

PHILANTHROPIC LESSONS FROM MAPPING JEWISH EDUCATION

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The Jewish educational system in the United States is a quintessentially American invention that reflects the diversity of the Jewish population and the American context in which it lives. The system has a vast infrastructure and is, perhaps, a “system” in name only. Though impressive, its size and structure point to an impulse to proliferate programs, create new organizations, and build facilities without tackling the community’s fundamental educational challenges. There is little empirical evidence that the system is effective in meeting the challenges entailed in preparing a new generation of engaged Jews.

Chief among these challenges is the difficulty of capturing the imagination of young American Jews. The world has changed since the main pieces of the infrastructure were built, and the methods and content that the system produces appear not to work in the current context. Today’s youth are accustomed to diversity in all of its forms. They are well-assimilated, sophisticated, and technologically savvy. As one national educator remarked, making a map of Israel out of ice cream no longer thrills them.

The need for more effective Jewish education is as great, if not greater than ever. The route to effective Jewish education, however, has changed. It is not a case of simply doing more of what has been done in the past. Something new is needed.

Method

The present analysis focuses on the educational infrastructure because wise funding requires an understanding of the existing system—its bright spots and its shortcomings. The analysis is based on three sources:

- (1) a map of the field that currently includes some 2,400 organizations, foundations, and programs concerned with Jewish education for children and youth;
- (2) qualitative community studies exploring how education is thought about and delivered at the local level;
- (3) interviews with top executives of national Jewish organizations and foundations.

The data presented here are preliminary as the research is still in progress.

Analysis of the Field

Our analysis begins with the elements of the educational infrastructure and then looks at the connections among these elements.

Elements

The Jewish educational infrastructure is comprised of a vast array of programs developed and supported by a large number of organizations, agencies, federations, foundations, and universities, along with a few philanthropists and entrepreneurs. The diversity and size of the field is seen in our map of the field which currently includes almost 2,400 programs and organizations. This number does not include local chapters of national youth programs. Nor does it include local synagogues, where much of formal education and youth group activity take place. These two categories would immediately add several thousand more elements to our map.

Programs have professionals, lay leadership, and “customers” or participants. Their content is presented through materials, curricula, media and technology. They have to be sited someplace and often own or rent real estate and manage facilities. As a result, the thousands of programs and organizations on our list represent an enormous enterprise. Annual expenditures on Jewish education are currently estimated at between \$2 and \$4 billion, two to four times the estimate made just 15 years ago.¹

Amongst these elements, there is a disproportionate emphasis on programming versus capacity building (Figure 1). Almost all of the entries in our database are programs that work directly with youth or children. Only 9% are uniquely devoted to capacity building—professional development, curriculum development, financial resource development, planning, research and evaluation, and the like. The absence of professional development in the field of informal Jewish education is particularly acute: The largest national youth movements spend less than 1% of their budgets addressing this need.

Not surprisingly, issues of professional competence are pervasive. Across the map, interviewees report inadequate human resources within the ranks of teachers, counselors, youth workers, school principals, and camp directors. In many settings (preschools, day schools, camps), we find key professionals who are not themselves Jewish. Interviewees argue that they would rather hire a qualified professional than someone whose main qualification is having been born or converted to Judaism. Although their choice is understandable, it raises serious questions about the Jewish applicant pool.²

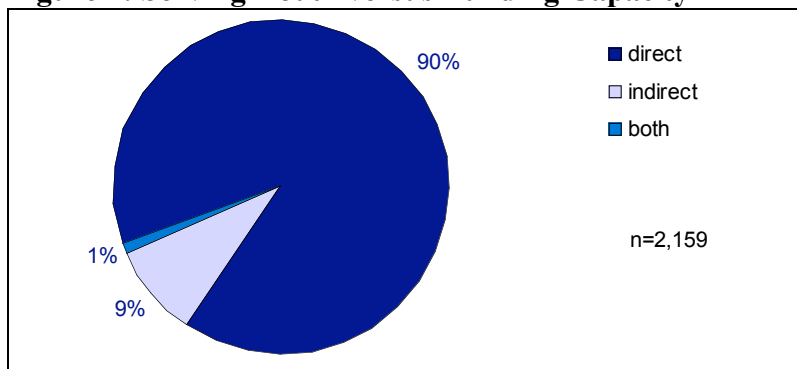
Several initiatives are underway to improve professional leadership in the field. For example: The Leadership Institute for Congregation School Principals, a joint program of

¹ Commission on Jewish Education in North America (1990). *A time to act*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

² Kelner, S., Rabkin, M., Saxe, L. & Sheingold, C. (2005). *The Jewish Sector's Workforce: Report of a Six-Community Study*. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University, Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies and the Fisher-Bernstein Institute for Jewish Philanthropy and Leadership.

