

What's a Funder to Do?

STEPHANIE GREEN

The big questions of Jewish education in America seem clear – What makes for an educated Jew, and therefore what are the Jewish educational needs of our local and national communities? Who will provide the services? How will the work be funded, and who will contribute? How do we set priorities given finite resources?

Within this set of broad questions, a relational question emerges, regarding the distinct roles, as well as the complementary roles, that central agencies, service providers, funders, and federations play in affecting the field of Jewish education. It is apparent that these groups make up an interdependent system, of which transparency and collaborative thought are critical. To that end, the goal of this article is to offer some gleanings on the independent funders' perspective, derived from work the Jewish Funders Network has done to organize funders of Jewish educational initiatives, facilitate discussions and collaborations among them, and strengthen their skills as grantmakers.

To be clear, the ideas presented here are a synthesis of what we have heard and seen in our work. They do not claim to reflect the thinking of all, although we do believe they are illustrative of some of the major issues of concern shared by many funders interested in Jewish education. In sharing these perspectives, our aims are two-fold. One, to inform other funders about this growing group of like-minded funders, in order to continue growing the collaborative process. Two, to illustrate to central agencies, service providers, and federations how independent philanthropists think and what they are thinking about regarding the field of Jewish education.

WHO ARE JEWISH “FUNDERS”?

At the Jewish Funders Network (JFN), a Jewish funder is defined by the philosophy of the giver, rather than the projects or programs supported by the funder. In other words, a Jewish funder is one who gives based on his/her Jewish values and ethics, whether to Jewish or secular causes. Who fits this description? Trustees from private and family foundations; professional staff of private, public, and supporting foundations; individuals or families with donor advised funds at community foundations, federation endowments, or public foundations; as well as single philanthropic individuals. Under such an umbrella, both independent funders/foundations and Jewish federations are equally considered “funders.” However, for the purpose of illustrating the particular perspectives of *independent* philanthropists, when the term “funder” is used it refers exclusively to those grantmaking organizations outside of the annual campaign system of the federation.

Over the past few years, JFN has organized a Working Group of over 250 funders committed to Jewish educational issues. More recently, JFN sponsored a funders-only *Summit on Funding Jewish Education*, convening more than 85 funders, large and small, to address their roles in advancing the field. A diverse spectrum of interests was represented, fostering a cross-fertilization of ideas and approaches affecting the entire educational landscape, rather than a single piece of it. For 24 hours, participants grappled with “the big issues” affecting formal and informal education, offered new visions for educating Jews of all varieties, and challenged each other to give their money and minds to work toward these visions.

WHAT'S ON THEIR MINDS?

Asked to put on their creative thinking caps and unleash their imaginations, the breadth of issues and ideas that funders raised was incredible. Although impossible to detail everything, several significant areas of concern stand out as focal points where Jewish funders are seeking to address their energies. These concerns can be categorized into three priority areas: 1) Systemic Issues, 2) Unmet Needs and Population Groups, and 3) Tools for Strategic Education Grantmaking. For JFN, getting these issues on the table is a beginning, not an end, which will require continued commitment on the part of Jewish philanthropists and Jewish institutions to advance tangible goals, plans, and funding.

I. SYSTEMIC ISSUES

Advocacy for Increased Education Funding

There are two linked questions that funders broach in nearly every discussion related to the role of Jewish education in America. The first, at a time when participation in the “Jewish community” is viewed as voluntary and many people feel neither drawn to the community nor obligated by it, how is it possible to create a sense of communal priorities and obligations around Jewish education? The second, can/should funders act as advocates in encouraging other funders to support Jewish education?

Consideration should be given to developing a strategic approach for funders, practitioners, and Jewish communal organizations to jointly advocate for the values of Jewish education. In addition, more dollars will certainly bolster the Jewish educational system. However, at the Jewish Funders Network we feel strongly that affecting the scope, quality, and availability of Jewish education in America can be most closely and immediately accomplished through more *strategic* philanthropy. There are many funders working to affect educational change right now, supporting and seeding programs around the country, but the biggest obstacle to systemic change is that most funders do not know what else is being done, how to avoid wasting time and resources by reinventing the wheel, and how to find partners to tackle shared and complex challenges together. From this perspective, our principal goal is to improve the *quality*

of grantmaking being done, rather than just the *quantity* – to change the way funders, thinkers, and agencies interact, to focus on joint program planning from the outset, and to give philanthropists the tools they need to engage in this manner.

