

How is the Preschool Doing in the Jewish Community Center?*

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... E.C.E. directors are addressing four major areas of concern. Issues revolve around where we are and where we are going 1. educationally, 2. Judaically, 3. financially and 4. politically.

An earlier paper discussed the importance of the preschool in a Jewish community center.¹ Having examined purposes and goals, it was considered timely to explore how Center preschools are doing. As suggested by colleagues, I sent questionnaires to early childhood directors in Centers throughout the country to determine what services they are offering and to whom, and how they go about delivering these services. I also asked directors to assess trends influencing program needs and to share concerns relevant to the success of early childhood programming. Responses were received from many regions of the country with a wide geographic spread. Centers in both large and small communities participated and the size of preschool and day care enrollment varied greatly. Nevertheless, the mailing list used was small, incomplete and perhaps deceptively selective. Consequently, I asked for input from the Jewish Welfare Board and the data bank of information they have gathered regarding preschools and day care on a national scale. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to report in summary on the findings of the early childhood education survey. The nature of the study precludes any

sort of statistical validation and sweeping generalizations would be inappropriate. In the second part of my presentation, however, I do explore certain trends and some concerns which appear common to early childhood educators in Jewish community centers also as revealed in replies to the survey.

Currently preschools exist in most Centers and serve more than 7,500 children in early childhood programs excluding day care. Significantly, the questionnaire reveals that Center preschools are attended primarily by Jewish children, although this is not always true of day care programs. While a few respondents indicate that their clientele is less than 50 percent Jewish, the majority of those preschools reporting record a Jewish attendance of over 75 percent. The Jewish Welfare Board maintains that the Jewish population in preschool is directly proportional to the Jewish membership in the Center at large. Consequently, those preschools which attract children from non-Jewish backgrounds in large numbers do so by having established a fine reputation which appeals to families simply wishing quality education.

If certain regularities can be identified in Jewish enrollment in preschools, tuition charges reflect great variety and bewildering dissimilarity. Fees for a 5-day preschool range in the survey from \$37.00 to \$77.00 per month. Day care can cost from \$63.00 to \$150.00 per month. Staff salaries do not seem to bear any correlation to tuition charged. Directors work different hours and the length of the contract year ranges from 9 to 12 months. Given the discrepancies between part and full time jobs, directors' salaries in the survey

range from \$4 to 17,000 per year. J.W.B. reports the upper limit to be higher, approximately \$24,000 per year. The average range for full time directors is \$11,000 to 18,000 per year with most full-time administrators making approximately \$12,000. Full-time teachers, teaching both morning and afternoon classes, as well as at camp, earn \$7 to 9,000 per year on a twelve-month contract. Fringe benefits such as health and retirement programs are provided for a majority of directors, but a surprising proportion is not covered. Some teachers have these benefits, but a majority do not. Paid vacations for both administrators and directors seem common in a majority of Centers.

The size of operating budgets varies as widely as does the size of the programs and ranges from \$15 to 150,000 per year. As budget models are unique to each Center, the lack of standardization makes it difficult to interpret some of the financial information in the survey. A majority of departments reported running at a deficit or on a break-even basis. (But one cannot be sure what this means.) Surpluses occur most often in the lower (\$15 to 50,000) and higher (\$99 to 150,000) categories. Salaries account for the largest expenditure in all budgets and amounts allocated to supplies were proportionate to budget size. Both the survey and J.W.B. data suggest that very few Centers budget for tuition scholarships. Although a fee scale for Jewish Center membership is common, similar allowances for preschool and day care are not.

J.W.B. reports that E.C.E. personnel are highly trained. Most preschool and day care directors hold master's degrees, and teachers usually have completed undergraduate programs in early childhood or elementary education. Commonly, the staff augments their own expertise with resources from within the community as well as the parent body. A large majority of the Centers surveyed indicate a consultant relationship with their local Jewish family and children's service and most use speech and hearing as well as learning disabilities specialists, social workers and

psychologists. Parent participation is encouraged in all Centers reporting. Lay committees are, of course, vitally involved with determining policy and evaluating programs, but parents are also active participants in the classroom, in holiday celebrations, and in fund-raising. They help with field trips, newsletters, hospitality and often integrate their special skills into program development and implementation.

