

Transforming Congregational Education:

Lessons Learned and Questions for the Future

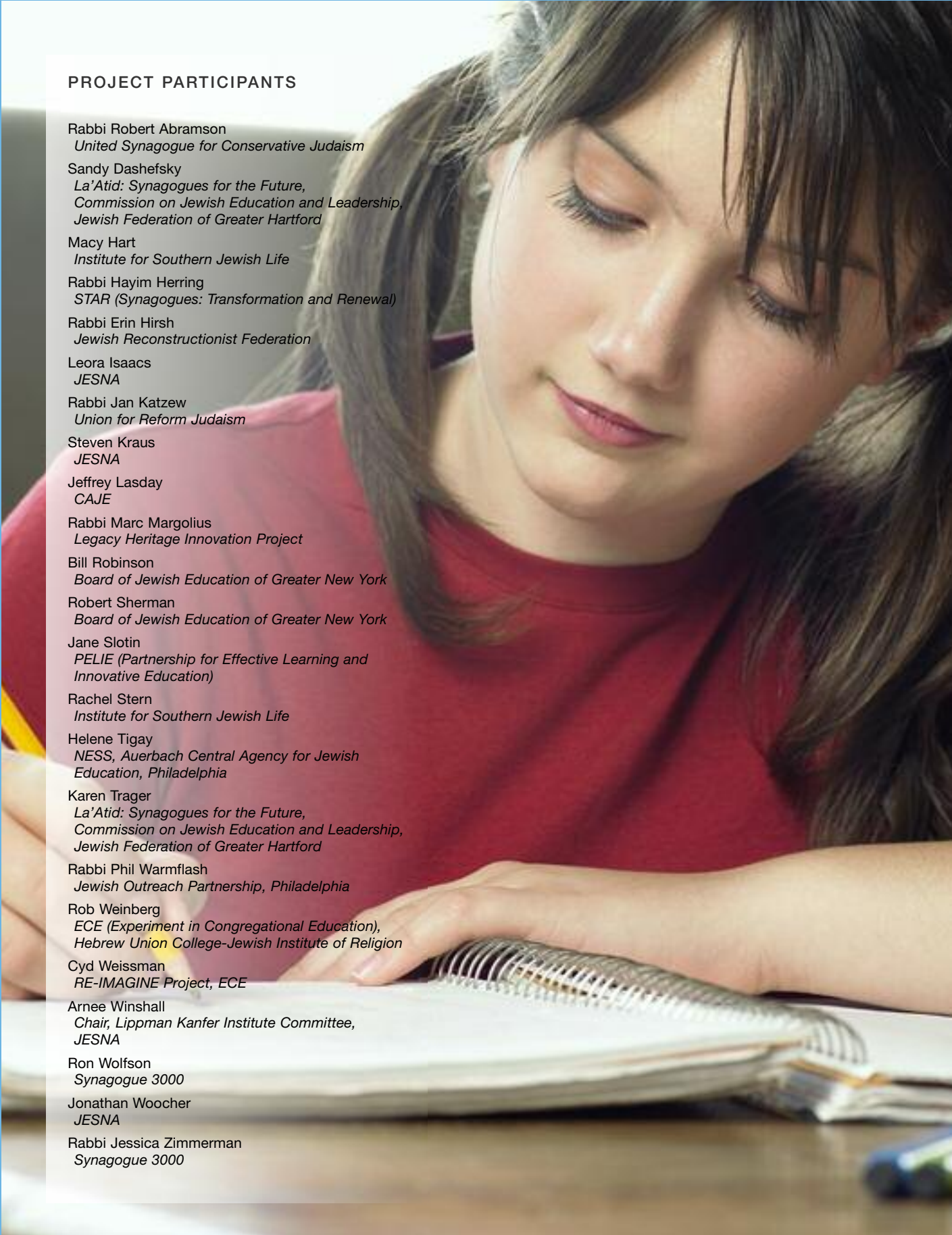


A Lippman Kanfer Institute Working Paper

**Jewish Education Service
of North America**

111 8th Avenue, 11th Floor
New York, NY 10011 USA
212.284.6882
212.284.6951 fax
www.jesna.org





PROJECT PARTICIPANTS

Rabbi Robert Abramson
United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism

Sandy Dashefsky
La'Atid: Synagogues for the Future,
Commission on Jewish Education and Leadership,
Jewish Federation of Greater Hartford

Macy Hart
Institute for Southern Jewish Life

Rabbi Hayim Herring
STAR (Synagogues: Transformation and Renewal)

Rabbi Erin Hirsh
Jewish Reconstructionist Federation

Leora Isaacs
JESNA

Rabbi Jan Katzew
Union for Reform Judaism

Steven Kraus
JESNA

Jeffrey Lasday
CAJE

Rabbi Marc Margolius
Legacy Heritage Innovation Project

Bill Robinson
Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York

Robert Sherman
Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York

Jane Slotin
PELIE (Partnership for Effective Learning and
Innovative Education)

Rachel Stern
Institute for Southern Jewish Life

Helene Tigay
NESS, Auerbach Central Agency for Jewish
Education, Philadelphia

Karen Trager
La'Atid: Synagogues for the Future,
Commission on Jewish Education and Leadership,
Jewish Federation of Greater Hartford

Rabbi Phil Warmflash
Jewish Outreach Partnership, Philadelphia

Rob Weinberg
ECE (Experiment in Congregational Education),
Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion

Cyd Weissman
RE-IMAGINE Project, ECE

Arnee Winshall
Chair, Lippman Kanfer Institute Committee,
JESNA

Ron Wolfson
Synagogue 3000

Jonathan Woocher
JESNA

Rabbi Jessica Zimmerman
Synagogue 3000



Table of Contents

<i>1. Setting the Stage</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>2. Goals: What Are We Trying to Achieve?</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>3. Content: What Must Be Changed?</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>4. Process: How Do We Make Change?</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>5. The Future: What Lies Ahead?</i>	<i>19</i>

THE LIPPMAN KANFER INSTITUTE: An Action-Oriented Think Tank for Innovation in Jewish Learning and Engagement

Jewish education is the primary vehicle through which the Jewish community ensures its continuing vitality. Dramatic demographic, sociological, cultural, technological and organizational changes that have taken place in society and in Jewish life over the past quarter century call for equally dramatic changes in how Jewish education is organized, practiced, and delivered in 21st century North America.

In order to achieve such changes — changes that by and large have not yet been implemented widely and, in some cases, not even imagined — Jewish education must:

- Identify where innovation is required,
- Capitalize on creative ideas that exist within the field of Jewish education,
- Cultivate ideas from fields beyond Jewish education, and
- Systematize the development and dissemination of promising solutions.

The Lippman Kanfer Institute: An Action-Oriented Think Tank for Innovation in Jewish Learning and Engagement responds to this need. The Lippman Kanfer Institute focuses on infusing innovation into the Jewish educational system. The Institute identifies and

disseminates new ideas, new thinking, new practices, and new organizational designs to keep Jewish education relevant and effective in a changing world.

