

## INTRODUCTION BY THE EDITOR

Effecting change on a national level in a decentralized educational system represents a major challenge. Both practical constraints and commitment to the ideal of local control narrow the options for national bodies such as the religious movements. Yet below are updates on two current initiatives which have embraced this challenge and are moving forward to advance the cause of congregational education.

Temma Kingsley describes the logic behind the Conservative Movement's new set of standards for its congregational schools, *Framework for Excellence*. She outlines the realities that led to their development, and explains the elements that were integrated into these national standards.

Rabbi Jan Katzew introduces CHAI – Learning for Jewish Life, the new curriculum under development by the Reform Movement. He provides insight into the Jewish and educational philosophies that undergird the design of this national curriculum and identifies its key components. These descriptions will be helpful for groups deliberating on setting policy on a national level, as well as for leadership of synagogues and congregational schools seeking to implement these initiatives.

## A New Set of Standards

TEMMA KINGSLEY

As the chairperson of the Task Force on Congregational School Standards of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, I am very proud of the work we have done in creating the new Framework for Excellence standards. The Framework offers six models for congregational schools. Each model requires certain basic elements and benchmarks for quality and then offers different emphases. With the help of the United Synagogue education staff, the school selects the model that will maximize the opportunity for quality Jewish education in its setting. A school may want to emphasize *Shabbat* participation, or family education, or an increased number of program years or expanded hours in the high school years. Mandated elements include planned and congregation-supported staff development as well as clergy involvement. The entire Framework for Excellence in Education document along with the Aims Statement for Synagogue Schools is available at the United Synagogue website ([www.uscj.org](http://www.uscj.org)) under “Lifelong Learning.”

### EVALUATING THE EXISTING STANDARD

Our task force began deliberations almost three years ago with discussions about the standard that existed at that

time: five years of school, three sessions each week, each session to be two hours long. None of the sessions was to take place on *Shabbat*. We understood the importance of maximizing class time and frequency of contact. We looked at research that corroborated our intuition that time and frequency lead to the greatest mastery of material. We listened to testimony from outstanding, successful school leaders who feared that changing the 5x3x2 formula would “water down” Jewish education.

On the other hand, upon examining attendance records to see whether youngsters were actually attending all the mandated sessions with regularity, it became apparent that changing demographics were contributing to erratic attendance patterns in some areas. Jewish families living far from the synagogue were unable to make the long trip three times a week. Shared custody arrangements meant that many children spent weekends in communities away from their schools. In focus group after focus group, in every one of United Synagogue's regions, lay and professional leadership shared their frustration with these situations and strongly requested that we consider this in designing the new standards.

Under the guidance of Rabbi Robert Abramson, the Director of Education for the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, we evaluated what was happening in our congregational schools. We paid particular attention to schools producing positive results: young people in significant numbers were staying in school beyond the years required for *bar/bat mitzvah*; families were becoming involved in their children's and their own Jewish education; or there was significant *Shabbat* and holiday attendance by a large proportion of the school population. What was happening in these schools that enabled them to produce the results that we as the lay leadership of the Conservative movement viewed as crucial to the perpetuation of Judaism? We learned that the schools that met the six-hour standard and were committed to quality education were indeed producing desirable results: but that the six-hour standard alone did not define or determine effectiveness. Because Rabbi Abramson and his staff are in constant touch with our congregational schools and in dialogue with the principals, he was aware of the locations around the country where the best results were being achieved. We were then able to include elements of the programs of those schools in the Framework.

## FRAMEWORK FOR EXCELLENCE

The most effective schools reward and improve their faculty by both encouraging and enabling professional development for principals and teachers. This became a required element of our new set of standards, the Framework for Excellence. Congregations are expected to move toward appropriate licensing and certification for schools and faculty. Principals are expected to avail themselves of the networking and learning possibilities afforded them by membership in and attendance at conferences of the Jewish Educators Assembly.

Because we understand the impact of informal education and experience-based education, our new standards expect that schools will encourage Jewish camp (*Ramah*), youth activities (USY), and appropriate Israel trips.

