Jewish supplementary education identified in the Holtz study cited above.

### IV. Making Congregational Schools Successful: Observations from JESNA and ECE

Practices in several key areas define and distinguish a school as “excellent.” They include:

- A. Systemic characteristics;
- B. Curriculum and Instruction; and
- C. Supervision and Professional Growth

#### A. Systemic Characteristics

A “best practice” congregational/community school should be a place...

- i. ...with well-articulated educational and “Jewish” goals.

The goals themselves may vary — ranging from core concepts that guide an entire congregation’s activities, to specific skills to be acquired, to attitudinal or institutional goals such as “instilling Jewish pride” or “creating a warm and caring environment.” However, some such set of goals should be clearly articulated and available. Measures of success will also vary, and may include such things as enjoyment, participation in classes and extra-curricular activities, continuing Jewish education

into high school, how well the students lead prayer services, how many families attended synagogue services, the stability of the teaching staff and whether all participants tell the same “story” about the school.

- ii. ...where stakeholders (such as parents, teachers, lay people) are involved in the articulation or at least validation, of these goals in an ongoing way.

The make-up of the lay and professional teams may vary but combinations of educational director, rabbi, cantor, teachers, parents, students and lay leaders are necessary participants in the process of articulating and validating the school’s goals. The lay and professional representatives work together, mutually supporting each other in their assigned roles. There are different ways in which the stakeholders work to support the system. Rabbis teach regularly in the school and/or work closely behind the scenes with their professional teams. School committees develop their own mission statements and play a crucial role in helping to define and refine the goals of the school and follow the lead of their educational director in providing support, advocacy and resources.

- iii. ...with shared communication and an ongoing vision.

One key to success is ongoing communication among and between the professional and lay leadership. When stakeholders work cooperatively as teams they are more likely to solve problems. It is not unusual to find congregational schools like these that run out of space, forcing classes to be held in converted closets, hallways, and pre-school rooms. Often there are potential scheduling conflicts on Sundays. When the key stakeholders meet regularly to discuss these potential problems, acceptable solutions and compromises are made. Since everyone is on the “same page” there are clear expectations for all participants and problems such as misbehavior and petty vandalism are reduced considerably.

When education is a priority for the synagogue as a whole and not only the school, often, sufficient money is allocated for teachers to use for projects and extra-curricular materials. This is an important consideration in the area of teacher retention and in shaping a positive image of the school. Tuition does not cover the costs of running

the school. Estimates are that synagogues subsidize schools in the range of 35–45%. Those schools which work systemically, either to create a coherent educational plan within their synagogues, and/or to communicate regularly about ways to enhance the educational programs in the synagogue, report that they have found many different funding streams within the synagogue’s budget to ensure that there are sufficient funds for these types of projects.

- iv. ...where one feels good to be there and students enjoy learning.

This is a very common theme expressed by all stakeholders in a school. Although not easily quantifiable, a sense of comfort, mutual respect and purpose and feeling the “joy of learning” are considered key components of success.

- v. ...where students continue their Jewish education after Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

Successful schools subscribe to the notion of lifelong learning; they argue effectively, and program well, for post Bar/Bat Mitzvah students. They also closely monitor and work to increase the percentage of post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah students in their schools. Incentive programs, such as trips to Israel, teaching certificates, tutoring jobs, and opportunities for community service are offered.

## B. Curriculum and Instruction

A “best practice” congregational/community school should be a place...

- i. ...which takes curriculum seriously and has a serious, well-defined curriculum.

Whether using materials published by denominational or commercial publishers, or having individual schools have teams of teachers and administrators create their own, successful schools have a well-defined curriculum. The curricular documents are reviewed and revised regularly, based on input from the key stakeholders in the school. Involving teachers in the development of curriculum empowers them and allows for the creation of specialized and individualized curriculum.

- ii. ...in which students are learning real content.

There are many ways to assess student learning, ranging from the formal, standardized test to the

collection of anecdotal evidence. What is common to all these processes, though, is ongoing review and revision of curriculum.

- iii. ...in which one observes interesting and strong teaching.

There are many different teaching styles employed. Active learning, whether done individually, or in groups, is most successful. There is a wide range of teachers' Jewish educational backgrounds, ranging from staffs in which almost all of the teachers are professional teachers who have licensing credentials, to school in which almost all of the teachers are avocational recruits from the congregation. Some schools rely heavily on college students. Regardless, schools of excellence report that they have no major problems in recruitment and retention. Teachers offer these reasons for staying at their schools: they feel like family; they are well treated; they are shown respect; they are paid well (but in many cases not the highest salaries in the community); they enjoy being in a serious learning environment; and they feel they are supported by their supervisor/principal. The interaction with the supervisor is identified as a crucial component.

- iv. ...in which affective experiences for children are observed.

