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**LEARNING FROM
THE CUTTING EDGE
IN EDUCATION**

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The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life is dedicated to strengthening and transforming American Jewish Life to ensure a flourishing, sustainable community in a fully integrated free society. We seek to revitalize Jewish identity through educational and cultural initiatives that are designed to reach out to all Jews, with an emphasis on those who are on the margins of Jewish life, as well as to advocate for and support Hebrew and Jewish literacy among the general population.


LEARNING FROM THE CUTTING EDGE IN EDUCATION

The Jewish communal world often operates in a vacuum. By its very nature, the enterprise of nurturing and sustaining a particular identity in the multicultural quilt of American society necessitates a seemingly introverted focus. Thus it is that much of the innovation in the Jewish world percolates in its own universe, separate from the outside world.

This is a shame, because there is much the Jewish community can learn from wider society. Specifically in the area of education, recent years have seen major theoretical and pragmatic advances in the field of learning. Some of these advances involve the way individuals learn; others involve the very structure of our educational institutions. All are aimed at effectiveness, efficiency and excellence. As it seeks ways to strengthen its schools and connect with young families, the Jewish community would be remiss to ignore these innovations.

The articles in this issue of CONTACT explore many of the best new ideas that have proven themselves successful in strengthening teaching and revitalizing schools. From institutional collaboration to communities of practice, from new methods of language instruction to innovations in early childhood education, these advances have already galvanized educational reform in communities across America. Taken together, they offer promise to the Jewish community as it seeks to implement the highest standards of Jewish educational excellence.

Eli Valley
Eli Valley



WHAT WE CAN LEARN: Jewish Schools and Today's Best Educational Approaches

by ELI SCHAAP

“Create schools! Improve the schools you already have! This is the call we would pass from city to city; it is an appeal to the hearts, the minds and the conscience of our Jewish brethren, pleading with them to champion that most sacred of causes — the cause of thousands of unhappy Jewish souls who are in need of schools, of better Jewish schools, for their rebirth as Jews.” (Samson Raphael Hirsch, October 1854)

While we have made some progress since Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's writing, his cry still needs to be heeded. There are many areas in which Jewish education can be significantly improved, especially by looking towards the cutting edge of innovation in the field of general education. For example, several approaches, such as mentoring and induction and the new focus on assessment, can be extremely valuable to the effort of achieving excellence. However, all these approaches make sense only if they are part of an overall, school-wide vision and plan. Unless the key stakeholders in a school jointly agree on their goals, all improvements will be temporary and not transformative. Without such a plan we will never know whether we are succeeding or failing.

I am not talking about expensive investments. Once a plan is agreed upon and goals are set for the short- and long-term, the next steps are coordination and communication. With the new technologies available, it is possible, at a reasonable cost, to transform a school's website into a tool for ongoing communication and cooperation, including bulletin boards, a shared calendar, shared documents, analyses of students' performance, and an unlimited number of sub-websites for teachers, parents and administrators. All this can be accomplished in a secure environment that protects sensitive student records and parent information.

While mentoring and induction programs come at a cost, the investment in these programs is less than the annual

costs of hiring novice teachers who, without the proper support, don't just leave the school but often leave the field, creating significant teacher shortages. It is shocking that roughly 25 percent of teachers are new to their schools in both day school and supplementary schools. It is extremely hard to create an organization of excellence when 25 percent of the staff is new to the organization each year.

The best for-profit and non-profit organizations are data driven. They constantly measure their performances against their goals and take steps to improve their programs. One advantage to this is that teachers and administrators can monitor student progress on an ongoing basis. Too many schools have no idea what happens with each student over time, so they cannot design differentiated instruction plans. If one of the goals of our schools is to have every child succeed, it would necessitate using the best of differentiated instruction so that we don't lose students because the teaching is too advanced or too boring. In many schools, the teachers spend much of their time teaching frontally rather than using differentiated teaching methods.

Being data-driven not only improves teaching; it also helps monitor short- and long-term goals, allowing the leadership to make necessary small adjustments to the plan on an ongoing basis. It can even help produce income if the students and their parents are tracked after the students graduate. Too many schools have lost all contact with their graduates, which prevents assessment of the long-term effect of students' education. If schools were to keep track of their alumni, they might facilitate significant fundraising. Universities raise most of their donations from alumni, but few Jewish schools have succeeded in raising significant funds from their graduates.

“New” is not necessarily good. Efforts towards improving schools, such as experimenting with merit pay or establishing an intensive professional development plan, only make sense if they properly fit into a

school's overall plans. The goal of a school should not be to use these methods and tools because they are the newest trends, but because they will contribute significantly towards achieving clearly defined goals. Too often, new approaches to teaching are used simply because a “competitive” school led the way. For example, there has been a trend in Orthodox day schools to start the teaching of Talmud at earlier and earlier ages. This ignores brain research studies showing that children don't have the capacity to grasp complicated texts such as the Talmud at too young an age. Actually, *Pirkei Avot* could have reminded these schools that starting Talmud at too early an age doesn't make sense (“Yehudah ben Tema used to say ... a fifteen-year old begins the study of Gemara.” — *Pirkei Avot*, 5:25).

This leads me to a final thought: in the search for excellence, we should not ignore the many great pedagogic ideas that come from millennia of Jewish tradition. Mixing formal learning with experiential education is not new. The Pesach Seder is probably the most successful form of Jewish education, attracting far more Jews than any other form of Jewish education over the last few thousand years. Learning by doing and by imitating role models is stressed throughout the Talmud and can be easily found in the thoughts of the sages of the Middle Ages such as Maimonides and the author of the *Sefer HaChinuch* (the book of education that discusses the 613 mitzvot). Service learning, as well, can be an excellent tool in teaching students about community and instilling them with values. However, this is not necessarily a new approach. Rather, it is an essential part of Jewish education — something too many Jews have forgotten.

