

Bereishit? If there are standards, it will help professionalize supplementary schools and really ratchet up the quality of curriculum in the schools. It has that potential; it's not automatic, because all of the other pieces have to be in place, such as resources, time, appropriate assessments that help you know whether or not students are achieving those standards, as well as professional development.

So, if anyone had the illusion that writing standards is an easy way to ensure quality, it really is an illusion. It's a piece of an entire system that is quite resource intensive, but the idea is that the results can be worth it.

Dr. Ada Beth Cutler is Dean of the School of Education at Montclair State University.

Editor's Suggested Discussion Guide:

- Cutler talks about both standards for student learning and standards for teacher performance and licensure. Underlying each of these areas is a results-oriented approach that focuses on outcomes rather than inputs.
 - The first step, then, would naturally have to be the creation of *consensus* in your group around desired outcomes for part-time Jewish education. To what extent is there agreement in your group about the results that you hope to achieve? What are the obstacles to achieving such consensus?
 - She also makes the point that *assessments* are the key to the impact of any standards. What would be needed to design and administer the sophisticated kinds of assessments Cutler advocates?
- Cutler acknowledges concerns about learning in context, about creativity and individual teacher judgment; yet she asserts, “There ought to be *accountability* to the standards.”

- What leads her to say this?
- What does your group think about whether there “ought to be accountability” in Jewish part-time education?
- Student achievement standards function in the arena of public education because there is accountability in terms of public image and even government sanctions. Who would be accountable to whom for student learning in your context?
- Cutler cautions against “magical thinking,” reminding us that we must have “opportunity to learn” standards. What are the financial, structural, and human *resources* you will need if you want standards to take hold in your context?
- One significant area Cutler discusses is standards for educators. To what extent would this be necessary or helpful in your context? How would you think about balancing expectations about quality with realities of supply of available teachers?

Central Agencies and the Voluntary Covenant: Making a Compelling Case for Standards

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Jewish religious institutions are no strangers to the debate over standards, so current in educational literature. The vocabulary of *halacha*, the Jewish way in life, is filled with terms of measurement and evaluation to determine whether or not an individual has fulfilled a particular ritual or sacred obligation. There are even legal and moral debates as to whether one must merely meet the obligatory minimum standard (*latzeit yedai chovato*) or exceed the letter of the law (*lifnim meshurat hadin*).

Judaism has always maintained that there are standards which demarcate proper from improper, but the tendency of Jewish tradition has historically been to keep those boundaries flexible. An example of the tension between obligatory standards and the need for flexibility is that of *Tefillah*. Jewish tradition has recognized that the prayers of every generation must be kept formalized yet fresh through the creative balance of *keva* (the fixed) and *kavannah* (the self-directed). Therefore, I would react to Dr. Ada Beth Cutler's comments using Jewish value-concepts: The use of

flexible standards could bring an increased measure of *tzedek* (righteous measure) and a balance of *din* (legislated goals) and *rachamim* (taking special needs into account) into our system of sacred education.

The national religious denominations and school associations have had very mixed results enforcing rigorous standards, and many central agencies have stalled in their attempts to craft local school or student assessments and standards for basic literacy. The quandary that modern Jewish communal institutions face with the issue of standards is a symptom of a more general issue: the nature of institutional authority in an era of what Rabbi Yitz Greenberg has called “voluntary covenant.” In Rabbi Greenberg’s formulation, the modern individual will choose to adhere to a standard when it is seen as *compelling*, but the time of *compulsory* adherence is gone. This voluntary covenant describes the potential relationship that central agencies for Jewish education could establish with their constituent schools around a “standards agenda.” The central agency has a number of opportunities to raise the standards banner in compelling ways.

CENTRAL AGENCIES AS CHANGE AGENTS

Central agency professionals are often the main conduit of information and research from general education to Jewish educators. For the standards debate in public education to begin to impact the Jewish school system, especially in the congregational schools, central agencies must create dissonance by moving standards to the top of the agenda. Teachers and principals must be exposed to the ever-expanding forms of learning assessment and to the more inclusive style of learning standards that give latitude to teachers and reflect the values and needs of the individual classroom and congregation.

