

CREATING THE CLIMATE FOR JEWISH EDUCATIONAL CHANGE: One Community's Experience

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The Syracuse Jewish federation used the principles of adult learning and collaborative leadership in its three-year Jewish educational planning process. The varying goals and perspectives of the three leaders of the planning effort enriched the communal planning initiative, which was supported and challenged by a mission statement, developed at the outset.

The three-year Jewish educational planning process that the Syracuse New York Jewish community engaged in demonstrates the value of professional-lay collaboration, the amalgam of multiple perspectives in planning, and the importance of a clear, well-defined mission statement. In this article, the major collaborators address some of the dynamics involved by describing how their three different perspectives (federation lay leader, educator, and federation professional) were brought to bear in a recent federation planning initiative, how the dynamics of that interaction pulled the community together and fostered coalition building, and how continual reference to a mission statement supported and challenged the planning process.

In December 1986, the Syracuse Jewish Federation created the Jewish Education Forum to undertake a serious and deliberate community educational planning effort to study and recommend ways to enhance Jewish education. The Forum began its work in the Fall of 1986 with the develop-

ment of a mission statement that made Jewish education a priority agenda item of the Federation (Figure 1). By February 1987, the Forum had completed its first phase of planning: an analysis of Jewish education. By the following February, a set of recommendations for present and future actions to enhance the quality of Jewish education in Syracuse had been prioritized. By September 1988 eight of the ten recommendations for action made six months earlier had been implemented. In addition, the federation established a standing committee, the Jewish Education Committee (JEC), charged with carrying on educational planning for the Syracuse Jewish Community. Specifically, the JEC is charged to

- Identify resources to support continuing Jewish education
- Continue linking organizations and resources
- Facilitate communication about Jewish education
- Coordinate the activities of the JEC subcommittees
- Continue to examine educational issues
- Work out a plan of disseminating information about community education issues
- Identify and prepare volunteer, community-minded Jewish educational leadership for the 1990s

Copies of materials produced by the Jewish Education Forum are available upon request from Barry Silverberg, Executive Vice President, Syracuse Jewish Federation, Inc., P.O. Box 510, Dewitt, New York 13214-0510.

Mission Statement

Jewish Education Forum of the Syracuse Jewish Federation, Inc.
(adopted by Board of Directors on December 9, 1986)

The Syracuse Jewish Federation is embarking on a community planning effort to strive for the highest quality of services for the improvement of Jewish life in Central New York.

Jewish education has been targeted as the initial priority. Nationally, it has been identified as the area of greatest concern and need, as well as the most successful arena in which to begin building community in a rapidly changing world.

The Jewish Education Forum is being established to study and recommend ways to enhance the quality of Jewish education opportunity in Central New York for the present and the future. It seeks to foster a spirit of communal collaboration by developing a participatory structure of involvement bringing together persons with knowledge of and/or interest in Jewish education.

THE GOALS OF THE JEWISH EDUCATION FORUM ARE

1. To heighten the Jewish education consciousness of the community;
2. To foster excitement and involvement about Jewish learning throughout the lifespan;
3. To identify the range and scope of the current education scene (what is);
4. To specify and prioritize education issues;
5. To design and recommend strategies for the implementation of a program in Jewish education to meet the considerable challenges facing the Central New York Jewish community both in the present and the future.

It is anticipated that the act of bringing together individuals involved in the current Jewish educational enterprise in Central New York will lead to an additional outcome: bettering communication, cooperation and coordination and maximizing the resources of the Central New York Jewish community.

Figure 1. Mission Statement.

MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO PLANNING

Planning for the Jewish Education Forum was shaped by three professional perspectives: Jewish communal services, community organization and social planning in social work, and principles of adult education. This multidisciplinary approach developed fortuitously because of the professional background of the three leaders who were

responsible for initiating this planning effort—the federation executive director, the federation vice president for community development, and the chair of the Jewish Education Forum itself. The federation executive director brought the perspective of the communal goals and processes of Jewish communal services to the effort. The federation's vice president for community development, a professor of community organization and social planning in Syracuse University's School of Social

Work, brought the perspective of community organization. The lay chair, who was the major source of leadership and energy for the entire process, is an adult educator with specific expertise in the areas of adult development and learning.

In addition to bringing these different professional orientations to bear on the issues of Jewish education, these individuals also envisioned different sets of goals to be gained by the federation from this planning activity.