All teaching of children is a partnership between educators, students and parents. Even with the best methodologies and tools, if we leave out even one of these partners we will not succeed in reaching our ultimate goal of excellence in Jewish education. ■

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WHAT Jewish Day Schools CAN LEARN FROM Public Education

by HARVEY NEWMAN

In the 1970s, New York City's public schools were notorious examples of educational failure. At the time, I was working in East Harlem's District 4, which ranked 32 out of the city's 32 community school districts in terms of student academic performance. Along with a number of other educational leaders, I transformed District 4 into a system of public school choice where parents and students could select the school they preferred to attend. Schools competed for student enrollment, and school leaders were empowered to make decisions to advance the vision and mission of their schools. If the schools could not make enrollment, they were shut down. We let parents and students make the decisions in terms of which schools deserved to expand and grow, and the result was amazing. Within eight years, District 4 moved up to rank 17th among the city's school districts for student performance. We were still educating the same community, but now schools saw their roles as providing exemplary educational environments that engaged students and parents and met the needs of all students, from those with special needs to those with unique intellectual, artistic and musical talents.

In the years since, I have worked as a teacher, principal and leader in the New York City public school system, where I have helped advance the concept of public school choice as a strategy to better serve all students. The question arises: can Jewish day schools benefit from the same philosophies that reinvigorated District 4? The answer is an emphatic yes. Indeed, to ensure their future, Jewish day schools must embrace the concept of school choice and learn from the history of New York City's public schools, which have modeled school choice for the past three decades.

First, let me share my personal history with day schools, which dates back over six decades and runs parallel to my experience in public schools. As a young child in an observant family, my parents made the then obvious choice of enrolling me in our newly opened, local Orthodox day school. On my first day, I arrived ready to learn, but the staff was not prepared to receive me. Concerned with the disorganization of the school, my parents made the much harder choice of pulling me out of the day school and enrolling me in public school.

In the mid-1970s, my wife and I made the choice to enroll our son and daughter in day school. Because of my own history, the choice was more challenging for us than it had been for my parents. However, we wanted to ensure that our children would

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be integrated into their Jewish culture as well as prepared for academic success. Unfortunately, we learned that those two aspects — Jewish culture and academics — do not always align well in day schools. Our daughter spent nursery through 6th grade at her Orthodox day school, where she achieved the highest overall academic achievement in her class. We removed her after being told that she would not be selected as the class valedictorian because our family was deemed to be not as rigorous in our Jewish faith and cultural practices as were her classmates' families.

The final personal experience I will share is that of my granddaughter, who attended a community day school in the Bay area. After several months, my son and daughter-in-law were informed that their daughter was not progressing satisfactorily at the day school. She had learning delays that would have required the school to provide adaptive strategies. In addition, it was a struggle for her parents to get her to go to school every day. Having worked in education for several decades, I knew that the challenges required a more supportive educational setting. When they visited New York City later that month, we had our granddaughter fully evaluated. The experts identified a perceptual motor vision problem that was disrupting her ability to focus on schoolwork. The problem was easily remedied, and our granddaughter is now thriving in a secular independent school.

I share these stories not to show my unique experiences with Jewish day schools or to claim that all day schools in North America suffer from these problems. However, my stories illustrate four critical needs in Jewish day schools that must be addressed in order for them to become schools of choice for contemporary families:

1. PROFESSIONALIZE OPERATIONS — In the 21st Century, parents expect schools to operate like other contemporary organizations and institutions. This means that schools must establish clear and functioning systems for enrolling students, tracking student performance, aligning curricula and instruction with student needs, as well as communicating with and involving parents in their child's academic, social and emotional growth. In public schools, these relationships and processes are fully documented and made publicly transparent so that, at any given time, a parent can review the school's performance in serving their child as well as the entire student population. Students from day schools will ultimately compete with

students from public schools and other independent schools for admission to higher levels of education. Therefore, it is more important than ever that day schools match the quality and level of transparency provided within public schools.

2. BE ACCOUNTABLE TO THE ENTIRE COMMUNITY — Only 10 percent of the Jewish community in the United States is comprised of Orthodox Jews, while 97 percent of the children at Jewish day schools come from Orthodox families. The other 90 percent of our community typically sends their children to traditional public schools or to independent schools. Jewish day schools need to expand their community involvement and engagement to reach out to and meet the needs of non-Orthodox Jews, who will, no doubt, continue to leave day schools, particularly as more diverse Jewish culture-based schools, such as Hebrew language charter schools, become available to them.

IN LIGHT OF *the current financial crisis, it is now more important than ever to learn from the best public schools on how to achieve excellence.*

3. MEET THE NEEDS OF ALL STUDENTS — Jewish day schools are often ill equipped to meet the needs of students with special needs. In a normal population, up to 15 percent of students require some sort of intervention service. In the pre-kindergarten years, parents can access special education resources from their local school districts through complicated petitions, assessments and therapy programs. Once their children enter kindergarten, it falls to the parents to privately subsidize special education resources that can range from speech therapy to therapies for autism spectrum disorders to physical therapy for hearing, sight or other physical delays and disabilities. When independent schools such as Jewish day schools do not provide such services, parents of children with special needs often have no choice other than public education, where these services are guaranteed.

4. HIRE EXCELLENT SCHOOL LEADERS — The three elements described above will be successfully

addressed if a school has intelligent, strong leadership. The job of a school leader in a Jewish day school is unique from that of any other form of leadership. The head of school must be able to guide curricula and instruction; advance student recruitment and enrollment; identify, develop and retain highly qualified teachers; as well as oversee business operations for the school. In many ways, leaders in Jewish day schools have similar jobs to leaders of charter schools, which are public schools but operate with autonomy from their local school districts in exchange for accountability. Over the past ten years of the charter school movement in New York, we have learned that the most effective charter school leaders must be highly experienced educators who have a clear vision for the school. They must be able to foster leadership among their staffs to help address the multiple issues typically handled by a school district office. Many of the most successful charter school organizations have begun to address

the leadership needs of their schools by establishing national leadership academies with criteria that align with the leadership needs of the schools. Jewish day schools should do no less.