Organizational Effectiveness and High Performance Boards

Although funders often seek to replicate outstanding educational program models, organizational infrastructure should not be overlooked. Program innovation is only as strong as the supporting organization, and funders are beginning to identify ways to incorporate capacity building, consulting support, leadership and board development, evaluation, etc. into their grant allocations. *Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life*, is an example of a Jewish educational organization that frequently utilizes consulting services to improve its performance. In Hillel’s case, consulting is provided in-house through its funder-supported *Campus Strategic Services Department*. Spurred in part by the current enthusiasm for “venture philanthropy” and the interest in incorporating business ethics into grantmaking, funders are now realizing that strategic philanthropy means grantmaking that will both help educational organizations, create good programs *and* do their work better. *The Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education (PEJE)*, a consortium of 12 funding partners, is making inroads in this area through the technical assistance it offers to day schools around the country. Some of the ideas proposed during the Summit to develop this approach include:

- Catalogue best practices and profiles of organizational leadership;
- Cultivate high performance professionals and professional development;
- Define standards of board excellence and the role of a good board member;
- Create an institute to train incoming boards of any Jewish educational group; and,
- Invest in evaluation, technical assistance, and strategic planning.

II. UNMET NEEDS AND POPULATION GROUPS

Incorporating the Arts

Involvement with the arts is often overlooked as a potential venue for creative Jewish learning. Jewish artists are undervalued and underutilized in a community seeking creative educators. New definitions of “Jewish education” should include the creation of and interaction with Jewish arts and culture. In addition, many Jewish artists who may or may not be engaged in “Jewish” work, or the Jewish community, could be brought in to develop educational and artistic ventures exploring Jewish life and learning, and to create opportunities for the exploration of Jewish culture through the arts.

Informal and “Unconventional” Education

In June of 2000, UJA-Federation of New York released a study of Jewish identity formation, *Connections and Journeys*, researched and written by sociologist Dr. Bethamie Horowitz. The results of her study indicate that a host of factors affect people’s decisions to engage Jewishly at various points in their lives. Because people respond to Jewish experiences differently and at different points in time, there is no single way to fashion an educated Jew. One of the critical lessons learned from these findings is that formal Jewish education (such as day schools), while effective, may not reach the majority of Jews. For this reason, we must develop a wide-array of choices and opportunities for people to connect Jewishly, particularly in the realm of adult education, as well as non-formal alternatives for youth, such as camping, the arts, youth and teen programs, etc.

People with Special Needs and Disabilities

The inclusion of individuals with special needs within the full spectrum of learning and participation in the Jewish community is a real need across the field. This issue is overdue for consideration on the national agenda. Many Jews with developmental and physical disabilities have fallen through the cracks or have been forced to look outside the Jewish community for programs and services. Funder advocates can spur organizations and institutions to think creatively about bridging gaps in Jewish education, recreation, congregational life and more, so that every individual may be included in all areas of Jewish life. Based upon discussions held during the Summit, the Manuel D. & Rhoda Mayerson

Foundation of Cincinnati is spearheading an effort to develop a national partnership of funders committed to serve as advocates for the full inclusion of people with special needs (ranging from disabilities to giftedness) and seek strategies to affect systemic change in this area.

Personnel

The dearth of qualified educators is one of the greatest challenges hindering the advancement of Jewish educational initiatives. This stems, in part, from lack of strong incentives to enter or stay within the field, such as poor salaries and benefit packages and few opportunities for ongoing professional development. Underpaid teachers reflect a Jewish community that undervalues the profession of teaching – a cultural mindset that must be shifted in order to attract talented individuals to the profession. The personnel shortage cuts across the field of education, from day school teachers and principals, to informal educators for youth and adults, to summer camp staff and youth group leaders. Paralleling the massive teacher shortages occurring in the secular public and private education sector, the Jewish education sector faces an even greater challenge in recruiting and training teachers with strong Judaic content knowledge. Specific local initiatives have been developed in some communities to begin addressing these concerns, and funders are beginning to organize nationally, as well. For example, the University of Judaism is developing a plan to create a “Jewish Teach for America” program that would seek to duplicate some of the successes of the secular, public school program Teach for America. To address this systemic concern, funders offered a variety of creative options at the Summit, among them:

- Fund salaries & endow Jewish teaching positions below the university level;
- Establish “Superfunds” for pension and life insurance benefits;
- Centralize services between schools, communities, and federations to share talents and costs of local personnel;
- Create ongoing professional development opportunities;
- Coordinate efforts locally, regionally, and nationally; and
- Introduce a National Jewish Educator Week.

