

Jewish Educators for the 21st Century

Exploratory Interviews to inform the deliberation at CAJE

As preparation for this deliberation, 10 Jewish educational leaders were interviewed to mine their thinking about Jewish Educators for the 21st Century.¹ They were asked to answer the following questions:

- 1) How has the work of Jewish educators changed?
- 2) In light of those changes, what do you see as the implications for recruitment, preparation, development and support of Jewish educators?
- 3) What further changes are needed?
- 4) What are your thoughts on how to achieve those changes?

What follows is a summary of their answers.

↻ CHANGES ↻

Populations: Students and Parents

- Students have increasingly complex family structures: Parents are older, many families include non-Jews, divorce is common, Jewish parents have adopted children of color, and single and gay parents are increasingly visible.
- There are a growing number of children with special needs. Children come to school with a broader array of psychological needs and are more frequently diagnosed and medicated.
- Students have more pressure and stress, both in terms of time and expectations. It is difficult to put demands on children who are already over burdened.
- Parents approach children's Jewish education as consumers, rather than seeing themselves aligned with an institution and its values.

Programs

¹ Interview participants include: Steven Brown, Dean of the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education and Director of the Melton Research Center for Jewish Education at JTSA; Sharon Feiman-Nemser, Director of the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University; Joel Grishaver, co-owner of Torah Aura Productions and the Alef Design Group; Tali Hyman Instructor in Jewish Education at HUC-JIR; Sara Lee, Adjunct Professor Emeritus of Jewish Education at HUC-JIR; Joe Reimer, Associate Professor in the Hornstein Program in Jewish Professional Leadership at Brandeis University; Jeffrey Schein, Director of the Center for Jewish Education and Professor of Jewish Education at the Siegal College of Judaic Studies; Susan Shevitz, Associate Professor of Jewish Education in the Hornstein Program in Jewish Professional Leadership at Brandeis University; Ron Wolfson, President of Synagogue 3000; and Michael Zeldin, Professor of Jewish Education at HUC-JIR.

- There has been a radical deflation in hours of learning. The decrease in contact hours makes the formation of Jewish community more difficult, since it takes time to develop relationships with teachers, students, and parents.
- Bar/bat mitzvah requirements are increasingly negotiable. Standards for becoming bar/bat mitzvot are not necessarily solely dictated by the rabbi.
- The school is often the only Jewish community that children have.
- Schools must compete for the time and attention of families.
- Teachers spend more time managing parental concerns.
- In the field at large, there is more sophisticated knowledge about educational research and its implications. Research is being designed and applied. There is greater understanding about the learning process. Emphasis is now on how people learn most effectively rather than how people teach most effectively.
- Fears about Jewish identity and continuity are no longer the driving force propelling Jewish education.
- Jewish texts have a privileged place in Jewish education
- The individualization of Hebrew school through private tutoring is removing a sense of community from the educational process.

Personnel

- 30 years ago, the majority of school principals were trained in public schools, to efficiently navigate bureaucratic systems. Today, education leaders are less administratively focused, and more hands on.
- Rabbis are less inclined toward pulpit positions. Priorities are shifting, and they are less often sacrificing quality of life and family for work.
- A career ladder is emerging. There is an increasing number leadership positions at the entry-level. For example, more congregations are now hiring assistant education directors or full time educators.
- There are many more roles for educators, such as adult educators or directors of life-long learning. A youth advisor is now also considered an educator. Experiential education is a burgeoning field.

Training

- Along with pedagogical skills and content knowledge, education schools are encouraging students to cultivate vision about the meaning and future of Jewish identity and education.
- There is increasing acknowledgement that teachers are on their own Jewish journeys and are negotiating multiple identities and priorities.
- Schools of education are better equipping learning teachers to understand the politics of Jewish communal life.
- There have been an increasing number of professional development opportunities over the past decade.
- The training of academics in education is changing. Scholars are housed in many academic disciplines, like the social sciences and history. This cross-pollinating is creating an integrated, less insular, and less insecure field.

Expectations

- Educational leaders must have a greater variety of skills, understanding, and knowledge of Jewish education in multiple arenas, such as adult learning, supplementary school, and youth and family education. Leaders need to know something about numerous aspects of Jewish learning, but do not necessarily do the work of implementation.
- Expectations of heads of schools have grown. That person is now more like a CEO, working as public figure and fundraiser. They need skills in the areas of board development, personnel supervision, and strategic planning.
- There is increasing demand from laity for Jewish education professionals to know torah, be knowledgeable about Jewish practice and also have educational administration and non-profit management skills.
- Educators must be savvier about fundraising, marketing, and communal relations.
- There are increasing expectations about what a teacher is supposed to do for students and parents. Parents expect more personal attention. Demands on teachers are also high from boards and stakeholders.
- The requisite skills for meeting the needs of the American Jewish community necessitate teachers' increased content knowledge and additional pedagogical skills.