Goal I: Building an Effective Planning Capability

The federation's vice president for community development viewed the process primarily as an opportunity to build an effective planning arm for the federation. He believed that the federation, and the Jewish community, required an effective planning capability to improve the quality of communal services. He shared the view of others that local programs did not attain the high levels of quality, initiative, and creativity that are the norm for Jewish community services. He believed that the flat level of the annual campaign during the past decade in Syracuse was both the cause and effect of these lackluster services. Mobilizing the Jewish community to examine its social, health, and educational concerns and to make choices on how that community should deal with them was seen as the most effective and reasonable, if not the only, means of building Jewish community services of excellence.

This lay leader viewed his primary responsibility with federation as achieving just that capability. The issue of Jewish education, although valuable in its own right, provided a timely opportunity to develop a planning process. In a sense, this effort could be considered a demonstration project from which federation leadership and constituencies could gain the experience and insights on which to base future planning activities.

If effective planning were to be a necessary first step toward improving the quality of Jewish community services, then an equally necessary ingredient was to make this planning exercise as sound as possible. As a professional experienced in community planning, he was aware that a sound planning structure and planning process needed to be based on well-thought-out interactional and analytical activities (Gurin & Perlman, 1972). He was also more concerned with the interactional aspects of planning than its content.

To ensure the success of the planning effort, two major issues were of concern: community attitudes toward the federation and community participation in the planning process. First, the fractious nature of the Jewish community, the lingering criticism of federation from certain sources, and the lack of agreement about and basic understanding of the federation's role and function in the community had to be addressed. Therefore, the first task undertaken by this planning effort's leaders was to ensure that the structure would not neglect to involve key individuals in the Jewish community. This was accomplished by using an analytical tool (*The Prince Political Accounting System*; Coplin & O'Leary, 1976), which is a systematic method of identifying the key actors in action arenas.

Second, it was agreed from the onset that this planning process must continually aim at being as broadly participatory as possible. For the results of this planning effort to be supported by the Jewish community, it was obvious that those responsible for leading the effort had to involve as many organizations and individuals as possible in some meaningful part of the activity. It was clear that the synagogue community was a major avenue for extensive participation. Therefore, throughout the planning and in the follow-up period, the chair of the forum and this leader worked closely with all the synagogue presidents.

Goal II: Incorporating Principles of Adult Learning

The design and conduct of the planning were shaped by the goals and professional perspective of the chair of the Jewish Education Forum, herself a professional adult educator.

Four features of adult learning were incorporated into the community educational planning process:

1. Adult education is *participatory*. It involves its learners, providing opportunities for peer exchange. It is process oriented, bringing together diversity and encouraging collaboration.
2. Adult education *builds on the life experience* of the learner. It begins where the learner is at, giving adults the opportunity to use their own growing reservoir of experience. It is meaningful. The learner is in direct touch with the realities of what is being studied.
3. Adult learning is *goal-oriented*. It is deliberate, purposeful, intentional, practical, and conscious.
4. Adult education is *situation-centered*. Groups work together to solve common problems. Topics being studied are already of interest to the learner, and there is a readiness to learn.

The Jewish Education Forum incorporated each of these four features (Zachary, 1987, 1990). It was *participatory*, involving all of the stakeholders in the process of Jewish education. Adopting the mission statement required a commitment that ensured its participatory nature from the outset. It utilized the *experience* of its local volunteers, Jewish Education Service of North America (JESNA) resources, and key leadership in the field of Jewish education. It was *goal-oriented* and thus focused and deliberate about its mission as described in its mission statement. It was *situation-*

centered in the local community, striving to meet local Jewish educational needs.

Goal III: Securing Communal Investment in Jewish Education

The executive vice president of the federation shared the goals and perspectives of his fellow leaders and brought additional insights that guided his contributions to the planning process. He saw Jewish education as an area that no one agency, organization, or entity could accomplish effectively alone. Jewish education involves every aspect of the Jewish community. He believed that literacy was the prerequisite for action in the Jewish educational enterprise and that basic Jewish literacy could not be assumed but had to be provided. Providing that literacy is as much a collective communal responsibility as the actions that derive from it. He felt very strongly that the future of the Jewish community is far too important "to be left solely in the hands of Jewish educators." It should be, first and foremost, a communal enterprise. Federation represents that entity concerned with the *total* communal enterprise.