Jewish day schools have long struggled with budgetary constraints. In today's economic downturn, financial concerns are even more acute. Thankfully, most of these ideas will not require major new infusions of capital. In fact, once implemented, they will make day schools all the more competitive with other private schools. In light of the current financial crisis, it is now more important than ever to learn from the best public schools on how to achieve excellence. Jewish day schools are in a much better position than those East Harlem schools to transform their future as an educational system. Now is the time for our day schools to address the issues that have limited their appeal and service to the broadest spectrum of American Jews, so that they can transform themselves into cornerstones of a stronger and more vibrant Jewish community for generations to come. ■

WELL-FUNCTIONING EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

by MICHAEL BEN-AVIE, Ph.D.

WHAT'S NEEDED IS *an evidence-based approach to guide programs as they change their operating systems and thereby increase their capacity.*

In the Jewish community, a great deal of energy is diffused as organizations develop program after program that leave only a momentary trace. With the best of intentions, philanthropists and Jewish institutions fund programs that make very little difference in the end. The reason for this emerged from research that I conducted with Dr. Jeffrey Kress, Davidson School of Education, during 2006-2007 on learning and developmental outcomes among youth and adults in Jewish educational settings.

The aim of the research in Jewish day schools, Camp Ramah, and the North American Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY) was to empirically investigate the childhood roots of quality of life among Jewish adults. A noteworthy secondary finding of the research was that the field of Jewish education is awash with innovative ideas that are rarely implemented well, if at all. This is because Jewish schools and educational programs tend to operate in a crisis mode. Thus, they do not have the capacity to implement these innovative ideas. Jewish educational programs need the

skill sets to improve their “operating systems.” With an operating system that functions well, they are able to:

1. increase the likelihood that they will achieve their visions;
2. manage all the different initiatives and programs that compete for their time, money and energy;
3. coordinate efforts with other Jewish educative programs;
4. learn the skill set to effectively work well together.

One of the most poignant findings from the research was that 42 percent of the educators agreed that “We talk and talk in meetings, but not much happens afterwards.”

Educators and volunteers are working very hard, but their efforts are dissipated by program fragmentation. For example, the staffs of Jewish camps and youth groups rarely collaborate, even though the same youth are enrolled in both educational programs.

Indeed, the research indicated that the same youth are engaged in multiple Jewish educational programs. Consider that 57 percent of the NFTY respondents indicated that last camp that they attended was a Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) sleep-away camp, and 22 percent another Jewish camp. Moreover, 33 percent of the respondents indicated that they are involved in family education

programs in their congregations. Those youth who tend to participate in NFTY regional events also tend to go to a URJ sleep-away camp. Moreover, those youth who are enrolled in family education tend to be more involved in the life of their congregations (e.g., committees). This pattern was also seen among adults.

The problem is that there are issues too big for any Jewish educational program to handle on its own (e.g., the transition of youth as they age from one program to the next). It makes sense, then, for Jewish educational programs to coordinate these transitions. What's needed is an evidence-based approach to guide programs as they change their operating systems and thereby increase their capacity. When Jewish schools and educational programs move beyond operating in a crisis mode, they will have the capacity (or energy) to coordinate efforts with others outside of their own educational programs.

Fortunately, Jewish educational programs are able to turn to a tried and true process for changing the operating systems of educational programs. The Yale Child Study Center's School Development Program (SDP) is one of the country's largest educational change initiatives. SDP works with schools throughout the world to promote both healthy relationships in school communities and high academic achievement of students. According to *Review of Educational Research*, SDP's process meets “the highest standard of evidence” for comprehensive school reforms

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that improved student achievement (Borman, G. D., G. M., Overman, L. T., & Brown, S., "Comprehensive School Reform and Student Achievement: A Meta-Analysis," 2003). SDP changes the whole underlying operating system of the school on behalf of students' learning and development. SDP has its roots in the field of community psychology and public health. Hence, its principles and team approach to reform are relevant not only for schools, but also for camps, youth groups and adult education.

SDP helps school communities organize themselves into three teams:

- **THE SCHOOL PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT TEAM (SPMT)**, which coordinates all the initiatives in the school by developing a Comprehensive School Plan (CSP). The SPMT is not the school board or school leadership team. It is comprised of members of all the different constituent groups (administrators, teachers, parents, child development specialists, community members) and meets twice a month to ensure that all the activities of the school are aligned with the goals and objectives embedded within the CSP.
- **THE PARENT TEAM (PT)**, whose role it is to engage parents in caring for the well-being of all the students in the school and not just their own children. The Parent Team is not the PTA or PTO. Typical activities of the PT include workshops on such topics

as standardized testing and the new math curriculum, social events to encourage parents' identification with the school, and enhancement of the school for all the students.

- **THE STUDENT SERVICES TEAM**, also known as the Student and Staff Support Team, which engages in global preventive planning to ensure students' healthy development and to manage individual cases. The team usually comprises such specialists as school psychologists and guidance counselors, an administrator, and one or more community members who are also professionals in the field of child development.

Educational reform is all about relationships. It necessitates changing the way people interact with one another on behalf of the students. Schools and educational programs operating in a crisis mode are characterized by passionate debates about the brand of coffee served in the teachers lounge while children's learning and developmental needs remain unmet. In these schools, issues are discussed in the parking lot instead of in forums where the issues may be addressed and resolved. The greatest challenge to working well together is our powerful human tendency to be defensive rather than resolve disagreements. When negative feelings are not open and strongly expressed, they often seethe just below the surface. Enormous energy is discharged in these ways without improving working conditions and opportunities for

the adults or the youth (Joyner, E.T. and Ben-Avie, M, and Comer, J. P., *Dynamic Instructional Leadership to Support Student Learning and Development*, 2004).

The three primary activities of the teams are writing the Comprehensive School Plan; organizing professional development activities that are aligned with the goals and objectives of the plan; and continually assessing the implementation of the plan's goals and objectives, making modifications as needed. Moreover, decisions are informed not by anecdotes or the voices of a few vocal parents or staff members, but rather by solid data.

