# RECENT TRENDS IN SUPPLEMENTARY JEWISH EDUCATION

JACK WERTHEIMER

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# LETTER FROM AVI CHAI'S EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR – NORTH AMERICA

Since its founding over two decades ago, The AVI CHAI Foundation has focused on Jewish education, primarily, in the past dozen years, to enhance day schools and summer camping. The Foundation also hopes to contribute to other arenas of Jewish education by supporting "thought leadership," which may take the form of research, re-conceptualization, assessment and other intellectual initiatives.

Toward that end, the Foundation commissioned this examination of recent trends in the field of supplementary Jewish education in order to help inform itself and a wider public concerned about such schooling. As a next step, AVI CHAI intends to support three research initiatives—described at the conclusion of the report—designed to stimulate new lines of inquiry in the field of supplementary Jewish education.

As is clear from the report, the supplementary school field is in a process of evolution that is not yet well understood. Change provides both opportunities and challenges. We hope that the report and the research to follow will stimulate conversation and consideration among practitioners and lay leaders and help in the process of realizing the opportunities and overcoming the challenges.

We very much appreciate Dr. Jack Wertheimer's commitment to Jewish education and leadership of this ambitious research project.

Yossi Prager

Executive Director - North America

# THE CURRENT SCENE

### A NEW ERA?

he field of Jewish education has undergone a palpable shift over the past 15 to 20 years. New programs of formal and informal education have appeared, and existing ones have been re-thought; new champions of Jewish education have emerged, as have some new funding sources. And Jewish education itself has risen in the priorities of communal leaders and individual families. Indeed, the mood among educators and lay volunteers in the field has improved considerably. Whereas in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the tone in educational circles was one of worry and even alarm, by the closing decade of the century, the outlook was one of expectation and forward momentum.¹

This shift in outlook has permeated the field of supplementary Jewish education as well.<sup>2</sup> As compared to the intensely negative self-assessments rendered by

insiders 25 to 30 years ago,<sup>3</sup> interviews conducted in the fall of 2005 with educators and observers yielded upbeat and cautiously optimistic evaluations. The field of supplementary Jewish education is brimming with new ideas and curricula, a raft of new initiatives, new strategies, and dozens of schools actively engaged in a process of reinvention.<sup>4</sup>

What accounts for this turnaround in the field's morale?

- With a majority of Jewish children receiving their Jewish education in supplementary settings, some Jewish leaders have made a pragmatic and others an ideological decision not to abandon a major educational system. Educators, congregational leaders, and some lay champions are determined to improve the supplementary schools.
- 2. Even many leaders who strongly prefer day schools as the optimal form of Jewish education acknowledge that, for the foreseeable future, a considerable number of Jewish families will rely upon supplementary schools to educate their children. Despite considerable efforts to recruit ever larger numbers of non-Orthodox children to day schools, and the increased student populations enrolled in such schools, to date only

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> I have surveyed the transformed scene in an essay entitled, "Jewish Education in the United States: Recent Trends and Issues," *American Jewish Year Book*, 1999 (vol. 99), pp. 3-115. On shifting attitudes within families, see my pamphlet, "Linking the Silos: How to Accelerate the Momentum in Jewish Education Today." New York: AVI CHAI Foundation, 2005 and the edited volume, *Family Matters: Jewish Education in an Age of Choice*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, forthcoming 2007.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> There is no elegant term for the range of schools and educational programs run primarily by synagogues. Synagogue schooling comes closest, but some supplemental education is offered in a communal setting or by independent institutions not affiliated with synagogues. The term "supplementary" refers to schooling offered on weekends (Shabbat and Sunday) and on weekday afternoons when students have completed their public or private school classes; hence what remains is supplemental to the public and private school. As will become clear in this report, some of these programs no longer conceive of themselves as schools at all, and reject the school model as harmful; some have consciously adopted a model of informal education, such as camping, as a more apt description of what they aim to accomplish.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> On the pessimistic mood of the time, see "A Field in Crisis," a section of my essay in the 1999 *American Jewish Year Book*, pp. 37-42.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> This study is based upon some 40 interviews conducted in the fall of 2005 with professionals in the denominational offices of the Reform and Conservative movements; professors of Jewish education at the Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education at the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Rhea Hirsh School at the Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles, and the Siegel College of Jewish Studies in Cleveland; observers of supplementary education in several national agencies; a range of leaders in central agencies of Jewish education; school directors; and the leaders of new initiatives in the field.