The education of lay leadership in their supporting role in assessment and school-parent communication is critical. As Dr. Cutler points out, setting standards without identifying the financial, structural, or human resources that needs to be in place “is a form of magical thinking.” These same resources will need to be present at the communal level if the central agency is to embark on more effective consultation and training toward individual standards.

Central agency staff should have a working knowledge of each denomination’s standards so they may take congrega-

tions or denominationally affiliated day schools to the next step of self-assessment. There are good models in the private and independent school sector, in which accreditation teams guide a school through self-assessment, and then conduct site observations to confirm the adherence to a set of goals reflecting research-based, broadly accepted standards.

Informed professional and lay leadership, adequate resources, and a self-reflective model will help our schools overcome the “fear of accountability” factor and enter the world of standards.

Another compelling focus for a central agency’s standards agenda is the area of professional development. The National Staff Development Council (NSDC) has developed a set of detailed standards grounded in research that documents the connection between staff development and student learning. The Association of Directors of Central Agencies for Jewish education (ADCA) has explored the compatibility of these standards with the Jewish school systems, and we believe there is much to be gained by modeling these standards to our schools and helping to provide the context and support for individual schools to build learning communities for their faculty.

Trumpeting the message, “If you don’t know where you are going, how will you know when you arrive?” NSDC emphasizes the important role of mission and vision statements to help schools identify the course they should be steering. This is parallel to the language of change and transformation in business and non-profit communal organizations. Central agencies are well positioned to use consultation and training to advocate for vision and mission discussions in schools.

STANDARDS FOR CENTRAL AGENCY CONSULTING

My experience is that the consultative process in educational agencies is one of the most misunderstood and undervalued by lay leadership and funding agencies. The consultant often works behind the scenes, helping school personnel do their jobs more effectively. Credit is rarely attributed to the consultation process. And there are, of course, consultations which may not yield the desired effect, due to a variety of circumstances beyond any one individual’s control.

Consultation standards could help manage expectations, control some of the variables which limit effectiveness, and manage the expenditure of resources. A protocol of consultation standards based on the social worker-client model would define the steps of client service and include measures of confidentiality, objectivity, assessment, and prescriptive suggestions. A *brit avodah* between the agency and a school or an individual delineates what structures need be in place from the client's side and what services in which time frame would be provided from the agency's side.

While the educational world has entered the age of standards, central agencies for Jewish education continue to struggle with issues related to defining core mission, addressing changing client needs and expectations, establishing a balance between direct service and consultation, and projecting a sense of professionalism and credibility to the funding and client community. Many central agencies have developed split personalities – acting as “system maintainers” to maximize the current,

very loose system composed of voluntary associations of educational institutions, and as “change agents” charged by federations or community leadership groups with improving and transforming local education. National standards may not be feasible for the near term, but local processes around standards could have ripple effects of community-wide educational improvement. Central agencies will do well to focus on establishing internal standards for consulting and on strengthening their voluntary covenant with schools by making a compelling case for standards. In these ways, central agencies can move the stalled assessment and accountability agenda forward.

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Editor's Suggested Discussion Guide:

- West assumes that central agencies, along with other bodies such as national school associations, will need to abandon accountability in favor of “making a compelling case” for standards among the schools and congregations which they serve. Is this a valid assumption?
- Educating teachers, principals, and lay leadership is one way West proposes to raise the standards of part-time Jewish education. How is this best done? Will it effect change?
- He also proposes guided/coached self-assessment (similar to the model developed by Emil Jacoby – see his article on page 25). This differs from the model offered by Ada Beth Cutler, who advocates externally-set standards focused on outcomes rather than inputs. What are the costs and benefits of the self-study versus the outcomes standards?

- West reflects on the need for standards for central agency consulting. To what extent would taking this step toward modeling accountability serve central agencies well in their attempts to “move the stalled assessment and accountability goal forward: in part-time Jewish education?
- West mentions the “fear of accountability” factor that will need to be overcome by schools in order to “enter the world of standards.” To what extent is this hesitation operative in your context? To what extent is it the primary obstacle to quality improvement in part-time Jewish education?
- West presents a model in which the religious denominations create standards for their affiliated educational institutions, whereas central agencies coach schools in reaching those goals. Does that seem to be the most logical role for central agencies and for religious movements with regard to part-time Jewish education standards?