The most useful and compelling data for improving Jewish educational programs considers human development at every point in the lifespan, ranging from early childhood to advanced adulthood. There are aspects of development that cut across age groups and settings. A fuller understanding of these aspects of development is needed for the operating systems of Jewish educational programs to work and for a system to emerge that cuts across age groups and settings. Why? The issue is that programs and systems may function well but miss their mark without an underlying approach that coordinates everyone's energies. Why an approach based on human development? Because the aim of Jewish educational programs is developmental in nature: the most desired outcome is that youth and adults forge strong relationships with the Jewish People — past, present and future. ■



RAISING THE BAR IN HEBREW TEACHING AND LEARNING

...this approach to Hebrew teaching is not only beneficial to the learners who can become true users of the language, but it can also facilitate the in-service professionalization of teachers, many of whom have never received formal training in language teaching.

by VARDIT RINGVALD

When Hebrew language educators seek professional advice, their questions usually center on teaching materials. “What textbook do you recommend?” or “Which program is worthwhile teaching?” are the most common questions I am asked.

While textbooks and classroom activities are components of the language teaching experience, the two primary questions on which Hebrew language educators should focus have to do with learner outcomes:

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1. What are the language-competency goals that each student needs to achieve at a particular stage of his/her learning process?
2. How do I ensure that each learner's language acquisition process is being maximized to enable the achievement of efficient, effective, and enduring results?

Currently, the best available framework for articulating competency goals for learners of Hebrew is provided by the Proficiency Approach. This approach, used in the teaching of foreign languages throughout the United States, aims to assist learners to develop the ability to perform in the target language in all four skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the groundwork was laid to pursue more effective approaches for language teaching and learning in the United States. As a result, the Proficiency Approach, developed in 1982, is still considered the gold standard in language education today. The guiding principles of this approach were developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), with the help of practitioners and researchers in the field. The approach recognizes that the learner's ability to perform in the target language develops gradually. Accordingly, it identifies four main phases through which language learners progress before achieving native-speaking abilities: Novice, Intermediate, Advanced and Superior. The first three phases are further divided into sub-levels enabling language educators to explicitly assess and describe a learner's ability at any given point. The criteria associated with the sub-levels (i.e., Novice-Low, Novice-Mid, etc.) enable the teacher to specifically identify the areas that need to be targeted in order for a student to progress.

The assessment process uses four interrelated criteria: **content/context**, **task**, **text type** and **accuracy**. Learners who can function at the advanced level in terms of **content/context** can relate to topics that are connected to issues outside their immediate surroundings, such as society and politics. In terms of **task**, learners can actively describe, narrate, compare and understand materials that include these topics. In terms of **text type**, learners can manage several paragraphs in a long text, as well as express a thought orally and in writing that is several paragraphs long. In terms of **accuracy**, in spite of some patterned mistakes in their writing and speaking performance, learners at this stage can be understood by native speakers who are not used to dealing with non-native speakers of the language. Students are also

able to understand most of the details described in materials used in the country in which the target language is in use.

The 1982 ACTFL Guidelines were generic and suited mainly to the most commonly taught languages such as French, Spanish and German. In 1989, Hebrew Proficiency Guidelines were created by a team of Hebrew language experts from Brandeis University.

The Proficiency Approach maximizes the acquisition of a learned language in an academic setting in which the contact hours are relatively limited. By adopting performance as its core principle, the Proficiency Approach focuses on learners' abilities in the target language instead of concentrating on what learners know about the language. Consequently, the approach, which supports the teaching and the learning of the pragmatics of the language, helps learners internalize the language.

Because acquiring a new language is a dynamic process, teachers must continually collect data and assess and adjust the curriculum in order to maximize the acquisition process for their students. Therefore, using the Proficiency Approach, one of the first critical tools for a teacher to master is the ability to understand and discern the levels and sub-levels described in the Hebrew Proficiency Guidelines. They also need to be equipped with a set of additional tools that will allow them to maximize a student's ability to internalize and retain the language. They develop the ability to guide their learners to progress from the input stages, in which they are able to use only language-receptive skills to understand and make sense of what is heard or read, to the productive stages in which they can practice writing and speaking the language. This crucial developmental process has to be supported in every possible way by the language educators, mainly by supplying the appropriate teaching resources but also by deploying an array of activities suited to the particular level and pace of learning.

We have developed the following tools for teachers that, for the most part, are influenced and inspired by the principles of the Proficiency Approach:

- **The means to articulate Proficiency goals for all language skills for all learners.**

The criteria used in the guidelines help an educator create and clearly define specific performance goals in all language skills.

- **Guidelines for identifying the appropriate materials and teaching methodologies for students at any given**

moment in order to best support them in achieving the above goals.

The goal of the Proficiency Approach is to promote functional abilities according to a fixed set of criteria. It does not dictate specifics for teaching materials or a specific teaching method. Therefore, it allows each teacher and institution to differentiate in order to maximize an individual's language acquisition process. The approach also provides flexibility for teachers to develop and implement curricula that reinforce the values and goals that each school chooses to emphasize.

- **Assessment methodologies that are used to evaluate the learner's progress at any given moment, at any stage of the learning, in all language skills for different purposes.**

The criteria specified in the guidelines make it easier to assess language abilities in all four skills for the purpose of deciding how to group learners appropriately, as well as how to articulate learning goals for each student.

These tools were developed to be applicable to several educational frameworks, both formal and informal, and for different groups of learners ranging from higher education down through elementary education.

Currently, the approach is being used and implemented in a number of locations around the country, including Brandeis University; School of Hebrew at Middlebury College; JCDS, Boston's Jewish Community Day School; Solomon Schechter Day School, Newton, MA; Gann Academy, Waltham, MA; the Middle School at The Epstein School, Atlanta, GA; and the Keshet Community Hebrew School After Schools, MA.

In contrast to using a ready-made curriculum, each school has the ability to articulate its own Hebrew curriculum goals, to choose ways to realize them that respond to the students and circumstances, and to assess whether the program is achieving the goals that have been set. However, this type of independence and differentiation can only be realized if the school invests in the professional development of its teachers.

