

# Rethinking and Redesigning the Religious School

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The afternoon religious school is an institution Jews love to hate. For over a century, educational professionals, lay leaders, parents, and students alike have been relentless in their critiques of the congregational school: the hours are inconvenient, discipline is lax, the teachers are unprofessional, and the students are bored. Responses to this situation have varied over time. In the 1970s, for example, the denominational movements created new curricula, and local Bureaus of Jewish Education launched initiatives to recruit and train teachers. In the 1980s and 1990s, in contrast, the religious school suffered from benign neglect, as communal leaders focused their attention on day schools, pre-schools, Israel trips, and other modes of informal Jewish education.

Today, however, leaders of the Jewish community realize that they cannot avoid dealing with congregational education, in general, and the congregational school, in particular. The majority of Jewish children are educated in religious schools. Any attempt to strengthen Jewish continuity must, inevitably, focus on improving the schools where most children learn about Judaism.

While all the critiques mentioned above are, to some extent, true, we believe that the root cause of the problem is one of unclear and conflicting expectations. Some parents see the religious school as a place for their children to associate with other Jews, while others see it as a vehicle for bar and bat mitzvah preparation. Still others expect religious school attendance to be simply a necessary (if unpleasant) part of being Jewish. Educators themselves are divided as to the primary goals. Are the goals to develop Jewish identity? Enjoy being Jewish? Motivate children to continue their Jewish education during high school and college? Learn Hebrew, or Torah, or history? With so many disparate goals, it is difficult for a congregational school to succeed.

At its best, religious school is only one element of a full program of congregational education. A congregation should offer all of its members a variety of learning experiences throughout their lives, including pre-school, family education, adolescent programs, retreats, and adult classes, in addition to religious school. These programs should have as their overriding goal the enculturation of congregants of all ages — enabling congregants to encounter the richness of the Jewish tradition and to develop in themselves strong Jewish identities, commitments, and practices. To paraphrase Hillary Clinton, “it takes a synagogue to educate a Jew.” Enculturation should be the goal of every aspect of congregational life, not just the religious school.

A decade ago, the Rhea Hirsch School of Education, at the Los Angeles campus of the Hebrew Union College, began the Experiment in Congregational Education (ECE) as a vehicle for transformation. Our goals were to create both congregations of learners (in which more people participate in richer and deeper learning) and learning congregations (which are reflective, ready to experiment, and practice collaborative leadership). During our first decade we worked intensively with fourteen congregations throughout North America. For the past year, under grants from the Nathan Cummings and Koret Foundations, the ECE has expanded its activities in an effort to reach a larger number of congregations, and to quicken the pace of their transformation. One of our new efforts focuses on re-thinking and re-designing the congregational school.

Through research and site visits, we have identified five alternative models that enrich and deepen participants’ experiences. These models stress parents and children attending school together on a regular basis; transforming parents into teachers; forming Shabbat communities filled with learning and celebration; creating memorable experiences through the arts and large-scale events; combining instruction with after-school day care; and offering flexible scheduling arrangements through tutoring, camping, and independent study.

These models can’t be transplanted without careful attention to context. They evolved in particular settings in response to specific needs, and in consonance with certain values affirmed by their communities. Each one owes its success, in large part, to a supportive congregational environment, in which learning is considered a communal responsibility.

A congregation thinking about adapting one (or a combination of several) of these models should, therefore, ask itself the following questions:

- What is our vision of congregational learning, and what role should the religious school play in that vision?

- How can we adapt elements of the alternative models to fit this vision, and respond to our congregation's needs?
- How can our congregation support the new model to increase its chances for success?

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