Hebrew Union College and the Jewish Theological Seminary, is working with experienced congregational school principals to further their leadership capacity, pedagogic skills, and Judaic knowledge. The JCCA/Mandel Center Lekhu Lakhem Fellowship is guiding the directors of JCC residential and day camps to become change agents within the Center movement. DeLeT (Day School Leadership Through Teaching), an initiative of Brandeis University on the East coast and Hebrew Union College on the West coast, is addressing the shortage of elementary day school teachers. And DSLTI (Day School Leadership Training Institutes), established at JTS with funding from the AVI CHAI Foundation, is strengthening the careers of senior professionals throughout the day school world. Some of these initiatives train fewer than 20 people a year. Even in the aggregate, they touch very small numbers of professionals relative to total numbers in the field.

Figure 1: Serving Youth versus Building Capacity



Connections (or Lack Thereof)

The Jewish education system is highly decentralized. Although local control of schools is an American trademark, poor connections among various elements in the field of Jewish youth education undermine the field's capacity to meet its challenges. Most notably, there are disconnections between national organizations and their local affiliates, across different types of institutions, and between the formal and informal sides of the educational field.

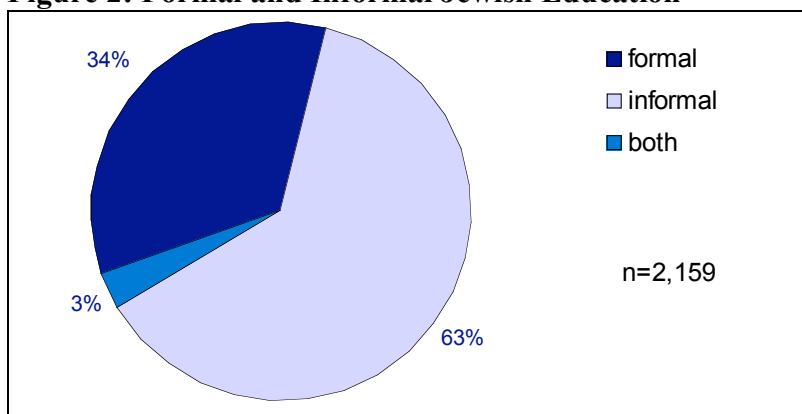
National to Local. Most organizations and programs can locate themselves under a national umbrella. College programs can link into Hillel; day schools can align themselves with PEJE; camps can turn to the Foundation for Jewish Camping for information and support. By their existence alone, these national umbrella organizations give the sense of a professional field. Institutions of higher learning have a hand in this as well. Notable, for example, is the progress made by the Institute for Informal Jewish Education at Brandeis University in elevating the status of youth work into a profession. In addition to defining a field, the national entities brand programs and give them an identity as part of a larger movement. In the best of cases, they also function as vehicles for communicating to and about the field. In these ways, they contribute importantly to the field of Jewish education.

At the same time, the national bodies, and the universities and seminaries, have little or no control over local programs and organizations. The Union of Reform Judaism and United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism are developing new curricula for supplementary schools, but cannot require local synagogue schools to adopt them. The JCCA has established quality and educational standards for local Centers, but cannot enforce them. The connections between the national and the local units are thus ineffective in promoting quality, innovation, or change.

Across Institutions. There are also ineffective connections across institutions, a result of silo construction and territorialism.³ The gaps exist locally and nationally. And they exist both synchronically (e.g., those working with high school students, whether in day schools, at camps, or in service programs, do not talk to one another) and diachronically (e.g., those working with high school students do not talk to those working at the college level).