The Lippman Kanfer Institute brings new thinking to important problems like the limited and episodic nature of educational participation among many Jews; the failure to build powerful synergies among multiple forms of education; and the untapped potential of technology, the arts, social action and other media for Jewish communication, self-expression and engagement. It maintains a vigorous connection with front-line practitioners and draws on and seeks to enhance innovative work already underway that promises to dramatically improve Jewish education's reach, impact, and effectiveness. The Lippman Kanfer Institute pays special attention to learnings from beyond the field of Jewish education. The Lippman Kanfer Institute's innovative ideas are brought to the field through vehicles such as conferences and colloquia, print and electronic publications; interactive media like wikis and blogs; and direct contact with educators and policy-makers working on the front lines.

The Lippman Kanfer Institute is part of JESNA and contributes to its mission to improve Jewish education by identifying and disseminating empirically-based learnings and innovative solutions to communities, institutions, policy-makers and practitioners. The work of the Lippman Kanfer Institute is supported by the Lippman Kanfer Family Foundation, based in Akron, Ohio.

1

“Our goal is to focus on what is undeniably taking place today: a broad-scale, multi-faceted effort to rethink, re-energize, reform, and re-imagine the educational work of synagogues... so as to make the Jewish learning experience of children and adults a positive, engaging, and impactful one.”



Setting the Stage

A quiet revolution has been brewing in Jewish education. It began roughly a decade and a half ago, and it has gained momentum steadily ever since. Its aim: to change the image and the reality of what has often been seen as the “black sheep” of Jewish education — the programs of learning for Jewish children, most often located in synagogues, that have come to be known as “Hebrew” or “religious school.”

Few would argue that these programs do not in fact need change. Condemned by critics as ineffectual or worse, recalled with distaste, if not disdain, by legions of its alumni, “Hebrew school” has been American Jewry’s most popular and most problematic form of Jewish education. It is not our purpose in this paper to rehearse the history of what is often called “supplementary” Jewish education, a history which has known some signal successes as well as failures. Rather, our goal is to focus on what is undeniably taking place today: a broad-scale, multi-faceted effort to rethink, re-energize, reform, and re-imagine the educational work of synagogues (and in some cases other providers) so as to make the Jewish learning experience of children and adults a positive, engaging, and impactful one.

JESNA’s Lippman Kanfer Institute, an action-oriented think tank for innovation in Jewish learning and engagement, has articulated a vision for 21st century Jewish education as learner-focused, relationship-infused, and life-centered. In this vision, Jewish learners of all ages are involved in meaningful educational experiences as active, rather than passive, participants. These experiences are connected to one another to form a continuum of learning, with multiple attractive options that encourage Jews to make Jewish education a lifelong endeavor. And, these experiences both draw upon and

give shape and meaning to the totality of learners’ lives and relationships.

The synagogue is in principle, if not yet in practice, an ideal setting in which this kind of Jewish education can take root and flourish. For more individuals and families than any other single Jewish institution, the synagogue is the embodiment of Jewish community. It is also, at least potentially, a gateway into the full variety and richness of Jewish life, not only within its own walls, but in the larger Jewish community as well of which it is (or should be) an integral part. It is difficult to imagine a thriving North American Jewry in the 21st century without synagogues that fulfill well both their traditional educational mission — inducting successive generations of young Jews into enthusiastic and knowledgeable participation in Jewish life — and the larger vision of serving as centers and platforms for lifelong Jewish learning.

Those most deeply engaged in the work of congregational educational improvement and transformation recognize that there is still a long way to go before synagogues in substantial number realize their full Jewish educational potential. But a solid beginning has been made. We have the opportunity, therefore, to examine what has occurred over the past decade and a half in order to seek guidance for the work yet to be done. Over this 15-year period, numerous organizations, initiatives, and individual synagogues have undertaken efforts to try to improve and renew congregational education. Of these, 11 organizations and projects stand out by virtue of the scope, seriousness, longevity and/or potential impact of their endeavors. These constitute the primary “learning pool” for this paper. These 11 initiatives and organizations are:

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1

Experiment in Congregational Education (ECE), including the RE-IMAGINE Project

www.eceonline.org

ECE's mission is to strengthen synagogues as critical centers of Jewish life in North America by helping them to become Congregations of Learners and Self-Renewing Congregations. ECE works primarily with cohorts of congregations — often in partnership with local central agencies — supporting congregations throughout the process of transformation. The ECE's RE-IMAGINE Project aims to help synagogues rethink their approaches to religious education for children in K-7 age groups and their families (unlike other ECE projects that encompass lifelong Jewish learning). An ECE Consultant guides teams of leaders from each of the participating synagogues through a process to examine their community's values, dreams, and goals. After experiencing unique Internet-based virtual visits to innovative educational programs across the country, synagogue teams adapt aspects of those programs — or invent their own new models — to fit their own communities' visions for Jewish learning. Other focused ECE projects target systemic change in particular areas of congregational education such as teacher recruitment and professional learning.

2

Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life (ISJL) Education Program

www.isjl.org/education/index.html

Believing that every Jewish child deserves an excellent Jewish education regardless of where they live or the size of their religious school, the ISJL education program serves its 13-state Southern region with:

1. A comprehensive curriculum, for grades pre-K-10 is designed to create a meaningful Jewish experience and to link the Jewish children in our region through a *common body of Jewish knowledge*.
2. A unique *delivery system* where each school is visited

by a traveling Education Fellow three times per year to provide face to face programming and support.

3. The annual “*Go and Teach*” *Education Conference*, which brings our community of teachers together for networking opportunities, learning from world-class Jewish educators, and providing a variety of education program resources.

3

Jewish Reconstructionist Federation (“Next Generation” initiative)

www.jrf.org

The “Next Generation” initiative seeks to enhance the quality of and build connections and synergies among the full range of educational settings serving members of Reconstructionist congregations, including the synagogues themselves and the movement's camp, youth, and Israel programs.

4

La’atid: Synagogues for the Future — Hartford

hartfordct.ujcfedweb.org/local_includes/downloads/26890.pdf

La’atid’s goal is to revitalize congregations/schools by engaging them in individual organizational change processes which respond to each congregation’s educational vision, culture, and needs. Consultants, on-site, assist each congregation to advance toward its specific goals including integrating Jewish learning and engagement, supporting innovative, community-building experiences and creating meaningful educational and spiritual opportunities for children and adults. La’atid brings together a broad base of professional and lay leadership to design and implement visionary, experimental action plans by listening to needs and focusing on Torah study and leadership development, both on-site and through community courses. Finally, La’atid also emphasizes school renewal, developing site-based professional learning communities steeped in relevant Jewish study and innovative teaching techniques.