- a small minority of children from Reform households attend day schools, and fewer than 30 percent of Conservative households enroll their children in day schools. Under these circumstances, supplementary schools are perceived as important targets for educational reform.
- 3. Supplementary high school programs in particular are attracting new interest. As analyses of the 1990 and 2000-2001 National Jewish Population Studies have demonstrated the positive impact of peer influences and continued exposure to Jewish education in the teen years, some communities and congregations have stepped up their efforts to retain young people in their post-bar and bat mitzvah years. Educators and parents have become convinced of the critical importance of continued Jewish education through the high school years, especially as they are mindful of the role peer groups play during adolescence. Moreover, other considerations are also spurring interest in the high school years: some of the potential market for such schools consists of young people who attended a day school until the sixth or eighth grades and who now wish to continue their Jewish education in a supplemental, albeit sophisticated, setting. More broadly, congregations are eager to retain teenagers and their families as members—with the high school programs as an important inducement to continued membership. All of these factors have heightened interest in supplementary high school programs.
- 4. Central agencies of Jewish education have particularly invested themselves in supplementary education. Indeed, many directors of such agencies regard themselves as the champions of supplementary schools. Because few bureaus of Jewish education (BJEs) were given the capacity and resources to engage in meaningful work with day schools, they have instead focused most of their energies on certain aspects of supplementary schooling, particularly the

- continuing education of school directors and the training and accreditation of teachers.
- 5. New work on synagogue revitalization has spurred fresh thinking on the place of the synagogue school in the life of the congregation. Here is how Professor Joseph Reimer of Brandeis University put it: "Whereas before the last decade most observers of American Jewish life viewed the synagogue as the poor cousin in relation to the more vital Jewish federation, in recent years the synagogue has made a comeback and moved into a coveted spot. It has become 'the holy community,' the place where the business of 'making Jews' actually takes place. Suddenly communal expectations for what synagogues can accomplish in shaping the Jewish identities of the next generation have dramatically risen." 5 This has encouraged adults to invest more of their energies in the improvement of congregational schools and has also led to the creation of new combinations of family- and children-centered Jewish education within the synagogue.
- 6. One of the untold stories of Jewish education is the extent to which rabbinic education has changed and influenced the thinking of a new generation of emerging rabbis. At HUC (Hebrew Union College) and at JTS (Jewish Theological Seminary), education departments have grown over the past decade, and faculty members have become far more involved in shaping the curricula of rabbinic education. The training schools have made the case to rabbis and cantors that both of those positions of leadership entail considerable involvement with synagogue education, and that rabbis and cantors therefore owe it to themselves to take education courses and develop a strong interest in synagogue education. Simultaneously, rabbis in the field

Joseph Reimer, "Integrating Formal and Informal Education in the Synagogue: A Concept Paper for CJP [Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Boston]," Unpublished paper for the Institute for Informal Jewish Education in Boston, Dec. 2003, p. 1.

have understood that in a highly competitive synagogue market, their congregational school is a major draw for new membership. These combined factors have reshaped the rabbinate, especially the younger rabbis, to play a far greater role in the synagogue school.

7. Today's parents are also more likely to demand more of the synagogue school than was the case in the middle of the previous century. Contrary to the folk wisdom alleging that parents tell their children, "We suffered in Hebrew School and expect you to suffer through it too," many parents are insisting on better Jewish education for their children. Supplementary programs may therefore benefit from the higher standards of

today's parent body.