Between Formal and Informal Education. In rhetoric and practice, there has long been a distinction between formal and informal Jewish education. Definitions vary, but generally refer to setting (schools versus camps, youth groups, Israel trips, etc.); the compulsory versus voluntary nature of the program; goals (specific learning objectives versus “emergent outcomes”); and method (academic versus experiential). The distinction on the ground is hazy. We certainly find camps that have teacher-directed classes, text study and the like and schools that make good use of experiential learning.⁴ The field as a totality has a mixture of both approaches (Figure 2), but there is little exchange between settings. The mixture can be beneficial only if connections are made to ensure that informal and formal education influence one another, and that learners are exposed to multiple settings, approaches, and styles.

Figure 2: Formal and Informal Jewish Education



³ Wertheimer, J. (2005). *Linking the silos: How to accelerate the momentum in Jewish education today*. NY: The AVI CHAI Foundation

⁴ Sales, A.L. & Saxe, L. (2004). *How goodly are thy tents: summer camps as Jewish socializing experiences*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.

All Education is Local

Education is a local phenomenon. It occurs in the youth group, in the classroom, or by the lake at camp. It is therefore essential to understand how local communities approach Jewish education. Each of the communities studied to date has a distinctive *zeitgeist*, educational theory, power structure, and process of educational innovation. These differences caution us against the assumption that programs can be readily transported from one setting to another. The contrast between Boston and Washington D.C. is a case in point.

Contrasting Communities

Boston, a well-established community, stands in contrast to Washington D.C., which is described as “not quite a community.” Their educational approaches vary accordingly.

Boston

The Federation plays a strong and central role in Jewish education in Boston. It is the source of power, money, and creative ideas. It has placed Jewish education front and center on the communal agenda with a commensurate “skyrocketing” of funding for Jewish education over the past decade. At this point, one-fourth of all federation allocations go to education.

Adult education is of primary concern on the premise that educating parents changes the context in which children live and increases the likelihood that parents will choose to provide Jewish education for their children. The community has put significant resources into and derives great pride from Me’ah (two-year intensive adult learning) and Ikarim (adult learning for the parents of preschoolers).

The Federation’s core strategy is to enhance the education that is offered in places where people already connect. Because more people belong--at some point in their lives--to synagogues than to any other organization, much of the Federation’s effort has been targeted to synagogues. Programs such as the family educator initiative, the youth educator initiative, Meah, Ikarim, and camp scholarships are all synagogue based. The intended result of the strategy is transformed communal institutions.

Washington D.C.

The Washington Federation did not exist as a central communal address until 25 years ago. Having predated the Federation by many years, the agencies continue to do their own fundraising and to operate as independent entities. Federation, meanwhile, is struggling to find its appropriate role.

The community has seen explosive growth over the last 20 years. The great majority of Jews in Washington come from someplace else and do not have deep roots here. Synagogue and organization affiliation rates are low, with a majority of Jewish

households having no involvement with any Jewish institution. Half of the respondents to the most recent demographic study said that they do not feel part of a Jewish community. In this climate, Federation is not seen as a community builder and Washington is referred to as “not quite a community.”

Two strategies are possible here: either strengthen existing institutions in the hopes of attracting more people to them, or undertake efforts to reach individuals and help them along on their Jewish pathways. The latter appears to be predominant. The rhetoric in Washington is about “engagement,” “identity building,” and “peoplehood” rather than “education.” And the community’s central educational agency, the new Partnership for Jewish Life and Learning, defines its mission in terms of lifelong learning for each individual Jew.

Our research suggests that the best opportunity to break down silos is at the local level. Washington D.C.’s Partnership for Jewish Life and Learning is an attempt to do just that through a restructuring of communal agencies and leadership. The Partnership is an amalgam of Hillel, the teen initiative, and the central agency (that worked primarily with supplementary schools). Rather than work with individual agencies, the Partnership is organized by age group—preschool, elementary, teens, college, twenty-somethings, adults. When the professionals or lay leaders from one of these groups meet, their conversations necessarily cut across camp, youth group, formal schools, family education and the like. At the same time, issues such as professional development, research, Israel, communications and marketing cut across all age groups and all domains. The result is a matrix organization that connects across traditional divides.