Hence, this approach to Hebrew teaching is not only beneficial to the learners who can become true users of the language, but it can also facilitate the in-service professionalization of teachers, many of whom have never received formal training in language teaching. Mastering the tools helps the classroom educators improve their effectiveness, better understand the goals associated with their profession, and reflect on their own professional development. ■



WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM REGGIO EMILIA

by ANN LEWIN-BENHAM

Over 1500 miles from Jerusalem's hills in verdant northern Italy is a city, Reggio Emilia, known for the world's "best preschools." Of the fifty preschools, one third have babies and toddlers three months to three years; the rest have three- to six-year-olds. Although Reggio is far from the spiritual center of Judaism, there are parallels between the philosophy of these 65-year-old Italian schools and the ethical precepts of the first monotheistic religion. As we try to find ways of implementing best practices in education, there is much that Jewish early childhood education centers can learn from the Reggio Approach. The Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative (JECEI) has recognized that the Reggio philosophy can strengthen and revitalize Jewish education among children and their families.

JECEI's most relevant application of Reggio ideas involves the deep involvement of the family. Drawing families into the school philosophically, practically and spiritually is a paramount goal of both Reggio schools and JECEI. Both programs broadly construe the idea of family — the ancient sense of protector of one's own and the current theoretical sense of the force that makes us human. In both school systems, evidence of family is pervasive: symbolically, in objects

Educator **Ann Lewin-Benham's** two recent books, *Possible Schools* and *Powerful Children*, describe a school she founded that is renowned for its success with the Reggio Approach. This article is copyright © Ann Lewin-Benham 2009.

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contributed by families — Jewish artifacts or, in Reggio, objects typical of the region; figuratively, in photos, drawings, and other images of family that appear throughout a classroom; and literally, in the frequent presence of family members in the classroom, both formally and informally.

How does the philosophy of JECEI mesh with that of Reggio schools? The Reggio philosophy is well suited to the Jewish experience and teaching. Both are reflective, as in Talmudic tradition, seeking layers of meaning in experiences: Judaism in the teachings of sages, Reggio in the forays of children. Both are collaborative, emphasizing the importance of group participation: Jewish tradition in a congregation bedecking a Sukkah or a community caring for its needy; Reggio practice in small groups of children elaborating each other's ideas in their projects. Both are concerned with the emotional well-being of each individual: JECEI schools through the respect that is given to each person; Reggio schools by emphasizing the rights of others. The coincidence of Judaism and Reggio is embedded in a shared belief in the dignity and importance of every person.

JECEI was founded in 2004 to engage the families of very young children in lifelong Jewish life and learning through exceptional early childhood education. Conceived by Michael Steinhardt and a group of other funders, JECEI's driving idea is that by offering the best preschool education steeped in Jewish precepts, families could be drawn closer to Judaism. Jewish ideas are elaborated through what JECEI has defined as seven lenses, including *masa* (journey), *b'rit* (belonging) and *k'dusha* (presence and intentionality). While beyond the scope of this article, the lenses and Reggio practices have direct parallels. As a mark of quality, JECEI strives to embed its philosophy in Reggio practices.

The Municipal Preschools of Reggio Emilia began in 1945 when mothers, surveying the ravages of World War II, sold war detritus — abandoned tanks, guns, helmets — to raise funds for a preschool. They built it on values of respect and collaboration, hoping to avoid future wars. Impressed by reports, Loris Malaguzzi (1920-1994), a young teacher, bicycled from his neighboring town to see the school for himself. He ended up staying for the rest of his life. Malaguzzi was a brilliant leader, philosopher and educator who forged what today is a community committed to its founders' values. They believe that from birth every child is rich, strong, and powerful, and has the *right* to early childhood experiences that respect the

individual, develop his or her multi-faceted potential, and expand the joy of living and love of learning that are the birthright of humans. These commitments are similar to Jewish teaching traditions that have developed over millennia.

Usually we speak of children's *needs*, a perspective that puts power in adult hands. Reggio educators recognize children's *rights*: to have a voice in what goes on around them, to be in beautiful environments, to work in small groups and to use tools and materials of professional quality. Imagine schools with clutter-free rooms, natural materials, soft colors, generous amounts of daylight, a variety of thriving plants, museum-like apparatus, plentiful and varied supplies, provocative use of mirrors, climbing/tumbling apparatus in every classroom,

AS WE TRY TO FIND WAYS of implementing best practices in education, there is much that Jewish early childhood education centers can learn from the Reggio Approach.

and no commercially produced graphics but rather walls covered with huge panels that tell the stories of children's experiences and reveal the life of the classroom.

Individually or collaboratively, young children in Reggio Schools do work of exceptional quality, far beyond what is expected from them. By eight months babies paint, at age three they mix their own paints, by age five they create huge, detailed murals. Academics occur naturally, not through table-work assignments "pushed down" from grade school, but from the "bottom up," stimulated by children's interests. It is similar to a Seder that, designed to inform children, meanders in response to their inquisitive minds. Reggio work is not identical "paper plate" art; in fact, it is not art as some think of it but rather is an indication of how children are thinking about a project or problem. Children learn reading, writing and math concepts not to become "kindergarten ready," but because these skills help them solve problems they themselves pose. The kindergarten year, spent in preschool, is when prior experiences come to fruition in complex projects which children conceive or their teachers pose.

Reggio schools are based on socio-cultural theory proposed by the brilliant Jewish prodigy Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), who died of tuberculosis at age 37, his ideas imprisoned behind the Iron Curtain for decades. Alex Kozulin, an authority

on Vygotsky, wrote (personal email): "Vygotsky's concept of psychological tools may have been inspired by the wide use in Jewish culture of different symbolic devices, such as *mezuzah* or *tsisit*, for the organization of a person's memory." Socio-cultural theory accords an important role to symbols in the development of language and thought. In the words of another brilliant Jewish psychologist, Reuven Feuerstein (1920-), the theory posits that "mediation is the factor that makes us human." In the hands of Reggio teachers, who are masters in knowing just when and how to intervene, mediation is a new art form.

Because the Reggio Approach is content neutral — there is no mandate to cover specific material — Jewish content can permeate a classroom, embedded, as in JECEI

classrooms, in materials on shelves, books in the classroom library, topics of conversation and themes of projects. The following story will help illuminate: A JECEI leader had recently made one's relationship with God the topic of an inspiring, soul-searching teacher enrichment session. A young JECEI teacher could not fathom talking to children about God, a relationship she was struggling to define for herself. Shortly after, on a glorious fall day, she and the children were in the park. Ginkgoes and maples filtered the sunlight in a spectrum of reds, yellows and oranges. The world shimmered, enveloped in the colors of Joseph's coat. Suddenly the teacher "saw" God in the children's joy as they played amid crisp smells, a bounty of leaves, shafts of sunlight. Noticing how awed they were by the leaves swirling gently around them, she said: "Tell me what you think God is." "God," said a child almost five, "makes all the beauty come down." The spontaneity, the openness, the group's relationships, the poetry, the spirituality epitomize Reggio practices infused with Jewish ideas.

