

The Health and Challenge of Jewish Education Today

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Education is the Jew's hallmark, Jewish Education our community's passion. Today, we are at the threshold of creating the strongest system of Jewish education ever seen – a literate, committed, practicing and just community with education at its core.

First, some data:

1. More Jews today – adults and children – are better educated Jewishly than ever before in our history. In Greater Boston, we have 17,000 children enrolled in 36 pre-schools, over 80 congregational or other supplementary schools, including high schools, and 14 day schools. We have over 2000 professional Jewish educators in the community.
2. About 75% of all Jewish school-age children get some formal Jewish education during their school-age years; in Boston, the overwhelming majority of enrolled children (about 80%) attend congregational or communal schools (weekends and afternoons). The rest are in day schools. (Note: only around 50% of ALL Jewish kids are enrolled in school at any given moment, though.)
3. Only about 20% of all eligible Jewish children are enrolled in Jewish pre-schools or, as teens, opt to continue studying post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah through high school.
4. An even smaller percentage takes advantage of Jewish summer camps, an Israel experience, Jewish youth groups, or Jewish studies in college.
5. Though the numbers are growing, even fewer adults engage in serious Jewish learning.

These data point to two critical principles of communal policy:

1) Though day schools probably do a better job at providing kids a more comprehensive and substantive knowledge base, synagogues and their educational programs are the most popular settings and are important instruments of Jewish learning, living, and long-term commitment and can, under the right circumstances, provide an adequate foundation for future Jewish study and practice; and 2) Jewish education, as currently structured and implemented, is not reaching enough of us, nor is it yet compelling enough to keep more of us engaged for enough hours over the years.

Jewish schools, especially congregational programs and their informal partners, have “produced” the majority of today's communal leaders, adult learners, Israel visitors, the highest

number of university scholars of Judaic Studies ever, and the greatest wave of serious and dynamic Jewish searching in our history. Congregations have great educational potential as integrators and creators of **educated, spiritual, practicing and acting communities – where all individuals and families can feel challenged, supported, and part of the community.**

In Greater Boston, the variety of Jewish learning opportunities is legend. We boast a Jewish pre-school system infused with Torah, Hebrew and Jewish values; the largest program of Jewish family education of any community on the continent; the largest group of full-time youth educators; a full array of day schools, representing the entire ideological spectrum (see *Roots and Wings: A Guide to Jewish Day Schools in Greater Boston* on the website of the Bureau of Jewish Education, www.bje.org), a growing network of professional special education services, the best network of partnering schools with institutions in Haifa, our Israeli sister community, unexcelled professional preparation and development programs, and a network of congregational schools to meet every need or taste.

Our federation, Combined Jewish Philanthropies, the Commission on Jewish Continuity, the Bureau of Jewish Education, synagogues, schools, and other agencies and institutions have come together as never before in support of Jewish education, subscribing to five basic principles:

1. Jewish learning is the foundation for and leads to long-term Jewish commitment, involvement, and practice.
2. To succeed, Jewish education requires time (much more time than is typically allocated), vision, creativity, authenticity, commitment to quality, and professionalism; to be effective, Jewish education requires volunteer and professional leadership of the highest caliber.
3. Transmitting Judaism – a holistic way of living – depends on the intensive involvement of family, community, and institutions.
4. Like Judaism, Jewish education is best conceived as an integrated system – a carefully charted mix of youth groups, camps, Israel, social action, technology, and the arts, with schooling at the center – preschool through college and beyond, day schools for some, congregational schools for others.

5. Strengthening and enhancing Jewish education calls for greater investment in needed resources – human, material, and financial.

In our community we are also committed to these three "indispensables":

1. To establish the highest possible standards of educative excellence, guided by a dynamic and comprehensive Jewish vision.
2. To challenge the status quo; to innovate, experiment, collaborate; to take risks.
3. Most important, to develop the best professional educators we can... and then support them with professional salaries, benefits, and incentives to reach even higher levels of professional competence. Our children and our seeking adults deserve no less than the best professional educators.

If we are serious about acting on these foundational principles, the result will be literate, committed, and active Jews – transformed Jews who will transform our community.

Jewish education is too important and complex to rely on simplistic solutions or on good intentions. There are wonderful educators throughout our community with creative ideas, waiting for leadership, consultation, and support to make them happen. Now, perhaps as never before, is the time to use all we have learned, marshal, then risk the resources at our disposal to create a community truly capable of preserving our past and fashioning our future.

You're invited to be part of our Jewish education system – as a student, a volunteer, a leader!

Dr. Daniel J. Margolis is Executive Director of the Bureau of Jewish Education of Greater Boston, the community's central agency for educational programs, services, and resources. For more information, call 617-965-7350, or see www.bje.org.