- 8. Moreover, the status of synagogue schooling has risen on congregational agendas: in some congregations, the education or school committee is a plum assignment, not an afterthought. Adults serving on those committees often have children enrolled in the synagogue school. They are insisting on a better quality of Jewish education. As one informant put it: "this is not your parents' religious school."
- 9. There has also been a sea change in how supplementary education is defined. When the mission was mainly the acquisition of skills and knowledge, two- or three-day-a-week supplementary education was always found wanting. Young people in those programs could not possibly keep up with the rigorous demands of day school. Neither could they possibly acquire the broad range of knowledge needed to be a literate Jew. Today, the rules of the game have changed: schools are valued not only, or primarily, for the skills they teach—ritual observance, participating in religious services, decoding Hebrew texts—but for the good experiences children have, the Jewish

memories they create, and the positive tone of interactions between parents, children, and school staff. This orientation has opened new avenues for supplementary education so that it can compete on its own terms.

10. With greater attention now focused on the ambience of supplementary schooling, morale

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Observers frequently comment on the improved spirit within schools among children, parents, and teachers. "It's far easier to do good things," claims one long-time educator. Children appear more engaged, teachers speak a common language with their students,

and parents are more receptive to the goals of the school.

11. Due to the increasingly consumer-driven quality of American life, new types of schools are springing up to offer families a range of choices. Independent schools have been established in recent years as alternatives to denominationally-based synagogue schools. So, too, various types of Orthodox outreach centers are entering the market, offering various configurations of days and hours and types of study. These new programs are competing with established congregational models, and indeed often undercut synagogue schooling by not charging membership dues. They reflect the changing nature of supplementary education and are

# CONTINUING CHALLENGES TO THE FIELD

stimulating new thinking in synagogue schools.

Having noted the various factors accounting for improved morale and a rededication to improving synagogue schools, it is nonetheless apparent that a set of endemic problems persistently weakens supplementary schooling. Many of these are built into the system's basic structure. Here is a listing of the most persistent challenges:

- 1. A more blatant limitation of supplementary schooling is the paucity of hours available for instruction. One educator put it bluntly: "We have lost the battle for time." The number of contact hours in classrooms has continued to decline in most supplementary schools over the past decade. (Only a few schools have gone in the opposite direction.) With most children now exposed to no more than four or five hours of schooling per week over a period of some 27 to 32 weeks per year, educators are forced to make hard-nosed decisions to set realistic goals. How much time can be devoted to the acquisition
  - of Hebrew reading skills, if teachers must also explain synagogue practices and the prayer book, discuss the holidays, explore Jewish values, and study Jewish history and contemporary issues? And how much time can be devoted to any of these worthy goals if the school also aims to create programs to nurture strong and passionate connections to Jewish identity and peoplehood?
- 2. The supplementary nature of the education imparts a message to young children about the limited importance of the enterprise. As parents are swept up by social pressures to involve their children in sports, the arts, entertainment, tutoring and other after-school activities, pressures mount to limit Jewish education even more, a pressure that grows exponentially when teenagers become immersed in the college chase. The fact that supplementary education takes place after school, and that grades do not "count," shapes the perception of children as to what is truly important.

3. Furthermore, teaching in supplementary schools is primarily part-time work and provides poor compensation, which means that few schools employ educators with very much time to invest in remaking the system. The relatively poor pay available to educators and the shortage of well-trained teachers result in a huge turnover in school directors and teaching faculty. This,

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- in turn, limits the continuity of school programs. Even the finest schools must scramble to retain excellence when key personnel retire or move on to other positions.
- 4. At least half the synagogues with schools are quite small.

  This limits their ability to fund their schools, hire full-time directors or provide enhancements. Lacking a critical mass of students and the

budget to support anything other than a bare-bones, often volunteer staff, smaller schools cannot even contemplate offering a richer array of programming.

- 5. Many congregations continue to tie synagogue education to the bar/bat mitzvah celebration, thinking this gives them leverage with families. It probably does, but the consequence is a distortion of Jewish education, which becomes focused on a one-time performance, rather than enculturation to a "way of life." It also reduces Jewish education to a coercive experience that families must endure—i.e., they are instructed to attend a set number of religious services over the course of the year prior to the bar/bat mitzvah. The linkage also places a strong emphasis on the acquisition of skills needed at the event, rather than on the breadth of education necessary to live as a Jew.
- 6. As schools redefine themselves, they risk creating increased confusion over their mission. Indeed, quite a few educators now argue that it is a

terrible mistake even to speak of the synagogue program as a school, when in fact it is more akin to an informal education setting, such as a camping experience. The newly revamped schools, they contend, should be measured against other settings of informal education, not as venues for cognitive learning and skill-building. Still, other educators claim they are accomplishing both goals—the cognitive and the affective. But which is the priority?

- 7. Because most schools are based in synagogues, they are highly dependent upon the goodwill and support of the rabbi and congregational leadership. Quite a few of the former understand the importance of Jewish education and are also aware of the centrality of the school for recruiting and retaining members. But in some congregations resentment builds because members without children in the school are heavily subsidizing those families that do enroll their children in the school by virtue of high membership dues. School budgets and the allocation of personnel resources within the congregation are a source of tension.
- 8. Recent research indicates that supplementary high schools produce students who are engaged with Jewish life. Unfortunately, these high schools have not been able to reach their maximal impact because of ongoing turf battles. When based within congregations, they are hard-pressed to offer systematic programming, and they suffer from drastically limited school hours. They seem more effective when under communal auspices or when they operate as a consortial body of several congregations, but rabbis are reluctant to relinquish "their" teens to programs not housed in their own synagogues.
- 9. The distance of national organizations from the local scene and the limited influence of those organizations on the day-to-day running of schools force each school to invent its own curriculum or tailor a pre-existing one to the

- capabilities of its personnel. This generally is not a prescription for excellence, although some schools have transcended this challenge by investing large resources in their improvement.
- 10. The renewed interest in supplementary schooling has, as we shall see, sparked many innovative approaches. The primary emphasis of new initiatives has addressed the so-called inputs new ideas, innovative programs, expanded resources, special funding for educators, etc. At best, all of these initiatives enrich the type of program delivered. Far less attention has been lavished on the so-called outputs—the types of students the school hopes to graduate. What is the ideal profile of such a student? How will such a student relate to Jewish life, participate in synagogue services, observe Jewish rites and rituals, and volunteer for communal service? And how might schools gauge themselves as they assess their work? The field of supplementary Jewish schooling seems to pay little attention to evaluating its outcomes.

These structural and endemic weaknesses coexist with new strengths and positive developments in the field.

# HOW LITTLE WE KNOW

To further complicate our story, we should note the absence of comprehensive national data about these schools. How many are there? How many children are in the system? How do enrollments break down by denomination? What is the role and scope of supplementary education offered by independent institutions? What is the rate of attrition and when does attrition mainly occur—after bar/bat mitzvah or after grade 8? What factors make for high rates of retention after those years? We also lack data to judge patterns of growth and decline, let alone to track educators—their credentials, compensation, aspirations. The entire field operates in a data vacuum, with unanswered questions far exceeding

what is known. At best, individual communities—mainly through their central agencies—keep records and track patterns, but in many communities such data either do not exist or are not publicized.

The likeliest compilers of national data are the key national agencies—JESNA (The Jewish Education Services of North America), CAJE (The Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education), ADCA (The Association of Directors of Central Agencies), and the religious movements under whose auspices most children are enrolled. JESNA embarked on a survey of educators in 2006 whose results should be available in 2007. ADCA counts 225,900 children in schools in the United States and Canada, based on central agency reports. Using this as a base, CAJE claimed in 2002 that about 10 percent of children reside in communities with no central agency, and the CAJE report on that basis estimated the number of children enrolled in supplementary schooling from grades 1-12 at 250,000. The education departments of the Conservative and Reform movements are not keeping records. (The Reform movement has recently received a grant to begin such a project.) Their explanation says much about the decentralized nature of Jewish institutional life, as they claim they cannot convince congregations to cooperate and, therefore, it would not be worthwhile to attempt to compile a record of their enrollments. In short, there are no good numbers on total enrollments, and there is no simple way to obtain them other than by building on the counts of central agencies, which are closest to the schools.