A unique opportunity exists for the 1300 or so Jewish early childhood centers throughout North America: To foster ever greater bonds among children, families and community through the powerful duo of Reggio philosophy and the JECEI mission. Were this to occur, it would provide a new vision for Jewish early childhood education. ■

COMMUNITIES of PRACTICE:

OVERCOMING ISOLATION AND SUPPORTING GROWTH

THE GLUE

*that holds a
CoP together
is the familiar
and trusting
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formed among
members.*

*This trust can
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surprising
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and systemic
change.*

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by NAAVA FRANK and JUDITH ZORFASS

Many key contributors in Jewish schools and organizations are “singles.” That is, single individuals who hold a focused portfolio such as Director of Admissions, Business Manager, Head of School, Board President, Rabbi, or Early Childhood Educator. While these key roles are rewarding, being the lone practitioner of a given “art” can also be isolating, and offer few opportunities to recharge professional batteries and connect directly to best practices elsewhere.

Joining a Community of Practice (CoP) helps overcome the drawbacks of isolation. In CoPs, people come together to network, share information, generate new ideas and practical solutions, commiserate, obtain support for risk-taking, and share resources. They ask nitty-gritty questions such as “how do our recruitment strategies compare to other institutions like ours?”

A CoP is a group of individuals who learn from each other by sharing information and expertise on an ongoing basis in order to improve their practices. CoPs are not new, but both supporting them systematically and recognizing their value to organizations are recent. Starting in the 1990s, workers in companies like Shell, IBM and Siemens gathered regularly to share and develop practices ranging from data analysis to deep-sea exploration. This powerful strategy has evolved and migrated to the fields of banking, government, health and education (both general and Jewish education).

While non-profits are adapting the CoP model from the business world, Jewish organizations should find the concept familiar. Josh Plaskoff, Director of Learning at Emmis Communications and author of a forthcoming book on CoP and Jewish tradition, argues that the relationship between “learning” and “community” is deeply ingrained in the Jewish psyche and that Jewish practices for supporting communities of learning can be a contribution to the world.

Already, Jewish organizations have

begun to adopt diverse models of CoPs. No two CoPs are alike. They can be large or small, face-to-face and/or virtual, draw on members locally or nationally, and be housed within or across organizations. PEJE (Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education) convenes seven different CoPs that support various roles. Partnership for Jewish Life and Learning started a CoP for directors of early childhood centers in Metro New Jersey, a subset of a larger group that has met for 25 years. The Jewish Teen Funders Network convenes individuals from across the United States who share an interest in teen philanthropy projects. Darim Online runs two CoPs for different congregational stakeholders, each focusing on how to use technology to achieve their mission and goals.

For isolated professionals, CoPs are a lifeline to new ideas, tips, tools and emotional support. Unlike a course syllabus, topics in CoPs evolve based on member needs and interests. As Lisa Colton from Darim Online explained to us, “The CoP model supports [a] holistic approach that includes reflecting as well as action, and thus achieves deeper, quicker and more profound results than anyone could accomplish alone.”

CoPs bring people together in many ways. While face-to-face meetings have been the norm for thousands of years, many CoPs today incorporate new technologies such as online discussion groups, web-based conferencing, email, teleconferences, blogs or wikis to meet virtually. These additional communication streams allow individuals to access the knowledge they need from peers and experts in real time on an as-needed basis.

One of PEJE’s CoPs focuses on professional development. During a web-based conference, educators from classrooms around the country explored an instructional standard by analyzing a video of classroom practice. In addition to deepening their understanding of the standard,



members said that the call gave them ideas for teacher activities at their schools. “When CoPs function well, they are liberating,” Robert Sherman, Executive Director of the Board of Jewish Education of New York, told us. “They help people discover what they know as well as challenge their assumptions.”

The glue that holds a CoP together is the familiar and trusting relationships formed among members. This trust can take time to build, but once established, it can lead to surprising and exciting outcomes and systemic change. The leaders of Boston’s Jewish day schools, funded by Boston’s Combined Jewish Philanthropies, have been meeting face-to-face every six to eight weeks for four years. Their conversations have helped them move from relating to each other principally as rivals toward seeing each other as useful resources and allies. The leaders used the CoP forum to jointly produce a set of guidelines for student recruitment. Having a CoP helped a newly

appointed head quickly get up to speed and feel comfortable in a new school and community. In the current economic crisis, the leaders are turning to the CoP as one key venue for ideas and information on resource sharing, secure in their feeling that they are not alone during difficult times.

Momentum is building across the country to launch and sustain CoPs to link people across Jewish schools, congregations and social service agencies. Facilitators of these CoPs need support and skills in order to be effective. In response to this need, the Covenant Foundation funded the formation of *Kehilliyot*, a cross-sector CoP which now includes members from 23 organizations who collectively facilitate communities with over 1200 members. Discussions within *Kehilliyot* include: how to design teleconferences, organize a core group, use a wiki to build a knowledge base, hire and supervise CoP staff, effectively manage a listserv, and address silence on teleconferences. The methods,

tools and approaches for strengthening CoPs are being shared with the broader Jewish community on <http://kehilliyot.welcome.wikispaces.com>. Brenda Gevertz of the Jewish Communal Service Association of North America runs local groups in eighteen communities. “We have learned so much in *Kehilliyot* and this has translated, in turn, to our local groups,” she told us. “So the ripple effect is profound across North America.”