Because our task force feels that an increase in the mandated years of study will have a major positive impact on the education of our youth, we encourage congregations to offer a Jewish early childhood setting where the population exists. According to a study done this year by Ilene Vogelstein and David Kaplan for the Jewish Early

Childhood Education Partnership, "New understandings about the development and transmission of cultural behaviors and beliefs, coupled with the knowledge that children spend substantial amounts of time in early childhood programs, suggest that early childhood education is the perfect opportunity to shape the Jewish identity of young children and their families and to lay the foundation for subsequent Jewish experiences and involvement." Thus, the early childhood program provides a most effective entry point for families into the synagogue world and the initial offerings of family education that take place informally in that setting. The early childhood experience often fosters a positive attitude toward Jewish education and connection, setting the stage for the attainment of the aims of the Conservative synagogue school.

We also understand that if we allow students to conclude their Jewish education at the end of their *bar/bat mitzvah* year, we relinquish the opportunity to influence the high school years of adolescent identity development. Because it is exceedingly important to reinforce their Jewish identity before students go off to college and meet the influences of the world at large, we now require education through the high school years. Schools entering the Framework must begin to provide legitimate Jewish education for the high school age students. This may be achieved in a classroom setting, as an independent study program, as a distance learning experience, or in a flexible plan designed by the rabbi or educational director.

Schools are now required to document that the education of their youth has been developed through a collaborative effort of parents, faculty, lay leadership, and clergy. In particular, we see rabbinic input, concern, and participation as critical in creating a solid educational program.

The United Synagogue Department of Education recognizes that it must continue to serve as a resource, along with the Davidson School of Education and the Melton Institute at the Jewish Theological Seminary for the creation of exciting and innovative curricula. The *Etgar* curriculum is currently in the process of development by a team of educators representing those institutions.

The response of congregations to the new standards has been overwhelmingly favorable. Many synagogues and their schools have already been visited by Wendy Light, the new consultant in the Department of Education whose

portfolio is helping schools to select their model and move towards its enactment. Each school administration is anxious to develop a program that is in keeping with one of the six models defined in the Framework. Our congregational schools are required to move toward full compliance with the new standards. The entire staff of the Department of Education will continue to make themselves available to assist the schools of our member congregations. Professional and lay leadership are eager to raise their schools to new levels and to meet the standards for the new Framework for Excellence. Right now the standards are mandated only for schools with more than 75 students. We will be reviewing and revising the standards for smaller schools in remote communities. We hope that in five years, all of our congregational schools will be part of the Framework and will provide our next generation with a solid foundation on which to build a Jewish life.

We know that we are only at the beginning of a long and developing process, but initial reactions indicate that our institutions are ready and excited about meeting standards based on best practices in institutions that have produced results. It is our hope that our youth will benefit from all of our efforts, growing to become educated, caring Jews and to live meaningful Jewish lives.

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## CHAI – Learning for Jewish Life

RABBI JAN KATZEW

### CHALLENGE

**T**he fundamental challenge we face in Jewish life in general and Jewish education in particular transcends any single movement. How can we help episodic Jews who live Judaism from time to time to live fully as Jews who live Judaism all the time? How can we nurture those who are Jewish by choice, who knowingly, passionately, and joyfully identify as Jews? Accepting the premise that we live in an age defined by choice, how can we raise a generation that will consciously choose to learn and live as Jews? All Jewish schooling is supplemental. Jewish families still serve as the primary educational institution in the Jewish community. When the Judaism lived at home is dissonant with the Judaism learned in school, home wins and consequently, too often, Judaism loses.

In the Reform Movement, approximately 120,000 children study in congregational schools, complemented by up to 5,000 that study in day schools. “Does the Reform Movement have a curriculum?” is an important and urgent question. Up until now, we have equivocated.

“Each congregational culture is unique.” “A curriculum is not a document; it is a living portrait, a dynamic shared learning experience.” “Textbooks do not constitute a curriculum.” All of these statements may be true, but they do not tell the whole truth.

Whom are we kidding? We are short on teachers who are as Jewishly literate and competent as they are caring. We lack teachers who are committed to Reform Judaism and who come to class with a clear, cogent, and compelling lesson plan. In the *yeshivat ma’alah*, the ideal class, we would have learners and teachers who are fully present and who understand Jewish learning as central to their lives. But, in our schools and in our synagogues, in our real lives as Jewish educators, the teachers are avocational. They are busy, and despite their intentions, they often do not have the time to develop a well-conceived plan for a lesson, to say nothing of a unit or a year.

At the 2001 UAHC Biennial in Boston, Rabbi Eric Yoffie articulated his clearest vision to date of the Jewish school residing at the heart of congregational life: