

THE EVOLVING ROLE OF FEDERATIONS AND THE JEWISH EDUCATION AGENDA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Everywhere we look today, in virtually every community throughout North America, the themes of Jewish continuity, Jewish renewal, and Jewish education are at the top of the communal agenda. This growing phenomenon represents an evolving awareness on the part of Jewish communal leadership and institutions regarding the critical importance of Jewish education and its relationship to Jewish identity, continuity, and affiliation. It also represents challenging opportunities for communities to begin rethinking how best to convey the richness and relevance of Judaism in order to inspire and enable Jews to create and maintain meaningful Jewish identities and lives.

The recent resurgence and awareness on the part of federations regarding the critical importance of Jewish education is a natural extension of their growing concern and frustration with the status quo, exacerbated by a plethora of statistics, demographic studies, and reports that call on institutions to collectively take stock and engage in serious communal introspection, strategic planning, and fundraising processes.

It is no coincidence that over the past decade there has been an ever-increasing focus at United Jewish Communities General Assemblies on Jewish continuity—let alone the creation of federation task forces, think tanks, and continuity commissions on the local level for the sole purpose of determining how federations should chart the future course for their communities against a backdrop of assimilation, alienation, fragmentation, complacency, and the shrinking communal dollar.

Although Jewish educational issues and challenges have been and will continue to be

passionately debated within the halls of our federations, consensus now does exist in the federation community on the following four policy and planning statements:

1. Jewish education, in the broadest sense (both formal and informal), must be viewed as a top priority and should be recognized as the primary vehicle or instrumentality for increasing levels of Jewish identity and affiliation.
2. The process of Jewish education or the Jewish education experience shall be viewed on a continuum, as a life-long process.
3. Successful and effective strategic planning and priority-setting for Jewish education must involve a true, meaningful, and sustained partnership between the local federation and *all* Jewish education service delivery providers in the conceptualization, formulation, and initiation of a strategic planning process.
4. A community must have in place a well-coordinated, integrated, and comprehensive service delivery system and financial resource development plan that responds to the unmet needs of all of its constituents.

These broad policy and planning statements represent a confluence of thinking now in place in most federations throughout North America. Several federations may place more emphasis on one statement than another, but most view these statements as being true to their respective mission and visions for Jewish education.

The challenge, therefore, with regard to the Jewish education agenda, is how federa-

tions can continue to maintain these common goals against a backdrop of competing demands for philanthropic resources. What should be the respective roles of federations—in partnership with Jewish educational institutions, foundations, and philanthropists—in planning for and supporting formal and informal Jewish educational experiences? And, finally, what issues/concerns must be addressed by a federation in order to create, enhance, and maintain a strong and viable Jewish educational community?

The proposed responses to these questions are multifaceted and suggest a variety of perspectives that are based on empirical realities, rather than anecdotal perceptions.

First, a qualifying statement: I have had the distinct honor and pleasure as a central agency executive to have worked closely with federations in New York, Baltimore, and Miami. In each of these communities, I have been afforded the opportunity and good fortune to work closely with the senior professional and lay leadership intimately involved in setting the tone, culture, and vision for Jewish education in the community. It is from these experiences that I have learned about the evolving nature and scope of federation's key involvement in helping shape a vision for Jewish education and its role in identifying and allocating the necessary resources in order for that vision to be realized.

As an institution, the federation over the last several decades has been instrumental in advancing Jewish education on the local and national level. In partnership with central agencies, schools, synagogues, ideological groups, and informal educational institutions, the federation has made concerted efforts to successfully fulfill its mandate as a philanthropic institution deeply committed to Jewish identity, renewal, and education.

One can always debate whether federations are providing sufficient financial resources to a particular form or type of Jewish education, and there will always be some tension in the relationships between federations and the Jewish educational systems.

The true challenge is to maintain the proper perspective and realize that federations and their educational institutions have the same objectives and are trying to marshal all possible resources to develop various educational systems as quickly and efficiently as possible (Solender, 1983).

The challenge of how federation objectives are identified and how they translate into fundable challenges and opportunities warrants serious discussion. Just as there is no silver bullet to increase levels of Jewish identity, affiliation, and literacy on the institutional level, so too there is no absolute formula for ensuring that federations focus all of their resources on a single mode, formula, or venue in Jewish education.

To understand and appreciate fully the nature and scope of federation's support for Jewish education, it is absolutely essential that we understand the context within which federation policy-setting and communal planning for Jewish education take place. Then we can better understand the linear relationships among priority-setting, planning, fundraising, and allocations.

Most federations today view themselves as consensus-building organizations with a successful annual campaign at the epicenter. The centrality of the annual campaign is paramount. Another characteristic of a strong federation is its comprehensive communal planning processes and the close relationship between the planning processes and the allocation of financial resources, as well as the funding of development initiatives.

These planning processes have benefited the Jewish educational community tremendously. Federations are no longer asking "Why Jewish education?" but rather these questions: What are the most effective venues? How do we define and evaluate success in Jewish education? What should be federation's role as a potential vehicle to increase levels of Jewish literacy? How do we strike the balance between formal vs. informal Jewish educational needs? What is the role of the federation regarding scholarship assis-

tance? Should federations expand their scholarship assistance program? Should federations expand their *raison d'être* and be more functional in the areas of outreach, Israel programming, family education, retreats, and lay leadership development? If so, how does that expansion affect the agency and institutions that are mandated to deliver these programs and services?

Underscoring the evolving role of federation regarding Jewish education is its tremendous potential and capacity to change the culture of a community in partnership with other institutions. Doing so will require (1) a reconceptualization of the federation's planning processes, (2) the identification of new principles and parameters, and (3) the identification of new frameworks for educational excellence anchored in model practice.

RECONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE PLANNING PROCESS

Reconceptualizing federation's planning process will require that federations begin to plan more strategically with partner institutions, including synagogues, the central agency of Jewish education, schools, JCCs, family service agencies, Jewish camps, rabbinic groups, and ideological movements. This planning process must be comprehensive in nature and must involve all stakeholders.

For this new planning process to succeed, it must identify these critical components:

- the key principles that characterize all of the Jewish educational community's interests
- new programmatic venues, structures, and a communal organizational framework
- current and potential resources that federation and its agencies could bring to the planning effort
- critical needs in the Jewish education community
- proposed new initiatives that would increase significantly the federation's impact on the field of Jewish education

All of these components would require an ever-increasing role for federation as convener, facilitator, and consensus-builder; the federation would also need to maintain a level of collaborative engagement throughout the implementation stage of the process.

NEW PRINCIPLES AND PARAMETERS

One of federation's most significant tasks will be to identify the key principles and parameters that shape its role in Jewish education and that also inform new Jewish education endeavors and initiatives created under federation auspices:

- a sincere commitment to the highest level of excellence and model practice
- a commitment to religious and intellectual pluralism
- a track record of collaborative strategic planning engaged in by federation and its local constituents
- a willingness and desire for interdisciplinary efforts that bring together the best thinkers in Jewish education

IDENTIFICATION OF NEW FRAMEWORKS

Once the parameters of the new programmatic structures are conceptualized and identified, federations will be in a more credible position to recommend the establishment of a new organizational framework as needed. This new federation framework would coordinate and integrate educational initiatives among the various parts of the community and between federation and the educational community.

In communities where there are strong and effective central agencies for Jewish education, federations may avail themselves of that leadership. To be sure, the ultimate desired structure would be for federations to identify and use the central agency as the coordinating body of the new framework. This empowerment of the central agency is determined based on *a priori* trust between the federation and central agency, as well as

that agency's perceived credibility and effectiveness in the Jewish educational community.

Finally, the goals of the new framework will be to foster greater collaborative partnerships within the Jewish educational community, enhance the credibility of federation as the central address for Jewish education (in partnership with the central agency), and above all, to create a structure that links strategic planning processes to comprehensive financial resource development.

In addition, the new framework will also enhance and facilitate the ongoing implementation of a monitoring, evaluation, and feedback process so desperately needed once programs and initiatives are funded within the community.

ENDNOTE

The challenges and opportunities suggested above call for a reconceptualization of the manner in which federations engage a community in planning processes for Jewish education. It also suggests a far greater role for federation as a facilitator of strategic and

collaborative partnerships within the community. Given the diverse nature of Jewish educational needs within the community, the vast disparity of ideological thinking, and the unswerving desire to promote educational excellence and model practice, it is essential that federations begin rethinking how best to advance the quality and quantity of Jewish education in the community. Although the opportunities and challenges suggested in this article may seem obvious to a few, reality dictates that over the next decade the North American federation community will be challenged to reinvent itself in ways never before envisioned. This is due in large measure to the proliferation of unmet Jewish educational needs, our growing understanding of what works, a changing demographic landscape, and the ever-decreasing philanthropic dollars received via federation annual campaigns.

REFERENCE

- Solender, Stephen D. (1983, Summer). The role of federation in Jewish education. *Jewish Education*, 51(2), 19.