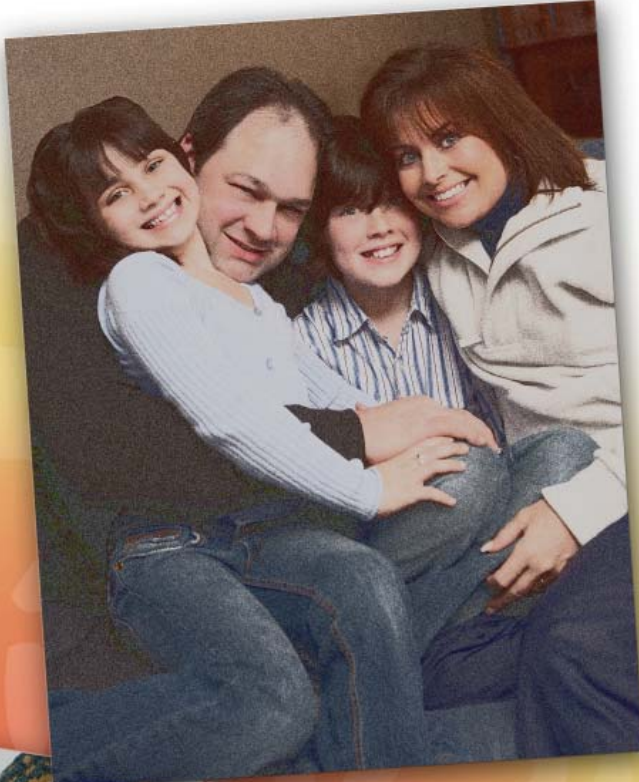
Rabbi Joshua Elkin, Executive Director of PEJE, summed up for us the power and potential of CoPs:

“CoPs emanate from the fundamental belief that the development of knowledge is not a top-down phenomenon. Rather, it thrives and expands through communication among practitioners and with experts. CoPs provide valuable forums where individuals have multiple opportunities to share their wisdom and experience, thus contributing to the spread of knowledge throughout a community and beyond.” ■

COMMUNITY CHANGE:

ENGAGEMENT OF FAMILIES WITH YOUNG JEWISH CHILDREN

by PATRICIA BIDOL PADVA



COMMUNITY CHANGE

Citizens in rural and metropolitan areas across the country are experiencing major challenges in such areas as poverty, quality of public school education, minimal health and social services for the economically-challenged, and structural racism.

People are demanding a voice in improving the quality of life for themselves, their families, their neighborhoods and their communities. More and more citizens are linking with each other through participation in deliberative forums to create their own futures, and they are connecting via blogs and other virtual options. The use of these inclusive, community-change approaches can result in consensus-based change strategies.

Inclusive community-change approaches are being used to create desired change strategies. In order for a change strategy to have a sustainable outcome, a viable network of impacted parties needs to be created and maintained. As the parties explore and share their needs and interests, they form relationships, analyze complex data, create a mutually beneficial, strategic-change plan, and conduct ongoing evaluation of the outcomes of the change. In order for the coalition to keep their issues visible on the community agenda, they must have a compelling communication strategy.

It is also important to have non-profit intermediaries who can engage residents, civic groups, political leaders, grassroots organizations and the private sector. The intermediaries need to identify and build relationships with influential policy makers and community leaders and provide them with data-driven change initiatives that persuade power-brokers to actively support the change.

JEWISH EDUCATION

The ultimate goal of Jewish education is to engage youth, families and adults in a pursuit of lifelong Jewish learning and affiliation with the community. In the Western world, the engagement of Jewish individuals in lifelong learning is a daunting task. Jewish individuals are able to participate freely in their country's educational, economic and social institutions with or without acknowledging either their individual Jewish identities or connections to a broader Jewish community. The challenge is to create Jewish experiences that meet the needs of individuals and families.

Systemic community change initiatives for Jewish



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PEOPLE ARE DEMANDING *a voice in improving the quality of life for themselves, their families, their neighborhoods and their communities.*

education that compel stakeholders to create, implement and sustain a fundamental shift in the vision, mindset, culture and protocols of the sponsoring organization (e.g., synagogue, school, JCC) and of the formal and informal educational options are transformational change efforts. All transformative change process models include ways to address such factors as how to support inclusive engagement among diverse parties; create consensus-based strategies; build supportive relationships; and create deep-seated changes in mindset, values and behavior. These change models are implemented using consensus-based system thinking tools and other approaches that include informed and passionate dialogue along with advocating one's views and a genuine inquiry into the views of others.

JEWISH EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION INITIATIVE

The Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative (JECEI) was founded by several philanthropic institutions in 2004. It was created as a passionate response to the concern that too many families with young Jewish children were either not engaged in or alienated from Jewish life. These families are at a pivotal time in terms of making decisions about the identities of their children and the values that they want to transmit. Families with young Jewish children seek out communities and institutions that can help support and inform their choices.

JECEI uses a transformative change model that enhances the capacity of Jewish early childhood centers to become centers of excellence that are also compelling family centers. The JECEI transformative change model is inspired by a synergistic blend of Jewish values and ideas, Reggio Emilia philosophy, emotionally responsive practices and customized change approaches for an individual center and for a communal network of JECEI centers. JECEI's work with Jewish early childhood centers helps them to increase the number of families with young Jewish children who are engaged in Jewish living and learning that meets their individual needs and connects them with other Jews.

COMMUNITY CHANGE APPROACHES INCREASE ENGAGEMENT OF FAMILIES

JECEI's family engagement options are often intensive and customized experiences that meet the needs and values of the current generation of adults who have young Jewish children. These innovative and customized options are resulting in an increase in Jewish living and learning for families and an increased connection between participating families. They enable this generation to access the rich resources of their heritage and inspire them to revitalize the Jewish community and ensure its future.

When JECEI works with a Jewish early childhood center, it works with the center's educators, lay leaders and parents to help it become a "school of early childhood excellence" and to increase the engagement of the families with Jewish living and learning. The JECEI family engagement processes begin with the joint efforts of educators and parents. When families continue to participate in the customized Jewish living and learning options, they become more active in both designing the options and in reaching out to other families. The parent engagement sessions are based on dialogue, and during the planning of these events, the parents and others consider the following questions:

- How can we enhance our capacity to talk and think more deeply together about what matters to us as parents of young Jewish children?
- How can we use our mutual intelligence and wisdom to create meaningful connections that support our personal and collective journey of Jewish living and learning?