- There is increasing awareness about the impact of children's Jewish education on family life.
- Funding and attention to outcomes assessment and evaluation has increased.
- A new goal for Jewish education is emerging: to develop students as empowered, informed Jews with skills to invent and create themselves as Jews while walking the space between multiple their identities.

❧ IMPLICATIONS ❧

Areas for Clarification and Deeper Understanding

- The term “Jewish educator” must be clarified. Jewish educators are professional and lay, part-time and full-time, seasonal and year-round. They work in schools, synagogues, and communal organizations. There must be a greater acknowledgement of educators’ varied circumstances. We need to think more specifically about the kinds of responsibilities educators have in different contexts.
- Roles should be charted to determine which positions require what levels of education and areas of expertise, which roles represent professional opportunities and which are avocational. Based on that understanding, recruitment efforts should be highly differentiated.
- The field needs a more nuanced understanding of the difference between induction, preparation, and professional development.
- The changing nature of Jewish identity needs to be more fully understood and incorporated into approaches and perspectives about whom and how we educate.
- We have not sufficiently spelled out how learners’ needs are changing.
- There must be stronger reasons than tribal loyalty and bar/bat mitzvah attainment for people to choose Jewish education. (Those reasons are no longer compelling for many).
- Many of the phenomena facing the field are related to larger American trends. Knowing this, we can use other models and literatures to help us understand and approach the relevant issues.
- Pluralism must be more effectively understood and addressed.
- The discourse framing formal and informal Jewish education as a dichotomy is not helpful. Nor is the distinction between institutions focused on enculturation (i.e. camps) and those attending to literacy (i.e. schools). Both modes of bifurcation are unproductive.
- In every job type, Jewish educators should have a powerful and compelling vision about what engaged Jewish education looks like. They should have the understanding, commitment, and skills to work toward that vision.

Goals and Objectives

- Moving toward a more holistic body/heart/mind theory of education is key.
- Educators should help children understand and integrate their complex American and Jewish identities.
- Entry-level positions should be places where people can be creative, develop their identities, use self-expression, and feel real growth, since there are few financial rewards. This would be a real culture change. The field has treated people like migratory, seasonal and low paid labor. People who stay in these jobs too long are considered mediocre. The challenge will be to create more opportunities for career development.
- Young people expect to have multiple careers. We need an approach to structuring leadership that accommodates both continuity and turnover.
- A level of professionalism must be achieved among supplementary school teachers.
- In the training of educators, there needs to be an understanding of Jewish learning that more strongly reflects the depth of process between content and skills.
- Systematic family education is a key to congregational life. Jewish education should be about creating community through trans-generational participation.
- Experiential educators are a tremendous future resource. Efforts should be dedicated to making short-term work experiences in Jewish education positive.
- The negative image of Jewish education needs to be addressed. As it is now, parents discourage their children from becoming Jewish educators and children complain about their Jewish educational experiences.
- Meeting the needs of contemporary Jewish learners requires constant innovation and a willingness to let go of outdated formulas.

Challenges

- The biggest challenge in supplemental schools is recruiting quality teachers. As a result, the educational system often rests on shoulders of people who have no training and who are hired at the last minute.
- There is an increasing gap between the growing demands on supplementary school teaching positions and the skills and commitments of the teachers (who are often young, migratory, and undecided about their careers).
- The low status and salary of supplementary school teachers makes recruitment of bright people difficult.

- Challenges of recruitment are formidable. People who are inspired by camp experiences are commonly encouraged to become rabbis (rather than Jewish educators).
- There is a shortage of well-trained, highly qualified Jewish educators in places with small Jewish populations. There are few incentives to attract educators to those locales.
- The large number of Israeli women teaching in supplementary schools brings many layers of complication. A culture clash can occur in educational settings. Teachers tend to have minimal background knowledge about American Jews. They are not trained as educators and do not think of themselves as education professionals. Hebrew language is taught in the style of military education or as an Israel ulpan. Schools place the bulk of Israel programming on the shoulders of these teachers, who have complicated ideologies about the country they have left. Israeli teachers tend to self-segregate. This multi-layered dynamic sets the educational project up for failure.
- Bar/bat mitzvah training that uses the lowest common denominator does not effectively shape students' positive Jewish identities. Education should be about addressing real life through a Jewish lens.
- Debates have emerged about teaching priorities: should there be more focus on the acquisition of content knowledge or critical thinking skills? What constitutes the canon has also been a subject of debate.
- A new challenge is to simultaneously provide professionals with managerial leadership skills while also cultivating their deep familiarity of Jewish tradition and values.
- Earning a Master's degree in Jewish education is more extensive and time consuming than acquiring a general education degree. Why go for a MA in Jewish education that requires so much?
- There is culture of funding that prizes start-up and program models over long-term capacity building and substantive change initiatives.