5

Legacy Heritage Innovation Project

www.legacyheritage.org

The Legacy Heritage Innovation Project is a non-denominational initiative to support synagogues which are creating new paradigms for congregational education, introducing systemic change through an integrated, family-based approach. It prioritizes projects which embed learning in the rhythm of Jewish living on Shabbat and chagim, engage parents and children in consistent learning and practice, link the different dimensions of Jewish living (Torah, avodah, gemilut hasadim), and foster collaboration and synergy within congregational life.

6

Nurturing Excellence in Synagogue Schools (NESS) — Philadelphia

www.ajca.org/content/ness/NESSInitiative.shtml

The NESS Initiative combines a standardized assessment of a school's assets and limitations, teacher training, leadership training for school directors, and training for lay leaders so that they can provide support for the schools' needs. Teachers learn innovative teaching strategies and meaningful Jewish content, as well as techniques for integrating them in ways that will capture the interest of today's students. NESS also incorporates opportunities for teachers to practice these newly acquired strategies and skills under the supervision of their trained school directors. In addition, two other components, curriculum development and parenting and family engagement, are developed through collaborative efforts of the lay leaders, the school director, and the teachers.

7

Partnership for Effective Learning and Innovative Education (PELIE)

www.pelie.org (under construction)

PELIE's mission is to substantially improve complementary Jewish education in North America and to thereby transform the perception and funding of the

field. PELIE is doing this by identifying and supporting the replication and adaptation of innovative models of complementary education and educational change initiatives.

8

STAR (Synagogues: Transformation and Renewal)

www.starsynagogue.org

STAR works with synagogues to bridge the chasm between the American Jewish community and the synagogue. Through philanthropic partnerships with the country's leading Jewish foundations and federations, STAR designs and delivers synagogue-based initiatives, continuing educational opportunities for rabbis and regularly publishes its worldview on the compelling questions facing American synagogues in the 21st century. Its commitment is to help find answers to 21st century challenges through innovative, research-based, well executed programming which respects tradition and values the freedom that people have to direct their own Jewish lives.

9

Synagogue 2000/3000

www.synagogue3000.org

Synagogue 3000 seeks to make synagogues compelling moral and spiritual centers for the 21st century. It has two main venues for its work: a leadership network and a synagogue studies research initiative. S3K Leadership Network is a trailblazing group of synagogue innovators on the cutting edge of congregational life. These are rabbis, cantors and artists across the spectrum of Jewish life, including challenging and promising alternatives to traditional synagogue structures. The synagogue studies research initiative supports the work with synagogues by linking scholarship to the work in the field. S3K convenes consultations and collaborates with congregational studies colleagues in other religious traditions; and then disseminates the lessons learned so as to continue "raising the bar" for synagogue excellence.

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Union for Reform Judaism (Chai)

urj.org/chai

The URJ CHAI Curriculum is designed to facilitate lifelong Jewish learning; it is intended for Religious School students grades 2-7, Religious School teachers, Education Committees, congregational Boards of Directors, parents of children ages 3-14, and families with children ages 7-14. CHAI responds to the need for a dynamic balance between Torah (Jewish literacy), avodah (competency), and g'milut chasadim (acts of caring and social justice) within congregational schools.

United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (Framework for Excellence and Project Etgar)

uscj.org/Framework_for_Excel6432.html

uscj.org/Project_Etgar7134.html

The Framework for Excellence provides benchmarks to the congregation including family education, active rabbinic and cantorial participation, and ongoing professional development for teachers and principals. It works to integrate elements of informal education and systematically engage in family education. The Framework schools start early, continue through adolescence, and ultimately expand formal education to students through high school.

Project Etgar is a curriculum created especially for middle school students (Grades 6-8) in Conservative synagogue settings, builds on students' prior knowledge and experiences while promoting new learning. It empowers them to articulate positive Jewish identities with pride, while adding breadth and depth to their understanding and observance of Judaism.

...

Collectively, these organizations have worked with hundreds of congregations throughout North America. They have brought to bear a range of approaches to defining the goals, content, and processes for synagogue educational change. By studying and synthesizing their experiences we can gain unique insight into the opportunities and challenges that await in the next stages of the work of congregational educational change. This paper attempts to build such a bridge between what has been and what will be, what we have learned and what may lie ahead.*

The content of the paper is derived from two sources:

1. a review of extensive material (published and unpublished) describing and in some cases assessing the thinking and work of the organizations and initiatives, much of it made available or suggested by the initiatives themselves; and
2. interviews with principals of all of the projects using a protocol aimed at eliciting their reflections on and lessons learned from their activity.

* In addition to the programs that serve as the basis for this paper, a number of other initiatives have been launched in the past several years that also seek to promote synagogue educational change. Because they were not studied as part of this research, learnings from these programs are not included in the analysis that follows. However, these programs clearly represent important additional sources of insight into the goals, contents, and processes of congregational educational change that should be added to future learning endeavors. Two of the most important of the projects currently operating are:

Jewish Outreach Partnership (JOP)

Jewish Outreach Partnership is a trans-denominational Philadelphia-based agency whose mission is to strengthen synagogues as vibrant, dynamic centers of Jewish life. Through facilitated conversations, consultation, workshops, and educational resources, JOP provides multiple entry points for synagogue lay and professional leaders to imagine and implement new strategies that promote systemic growth within their congregation. Current JOP initiatives include Reshet Networks for Synagogue Strength, Synaplex™ Philadelphia, the Tuttleman Leadership Institute, the Synagogue Mentorship Program, Making Connections Home Study Guides and One Book One Jewish Community.

The Leadership Institute for Congregational School Educators (LICSE)

A joint project of Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion and the Jewish Theological Seminary, and funded by the UJA-Federation of New York, LICSE prepares a cohort of professional educational leaders of synagogues to lead vision-driven change in their congregational schools. The program uses a variety of learning activities, including seminars, individual projects, peer learning and mentorships, to help participating educators build their leadership capacity, pedagogic skills, and Judaic knowledge. The program also engages lay leaders and rabbis as key partners in the change process.

The paper is organized around three questions:

1. What are the goals of congregational educational change? What can and should we hope to achieve through these efforts and for whom? What visions are guiding these endeavors?
2. What is the content of congregational education change? What is it that needs to be changed? What are the primary drivers of success in this endeavor?
3. What is the process for congregational educational change? What needs to be done, by whom, to make congregational educational change efforts succeed?

These questions, and often the answers to them, are, of course, closely related. In some cases, indeed, there is a deliberate congruence between an initiative's vision for what a synagogue should be and the methods it employs to reach these goals. The intertwining of goals, content, and process may produce what on the one hand seem like tautologies — e.g., that to create a synagogue in which more members are active Jewish learners (a goal), we should introduce more Jewish learning into the change process (the means). But, in fact, this and other similar “tautologies” we will encounter actually represent one of the most profound overarching learnings that emerges from the accumulated experience of these initiatives: synagogue change is not a destination; it is a journey in which what we do powerfully shapes what we become. So, though we will use the categories of “goals,” “content,” and “process” to organize the material presented here, it should be clearly understood that these are three faces of a single reality.