The federation also needed to establish its credibility as a serious planner in the arena of Jewish education. Syracuse had undertaken two previous major planning efforts in 1945 and 1975. Although they were productive in terms of ideas, few initiatives flowed from the recommendations. The Forum leaders felt that this failure of implementation occurred because the recommendations had not been wholeheartedly embraced by the federation leadership after the studies had been completed.

Therefore, several limiting factors had to be dealt with before the actual planning process could begin in earnest. First, it was necessary to overcome the skepticism of the lay leaders that stemmed from the past failures of implementation. It was clear that federation would have to make a commitment to local implementation, as

well as planning in Jewish education. The community would continually have to be educated about federation's commitment to Jewish education.

Second, financial resources were a concern from the outset of the process. With a flat campaign, finding extra dollars was out of the question. In the absence of dollars, other resources needed to be tapped. Clearly it would require a thoughtful, creative process to mobilize a community without capital. As a result, the Jewish Education Forum became a time-intensive effort for both lay people and professionals. It drew on human resources not only within Jewish educational circles but also from the broader arena of local general educational expertise.

The mission statement (see Figure 1) was a key point of reference in the planning effort. Although it took six months to develop, the time expenditure was invaluable. The mission statement focused and disciplined the Forum's efforts, necessitating a continuing re-evaluation of its efforts and acknowledgment of its accomplishments. The mission statement thus became a foundation for measuring and celebrating success—both of which are critical when working with achievement-oriented professionals and volunteers.

In sum, the Forum became a paradigm for future federation efforts, and Jewish educational planning became an investment in the future of the Syracuse Jewish Federation. Thus, all three sets of goals—building an effective planning capability, incorporating principles of adult learning, and securing a communal investment in Jewish education—were achieved.

CREATING THE CLIMATE FOR CHANGE

Using these complementary perspectives, the Forum tried to create a climate for educational change by nurturing commitment to the communal Jewish educational enterprise. The process of commitment involved continual learning that was both

tangible and intangible. The tangible highlights of the three years are presented in this section.

Year I

We began by learning about the state-of-the-art of Jewish education from a national perspective. Study groups were formed based on individual interests and expertise. These groups analyzed studies of other communities, national studies, and issues of current practice in Jewish education. We thereby built on the experience of other communities, as well as on the expertise of nationally known educational consultants. Learning about the local perspective was equally important. We examined the earlier studies of the Syracuse Jewish community done in 1945 and 1975, learning both from the process and the outcomes.

Small group discussion, both within the Forum meetings and outside the formal sessions, resulted in our learning that Jewish education in Syracuse mirrored the national Jewish education scene. We too were facing critical choices and options and were witnessing new modes and forms of Jewish education. Building a stronger, more informed Jewish community required that we pay attention to these changes in Jewish education.

In this first year, we also used focus groups to gather data from teachers, federation staff and lay leaders, staff of boards of Jewish education, school principals, and synagogue presidents. The members of these groups focused on four areas: the critical issues in Jewish education, possible solutions to problems in education, prioritization of those solutions, and their role in implementing them. Through the focus groups, the Jewish Educational Forum was the convenor of new conversations about Jewish education.

The forum also developed a survey to identify the providers of Jewish education and to find out exactly what they provided,

to whom they provided it, and on what basis.

After analyzing the information gained from the study groups, focus groups, and survey, we disseminated our findings and sought feedback (*A Review of Year One*, 1987). We publicized what we learned as we learned it. This timely distribution accomplished several aims.

- It made people aware of the fact that Jewish education is a community issue.
- It created credibility for the planning process.
- It provided timely and relevant information about the current educational scene that could be used by anyone involved in Jewish education.
- It educated the community about the issues of Jewish education locally.
- It promoted collaboration among constituent groups.
- It created a climate for educational change.

Year II

In the second year, four work groups—Educating the Educator, Adult Learning, Educating our Youth, and Building Community—Now and in the Future—were formed to analyze issues within their domain and prepare written reports on them. Each report defined the scope of the issues, presented the facts and perceptions surrounding the issues, described how they fit into the overall community educational effort, and presented action recommendations.

In addition, position papers were written by work group members in their areas of interest. To facilitate the writing process, two writers were hired to do the work that staff and volunteers did not have time to do. These position papers were formally presented to the Forum to enhance understanding of the issues under discussion.