Programmatically, preschool continues to provide 2, 3 and 5 day options for 2-½ to 3 hours per day in either the morning or afternoon. Morning hours seem to be more popular with enrichment classes and extended day schedules replace afternoon schedules. Extended day programs now allow children to stay through lunch until 1:00, other models expand the service to 3:00 and a few keep preschoolers until 6:00. Enrichment classes include music, arts and crafts, science, cooking, dramatics, physical education and Hebrew. In the Denver Center, all enrichment classes are scheduled in the afternoon and are used primarily by preschoolers who stay for extended day. In Memphis mothers may participate in a weekly shabbat enrichment class with their children. A few early childhood departments supervise babysitting for non preschoolers while parents are in the building, and Houston offers a "Mothers Day Out" program for 2-year-olds. Camp no longer seems to be an adjunct program of the early childhood department but rather a natural extension of a year round preschool.

The quantified data culled from the survey and presented thus far are interesting and informative, but probably of even more significance are reflections offered by directors to general questions about departmental changes, trends, problems and future aspirations. While these responses do not lend themselves to statistical summary, I believe a reading of all the questionnaires reflects the fact that E.C.E. directors are addressing four major areas of concern. Issues revolve around where we are and where we are going 1. educationally, 2. Judaically, 3. financially and

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¹ Nancy Livingston, "What is a Preschool Doing in a JCC?" This *Journal*, Vol. LIV, No. 1 (1977), pp. 39-42.

4. politically. My interpretations of answers to these questions are based on the survey, J.W.B. data, current publications and continued communication with early childhood administrators and other Jewish communal workers.

Educationally: Changes in the family structure are altering the nature of early childhood programming in Centers. Preschool hours are beginning to increase with requests from single working parents. Educators report a certain degree of ambivalence over offering longer hours to younger children, revealing professional preference for a one-to-one relationship between parent and child during the first few years of the toddler's growth. Nevertheless, early childhood departments are becoming responsive to current needs. According to J.W.B. figures, very few preschools provide day care (probably less than 20 percent). However, many Centers, especially those in large urban communities, are beginning to examine the necessity of full day service.² "Day care" often carries with it certain negative connotations, implying simply custodial care for deprived families, making this model less desirable than preschool. Full day coverage, moreover, has more exacting licensing requirements than preschool, is more expensive and more complicated to administer. All of these reasons present a cogent argument for caution in establishing day care service. Boards frequently feel that government subsidies are appropriate and will not go ahead without federal funding. As a result many Centers have opted for camps and extended day programs to provide fuller if not complete coverage. The extended day model allows for day care hours on a more flexible basis. Activities can begin before preschool and last through lunch or late into the afternoon, contingent upon the needs of the membership and the facilities of the Center. More than three quarters of directors report in the survey

² Interview with Sherwood Epstein, J.W.B., New York, Feb., 1978. Day Care Centers responding to the questionnaire were primarily quite new, having been established within the last five years.

some kind of extended care and even more assess that this is one of the most important new directions their programs will be taking.

Single parents are using both preschool and day care services. It does not seem to be uncommon to have as many as half the children in a day care program be part of a single parent family. Perhaps the single parent phenomenon as well as the rise in the number of working mothers has inspired not only full day coverage but has also generated a need for earlier entry into the preschool. Although the traditional age range of 3 to 5-½ seems quite common, many schools are now accepting children aged 2-½. Others mention offering activities for toddlers as young as 18 months old. No matter what the family circumstances, parents seem to recognize the value of conscious child rearing techniques and are seeking early professional guidance. Centers frequently provide classes in parenting and observation nurseries for mothers with infants.

Preschools accepting younger children for increasing hours must parent as well as educate. Commitment to giving more to the child who is with us longer has made interdepartmental programming crucial. It would seem that we rely heavily on the Physical Education and Aquatics Departments (when available) to enhance and broaden the experiences we offer. Cultural Arts departments enrich music, art and dance activities. Half of the Centers reporting now include enrichment classes, perhaps not only to take up the slack of decreased demand for afternoon preschools but possibly to augment activities for children who attend for an extended day.