Serious efforts are made to integrate affective and cognitive experiences and to use informal teaching techniques in formal learning. Not only do students work on remembering, understanding, problem solving, logical ordering, synthesizing and evaluating (cognitive experiences), but they also spend time dealing with interests, attitudes, appreciations, values, morals and emotional biases (affective experiences.) In these schools, youth group personnel are employed in the school and youth group activities are counted as "school time." On the flip side, youth group activities often have a cognitive component and are integrated with the school's curriculum. Music and other subjects are taught using "camp methods." School curriculum is formulated using the question, "How can we make this like camp?"

- v. ...with family or parent education programs.

Family and parent education multi-session programs have become institutionalized and are integrated

into the school's curriculum. There has been an expansion of adult education classes and new teachers are sometimes recruited and trained through these classes.

### C. Supervision and Professional Growth

A "best practice" congregational/community school should be a place...

- i. ...which engages in regular professional growth and/or supervision of teachers.

This is a very strong component in successful schools. One option is to offer paid teacher time in which teachers are encouraged to work one hour per week before class to prepare materials and meet with stakeholders. In addition, one can observe mentoring programs for all new teachers, grade level teachers meeting regularly, lead teachers being responsible for helping other teachers, and regular, on-going in-service opportunities with sufficient money available to attend local and national conferences.

- ii. ...with an effective principal who serves as a true educational leader.

The importance of the educational director is described by all key stakeholders as one of the major critical success factors in schools. Among the descriptions of successful educational directors one finds the following words or phrases: a visionary, a leader, creative, dedicated, a role model, fair, a pied piper, a scholar, an educational expert, someone who cares about everybody, incredible, energetic, a friend, a mentor, a teacher. When outstanding educational directors leave what are considered to be excellent schools, the quality of the schools tends to decline.

### V. Moving Forward with Congregational Education

We draw encouragement from the fact that over the last decade, an expanding array of efforts have been mounted, institutionally, locally and nationally, to address the issue of improving the quality of congregational Jewish education. Many of these efforts show promise. It is now possible to identify both broad strategies and specific interventions that appear to be effective in elevating the quality of congregational education and its attractiveness to children and their parents. A "best practices" literature has developed which, though modest, can provide guidance to those seeking to improve their educational programs.

Despite this progress, we are still a long way from achieving widespread excellence in congregational education. Nor is it likely that we will do so within the next five to 10 years if we continue along our present course. Change efforts thus far are scattered, diffuse, and under-funded. The variety of initiatives and the models that exist of “successful” programs often embody different working assumptions and methods for producing improvement. There are few opportunities for the sharing of learnings or of results. Most projects encompass a relatively small number of institutions, and many require intensive work over many years to offer the prospect of meaningful improvement. Project sponsors, who are often scrambling to find the resources to sustain their projects, generally do not have the capacity to expand their work quickly. While some are seeking to develop “second-generation” tools and resources that could be used widely beyond the scope of the individual project, others, especially individual congregations that have pioneered innovations, are not in a position to do this. For large numbers of institutions there is justifiable uncertainty where to turn or what to do in order to improve.

Local central agencies for Jewish education and the national religious movements offer some assistance. But they too are often under-resourced, and must strive to ensure that they can support “state of the art” practice in the field and match up their services with what diverse congregations need.

## VI. Conclusion

What, then, can be done to make congregational educational improvement a widespread and ever-expanding phenomenon? How can we “scale up” to help many congregations — not just a relative handful of exemplars — improve substantially with reasonable effort, at manageable costs, and at a steady pace? These are questions to which JESNA devotes both thought and practice.

More individual improvement projects alone will not be enough. Rather, what will make the greatest difference is implementing a systematic approach to:

- defining and understanding what works and under what conditions,
- identifying and capitalizing on the successes of efforts already under way,
- supporting the extension of this work to more sites, more quickly, and
- assisting in the development of the next generation of initiatives, tools, and resources that can catalyze and support widespread change.

This is the objective of the new Center for Excellence in Congregational Education that JESNA is launching in cooperation with the religious movements, central agencies for Jewish education, and other organizations working on congregational educational change. The Center for Excellence in Congregational Education will emphasize three major areas of activity:

1. Building and disseminating the knowledge base needed to guide educational improvement efforts.
2. Preparing leadership who can spearhead improvement efforts effectively.
3. Developing and deploying mechanisms to support educational improvement efforts as they take place.

Building on the foundation of today’s best practices, the Center will spearhead the next generation of improvement initiatives and seek to ensure that congregational and communal education fulfill their vital role within the overall Jewish educational system in North America.

For additional information on how JESNA can help you make a difference in congregational and communal Jewish education, please contact JESNA’s Information Solutions Hotline 212-284-6897 or email [questions@jesna.org](mailto:questions@jesna.org).

These Spotlight papers have been prepared by JESNA to provide funders and other community leaders with a brief overview of important areas in Jewish education.

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