The final section of the paper looks briefly to the future. What may be next for the work of congregational educational change? What challenges and opportunities lie ahead? What issues need to be addressed if the substantial work already done and underway is to realize its full potential? This section will, hopefully, set the

stage for the next phase of the overall project which the Lippman Kanfer Institute and these initiatives have undertaken: envisioning the next decade of congregational educational change.

The pages that follow offer synthetic reflections, not specific assessments of or judgments about individual initiatives. Some of the projects from which the proposed learnings are derived have been evaluated (generally with substantially positive findings about their impacts), but not all. Some have a long “track record”; others are virtually brand new. The change initiatives themselves are quite varied in their foci, intensity, and methods — some do not even focus specifically on education, but rather on synagogue life more broadly. What we are looking for are patterns of experience and learnings that can illuminate broad directions for congregational educational change going forward. We should not expect that each organization or initiative will yield identical insights. But, we will also see the outlines of a “collective wisdom” that is beginning to emerge from the accumulated experience of these initiatives and that can provide substantial guidance for future action.

What we offer here is, then, neither an analysis of individual projects nor a formula, but rather a set of proposed findings and insights that (still somewhat tentatively) seek to outline key parameters of a maturing, but not yet fully grown, field of endeavor. Operating at this level of abstraction, some context will be lost. But, hopefully, we can compensate for this loss by drawing out principles of action that transcend individual initiatives and can help guide future work in a range of settings.

In all that follows we try to keep in mind the starting point for this lessons learned process: a desire to see the revolution that has already begun continue with even greater vigor and greater success as the next decade of congregational educational change unfolds.



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Goals: What Are We Trying to Achieve?

The initiatives reviewed for this paper articulate their goals in a variety of ways. Nearly all of these articulations, however, focus on three “beneficiaries” of the change efforts: the learners, the educational framework or process (“school”), and the synagogue as a whole. Some of the initiatives clearly make one of these the primary focus of their goal articulations; some include two or all three; and some are explicit in trying to weave different foci together (e.g., changing how synagogues operate in order to better inculcate Jewish identity).

Within each category, the specific goal articulations offered have a great deal in common. With respect to impact on individuals, for example, initiatives speak about “enhancing the learning experience for young people,” “having students become lifelong learners,” “increasing Jewish literacy,” “creating more engagement with Jewish learning by more people more regularly,” “making Judaism a palpable force in the daily lives of students,” and “making a positive difference in the lives of learners.” The significance here is the clear recognition by nearly all of the initiatives that at the end of the day their success should be judged (at least in part) by the impact they have on individuals’ lives, not just on institutions or programs. One of the issues we will address below is whether and how this “learner-centrism” is in fact reflected in the change processes themselves.

With respect to goals articulated in relation to educational programs, there is an important distinction among the initiatives. For some, the major focus is strengthening what has historically been the most prominent educational framework that synagogues maintain — the Hebrew or religious “school.” Such goals are often stated simply and straightforwardly:

“help schools be better”; “change the schooling process”; “school is happier and more satisfying.” Some articulations have more specific content, especially around creating a common body of knowledge to be learned, or common goals and a shared language around student outcomes.

For other initiatives, though the language of “schooling” may not be explicitly repudiated, neither is “school improvement” the primary framework for goal articulation. One initiative speaks, e.g., about seeking to create “a new type of educational programming that addresses and transcends the weaknesses of traditional Jewish education.” Another speaks of creating an appropriate framework for a “next generation” vision, that involves the integration of education, youth programming, camping, and Israel experiences. The issue here is not insignificant. The initiatives appear to be divided among those who see their goal to be one of “improving” the operation of synagogue schools and those whose aim includes transforming them (“re-imagining the religious school”) into something that is quite different, perhaps not even a “school” as we generally think of it. (There is actually a third category, as we shall see in a moment: those that do not focus much on the education of children at all.)

The line between “improvement” and “transformation” is not always clear, nor does it map directly onto the scope and substance of the actual change efforts pursued. Some of the most ambitious and systematic initiatives reviewed do not explicitly challenge the structure of the school as the basic unit for delivering quality Jewish educational experiences for children and their families. Nonetheless, whether fundamental structural change is needed in how education is delivered by congregations

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or whether the existing structures can be sufficiently improved to provide a dramatically better educational experience is one of the issues on which initiatives that otherwise overlap substantially in content and process appear to disagree.

There is another important sub-category of goal articulations with respect to educational activity that should be noted: Several initiatives explicitly aim to support what might be called “under-resourced” congregations. These initiatives argue (implicitly, if not explicitly) that more ambitious “transformational” objectives are often not relevant to synagogues that lack full-time clergy and leadership personnel, trained teachers, well-developed curricula, and other elements that larger or better-resourced congregations may take for granted. A major goal for these initiatives is providing a well-designed educational framework — curriculum, educational resources, teacher training, consultative assistance — that will enable any synagogue that wishes to do so (including, but not necessarily limited to, under-resourced ones) to provide a solid Jewish educational experience for its children and families.

As noted above, there is a third category of goal articulations that is fully as prominent as those that speak about improving or transforming educational frameworks and processes: those that aim at major changes in the synagogue as a whole. We deliberately included in the universe of initiatives being reviewed several that do not even claim education as their primary focus, though Jewish learning is certainly an important part of their vision for synagogue life. However, even excluding these projects aimed at synagogue transformation, it is striking that nearly all of the initiatives speak in some fashion about changes in the synagogue as a whole as part or even the centerpiece of their visions.

For some, an important piece of this is a transformed relationship of the school to the synagogue as a whole. They speak of seeking “an organic interconnection of synagogue and school, with the school seen as central to congregational purpose and activities,” or a “sense of

community among congregations and schools.” Some envision education in turn as a lever for wider change: “using Jewish learning as the pathway to congregational transformation”; “re-imagining the religious school, but with the hope of congregational change.” And some have a vision for the synagogue that places Jewish learning and learners at its core: creating “congregations of learners,” or building “learning communities, where planning and decision-making are rooted in Torah study.”

But the goal articulations are not limited to the educational domain alone. Several initiatives speak of seeking to create “systemic change”: “increase the capacity of synagogue and school leaders to reflect and ‘re-engineer,’ based on their own unique vision and mission”; build “a more systematic operation of congregations in order to better inculcate Jewish identity and promote engagement”; “get congregations to think differently, to respond differently to people and the community.” These initiatives aim to affect synagogues as a whole, “to increase participation and visibility,” “involve the disenfranchised and those ‘on the way out,’” “strengthen synagogues as vital centers of Jewish life in North America.” This is an ambitious vision for synagogue transformation that extends far beyond improving specific educational offerings (though the latter may contribute to its realization).