There is strong indication that directors continue to strive for educational excellence in programming. A well-balanced curriculum, focusing on the total development of the child, is paramount. The survey confirms the trend toward a more highly structured cognitive approach, indicative of parental emphasis on skill-building and their desire for children "to learn."

Educators are planning for more activities in

conscious problem solving and increased knowledge in all academic areas. Directors continue their efforts to share ideas with other Center preschools as well as consultants to ensure proper staff training and complement existing expertise. As J.W.B. boasts, "we do preschool as well if not better than anything else we do."³

Preschool education in Jewish community centers includes special emphasis on Jewish content. Teachers in a Center preschool realize they are not only educators, they are *Jewish* educators. Consequently, we must assess where we are educationally at least in part by where we are Judaically.

Judaically: we seem to be more aware. Administrators often note that families are asking preschools to inspire Jewish consciousness in young children. Many Center programs are responding to this interest. The survey indicates that, at least in some schools, we are upgrading and expanding Jewish curriculum by placing greater emphasis on Jewish knowledge. We continue to create a Jewish ambience which builds positive memories by emphasizing activities that contain actual learning experiences. We direct our energies toward enabling cognitive development in many areas and we include Judaica. Several Centers have been developing more sophisticated curriculum materials for the study of Jewish holidays, culture, history, the Hebrew language, value clarification and Israel. Instead of simply celebrating Jewish holidays, we explore with children, at age-appropriate levels, the values intrinsic to actual events. Early childhood directors indicate their concern for transmitting Jewish heritage by defining their Jewish purposes with teachers and parent groups. Some report placing new or increased emphasis on hiring more Jewish staff with strong Jewish knowledge and commitment.

We are encouraged to be more Jewish by our boards, the executive staff, J.W.B. and by each other. For the most part, I believe, we accept the challenge. We recognize that being

³ *Ibid.*

Jewish is a unique and desirable aspect of our program. In large part our Jewishness justifies the preschool's existence in the Jewish community center, and this Jewishness may be crucial to our eventual survival, given competition with other types of preschool programs.

In our determination to provide Jewish education in the Jewish community, we face several problems. Perhaps we are being asked and are asking ourselves to do too much. As a result we are held accountable for meeting unrealistic expectations. Compounding and confounding our dilemma is the fact that we are in a triple bind. We are receiving conflicting messages: be Jewish; serve the entire Jewish community; but don't be too Jewish.

An earlier account stated that the J.C.C.'s "eclectic acceptance of Judaism" enabled our preschools to attract children from a diversity of Jewish backgrounds and to offer a wider variety of experiences in Judaism for Jewish children.⁴ I felt that the Jewish community center was open to more kinds of Jewish life styles than synagogues and Jewish day schools. Our E.C.E. directors understand when Bubis explains:

... there is no one kind of Jewish family. There are families of Jews . . . all of whom could best be seen within a spectrum of intensities. Their Jewish hues range from far beyond the pale of white to the richest of Jewish coloration regardless of denominational persuasion.⁵

Preschools adhere to the premise that Center workers must "underscore the absolute urgency of responding creatively, assertively and purposefully to *all manner* of Jewish families."⁶

At times in school we confront ambiguity, even ambivalence, on the part of teachers about their role as Jewish educators. This is indeed a challenge to us as administrators. Perhaps we must redouble our efforts to make

⁴ Nancy Livingston, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

⁵ Gerald B. Bubis, "The Contemporary Jewish Family: Implications for Jewish Community Centers," *JWB Yearbook*, Vol. XXIII, 1977, p. 72.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

priorities clear and to give guidance and support as conflicts occur over choices for time allotments and emphasis. If there is an element of confusion, even resistance, on the part of staff, perhaps this is only a function of the mixed message we have been given by a large segment of the Jewish population.