These customized Jewish living and learning options usually include components such as dialogue, prayer, study, culture, music and social action. The young families feel connected to their friendship circles and to the Jewish early childhood center. They often affiliate only with other formal and informal Jewish education options when they perceive that these educational options fulfill the needs of their families. They want educational entities that are open to parents of Jewish youth to become leaders who can

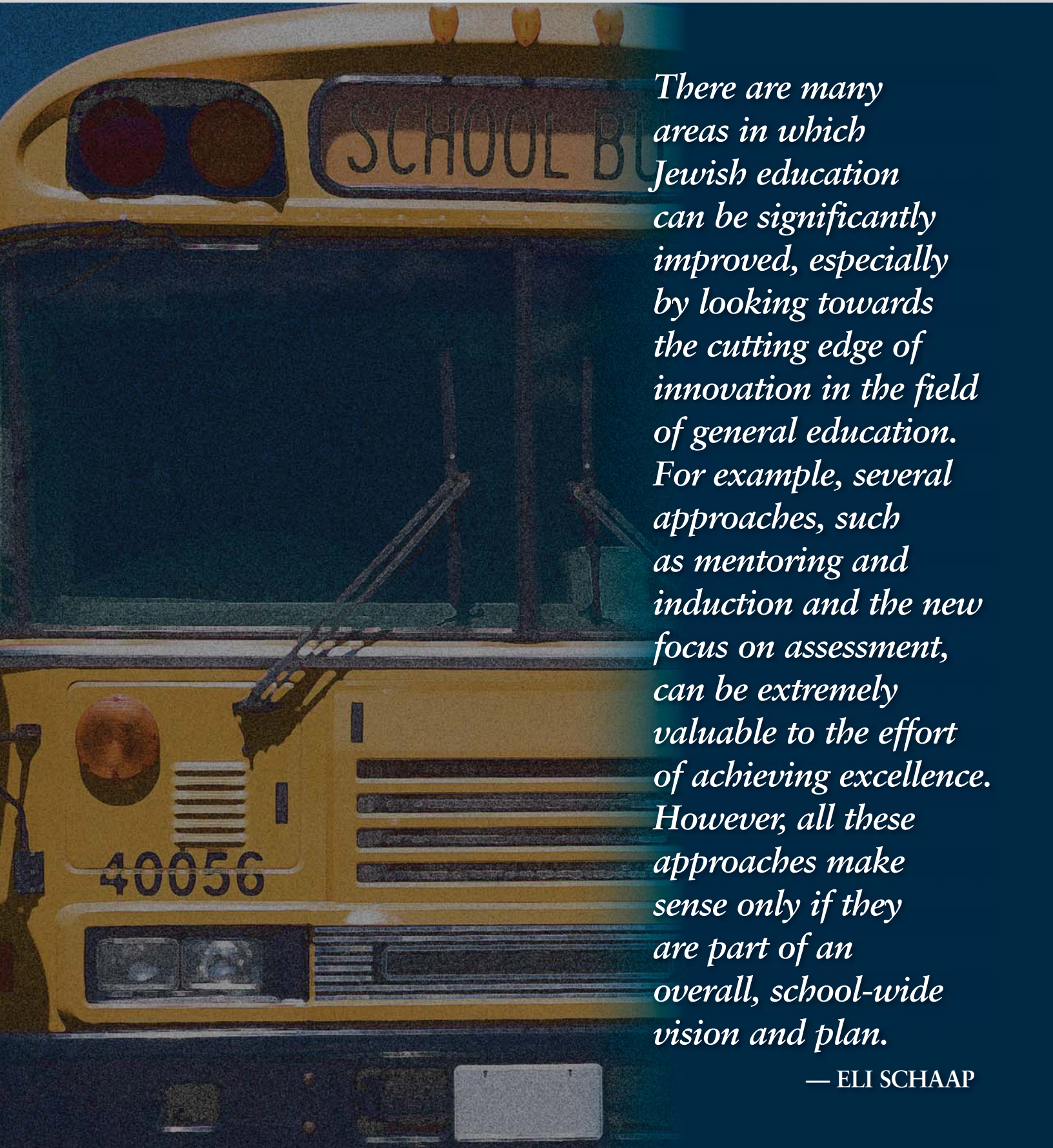
shape the educational options offered to their children. JECEI is also working with the communal network of centers so they, in turn, can work with their community's formal and informal educational providers to make them more attractive to families with young Jewish children.

JECEI'S COMMUNITY CHANGE GUIDELINES

JECEI's organizational and community change model is based on the best practices of sustainable change. The basic assumptions of this model are:

- By providing opportunities for dialogue, joint decision-making, envisioning and creating customized Jewish living and learning options, parents with young Jewish children are more likely to become more engaged.
- By providing meaningful engagement in consensus and inclusive events, a network of ad hoc parties who are engaged in Jewish living and learning will be created.
- By teaching participants how to use JECEI's state-of-the-art, consensus decision-making, dialogue, and systems thinking tools, participants will be able to use them without the assistance of a consultant.
- By using a variety of large-system change approaches such as future search, open space technology, world café, and appreciative inquiry, the community will be able to create the future rather than respond to past events.
- By using the JECEI website that allows participating JECEI schools to create websites for their educators and parents, the connections between individual schools in a community will increase.

The use of inclusive and customized community-change models in Jewish education will increase the number of young adults and families with young Jewish children who are engaged in ongoing Jewish living and learning. The Jewish community will be vitalized by young Jews who create options that meet their personal needs and also connect them to the rich resources of their heritage. ■

The background of the page is a photograph of the front of a yellow school bus. The bus is viewed from a low angle, showing the hood, the windshield, and the front grille. The words "SCHOOL BUS" are printed in large, black, block letters on the front of the bus. Below the grille, the number "40056" is visible. The bus is parked on a dark surface, and the background is a dark, textured blue.

There are many areas in which Jewish education can be significantly improved, especially by looking towards the cutting edge of innovation in the field of general education. For example, several approaches, such as mentoring and induction and the new focus on assessment, can be extremely valuable to the effort of achieving excellence. However, all these approaches make sense only if they are part of an overall, school-wide vision and plan.

— ELI SCHAAP