Indeed, the relationship among the three different “goal clusters” we have identified — the goal of strengthening Jewish identity and affecting the lives of learners through enhanced learning experiences, the goal of improving specific educational programs and performance, and the goal of strengthening synagogues as centers of Jewish learning and living — is itself an interesting issue to consider. These represent three potentially quite different takes on where our focus of attention should be as we examine and seek to change the condition of congregational education today. At the same time, it is important to note that while the various initiatives do not all articulate their goals in all three categories, nor place equal emphasis upon them, a number do connect them, implicitly or explicitly, and in practice they are deeply intertwined. In the concluding

section of the paper, we will look again at the distinction among these three ways to articulate the goals of congregational educational change efforts and at the relationships among them, and consider some of the issues these distinctions and relationships raise for setting future directions.

Looked at through another lens, the various initiatives we reviewed can be arrayed along a spectrum with respect to their goals, from those that are narrowly focused on improving the educational process and experience within specific frameworks (the synagogue school, or even programs targeting specific populations within those frameworks such as teenagers) to those that seek broad transformations in synagogue life as a whole, with changes in education an important component and beneficiary of and sometimes lever for such wider change. Yet it is also true that there is substantial overlap among the initiatives, with many articulating substantially similar goals for enriching the lives of Jewish learners, for improving educational programs and practices, and for strengthening synagogues as institutions capable of engaging large numbers in rewarding Jewish learning. We would even suggest that

implicit in the variety of goal articulations is, perhaps, a unifying (or at least a bridging) vision for the work of congregational educational change that might be stated somewhat as follows:

To provide those of all ages interested in Jewish learning and experiences with attractive, high quality educational experiences in a variety of forms and contexts that will affect their lives, and to do so by helping synagogues become more visionary, reflective, integrated and disciplined about putting in place the conditions necessary to be an institution and community where such Jewish education is done widely and well.

What nearly all of the initiatives reviewed would also agree is that achieving such change involves a combination of practical steps and deeper cultural and perhaps structural transformation. So, we turn next to the question of what exactly must be changed in order to achieve the goals these initiatives set, and then to the question of how to do this.

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For a number of these initiatives, the best answer to the question, “what must be changed?” is, in fact, “everything”.

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Content: What Must Be Changed?

Regardless of how one articulates the goals for congregational educational change, the work itself is complex and challenging. Every initiative reviewed understands that there is no “silver bullet,” no single intervention or lever that will achieve even a modestly articulated goal such as “making school more satisfying.” For a number of these initiatives, the best answer to the question, “what must be changed?” is, in fact, “everything.” They use watchwords like “systemic change” and “alignment” to express the idea that not only must multiple elements be changed, but that they must be changed in a planful and coordinated fashion. At the same time, the various initiatives do highlight a number of specific elements of congregations’ structures, cultures, and practices where change is seen as especially critical and impactful, whether this change is undertaken through an encompassing systemic process or a more measured and limited set of activities. These may, therefore, serve as particularly useful leverage points on the positive side, or barriers on the negative side, when change is being attempted.

Many of the most ambitious initiatives seeking congregational educational change or synagogue transformation more broadly argue that such change must be both systemic (touching many aspects of synagogue life in a coordinated fashion) and vision-driven. They speak of “aligning all elements of the educational system to work toward a common purpose (make a difference in the lives of learners),” or “changing the culture, vision, and structure, and aligning other elements — curriculum, training, leadership, budget — around the vision.” For some of these initiatives, the “vision” serves as the touchstone of the entire change process, and hence developing that vision becomes the first and foremost task for a

congregation to undertake. For others, creating a vision is one (important) dimension of the process, but one that can and should be carried out in conjunction with other changes that address other dimensions of the educational process and of the synagogue’s structure, culture, and practice, or even as an outgrowth of a period of experimentation.

These are perhaps not unimportant nuances in terms of the process of change (see further below), but they should not obscure the fact that a significant number of the initiatives studied view far-reaching structural and cultural changes, guided by a vision and finding expression in a range of new practices, as the best (or only) way to achieve substantial change in the educational life of synagogues and the attitudes and behaviors of learners. In this context, there are a number of characteristics of congregational culture that are frequently singled out as targets for change:

- reflectiveness and the ability to be self-critical
- openness, willingness to innovate, experiment, and take action
- the cultural norms around Jewish learning — where, when, and how it is done
- systemic thinking around issues such as governance and engagement of constituencies
- marketing and communications

As we have seen, for several of the initiatives reviewed, improving Jewish education is one dimension of the goal of strengthening synagogues and synagogue life, and the latter is seen as essential for the former. Both are part of a comprehensive vision for congregations as

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“congregations of learners” (infused with Jewish learning) on the one hand, and “learning (or self-renewing) congregations” (capable of ongoing growth and development) on the other. It is not surprising, therefore, that these initiatives focus a good portion of their attention on aspects of synagogue structure, culture, and behavior (such as governance, lay-professional collaboration, risk-taking, reflectiveness, a welcoming and engaging atmosphere, etc.) that do not at first glance seem to relate directly to Jewish education. In fact, the impact of these changes on specifically educational outcomes is not yet well-established empirically. But, it is not only the ambitious “systemic change” initiatives that cite such factors as leadership, communication, volunteer engagement, and other aspects of congregational culture as important. Thus, the case for connection appears to be strong enough to justify the prominence that these areas for change have been given in the work of these initiatives.

At the same time, nearly all of the initiatives studied do affirm that changing specific dimensions of the educational environment, framework, and process is also indispensable to achieve their goals. This is especially true for those initiatives that place the quality of the learning experience for students (children and families) at the center of their goal articulations. A number of initiatives identify as targets for change:

- the school culture and the centrality of the school in the congregation
- the quality of teaching — teachers’ skills, methods, and relationships with students and one another
- curriculum (although different initiatives have different images of what curriculum should emphasize, how and by whom it should be developed, and how individual schools should relate to the curriculum development process)
- congregational programming — more diverse, experiential, integrated, family-oriented, and Shabbat-centered

As noted earlier, while some initiatives appear to focus heavily on one arena for intervention — e.g., curriculum — the reality is that all of the initiatives seek to bring multiple levers to bear. Some do this more fully or more explicitly than others. Several strive to create what is in effect a complete and fully aligned “package” of changes, to be pursued simultaneously or sequentially, in which all aspects of the synagogue’s educational program — vision, curriculum, leadership, teaching, family programming, lay support, evaluation — receive attention. Others target their interventions more narrowly, trying, as it were, to carve out spaces where first-rate Jewish learning — strong, relevant content; well-prepared teachers; active learning approaches; connection to the lives of the learners and the environments in which they live — is taking place. Some focus directly on the religious school as still the single most important venue within the synagogue for Jewish education. Others look explicitly to move beyond the school and to stimulate educational activity that connects to and penetrates into wider populations and dimensions of the synagogue’s life.