Jewish parents in America have largely chosen to walk an educational tightrope; their objective being to move the children along without falling into unwanted success (becoming too Jewish) or outright failure (rejection of Jewish loyalties). The Jewish educational establishment is under constant pressure to maintain that tightrope.⁷

As we attempt to deliver a Jewish program in a setting which does and should serve the entire Jewish community, at least to some extent, we have become vulnerable to excessive demands and unreasonable aspirations. Jewish preschools are in jeopardy when they are charged to inspire Jewish identity not only in children but in their families. "The school is too often expected to be the major, if not the only, resource for a child's Jewish upbringing."⁸ Is it really true that we are supposed to try to make our Jewish clientele more Jewish whether or not they want to be? Can we be expected to inculcate a meaningful Jewish commitment into an ambivalent family? What is the responsibility of the parents?

To ask Jewish preschools to heighten long term Jewish identity is like asking Headstart to raise children's I.Q.s. Initially we may achieve success, as we can stimulate awareness and excitement in children, even perhaps in parents, but is it not the families who must carry the major responsibility over a lasting continuum? We "cannot expect 2-1/2 hours a day to overwhelm the environmental handicaps."⁹ A single inoculation of preschool

⁷ Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin, *To Raise a Jewish Child*. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1977, p. 16.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁹ Irving Lazar, "The Persistence of Preschool Effects," address delivered at the Conference on Research in Early Childhood Education sponsored by the Colorado Association for the Education of Young Children, Feb. 25, 1978.

Judaism cannot and should not be expected to make the child or the family Jewish. Bergman cites research maintaining that a "minimum of 3,000 hours of instruction" is required to have any impact on the maintenance of Jewish identity.¹⁰ Preschools cannot hope to achieve what 12 years of synagogue schooling is unable to accomplish. In our commitment to Jewish survival and our dedication to Jewish education, perhaps we have not defined the parameters of our capabilities. As we attempt what most likely is an impossible task, have we asked how our success can be measured? Is it through Jewish artifacts bought for the home by families with preschool members or their observance of Jewish rituals or their contributions to Jewish philanthropy?

A prime example of the problem becomes evident in Margaret Purvine's research project sponsored by J.W.B. "to explore expectations and changes in Jewish behavior patterns of families attending J.C.C. preschools."¹¹ In the study, Center preschools were held accountable for changing family behavior as researchers expected to find measurable gains even when parents did not list Jewish identification as a priority in selecting the school. Possibly the preschools studied did not place as high an emphasis on Judaism as desirable, catering to and selecting highly professional and marginally committed Jewish families. Nevertheless, it seems unrealistic to presuppose that nine months of any preschool can make a "statistically significant" difference¹² in Jewish behavior patterns of families. Ironically, the study did not attempt to assess what seems most important: the Jewish impact of the schools on children.¹³

¹⁰ Himmelfarb in Elihu Bergman, "The American Jewish Population," *Midstream*, Vol. XXIII, Oct., 1977, p. 14.

¹¹ Dan Morris and Martin Halpern, "An Overview: JWB's Programs and Services," *JWB Yearbook*, Vol. XXIII, p. 45.

¹² Margaret Purvine, "Jewish Community Nursery Schools: Expectation and Reality as Seen by Parents and Staff," *Research Digest*, 1977, p. 18.

¹³ A long range study of the Jewish impact on J.C.C. preschool graduates (taking into account environmental factors) would be most interesting.

Although the research design seems in question and the conclusions suspect, the implications are most damaging and dangerous for early childhood education in Centers. The study points to a causal relationship between the fact that the preschool serves only a segment of the population (professional, borderline Jews) and a perception of the preschool as peripheral to the Center as a whole. Purvine suggests that perhaps J.C.C. nurseries should actively recruit more Jewishly observant families while, at the same time, he laments the possibility of "excluding a substantial number of Jewish families who would not choose a nursery school with a predominantly Jewish emphasis."¹⁴ I agree that the preschool should actively encourage participation of all Jews. Clarifying Jewish purposes with staff and parents, projecting a pervasive Jewish image, increasing scholarships and perhaps even lowering fees might help. The positive influence of strongly Jewish families on those with less certain loyalties should not be discounted. Nevertheless, as long as Centers and therefore nurseries serve the entire spectrum of Jewish families, the preschool cannot be ostracized from the mainstream of the Center for serving only a specific Jewish group. As the preschool is disparaged for not transforming ambivalent families into devoted Jews, it may also be punished for attracting non-committed parents. Without relinquishing Judaic purposes, the preschool must make its limitations clear and refuse to be held accountable for achieving unrealizable goals.