What follows, then, are a few preliminary stabs at quantification. According to the Department of Lifelong Jewish Learning at the Union for Reform Judaism, 803 congregations affiliate with the Reform movement, of which nearly all (792) have schools. We should note, however, that 462 congregations have fewer than 300 membership units. When asked to estimate the number of children enrolled in supplementary schools under Reform auspices, officials of the Union for Reform Judaism gave a figure of 120,000, but admitted

that this was only an approximation. Their counterparts at the United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism estimated an enrollment of some 80,000 children, including high schoolers (but not early childhood enrollments) in some 585 schools. Even if we add several tens of thousands of children in Chabad, Reconstructionist, and non-affiliated schools, it appears that, at any given moment, the number of children enrolled in day schools and supplementary schools is reaching parity. (Approximately 205,000 children attend day schools.) However, as many children in supplementary schools enroll for just a few grades, *in the aggregate* more Jewish children attend supplementary schools than attend day schools.

Some observers agree that enrollments have contracted over the past decades, but claim the decline has bottomed out. Data from local communities reveal a more complicated picture. School enrollments continue to decline, especially in the supplementary sector, but early childhood programs remain stable or are even growing slightly. What this portends is difficult to determine, particularly because these data are not correlated with demographic surveys showing low fertility rates and high intermarriage rates among Jews, both of which point to declining school enrollments in the near term.

The following are the patterns in three communities. Between the three school-years 2002-03, 2003-04 and 2004-05, total Jewish school enrollments declined in Philadelphia-area schools from 17,681 to 16,911—a drop of 4.35 percent. Day school enrollment declined during those years from 2,202 to 2,125— a drop of 3.5 percent. Supplementary school attendance declined from 14,614 to 13,805, or 5.5 percent. In Los Angeles, supplementary school enrollments declined between 2002-03 and 2003-04 by 10 percent. Approximately 1,720 students are enrolled in supplementary high school programs in LA, compared to over 2,000 in day high schools. In Cleveland, enrollments in supplementary schools

pre-K to grade 12 have decreased from 3,981 to 3,559 between 2000-01 and 2004-05—a drop of 10.6 percent. It appears that day school enrollments increased over this period. (According to one observer, enrollments in supplementary schools in Cleveland are down 20 percent over the past ten years; day school enrollments are up by 5 percent.) The contraction in supplementary school enrollment, we should note, is not attributable to the seemingly inexorable migration of Jews to ever further exurbs. Central agencies are keeping tabs on school enrollments in their enlarged catchment areas. More research is needed, but one suspects that schools are beginning to suffer declines because low Jewish birthrates are having their effect.

When it comes to personnel, we are even more in the dark. The head of the Education Department at the United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism estimates the number of Conservative supplementary schools with an education director at 50 percent (approximately 350 schools); only some 200 employ a full-time director. It appears that matters are no different in Reform temples. But in the absence of systematic data-gathering, we do not really know. Moreover, we currently lack information about compensation for educators, and we have no data to determine which interventions would enable schools to recruit more and betterqualified teachers. More comprehensive data are sorely needed to help the field of supplementary education plan effectively and grow.

# STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

# SOME OVERALL STRATEGIC ISSUES

Inderstandably, discussions in the field do not focus on quantitative questions, but rather on ways to improve supplementary education. Before examining some of the most influential initiatives, we will examine the key strategic questions at play.