These differences are not inconsequential. As with the area of goals, there are real differences among the initiatives with regard to what they seek to change that cannot and should not be minimized. However, there is another perspective that can be taken as well: As a group the initiatives propose a set of targets for change efforts that cover all of the key “commonplaces” that have come to be seen as defining any educational process. More important, the changes they recommend in these areas are generally well-delineated and frequently are recommended in quite similar terms, even if in different configurations, by multiple initiatives. This should increase our confidence that if implemented, these changes will in fact make a difference.

Two final comments on the “what” of congregational educational change:

As noted above, a number of initiatives have come to the fore in recent years that focus on helping

congregations expand and transform their programming, both in and beyond the school framework. Although these initiatives certainly call on synagogues to engage in reflection and planning, they tend to emphasize (at least initially) a “go out and do it” attitude. This can be seen in a sense as a practical counterpoint to the emphasis on vision-driven systemic change that we noted above as characteristic of several initiatives. These do not constitute incompatible alternatives. Quite the contrary. A number of initiatives seek in various ways to connect the design and implementation of new programming to a larger vision for the synagogue and a recognition of the importance of systemic thinking. Some begin with the vision and ask congregations to experiment with specific programmatic innovations that will begin to move them along the road to realization of that vision. Others encourage synagogues to initiate new programs, but then to reflect on them and to begin to envision and implement the wider changes necessary for these new programs to thrive and expand. We can see this as a contrast between more “deductive” and more “inductive” approaches to change. In both cases, the outcome is intended to be both immediate, visible change that improves and enriches the Jewish educational experience for one or more constituencies and creation of a platform for ongoing expansion and deepening of Jewish learning and community throughout the congregation. The fact that what look at first glance like alternative approaches — “vision-driven” vs. “program-driven” — are seen by their advocates as

complementary and compatible (as evidenced by cooperation between and among several of the initiatives) is itself a highly positive indicator that a solid shared wisdom about the whats and hows of congregational educational change may be emerging.

Finally, it is worth noting what is generally not spoken about by these initiatives when they address the content of change. While many of the initiatives acknowledge the larger backdrop against which synagogue life and congregational education are playing out today, very few discuss changes that might be pursued outside the context of individual synagogues. A few speak about better integration with other educational venues (especially camp) or reaching out more effectively to the larger community. And, several express a desire to “change the conversation” about congregational and complementary Jewish education specifically and Jewish education generally. But, the vast bulk of attention these initiatives give is, perhaps inevitably, on changes to be made within the synagogue — facilitated and supported externally, but internal to the life and work of the congregation. By and large, these initiatives do not address explicitly the implications of looking at the congregation as, at least potentially, part of a larger educating system (though they certainly do not discourage this). Nor do they detail the (additional) changes that might need to be made internally and externally were this direction to be pursued. We will return to this issue in the concluding section.

4

“...change is clearly happening. This reflects the fact that over the past two decades the initiatives reviewed have developed quite sophisticated processes for catalyzing and supporting change.”



Process: How Do We Make Change?

All change is difficult. Changing education is notoriously difficult (viz. the often unhappy history of educational reform). Changing education in synagogues — institutions that are both voluntary and religious — is perhaps in the same league as quitting smoking: not impossible, but damned difficult. And yet, such change is clearly happening. This reflects the fact that over the past two decades the initiatives reviewed have developed quite sophisticated processes for catalyzing and supporting change.

These processes are hardly identical. This is not surprising given the differences in goals and in the scope and scale of change being sought among the initiatives. The differences in approach reflect differences of viewpoint, some pragmatic, some philosophical, concerning what strategies and tactics work best for specific purposes. They also reflect to an extent tensions that may be inherent in any guided change process, e.g., between “customization” and “curricularization,” that show up not only among initiatives, but within them as well.

Nonetheless, there are a number of themes that cut across the approaches taken and the learnings reported by the various initiatives. Though constituting less than a “formula” or “recipe” for how to implement congregational educational change, they clearly provide extensive guidance on what to do, what not to do, and what to expect. Together, they bespeak a sophisticated understanding of what successful change requires and entails.

1

Substantial change takes time and does not proceed smoothly. Deep change is hard work. The process is time-consuming, creating tensions that need to be managed between the need for process and the desire for visible results, and between the time needed to root change and how long one can maintain enthusiasm. Change has its own rhythms; it’s not a straight line. Adoption will always be uneven, and luck and idiosyncratic events play a role. The process is never finished.

2

Take action and be ambitious. Perhaps precisely because change is difficult, “just doing it” is important. Congregations need to “think big and act boldly.” Action and results are a window into reflection and vision. Be willing to experiment and don’t set expectations too low. Change is messy, and attempting to proceed at a “moderate” pace may produce the worst of both worlds (drawn-out process, few visible results).

3

In a systemic approach to change, vision, action, reflection, and conversation feed off one another to drive the process forward. Combining these elements is the key to a successful change process. A guiding vision is important, but so is creating facts on the ground. Envisioning what might be and encountering concrete examples of “the

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Emerald City” provide both inspiration and impetus to try to close the gap between the ideal and the current reality. New programs and activities, even at early stages in the change process, in turn help people see what is needed and possible more clearly and can be used as levers to drive further and deeper change through capacity-building and referral back to the vision. Conversation at every stage is critical, as long as it is purposive and linked back to the vision and Jewish values. At its best, this becomes a spiraling process of continuous learning and growth, with each element feeding the others.

4

Getting (the right) people engaged and empowering them is critical. Bring a broad-based group of leaders together to do the planning and make sure they are listening to the community. Respond to what’s coming from the congregation. Find the “Nachshons” and cultivate them to lead. Keep moving people to higher levels of engagement. Rabbis, parents, and educators are key stakeholders in any change effort. They need to be engaged directly and sometimes separately if the process is to work. Lay leaders are also key. Their personal growth is often tied to and a spur for institutional growth. Getting and keeping stakeholders — those driving the change process, congregational leadership, and those affected by change — on the same page is an ongoing challenge. So too is keeping those most involved from burning out. Leadership transitions pose a challenge as well. Teachers need particular attention. They should be included early on and given the professional development and support they need to work in new ways.

5

The change process is powered by and largely about learning. Learning is taking place on multiple levels throughout these change initiatives: learning about Jewish education, the congregation, leadership, process, people, the relevance of Jewish texts. Jewish learning plays a unique role, modeling the outcomes being sought, helping participants to grow Jewishly (and feel

the satisfaction of doing so), and anchoring conversations in Jewish values.

6

Quality outside assistance can help the process tremendously. Consultants, facilitators, mentors, and evaluators can provide invaluable guidance and support for many aspects of the process. But, they need to be good at what they do — and there are too few good consultants currently available. Building a relationship of trust is critical. Consultants and mentors need to be an active but not overbearing presence, and if more than one is involved in different aspects of an initiative, to work as a team. Calibrating the right type and amount of support to provide may be a challenge. Ideally, there should be a balance between providing ongoing support and preparing a synagogue to take charge of the change process itself. The most effective outside support, it would appear, is aimed both at supplying the perspective (and occasionally mediating the conflicts) that insiders have difficulty achieving and at building internal capacity in the synagogue.