As the E.C.E. department is viewed as an appendage rather than an integral part of the Center, "the key issue becomes funding policy—specifically how self supporting the nursery school must be."¹⁵ The unstated but logical conclusion for peripheral programs is commonplace for the preschool in Jewish Centers. J.W.B. admits that in most Centers "the preschool must be self-sustaining and

self-perpetuating.¹⁶ The problem becomes dollars.

Financially: the preschool is in a precarious position. As an adjunct program we are both part of and separate from the budgetary problems of the Center. In both instances the preschool may suffer. If the Center is financially troubled, preschool reflects the total insecurity. Even if the Center is financially strong, the preschool may still not be able to look to the total budget for subsidy.

"Centers are caught up in the fight for dollars in a time of static Jewish giving in an inflation ridden economy."¹⁷ Even when Jewish money is available, Centers and Jewish educational programs may not be able to expect substantial community support.¹⁸ Centers, it would seem, as most service institutions, do not have money to spare. If preschools were considered a top priority (which they are not),¹⁹ there would probably be little if any money available to upgrade or augment early childhood programs. Preschools share with the Center certain inescapable problems. The "extensive hours of operation, specialized facilities and voluntary nature of participation underscore the vulnerability of J.C.C.s."²⁰ With the high cost of energy, Centers "are paying a larger proportion of budgets for energy rather than human services."²¹ Certainly preschool is not the only department which must pay its own way. Increased pressure will very likely be placed on more and more programs not only to break even financially but to produce new dollars to meet other Center deficits.

¹⁶ Epstein interview, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ Babis, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

¹⁸ Bergman reports that allocation priorities suggest an "insensitivity to contemporary community needs, (especially Jewish education) let alone survival, by those who make decisions about such matters," *American Jewish Population*, p. 15.

¹⁹ Preschool is not among priorities listed in the *J.W.B. Yearbook*, 1977, pp. 76-7.

²⁰ Morton Altman et al, "An Analysis of Trends in Jewish Community Centers: 1974-1976," *J.W.B. Yearbook*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁴ Purvine, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

It is now essential that preschool directors bear the responsibility for their budgets. Under present circumstances, it is not realistic to be simply an educator in a J.C.C. As money becomes tighter, we must be able to scrutinize our spending in terms of cost effectiveness. Understanding, maybe even controlling income versus expenses, is no longer solely in the domain of the board, executive director and comptroller. To preserve our programs, E.C.E. directors need to develop business management skills. Responses on the questionnaire may suggest that we are not as knowledgeable about our budgets as we are about educational programs, but that does not mean we cannot learn. Total enrollment may be crucial to the dollars needed for preschool survival. Long as well as short range planning must meet community needs to ensure enrollment. Demographic studies gain importance as administrators realize that decisions to expand, decrease or eliminate services must be made on the basis of empirical data. We may in fact have to become marketing researchers and advertising experts to fill our programs in the midst of decreasing Jewish population. Planning, marketing and budgeting may be new for us, but preschools will not escape the financial crunch, and we will be held accountable for economic efficiency.

Being accountable for our own finances seems more appropriate than being responsible for someone else's Judaism. As we begin to grow in our ability to manage our budgets, we will have to help boards, directors and communities to grow in their understanding of the importance of early childhood education in Jewish community centers. Preschools offer Jewish education to those who want it and those who need it, and Jewish education is an intrinsic not an adjunct purpose of the Center.