There is considerable debate over how to spur educational change. Some are pushing for synagogue revitalization efforts, which would then transform the school experience of youngsters by placing Jewish education at the heart of synagogue life. Others argue for a community-wide embrace of Jewish education, which will then translate into "an informed and excited adult consumer base that will demand of their professional leaders more of what Jewish learning can be and less of what they have settled for in the past." Put in simple terms, the field is debating whether the goal is to spur parents to want more from their synagogue or to want more from their synagogue school.

A second, and related, strategic concern is whether proponents of educational reform want to wait until a congregation undertakes serious transformation, a protracted process requiring sustained attention, or whether to focus on educational change, regardless of whether the synagogue has embraced an ambitious program for self-reform. Critics of the ambitious-systemic-change model argue that both its strength and weakness is its emphasis on reinventing the wheel in each congregation. Rather than come with a set of models that might be adapted, the synagogue-change model requires each congregation to conceive of its own *mission*, reform its *decision-making structure*, and work through

*a process* for thorough-going reform. Such a process is exceedingly time-consuming and places enormous pressures on congregations. To be sure, when successful, systemic change processes can bring about dramatic improvements. But all the stars must be aligned for the process to succeed. Therefore, some change advocates focus more modestly on *school reform*, not congregational change.

Still a third strategic question revolves around *where* the impetus for change should be based. Should it come from a national effort that has significant experience in leading change efforts, but only limited resources to address local matters? Or, should it be based in local communities, which means that the key local players may be available to marshal the necessary resources, but that each community must then reinvent the process for itself?

On still another plane is the question of whether it is feasible to develop programming that will embrace children in formal schooling, offer rich experiences within the synagogue, and provide various types of informal Jewish education. One of the bolder statements urging such a course of action comes from a paper written by Barry Shrage, executive of the Boston federation: "The goal of educational and communal policy must be the transformation of congregational education through an overall strategy designed to make each congregation a total educational environment.... The distinction between formal and informal education must be erased and we must move to assure as much support and funding for high-impact Jewish camps, Israel experiences, youth activity and family and adult education as we currently provide for our highly problematic afternoon school efforts."7 What this has come to mean to some is not a diminution in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Joseph Reimer, "Integrating Formal and Informal Education in the Synagogue," ibid., p. 1.

<sup>7 &</sup>quot;Sacred Communities at the Heart of Jewish Life: Twenty Years of Federation/Synagogue Collaboration and Change in Boston."

the importance of congregational schools, but "recognizing that while Jewish schooling is a necessary component of Jewish education, it is not itself a sufficient condition for educating Jewish youth. What is missing is the component of the heart, of the lived connection, of experiencing rich Jewish living which gives meaning to what is learned in school." Congregations vary greatly in how far they have gone to complement

schooling with informal experiences. An observer of one Jewish community declared that "most congregational schools in Greater Boston have already taken many significant steps toward creating communities of learning. They have incorporated family education, active youth group

activities, worship services and even Shabbat retreats into their school years." Synagogues in other communities have not necessarily developed as extensive a set of informal opportunities, either because they lack the financial resources, personnel, know-how, or commitment.

This, in turn, leads to the question of emphasis. If the resources do not exist to expose children both to formal and informal education, should priority be given to improving the school experience or the informal educational settings? Proponents of the former point to significant strides in the general field of education that may serve as models for improving the classroom experience. The goal is to create a school focused on building Jewish literacy and skills; presumably, children will be exposed to other Jewish experiences in summer camps, trips to Israel, and youth groups. By contrast, others are stressing the need to create an environment in the synagogue that will primarily serve as a setting for rich Jewish experiences and not necessarily for formal learning. The emphasis of those in this second group is on the context, perhaps even more than the content of Jewish learning.

Hence, programming has shifted from Sunday mornings to Shabbat, the latter offering more of an ambience for experiencing Judaism than for learning skills.

Still another strategic question is whether the key effort for improvement should be directed toward the classroom or toward the larger learning environment.