7

Because change is complex, a multi-pronged support system is needed. While some congregations have been able to make substantial change in their educational programs on their own, most appear to require some type of outside assistance in order to initiate and negotiate a serious change process successfully. Even for apparently straightforward changes (such as introducing a new curriculum), and certainly for multi-dimensional systemic change, support needs to come in multiple forms: assessment, tools, training, site visits, networking, inspiration. It needs to be both individualized (targeted at the specific congregation and often at sub-groups or individuals within the synagogue) and collective (bringing the congregation and change-makers into relationship with others similarly engaged). Conferences, classes, formalized curricula, publications and other resources, consultation, communities of practice, networking (including online) all play a role and can be deployed in

various combinations. Support should be available from the outset and ideally would be ongoing even beyond the active phase of a change initiative. However, those providing support also need to give congregations room to take ownership of their own change and adapt it to their needs. There is a potential tension between “turnkey” support (“we’ll give you everything you need”) and empowering synagogues to pursue their own directions and develop their own resources.

8

Financial resources can help “lubricate” change. All change requires resources, and new funding, whether internally or externally generated, can certainly help to make the change pathway smoother. A challenge is to ensure that new funds help to create the infra-structure for sustainable change, not just new short-term programs. If more funding were available to the change initiatives themselves, their ability to support congregations in their processes could be significantly strengthened.



These eight themes certainly do not exhaust the learnings about the change process from the initiatives reviewed. But, they demonstrate that the current state-of-the-art with respect to congregational educational change is quite sophisticated, and that there is substantial agreement among the initiatives about the requisites (or, at least, the desiderata) for successful change.

In practice, there are differences in how these principles are implemented. Even initiatives that aim to promote “systemic” change start in different places and employ different tools: Some begin with broad visioning, and then move to experiments. Some begin with action projects that aim to be systemic in microcosm, and then try to use these to generate deeper reflection about larger issues. Some tackle multiple dimensions of the change process (visioning, leadership development, professional training, curricular change) almost simultaneously. Others address these sequentially. Some

provide highly explicit processes for synagogues to follow; others are looser. Some place great emphasis on gatherings of participating congregations. Others focus more resources on intensive consultation.

As we have noted throughout, there are also “tensions” and “tradeoffs” built into the entire change process between:

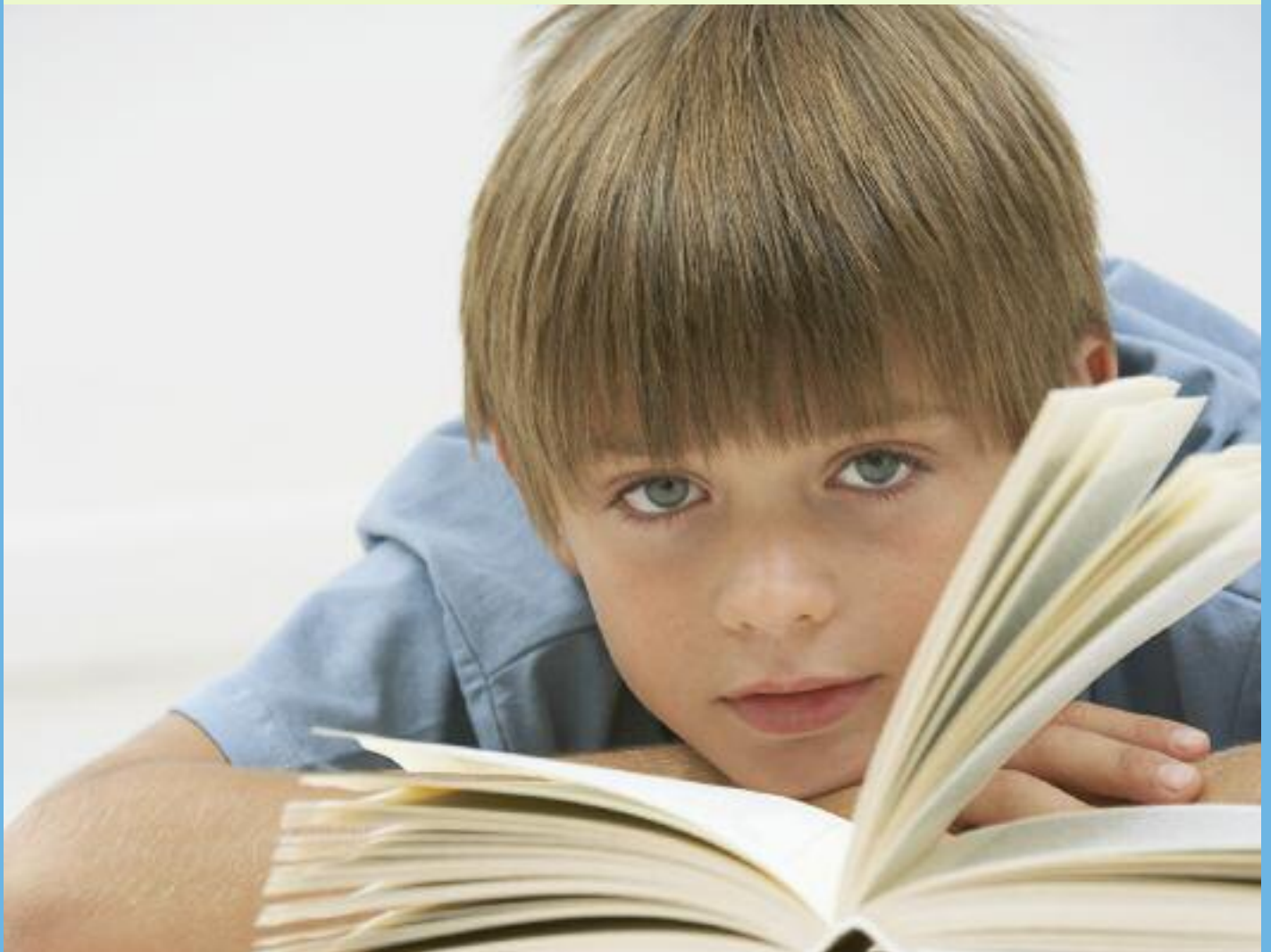
- “customization” and “curricularization,”
- “turnkey” support and an emphasis on process,
- fostering autonomy and maintaining an ongoing support structure,
- concentrating on specific elements (curriculum, teaching, leadership) and seeking broad systemic and cultural change,
- deliberative visioning/planning and quick action steps/new programs.

These are best seen not as either/or propositions, but rather as “eilu v’eilu” options with valid rationales for both alternatives. And, indeed, though some initiatives clearly incline toward one end or the other of these tensions in their practice, a number work hard and with some success to embrace both — to create a balance or synthesis, rather than simply a trade-off.

