

# Why Write *Another* Report About Mentoring?

by Tobin Belzer

Teachers are more familiar with the dynamics of mentoring than most people. We understood this when we chose “mentoring” as the inaugural topic for JESNA’s Publications and Dissemination Project (PDP). The PDP is a new initiative that aims to improve the delivery of Jewish education in North America by bringing the procedural and content knowledge that resides within JESNA to practitioners and policymakers in the field. JESNA’s research and evaluation functions — performed primarily by the Berman Center for Research & Evaluation in Jewish Education — have generated valuable lessons and useable data. The role of the PDP is to leverage this intellectual capital by bringing it to the public arena using multiple media.

Decisions about PDP report topics are based on community needs and value to the field. By choosing “mentoring” as the first topic, we did not expect to discover a heretofore-unknown aspect of mentoring that we could then impart to teachers. Instead, the topic emerged because the value of mentoring is undeniable, yet the nuances of good mentoring are complex. We hoped to explore what, if any, unique factors emerge in mentoring relationships in Jewish educational settings.

To gather data for the PDP report, “Mentoring Jewish Educational Professionals: Lessons Learned from Research in the Field,” we drew upon the findings of a number of Berman Center evaluative reports. We began by teasing out the differences and similarities between the mentoring projects. We combined this inquiry with a literature review of scholarly and mainstream sources. We also compared the nuances of mentoring in Jewish education with those in the field of education more broadly. By synthesizing our evaluation findings with a range of mainstream and scholarly secondary sources, we hope to provide insights that are grounded in the field of Jewish education and corroborated by the field at large.

Among the programs evaluated, we found that specific variables impact the quality of the mentoring experience. The various programs featured different types of mentoring through various organizational frameworks. For example, the relationship between a novice teacher and a mentor was facilitated through a university program, directed by a Jewish communal organization, and/or administered by a school. The extent of financial support for the mentoring program and the availability of mentoring partners were also influential variables. Who is being mentored also matters: Mentoring programs are affected by the relative age and professional knowledge of the novice teachers.

We found that the mentoring relationship can take many forms. The traditional one-on-one mentoring relationship pairs a novice teacher with a master teacher, but novice teachers can support each other through peer mentoring. The mentoring relationship can also be facilitated as group mentoring, where one mentor works with a small group of novice teachers. In team mentoring, several mentors work with small groups of mentees.

Six other instructive lessons emerged based on Berman Center researchers’ analyses of these programs. We learned

that: (1) Orientation and training should be provided to both mentors and novice teachers, (2) Mentor and teacher pairings should be thoughtfully coordinated, (3) Roles should be clearly defined, (4) Programs should draw upon mentors’ strengths and be guided by novice teachers’ needs, (5) Multiple avenues of frequent communication and feedback are important, and (6) Mentoring programs need thoughtful and ongoing management.

Perhaps most fundamentally, we learned that our lessons about mentoring Jewish educators are supported by scholarship from the wider field. The mentoring experiences of a unique subpopulation — Jewish educators — reflect the practices of mentoring teachers in general.

Our aim is not to present an exhaustive guidebook on the effective practices of mentoring teachers. Indeed, our focus on evaluation reports compiled by the Berman Center means that we have not incorporated lessons that could be learned from the many other excellent mentoring programs offered for Jewish educators. Also, a number of prominent themes in the wider literature about mentoring educators were not present in the reports referenced. We encountered no mention of the distinct phases of the mentoring relationship, a subject that is frequently discussed in the mainstream literature, nor were the phases of teacher development elaborated upon. Finally, in the general scholarship, there is a great deal of guidance about the ending and closure of the mentor relationship. This was not a topic that emerged in our evaluations.

Bringing the reports together allowed us to clarify what each of the programs refers to when they employ the term “mentoring.” In doing so, we aimed to develop a shared language that can be used in conversation with the broader field. Across each program studied, we found a fundamental lack of shared language about the practice of mentoring. By combining these sources, we offer the articulation of a broad definition for mentoring teachers as Jewish educators. Among the programs examined, the term “mentoring” refers to a structured relationship centered on support, guidance, and encouragement aimed at developing the competence of novice teachers in Jewish education.

We hope that, in producing a report about mentoring, we will contribute to the vibrant discourse that is emerging about research and practice between the worlds of education and Jewish education. ❁

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