↻ MOVING FORWARD ↻

Recruitment

- Begin the process of recruitment earlier. Work with teens, developing them as future educators and lay leaders.
- We should systematically invest in those with promise, who have shown interest by working for a year or two. They should be encouraged to stay a 3rd or 4th year, and offered professional development, and financial incentives. We need to create full time jobs with benefits, where responsibilities increase as people take clear steps along a career ladder.
- Assertively recruit Jewish educators from top schools. Transform the attitude that we cannot legitimately recruit in those realms.
- Develop a community of future educators through Hillel. Students who are teachers can do more than earn extra money. Their interest should be flamed through the cultivation of rich peer relationships.
- One recruitment pool for Jewish educational leaders is among rabbinical students. Many pursue MA's in Jewish education while studying for ordination.
- Educational training institutions that recruit should have access to birthright alumni, and other such networks of people who discover their Jewish identities outside of religious contexts.
- Recruit people who are having a mid-career change.
- Since many teachers learn at Pardes, the education there should include a clinical component.
- Avoid glitzy recruitment campaigns. Marketing will not help attract people if they cannot make a living.
- Fair salaries and a career ladder should be recruitment incentives.
- Training programs should not be market driven. It should not be easier to get an MA, simply because we need more educators.
- Recruitment must begin with improving supplementary schools, rather than simply trying to fill positions in existing schools.
- Emphasize specialties within Jewish education (i.e. experiential, family education, and camping). Recruit and induct based on individuals' interests in specialized areas within education.

- Provide models of people who are having good experiences in Jewish education.
- To recruit, we should interview educators and use their testimonies about why the work is rewarding and soul fulfilling.
- We should not underestimate people's desire to make a difference. The language of “a calling” and “Jewish leadership” should be re-appropriated from rabbinic recruitment rhetoric.

Professional Development

- Teachers at every level should have access to professional development offered by their places of employment.
- Recruitment, preparation, and induction need to be part of a continuous training structure. Schools need to be better equipped to induct, support and develop their teaching staff.
- Career paths and professional development opportunities should be created as incentives for teachers.
- Any professional development should be about Jewish identity formation and lifelong Jewish learning. Adult learning occurs in the service of children’s learning.
- Educators need ongoing education about Judaism, Jewish history, Hebrew, art, and travel to Israel to enrich their lives, improve their teaching, and to make the career more compelling.
- Educators who are trained for classroom settings and those who facilitate experiential learning should be convened to reflect up the strengths of both types of approaches.
- There should be a laboratory of innovative projects. That type of training ground is the best place for teachers to grow.
- Develop living laboratories: places where good practice and professional development are happening. Such programs are the most powerful sites for professional development.
- Extensive scholarships should be provided for Jewish educators to earn MA degrees. Funding should be available for graduate students so they can avoid debt and feel that the community is investing in them.

- As a form of professional development, working teachers should be recruited for MA programs in Jewish education.
- Develop more Jewish professional development leaders and mentor teachers.
- Money should be invested in the preparation of educational leaders, rather than in recruiting Hebrew school teachers. (Leaders can determine the vitality and direction of a school, whereas, individual teachers are less able to transform an organization).
- Cultivate cultural sensitivity training workshops for Israeli teachers.

Innovation and Transformation

- Experiment with initiatives that foster institutional collaboration. Develop ways for people to meet their Jewish needs from multiple sources.
- Support programs that offer multiple learning modalities.
- School transformation must go hand in hand with synagogue transformation. Change should be systemic. Cultivate teachers to be active members of their synagogue communities and teach synagogues how to treat teachers.
- Invest in institutions that deal with experiential Jewish education.
- The educational potential of camp as a rich learning environment should be capitalized on.
- Invest in efforts in which educational leaders are working to transform institutions. There is synergy between sophisticated leaders and revitalized organizations.
- Donors should be educated about teaching and education, to clarify common misconceptions. They must be sold on the importance of professional development. Encourage donors to help adequately compensate teachers and fund effective programs.
- Imaginative staffing patterns should be developed, so that rich opportunities are available for people who are making less of a long term commitment.
- Jewish education schools should have greater access to information about one another.
- There should be a literature of successes: a virtual library of multi-media, web-based cases that includes examples of living, breathing people who are excited about their Jewish educational career. Use this to inspire young people and help them envision themselves in the field.

- Train professional staff in congregations to be savvier about outreach. Relationship building should be a primary function.
- Davka writer should be used more widely so that teaching materials look more polished and contemporary.
- There should be a website to help teachers develop lessons integrating social studies with Judaic studies.
- Experiment with online technologies for professional development.
- Technology is important, but we should keep the perspective that it is a tool at best, not a value.