The differences among the initiatives with regard to how best to generate and support change are not unimportant, and there is room for a great deal of additional sharing and learning about what works best, with whom, for what purposes, under what circumstances. But, these realities should not obscure another: much has been learned and much agreed upon, perhaps enough to allow us to say (with some caution) that we now know how at least to start congregations on the road to substantially improving or even transforming their educational programs, practices, performance, and culture. With this achievement as the backdrop, we can turn to the final question we will explore: Where does the work of congregational educational change go from here?

5

“By coming together to share learnings and envision future directions, these initiatives have the potential to greatly accelerate the endeavor of congregational educational change as a whole, and perhaps to give it some new direction.”



The Future: What Lies Ahead?

This is a moment when congregational education seems poised to take on new prominence on the agenda of North American Jewish education and Jewish communal life. Without rehearsing all the reasons or indicators of why this may be so — and without detailing all the potential pitfalls that could derail this phenomenon — it may suffice to say that for those who are already committed to strengthening this endeavor, this is a time of opportunity. This is especially so for the organizations and initiatives involved in this project, who have both helped materially to shape the current environment and who are in a position to gain additional support for their work.

The opportunity, however, may well extend beyond the development of each individual initiative. The premise of this project is that this is indeed the case. By coming together to share learnings and envision future directions, these initiatives have the potential to greatly accelerate the endeavor of congregational educational change as a whole, and perhaps to give it some new direction. If this is to happen, we would suggest that there are a number of questions growing out of the experience of the past two decades and the learning derived therefrom that are now ripe to be addressed. These questions form, in effect, a learning and planning agenda for the next stages of the work of congregational educational change — an agenda that we now have the possibility of pursuing collaboratively as well as individually.

Here are 10 questions that might be part of this agenda:

1

How can processes that are almost inevitably incremental in practice (even when guided by a “big vision”) be a lever for fundamental and systemic change? Thus far most of the changes that have been implemented at the congregational level, regardless of which initiative they grow out of, seem relatively modest, programmatic, and incremental. (There are some notable exceptions, congregations that have made far-reaching changes and that have sustained a momentum for ongoing change over a considerable number of years.) Despite injunctions to “think boldly” and some ambitious visions, transforming a whole congregation or even a whole “school” appears very difficult indeed (which may be why some of the initiatives do not even attempt it). What more can we do, if more is needed, to help congregations achieve deep and fundamental change in how they do Jewish learning? Is this just a matter of time and persistence, or do new approaches need to be injected into the congregation on a sustained basis, so that a culture receptive to systemic change is created? If the former, how do we give more impetus to efforts to overcome the “regularities” of congregational life that appear to constrain change? If the latter, what might these new approaches be?

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2

How do we balance (or synthesize) a desire to elevate congregations' sights, raise their standards for what constitutes "good" Jewish learning, and increase their accountability for performance (all necessary, perhaps, if Jewish learning is really to be satisfying and transformative for individuals) with a recognition of congregations' fundamental autonomy and their need to "own" whatever changes they make? Is there some mix of advocacy, standard-setting, tools and resources, and supports that can propel congregations along a faster trajectory of improvement?

3

How can we more effectively incorporate learners' voices in the change processes? To date, this has not seemed to be a prominent feature of most of the change initiatives — though some do encourage the synagogues they work with to seek out such information. We are living increasingly in an age of not only consumer choice, but co-production of experiences and a demand for customization. How do we incorporate this reality into change processes that are almost inevitably going to be driven by a relatively small group of leaders. Are there techniques to be used beyond town meetings and focus groups?

4

Can we see today's initiatives — different as they are — as a collection of valid options for synagogues that are at different places in terms of their visions, histories, and capabilities? If we are prepared to adopt this view, a) how do we help congregations to determine where they are and what initiative will best fit with their current situation and aspirations; b) how do we make more options actually available to congregations, including the financial support necessary to pursue them (this may mean getting funders to re-think how they "steer" congregations toward particular initiatives); and c) how do we encourage congregations to move in a thoughtful way along a continuum of development that might

include involvement with multiple initiatives (simultaneously or over time)? (We know that there are congregations today that participate in multiple initiatives; is this being coordinated in any fashion?)

5

How can the congregational educational change initiatives collaborate more effectively in general? (Some collaboration already takes place, and many initiatives acknowledge learning from others.) In what areas and in what ways is greater cooperation desirable and feasible? Should there be a framework for regular conversation and knowledge sharing? Is developing and maintaining a common bank of materials and resources possible and advisable? To what extent does competition for funding and attention inhibit greater cooperation?

6

How can we help congregations take better advantage of additional modes and settings for Jewish learning? E.g., while a number of the initiatives make use of technology themselves, there is generally little emphasis on helping congregations make better use of technology for expanding Jewish learning. Similarly, relatively little attention (with some exceptions) seems to be given to helping congregations think through their relationships with other educational providers and experiences available outside the congregation itself. At a time when "silo linking" is a major theme in thinking about how to expand and maximize educational impact, should this play a more prominent role in the change initiatives? Should these initiatives be helping synagogues rethink their educational roles to embrace "educational stewardship" more explicitly?

7

Should the change initiatives put greater emphasis on encouraging/helping congregations to engage populations currently not being served? Again, with a few exceptions, almost all of the initiatives focus on helping congregations do better "inreach." Should more

emphasis on “outreach” be added (or should this be left to other organizations that do focus on this area)?

8

How should congregational educational change initiatives relate themselves to non-synagogue providers of “complementary” education? There is some anecdotal evidence that the number of children enrolled in non-synagogue based complementary education programs is growing. Should congregational educational change initiatives seek to work with such programs (at least one already does)? How would this affect their commitment to strengthening synagogue life? Is there a potential tension between the goal of strengthening synagogues qua synagogues and the goals of creating better educational programs and enriching the experience of learners?

9

How do we develop the cadre of personnel needed to carry forward and expand the work of congregational educational change (both synagogue leadership and those who work with them)? Who will recruit, prepare and develop these change agents and facilitators? Who will they work for? Can we agree on the skills and

dispositions needed? Do we need to design a different “delivery system” for providing consultation, training, and support in order for this work to scale effectively and efficiently? Is this best done locally, nationally?

10

How do we enhance accountability, evaluation, and learning with respect to these initiatives? What are we prepared to hold ourselves accountable for and to whom? How can we track progress and measure results more effectively? (Evaluation practices and sharing of evaluation materials vary widely among the initiatives.) What more do we need to learn in order to make our efforts more effective? How can we go about learning this?

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Undoubtedly, there are other questions that could be added to this list (and some that might be dropped). What we hope is that posing these questions alongside the portrait we have tried to draw of these initiatives today underscores that we are in the middle of a journey. Significant progress has already been made, but there is still plenty of room to move forward. The next steps in the journey are ready to be taken.