III. TOOLS FOR STRATEGIC EDUCATION GRANTMAKING

Developing Collaborative Structures

The Jewish education challenges that lie ahead are large, complex and potentially daunting to smaller and mid-size foundations. In addition, the unique needs of smaller and more isolated Jewish communities demand special attention and consideration. Constructive change will require leveraging of funds, which necessitates new collaborations among smaller funders and geographic diversity. Local and regional funding partnerships, communication through new technologies, and national sharing of best practices will be important. Among the ideas suggested by funders:

- Commission a demographic study of Jewish educational needs in smaller and more geographically isolated communities (e.g. Southern states);
- Develop regional caucuses of funders, focused on particular educational concerns, to share challenges and successes and collaborate on solutions; and
- Include diverse geographic representation on national steering committees for educational initiatives.

Mapping the Field

No one wants to reinvent the wheel. There are many challenges yet to be met, but there are also numerous examples of successful programs in diverse educational arenas taking place around the country. Identifying and mapping current educational initiatives across the country is a necessary first step in order to build local and national models of “best practices.” Funders were particularly captivated by JESNA’s project to create a databank of projects and initiatives around the country tied to Jewish education, which is searchable by keyword, geography, etc.

“Walking the Talk”

In order to promote the value of Jewish education, funders must make Jewish education a focal point in their own lives, speaking from a position of knowledge and strength. Jewish living, text study, and setting an ethical Jewish example are personal goals for funders to strive for. One idea proposed during the Summit, to develop a curriculum for Jewish funders on what the Jewish tradi-

tion teaches about philanthropy, is currently in development by the Jewish Funders Network and the Donors Forum of South Florida.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

There was a palpable energy felt during the 24 hours of the Summit on Funding Jewish Education, with the obvious next question being how to help the funding community build upon these ideas and move forward. Success requires continued creative thinking, energy, and commitment. More importantly, affecting real change demands a new model of partnership between funders, federations, service providers, and central agencies. Based on lessons learned from the Summit, we envision the facilitation of educational consortiums, which would address major needs in Jewish education. Some suggestions that might contribute to more effective collaborations include:

1. *Pick a single-issue.* Develop collaborations that are topical and focused on singular issues, rather than the field as a whole. While it is important to understand the interconnecting opportunities and demographics that make up the complete educational system, partnerships must be realistic in scope to accomplish significant change.
2. *Be inclusive.* Include all the relevant players in the game, *from the outset.* Whereas our current models of engagement are reactionary or exclusionary – with practitioners and educators developing programs that are then “sold” to funders for support, or with an individual funder identifying a need and seeking to solve it on his/her own or with limited financial and/or organizational partners – real change requires all parties to participate in assessing needs and developing strategies for change, working together to identify the role each can play in addressing the challenge.
3. *Empower funders.* Enable funders to take leadership around the issues. Giving funders a sense of ownership to act upon and advocate for the issues they feel passionately about will not only encourage a greater desire among funders to become as educated as possible about the issue in question, but will undoubtedly contribute to greater success in

impressing the legitimacy of the need to the overall community.

Collaborations amplify the voices of the educational community to put serious issues on the national Jewish agenda, and they enable funders to act more strategically by leveraging their dollars to impact large-scale change. The effort need not be daunting. We could begin locally, regionally, or even nationally. The General Assembly and the Jewish Funders Network National Conference offer two annual, national venues to bring together funders, providers, central agencies, and federations. In addition, national Jewish organizations like JFN and JESNA could help facilitate regional consortiums with the help of local federations, central agencies, and foundations. The energy and enthusiasm we see among funders (and federations, and central agencies, and providers) to contribute to the creation of a vibrant and viable Jewish educational system is inspiring. Our challenge is to grasp that momentum and move boldly forward.

STEPHANIE GREEN is the Director of Peer Programming at the Jewish Funders Network. In this capacity, she works with independent funders to develop a range of services, including: regional and national programming, funder consortiums, and educational resources.