In addition to linking programs and organizations that heretofore operated in uncoordinated ways, the Partnership intends to create lifelong learning with seamless handoffs from one age group to the next. This vision and approach—focused on the individual’s Jewish learning and not on communal institutions—is well matched to the zeitgeist in Washington. The Partnership is new and the jury is out as regards its effectiveness. But the thinking warrants attention.

Lessons from Funders and Foundations

The purpose of this analysis is not to point to a specific program or initiative that merits funding but rather to raise points for consideration during JJF’s planning process. Before choosing grant recipients, the Foundation needs to determine what kinds of changes it wants to effect in the field and what role it wants to play.

Interviews with the heads of other foundations point to general lessons about the funding of Jewish education. Funders have an analysis of what is wrong in the world of Jewish education and a belief in what is needed to fix it. They know that no single intervention is going to transform the world. Given the vastness of the field, they tend to focus their investments in specific areas: AVI CHAI supports day schools and camps, Bronfman Philanthropies is focused on emerging and young adults, Schusterman Family Foundation supports a number of innovative projects and service learning. These foundations may

support numerous and diverse projects but their portfolios have some thematic coherence. The philanthropies are increasingly amenable to funding partnerships and are often willing to trade some of the maneuverability they have working alone for the greater capital and risk-sharing they gain from collaborating.

Funders use their monies to shape the field. For example, we have noted the lack of connections in the field. The Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation regularly brings together its grantees for networking, learning, and personal renewal. Seated at the table might be the executives of Hillel, BBYO, ARZA, PEJE, Heeb Magazine, and Spark, to name just a few. The conversation necessarily links across age groups, institutions, denominations, and perspectives. Jewish sororities and fraternities have various relationships with Hillel on campus—sometimes providing leadership and manpower and sometimes being seen as the competition. This year, for the first time, the Israel on Campus Coalition conference (“Israel Amplified”) was open to fraternities and sororities, a change that was stipulated by CLSFF, the conference’s funder. These are all connections and cross-fertilization that would otherwise not occur.

Funders have helped build the educational infrastructure. For example, it was a collaboration of funders that created PEJE which in turn has built a set of “communities of practice,” national Assemblies, publications and other communication vehicles, coaching and consultation, grantmaking, research and knowledge dissemination, and advocacy for day schools.

The funders have made innovation possible. Probably one of the largest educational experiments in our time is birthright israel—a risky venture that posited that ten days in Israel, all expenses paid, could transform a young adult’s Jewish trajectory. Although partnered with public monies from federation, JAFI, and the government of Israel, the innovation would not have happened without the philanthropic leadership of individuals and foundations.

At the same time, the foundations have done little to scale-up existing models. Our search has not as yet uncovered compelling examples of major funding efforts to roll out locally-tested programs nationally. Before pursuing this as its own strategy, the JJF would want to know the obstacles and limitations that have prevented others from pursuing it more vigorously.

There is also a tendency to avoid funding troubled or failing institutions. This pattern is quite clear in regard to in the congregational schools. One community talks about fixing the schools but is offering such minimal funding that they are, in effect, starving them into continuing failure. A philanthropist in another community told us that after spending a half million dollars on supplementary schools, he is convinced that they cannot be fixed. He has shifted his contribution to day schools. Some communities are “giving up” on the congregational schools and are investing instead in alternatives such as camps, youth groups, JCCs, travel programs, youth philanthropy, and family education as a way to make up the shortcomings of the schools.

To date there has been no systematic analysis about why supplementary schools are so troubled. It may be the emergence of day schools, consumer-driven reductions in days for supplementary education, formal approaches, old curricula, the inadequacy of teachers and administrators, the inability of synagogues to operate schools, or other factors. If the Foundation chooses to use its funds to transform a troubled institution like the supplementary school, it will first need to define the problem, then determine whether or not the institution has the capacity to change, and only then to decide how that change might best be effected.

I am a researcher and, therefore, will end by noting that the lack of systematic analysis of the supplementary schools is but one outcropping of a general lack of research on the educational system. There is little by way of needs assessment, strategic analyses, model building, and evaluation research. A stronger knowledge base is needed in order to develop educational policy, build organizations, and fund and implement programs in a way that will help our vast infrastructure become an effective educational system.