

THE CONTINENTAL COUNCIL FOR JEWISH DAY SCHOOL EDUCATION

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Introduction

Many of us have been part of, or have witnessed, “calls to action” in the field of Jewish education. Unfortunately, those calls have not been heeded and the reports which heralded these calls are now gathering dust on library shelves. We hope that the story of the Continental Council for Jewish Day School Education is one that breaks that pattern. As you will read, this two-year-old national entity, had its genesis in a task force. But the work that it has accomplished and the momentum that it has gathered has led many to believe that this time things will be different. Progress is being made through the efforts of the more than 120 Council and Working Group Members and the field of day school education is being enhanced by the work of the Continental Council for Jewish Day School Education.

The Origins of the Continental Council for Jewish Day School Education

In 1997, the Council of Jewish Federations’ Executive Committee, created a Task Force on Jewish Day School Viability and Vitality. Charles Bronfman, chairman of the Board of United Jewish Communities (following the CJF/UJA/UIA merger) and Mark Lainer, President of Jewish Education Service of North America (JESNA) oversaw this UJC-JESNA Task Force, chaired by Bennett Yanowitz (past president of JESNA) of Cleveland, Ohio. It met three times, commissioned and reviewed briefing papers by day school experts and held consultations with day school principals, directors of central agencies for Jewish education, federation planners, executive directors and presidents. In June 1999 the Report of the Task Force on Jewish Day School Viability and Vitality was published. Copies of the Report can be obtained by contacting JESNA. It is also available on-line at JESNA’s website, www.jesna.org.

To get a sense of the scope and magnitude of the Report, we offer here the Executive Summary’s Summary of Recommendations.

“ . . . The Task Force calls on federations to:

- 1) unequivocally express their support for Jewish education in general, and day school education in particular, by providing increased financial resources and other forms of assistance for all types of Jewish education, with special emphasis on support that helps to ensure day school viability and vitality;
- 2) adopt and promote the principle that while the primary responsibility for a Jewish education is that of the parent, no Jewish family that desires to send its child(ren) to a Jewish day school should be prevented from doing so for financial reasons;

3) adopt and promote the principle that excellence in Jewish day schools is the best guarantee over the long term for school growth and financial resource development;

4) adopt and promote the principle that excellence is linked to the quality of human resources, both lay and professional, and work to attract, train and retain top quality Jewish educators, administrators, and lay leaders.”

The Task Force Report offered a series of concrete recommendations related to each of the four areas outlined above. JESNA and UJC took this “call to action” very seriously. Each set up its own day school committee, with the major focus of each committee being the implementation of the recommendations of the Task Force Report. Since the mandate was so large, each committee set out to do its work confident that there would not be duplication of efforts.

One of the recommendations of the Task Force was that “at the continental level, UJC and JESNA, should play a role in developing and supporting initiatives in these areas and help to create an independent “**continental council**” comprised of day school leaders and others from North America to serve as a forum to address field-wide day school issues on an ongoing basis.

In June 2001, Lynda Giles, chair of the UJC subcommittee on day school education and Claire Ellman, chair of the JESNA Day School committee convened a meeting with the professional leadership of the national Jewish day school associations to explore their interest in the creation of a continental council. Having received their approval, the next step was to create and convene a steering committee for a continental council, made up of the professional and lay leadership of the national Jewish day school associations and representatives of the JESNA and UJC day school committees. Such a committee was formed. Its first task was to choose the leadership of the Continental Council for Jewish Day School Education. A decision was made to appoint two co-chairs and two vice-chairs. Chosen as co-chairs were Dr. Lynda Giles, chair of the UJC subcommittee on Day School Education and Rabbi Joshua Elkin, executive director of the Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education (PEJE). Chosen as vice-chairs were Claire Ellman, chair of JESNA’s Day School Committee, and Rabbi Robert Hirt, co-chair of the Association of Modern Orthodox Day Schools and Yeshiva High Schools, Yeshiva University. The Steering Committee chose November 29, 2001 as the date for the inaugural meeting of the Continental Council for Jewish Day School Education.

The Continental Council for Jewish Day School Education and its Work to Date

Fifty-five leaders were able to attend the first meeting. Among those attending were representatives of five of the national day school associations, the central agencies for Jewish education, all the national religious movements, the major foundations which have funded day school initiatives, eighteen federations and national Jewish communal organizations. The Council adopted the following Mission Statement:

The Continental Council for Jewish Day School Education is dedicated to the growth and enhancement of the quality of Jewish Day School Education. Through the engagement of volunteer and professional leaders from all sectors

of the community, the Council will serve as a forum for addressing key issues affecting day schools, a focal point for advocacy on behalf of day school education, and a vehicle for promoting collaborative action around shared concerns. The Council will promote and establish positive and mutually supportive relationships between day schools, federations, other Jewish religious, educational, communal organizations, and the community at large.

Patrick Bassett, president of the National Association of Independent Schools provided a provocative and very-well received keynote address about re-engineering compensation systems for the 21st Century. The overwhelming theme of the small-group discussions was the need for action and not talk. More than one Council member stated that the Council could not succeed simply as a “talk-fest”—there needed to be tangible results.

The Council's leadership heeded this concern and decided to create another level to the workings of the Council. Five working groups, representing key areas of focus for the day school world, were created. An important organizational decision was made at JESNA and UJC in order to avoid duplication, to leverage knowledge and resources and to add value to work already done. The decision was made to fold the functional agendas of each of the extant day school committees into the work of the Continental Council for Jewish Day School Education. The same staff, lay and professional leadership that had been working for three different entities could now concentrate its efforts in one area, the work of the Continental Council. The hope of the leadership was that this decision would serve as a model to other organizations working in the field of Jewish education.

A second successful meeting of the Council was held in June 2002 in New York and the Council designed the day school session at the meeting of the General Assembly in Philadelphia in November 2002. Each session featured presentations about state-of-the-art responses and initiatives to the five key agenda items of the Council. Information about these meetings can be found JESNA's website, as well.

Next Steps and Summary

The next meeting of the Continental Council will take place on Monday, June 23, 2003 at the first CAJE Conference for Day School and Early Childhood Educators at Hofstra University in Hempstead, Long Island. JESNA and the Continental Council are Co-Sponsor of this Conference. Each of the working groups will have an opportunity to share their progress with the members of the Council and the Council will prioritize the work of the groups. The working groups continue to add members, representing our key constituents throughout North America. The Council and its work are being recognized by name and by its product by day school leadership.

The Continental Council has succeeded in creating a deep infrastructure representing all leadership stakeholders in the day school movement. Bringing these people together twice a year and providing them the opportunity to meet each other and to share information, challenges and successes are an important contribution. However,

we know that we need to do more. We need to help advocate for the small-scale and large-scale changes that are the agenda items of each of our working groups. We believe that we have made a strong statement and a good beginning in bringing about some of those small-scale changes. Working together, we believe we can and will get to the next steps—the level of change we all agree needs to happen to enhance the quality of Jewish day school education. We will keep you informed.

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