Then, the issues presented in the position papers were prioritized in terms of both present and future needs, and task

forces were assigned the responsibility to develop specific proposals based on the high-priority issues. In this year, the task forces developed proposals for funding the Jewish Community Educational Resource Center and teacher training program.

Year III

By the third year, activity had increased exponentially to include the following:

- A series of regular dialogues (forums) that brought together persons with a vested interest in Jewish education
- The establishment of the Jewish Community Educational Resource Center to serve the educational needs of learners of all ages in the Central New York Jewish community
- The establishment of an Annual Lecture and Program Development Fund to support an annual community program to stimulate interest in lifelong learning and Jewish education as a profession
- A regular monthly educational column in the Jewish press to bring issues of Jewish education to the attention of the community and to create public dialogue about Jewish education
- The creation of a "think tank" that met regularly to sort out and discuss broad issues of community Jewish education and to recommend ways to enhance Jewish education locally
- A JESNA Major Issues Conference for the purposes of creating a coalition between federation and synagogue leadership to accomplish the goal of strengthening Jewish education in the community
- A task force promoting the professional development of Jewish educators by increasing collaboration among teachers, their recognition in the community, and ongoing professional development for educators
- The establishment of a Jewish educators training program at the community Hebrew High School to address local

concerns about the teacher shortages in area Hebrew schools

- Preparation of the final report on the planning process, *Creating the Climate for Educational Change* (1989)

OUTCOMES OF THE PLANNING EFFORT

Over four years have passed since the Syracuse Jewish Federation first began this educational planning effort, and still new initiatives emerge. The most recent initiatives include:

- Establishment of a Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education (CAJE) Scholarship Program
- Three mini-CAJE conferences, each of which involved educators from Syracuse and surrounding areas
- The Think Tank's report, *New Directions for Jewish Learning Throughout the Lifespan* (1990)
- Establishment of the Jewish Education Committee as a standing committee of the Syracuse Jewish Federation

In addition to these tangible results, many more intangible outcomes have emerged in the process. The most important are the lessons about lifelong learning as a community experience.

We have learned together in our efforts to create the climate for educational change. The process of learning itself has been evolutionary. We have been building a history, a continuity, and an identity. It has evolved into a truly participatory, action-oriented process.

We have learned as individuals, as educational institutions, as agencies, and as synagogues how to work together better. We have forged relationships that previously were nonexistent or limited. We have empowered people by giving them a voice, making them partners and stakeholders in the process. We have opened up new channels of communication.

We have learned that learning is connected with patience. The process may be slow, but maintaining momentum is essential. Knowing how is of no benefit unless we know when to use our knowledge.

We have learned that participation takes preparation. We are learning how and when to use our human resources effectively and how to accommodate varying levels of participation and involvement, as well as different areas of expertise, in the Jewish educational scene. This means affirming people where they are.

We have learned the importance of mutual support—support for dreaming, support behind the scenes, support for creativity, and support in which judgment is suspended.

We have learned that, for Jewish education to be taken seriously, Jewish education must be perceived as a community issue.

We have learned to look to others outside the local Jewish community for enrichment and renewal. Talking to other community leaders in different parts of the country has enriched us and at the same time taught us to appreciate the richness of our own local resources. Learning from other communities has resulted in innovation, saved energy, and enabled us to remain focused and on task.

We have learned that educational accountability is as appropriate in the realm of Jewish education as it is in general education. We now ask the same questions of Jewish education as we do of general education.

We have learned to ask the "hard" questions, and as we have, we have discovered other issues that need to be addressed. The lesson from this has been knowing when to move on these issues and when to stand still; when to regroup so we can move forward.

CONCLUSION

The Jewish Education Forum has built on the features of adult learning in every

phase of its process—through *participation*, utilization of *experience*, and its *goal-oriented* and *situation-centered* nature in striving to meet local Jewish educational needs.

Today, in Central New York, Jewish education planning is respected as a serious endeavor. We are living our mission statement as a community, not only as a small task force. The result is rising expectations and a heightening of consciousness and concern for the quality of Jewish education in our community.

Planning in Jewish education is not for the faint-hearted. Continuity, persistence, and momentum are essential because Jewish education cannot and must not be taken for granted.

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