It is an irony that those activities such as . . . nursery school which offer the most intensive and extensive opportunities of meeting Center goals are tied to dollars, as they are and must be.²²

We would be remiss if we were not

²² Bubis, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

financially efficient. But we must help boards to understand that even if we are expert budgeters and managers, we may not always be able to avoid deficits. With expanding needs for children of single and working parents, more people are requesting scholarships.²³ Who will pay for them? How will Centers respond to the need for longer preschool coverage at reduced fees? The survey indicates our concern that the quality of early childhood programming may be compromised. Working parents have less time to devote to our programs, and we may have to pay for some of the services once provided by volunteers. A review of Center priorities is necessary. We are important, we are doing a good job, we are serving Jewish needs, but we may not be able to do it alone. This is the message we must take to our parents, executives, to our board, maybe even to Federations. It will be our job to influence policy-makers.

Politically: most of us are still in preschool. Obviously this is not a problem we face simply as Jewish communal workers. Historically, early childhood educators throughout the country have shied away from the political arena. Until recently we seem to have been unwilling to recognize the relationship between political power and quality education for young children. Currently, many national E.C.E. journals have accused us of being timid, afraid, ignorant, naive, divided and blatantly ineffective when it comes to governmental policy-making for children. While we begin to criticize ourselves from within, we are still being ignored by those in power. Some legislators, however, are currently challenging us to muster our forces and use our leverage. Educators listening to the charge are increasingly aware of the potential power we can wield simply by virtue of our numbers. Some of us are beginning to take our heads out of the sandbox to advocate both for children and early childhood education.

Federal and J.C.C. policies for children are linked to money. The federal budget just as the

²³ Altman, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

Centers' is not expanding.²⁴ "The pressure to cut human services programs (in government) or make them more discretionary is going to increase."²⁵ Congresswoman Pat Schroeder recently observed that "children are the only segment of the economy that does not vote and consequently they get their money taken away from them."²⁶ She reiterated what we already know: that kids are not a priority on the national agenda and she admonished us as adults for "allowing this to happen."²⁷ What occurs on the federal level is not so far removed from the decision-making process in Jewish community centers. If our national legislators are insensitive to the needs of young children, why should our boards and executives be expected to be more knowledgeable and caring? We are probably more fortunate than many others that Jewish tradition has always valued the family and Jewish agency decisions have reflected this priority.

Nevertheless, we have a job to do nationally and at home. It seems futile to cower and complain that "nobody is going to give us anything."²⁸ It is simply a political reality that to preserve quality education we must gather our courage, intelligence and strength to educate, persuade and compete for what we need. At times the task may seem overwhelming, and we have been cautioned not to expect that we can change everything at once.

²⁴ Pat Schroeder, address delivered at Child Advocacy Conference, Colorado Women's College, Mar. 18, 1978.

²⁵ Marian Wright Edelman, "Today's Promises-Tomorrow's Americans," *Young Children*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 3, Mar., 1978, p. 5.

²⁶ Schroeder, *op. cit.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Edelman, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

Those more politically astute are optimistic and recommend that we (1) do our homework and understand the issues, (2) define our objectives, (3) determine specific long and short range goals with realistic strategies for success, (4) be resilient and (5) corral our constituencies.

As we advocate for children with the J.C.C. structure, we can build from strength. If we internalize the national prejudice and demean what we are doing, if we lack confidence or are afraid, we may lose ground we have already gained. If the preschool does not have status, it does have respect. The recognition and admiration we have earned may open the door for communication with decision-makers. We can capitalize on the fact that we are professionals and are viewed as such. We can take that professionalism into our dealings with the board, analyzing total Center purposes, scrutinizing Center budgets, understanding committee structures and joining forces with our allies. We are not alone. Our strength lies in our competence, our persistence and our proven achievements. Parents are busy but many are also intelligent and some highly trained. Some are committed to our causes. Creating a mechanism for them to grow from committee to board participation is vital. Preschool involvement at the board level will be the most effective means of ensuring early childhood goals in the Jewish community center.

As the commercial admits, since we are not number one, we have to try harder. Our agenda is crowded, calling for new expertise and vigor. I feel confident that the preschool can help set priorities in a J.C.C. If there is still much to do, I think we can be proud of how far we have come.