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National efforts and central agency programs mainly focus on continuing training for school directors and, to a lesser extent, for teachers, as well as improved and updated curriculum design and content. The systemic or holistic initiatives assume that such changes will have a limited impact, absent a sustained effort at organizational

restructuring that gives power to a wide spectrum of so-called "stake-holders" and which opens the process of decision-making to transparency, mission-directed planning, and democratization. More broadly, the systemic approach looks beyond single programs to the mix of educational opportunities available to children and their families, and tries to create a synagogue-wide transformation, connecting the school to early childhood, teen experiences, adult education and family education. It seeks linkages, rather than strengthening the school in isolation from other educational venues.

There is then the question of personnel development. Some synagogues are creating full time directorship positions, often defining the school directorship as a position transcending the school: the goal is to recreate the principal's portfolio to include sustained and integrated involvement in the life of the congregation. Synagogues are competing with one another for personnel, and this is a way to create an attractive package to retain the principal at a time when school directors routinely move from one school to the next, often crossing denominational boundaries. The other major initiatives to address personnel development are the programs run by BJEs and other institutions to offer in-service training to school heads and to teachers.

<sup>8</sup> Reimer, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Op. cit.

We should note in this brief survey of key strategic issues that some questions are *not* in serious play. For example, in contrast to the agonizing during the 1980s about the optimal threshold of "contact hours," there is little serious discussion today concerning the advisability of increasing the number of hours children spend in supplementary programs. This issue has dropped off the radar screen. True, a few congregations have added hours in order to accommodate the new Reform and Conservative curricula mentioned below, but no agency is pressing for increased school hours. A second unasked question is whether any particular school model is ideal. All the change initiatives are predicated on the assumption that one size will not fit all. In fact, the various initiatives stress the importance of each congregation arriving at an understanding of what will work best within its own unique culture and community.

### NATIONAL EFFORTS

## THE REFORM MOVEMENT

The majority of supplementary school children are educated in Reform and Conservative synagogues. Education departments in both movements primarily devote their energies to curriculum development and training, as well as to consulting with school directors. They see their primary role as the enhancement of the pedagogic leadership of schools, and therefore leave more far-reaching systemic change initiatives to central agencies or the ECE project (see page 14) based at the Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles, given their own limited staffing resources and reach.

The Reform movement has integrated its educational offerings under a single department of Lifelong Jewish Learning, which takes in early childhood, supplementary schools—including high school—adult education and family education. The virtue of this approach is that it embeds the various components within a coherent framework.

The Union for Reform Judaism's (URJ) department offers online teacher training as well as consultation services provided by 13 regional educators, a significant financial investment. The newly revamped department also has shifted from the language of peoplehood and Israel-centered programs popular in the seventies and eighties—which in turn had replaced Emanuel Gamoran's synthesis of Reform and Reconstructionism—to the current motto, "Torah at the Center." Some observers sense a new emphasis on spirituality and mysticism emerging but, in the meantime, the Reform educational apparatus is placing far more stress on Hebrew language and Jewish religious literacy than it had in the past.

At the core of this program is a new curriculum called *Chai*, which also has a Hebrew-language track called *Mitkadem*. Sample lessons are available at the URJ website (http://urj.org/chai/samplelessons/).

When its first phase is completed, *Chai* will run from levels 1-7, corresponding to grade levels. In each year, the curriculum outlines 27 one-hour sessions for each of three curricular themes—*Torah*, *Avoda*, and *Gemilut Hasadim*, the study of Torah, ritual observance and good deeds. The curriculum adheres to a model known as "backward design"—i.e., it begins with the desired outcomes and then builds backward from them. It also strives to develop a curriculum that will be reinforced not only in the classroom, but in other synagogue settings.

The *Chai* curriculum is not intended to cover all subjects, but to serve as a core curriculum to which schools will then add. Its strength lies in its emphasis upon religious content—*tefila* (prayer), belief in God, *brachot* (blessings) in Hebrew, and Jewish values. As the developers of the *Chai* curriculum themselves concede, among the topics slighted by the curriculum are Israel, Jewish history, the Jewish holidays, and the Jewish life cycle. Schools are encouraged to address these using earlier curricula and textbooks. A second phase of work will run from 2007-2009 and is projected

to include curriculum on Israel, history, holidays, the Holocaust, and life cycle. It will also prepare curricula for post-bar and -bat mitzvah students.

