

How Do We Invest Strategically in our Future?

by Joshua Elkin

Those of us who work professionally within the Jewish community often think about which investments will have the most positive influence on our Jewish future. Make no mistake about it - Jewish education is the most strategic target for the investment of financial and human resources. Seymour Epstein, Director of the Board of Jewish Education and Vice-President for Jewish education at United Jewish Appeal-Jewish Federation of Greater Toronto, sums up this position: “Jewish education is the strategic plan of the Jewish people.”

When you think about our long history, it is nearly impossible to imagine that we would be here today as Jews were it not for a significant and ongoing investment in Jewish education in a variety of forms. The first paragraph of the *Sh'ma* and the structure of the *Haggadah* have it right – it is all about teaching our children, for they are indeed our future, individually and collectively.

But simply saying that Jewish education is the best investment begs a bigger question. How can one invest most strategically in Jewish education? Based in part on our experience at the Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education (PEJE) over the course of the last decade, I offer the following areas as the prime targets for investment in Jewish education.

A. Envisioning a bright new future

More than from a dearth of money, we suffer from a dearth of vision. We need to invest in our people - professional and volunteer leaders – to help them imagine different futures. We desperately need new ideas and new strategies to propel us forward. Investing in helping leaders become more capable in the envisioning and re-envisioning process is one of our most significant leverage points. We need to provide workshops, retreats, and other opportunities where Jewish educators and volunteer leadership can dream and envision their desired future, and then align efforts to help make those visions a reality. We need to articulate the school of our dreams, the camp of our dreams, or the adult learning opportunities of our dreams.

B. World Class Governance

A second target for highly strategic investment is building effective governance for Jewish educational settings. We would do well to ensure that every Jewish educational organization has a year-round Committee on Trustees which concerns itself with Board performance, Board development, and Board evaluation. Accomplishing this will require serious caching and guidance. However, the caliber of the resulting governing bodies will validate the wisdom of the investment.

C. Professional – Board Partnership

Investing in shaping this key partnership represents yet another strategic move. All too often we hear about Boards micro-managing the work of a Jewish educational organization, or we see a professional who is carrying the total weight of the organization on his/her shoulders, with little, if any, Board involvement. Running a truly effective and sustainable program of any sort necessitates a carefully crafted team effort in which key professionals and Board members have defined roles that are tweaked and adjusted as needed over time.

D. Reflection/Evaluation

Any sound investment in Jewish education must stem from an awareness of the power of reflectivity and regular evaluation. Such a posture keeps everyone on his/her toes. The annual evaluation of the Board is paralleled by the annual review of the top professional, which should be performed by an appointed sub-committee. Routinely providing annual Board reviews removes the sting from them and enables professional and volunteer leaders to grow and improve their skills. To instill these evaluations in the culture of the institution usually requires a coach. Investing in this kind of coaching will pay rich dividends well into the future.

E. Culture of Accessing Expertise

We must invest to change the way Jewish educational settings tackle the difficult challenges that they face, be they financial, ideological, or sociological. I believe that our Jewish institutions and their leaders are dangerously under-coached. There seems to be a culture of going it alone or re-inventing the wheel, rather than turning to experienced mentors, coaches, consultants, or experts with extensive experience. Financial support can help underwrite the costs of bringing in valuable expertise until such time as each Jewish educational institution can secure the needed resources to pay for the coach itself.

F. Building Bridges

All too often, Jewish educational institutions operate as islands, with few, if any, meaningful connections to other settings where Jewish education takes place. We need investment that encourages professionals and volunteers from different types of programs and settings to connect with each other and to build organic bonds. So much needs to be done to nurture these avenues of collaboration and synergy, which include day school – synagogue, synagogue – camp, early childhood programs – adult learning, and youth groups – Israel programs. The deeper the links, the more powerful the synergy and the more creativity is unleashed. The whole is indeed greater than the sum of its parts.

G. Some Personal Favorites

I can't conclude a statement on investment priorities in Jewish education without citing some of my personal favorites. We need to invest in Hebrew language literacy. Hebrew is the ultimate bonding agent of the Jewish people. I also believe that the Arts -- music, dance, and theatre -- have not received their due. The Arts

have the power to touch our souls in deep ways. An investment here is undoubtedly worthwhile.

This portfolio of investment possibilities in Jewish education is most definitely not intended to be the final word, but rather a catalyst to get us all thinking about what it really means to invest strategically in the Jewish future. May we all live to see the day when all professional and volunteer leaders work synergistically while respecting their unique roles, and where we can know that all of our investments are leveraged and well integrated into the fabric of Jewish educational life.

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