

Building the Future from the Future: Investing in Jewish Education in 21st Century America

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After the Jewish Funders Network conference, at which we had a full day dedicated to the subject of funding Jewish education, JESNA asked me to write about funding Jewish education from a funder’s perspective. I have to admit that it is often difficult for me to separate out the different “hats” I wear, as I am involved in Jewish education as a funder, and also as a “founder” of The Jewish Community Day School of Greater Boston (JCDS), as a psycholinguist interested in how and why our children learn Hebrew, as an educator, as a parent, and as a passionate and committed American Jew who cares about our community, past, present and future.

My husband and I began funding Jewish educational institutions as a result of becoming parents/consumers of Jewish education. We returned from a year and a half of living in Israel with a seven-year-old and a four-year-old, and needed to educate ourselves about continuing their education. In Israel, what we often refer to in America as “Judaic” and “secular” education takes place under one roof – not just the school roof that was made up of the secular schools, the Orthodox schools, the Masorti/Tali schools, the pluralist schools, but the roof we call “Israel” – the neighborhoods, the people, the calendar, the holidays, *Shabbat*. In America, many Jewish children receive their secular education in public schools and their Jewish education in some kind of after-school and/or weekend program, if at all. Even those who are educated in day schools usually receive their Jewish and secular education according to a school-determined allocation between percentages of the day or week. Occasionally, as at JCDS, we are able to immerse children in a world that integrates all aspects of their being. Given these alternative methods of delivery, it is incum-

bent on us to find the most effective platforms for reaching our children wherever they are being educated.

We became serious funders of Jewish education in order to support a transformation of Jewish education, working to establish the following premises, which were not necessarily the consensus conversation at that time:

- Jewish day schools provide the best education that is available.
- The Jewish traditions of ethical behavior, social justice, and lifelong pursuit of learning for its own sake, are normative values that are part of Jewish identity, which itself is an inevitable consequence of Jewish day school education.
- Jewish day schools provide for students and for the school community an example of tolerance and respect for others and for other viewpoints, which enables living in a tolerant and respectful world, as an individual, as a member of the Jewish people, and as a citizen of society.
- Educated Jews have access to Jewish texts in their original language – providing a connection to Jewish thought and tradition – and a facility in modern Hebrew – providing a connection to Israel.
- Jewish educational institutions have the human and financial resources that are required for the achievement of excellence in all aspects of their programs.

Initially, we found ourselves motivated to encourage our children’s day schools to aspire to be the best con-

text to reach these goals by getting involved as volunteers and lay leaders and by providing financial support. We also extended our support to other educational institutions across the denominational spectrum that were similarly committed to effecting transformation in Jewish education.

However, our vision and goals for the kind of Jewish education we wanted to make available were not consistent with the mainstream conversation at the time. We found that the only way to have them realized was to bring together the requisite resources and create a model school – one in which the staff is sparked to be creative and find ways to realize their visions and their aspirations as Jewish educators, where children and their families are flames to be kindled, rather than vessels to be filled, and where effective practices from the commercial world would be applied to the endeavors that mean the most to us.

At JCDS, we are demonstrating that the way to bring more Jewish children into Jewish day schools is not by offering “low-cost” education, but rather by offering the best educational opportunity that can be provided for our children. Our school and class size is intentionally small. The teaching and learning program is tailored to each child’s unique attributes as well as to the class as a whole. We commit ourselves to recruiting the best teachers and staff – both native Hebrew and English speakers – and to ensuring they are adequately compensated and have available the highest quality opportunities for professional development. Our Board has committed itself to raising the tuition, for families that can afford it, to the full cost of the child’s education, while at the same time expanding our program for flexible tuition so that the school remains accessible to all. We will maintain our attention to the quality of what we provide for the children, the teachers and staff, and the parent community, as a priority – ahead of growth – but we will, in due course, grow to satisfy the demand that we are generating. Jewish families in Greater Boston who are choosing a school for their children on the sole criterion of the quality of the teaching and learning will have JCDS among their leading alternatives.

We have been continually re-energized by the engagement of the highest caliber of professional staff and the

most committed and enthusiastic of volunteers who have been attracted to participate with us to ensure the success of this exciting endeavor.

We have helped to create and are now part of a truly meaningful Jewish community.

As a community school without any affiliation with a movement or denomination, JCDS’ only “natural” constituency for financial support is among those who are attracted by the mission of the school and the quality of the programs that it is delivering. In this regard, we are particularly gratified that JCDS has begun to attract a wider base of financial support. With financial support as with student recruitment, the program itself elicits interest not only from funders of Jewish education, but from those new to Jewish education. The school has also benefited from an increasing level of sophistication and concern for accountability among funders that have made the pursuit of excellence in Jewish education a priority. This is a trend that we can endorse with enthusiasm.

What we have learned since we undertook this program of funding for Jewish education is that there is a lot riding on this. The implications of doing it right – delivering Jewish education effectively – are profound. Some of our Jewish camps – Camp Ramah in Wisconsin, where my husband was a camper, and Camp Yavneh in New Hampshire, where I spent two unforgettable summers (and our children followed in my footsteps), are examples of this. Many of our Jewish educators and leaders today within all denominations acquire their leadership skills and their Jewish passion at Jewish summer camp. Doing it right begins with taking risks to implement our visions with commitment. And doing it right costs a lot of money. It costs money to pay for administration, to recruit the best teachers and staff, to procure facilities, materials and supplies, advice and expertise. It costs money to underwrite tuition for those who cannot afford this education, and it costs money to reach out to those in the community who are not comfortable seeking this education. And none of us can do this alone.

Thankfully, we are seeing that we are not alone, and that the transformation of the consensus conversation is not only beginning to happen, but is becoming widespread. There has been awakened an awareness of the priority for the pursuit of excellence in Jewish educa-

tion. We now have “Donor Assemblies” for day school funders, new day schools sprouting up around the country with the assistance of PEJE, Jewish Funders Network conferences dedicated to funding Jewish education, and foundations funding outreach initiatives and curriculum development.

This community awareness and involvement is going to become even more important as the emergence of community concern for the pursuit of excellence in Jewish education has contributed to an already severe shortage of qualified and trained Jewish educators. This subject will have to be at the top of our community agenda in order for this transformation and renaissance of Jewish education to succeed. Initiatives to recruit, prepare, and retain teachers cannot be undertaken single-handedly. It will take a wide collaboration to create and fund an infrastructure that will address this shortage systemically. We entered the door of funding Jewish education through our personal experience and find ourselves moving through another door as we become increasingly aware of how our continued funding can have an impact.

A transformation is possible and in fact is taking place to promote lifelong learning, to engage our Jewish children and families in funding their lifelong Jewish hearts and souls, and to live their lives informed by the values of our traditions and texts. Being a funder of Jewish education is just the beginning of taking responsibility for this small piece of the commitment to Jewish continuity and to creating a meaningful Jewish community. It is coupled with investing in and becoming part of a system, which enables us to reach our personal and collective goals.

When my 11-year-old son filled out his camp form and wrote that *tanach* is his favorite subject, or when a grandmother, a graduate of the *Me'ah* adult learning program, undertakes to become a *Bat Mitzvah*, or when on the occasion of my 50th birthday, 108 JCDS students each shared what a JCDS education means to them personally, the impact of our support of Jewish education becomes evident, one child at a time, one person at a time, and soon – one community at a time. And the time is now.

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