The Union for Reform Judaism has invested heavily in the new curriculum and has hired a large staff of regional personnel who help congregational schools implement the curriculum. Indeed, the project is the most costly undertaken by the URJ and is also the longest in duration, with an expected timetable of ten years. The URJ has thought not only about the production of the curricular units, but also about providing support to school directors who will adopt them. Materials are available in a handsome format. The giving of serious thought, planning, and financial investment attests to the care taken by the central organization to upgrade temple education. Still, an observer cannot fail to note the limited nature of the enterprise. There is only so much that can be taught in a few hours a week of schooling. The Chai curriculum strives to work within those constraints, but the limitations are very real.

The *Chai* curriculum has been adopted by slightly more than a quarter of the Reform movement's congregations, and the *Mitkadem* curriculum by about 15 percent of the movement's schools. The larger the congregation, the more likely it is these curricula have been adopted. Some outside observers have expressed concern as to whether the URJ appreciates the complexity of implementing a new curriculum, particularly by teachers whose own Jewish literacy is spotty. On the other hand, we should not underestimate the impact of the curriculum even on those schools that only use it partially.

# THE CONSERVATIVE MOVEMENT

In the late 1990s, the Education Department of the United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism, in partnership with several arms of the Conservative movement, developed what it called a "Framework for Excellence for the Conservative Synagogue School." The framework consists of three components: 1. A definition of the "aims of the Conservative Synagogue School;" 2. A set of

benchmarks to gauge the quality of such schools; 3. A menu of six models for how schools might organize their time. The "aims" section offers a wish list of what children should "know and experience" during their K-12 Jewish education. These include discussions of various Jewish values concerning the proper relationship between human beings (bein adam lehavero); a rundown of some of the key mitzvot (bein adam lamakom); an emphasis on Torah study (which means primarily Tanakh, and not rabbinics); Hebrew literacy; a knowledge of the liturgy; an understanding of modern Israel; identification with Klal Yisrael; and an understanding of Conservative Judaism. The benchmarks identified key standards for synagogues that run schools, ranging from concern for the credentials of their staff to the assessment and definition of a clear educational philosophy and curriculum. Perhaps most noteworthy was an insistence upon several new emphases, such as family education programming, developing informal educational opportunities within the synagogue, and developing the partnership between the rabbi and bazzan. These are not revolutionary ideas, but do reflect the shift in outlook in the 1990s.

The most noteworthy aspect of this effort is its listing of six alternative models for how schools might deliver their education. The Framework document explicitly responds to the new social realities facing families that impede the ambition of schools to run three-day-a-week programs. It specifically takes note of the increased distances families live from the synagogue, the high incidence of families in which both parents work outside the home, and the growing population of single parents. Each of these factors militates against synagogues offering three-day-a-week programs, as most had been required to do in the post-World-War-II decades. Instead, the six models offer "flexibility" in how the program could be structured. Such flexibility is purchased by having schools lengthen the number of years children are enrolled in synagogue schooling—i.e., schools would seek to attract children for grades K-3 and seek to retain them in the post-bar and -bat mitzvah years.

In addition, some models employ compulsory Shabbat attendance in lieu of an additional school day. No systematic data are available as to the actual implementation of these models, let alone how they are reshaping schools. (For the Framework, see http://www.uscj.org/Framework\_for\_Excell6432.html)

The Etgar curriculum aims to deliver a sophisticated new curriculum to Conservative synagogue schools. Developed jointly by the Melton Center at JTS and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, Etgar currently offers a detailed curriculum for grades 6-8. It integrates material on Hebrew language, Bible, tefila, Shabbat and Kashrut observance, Jewish history, holidays, Israel, and the teaching of proper interpersonal behavior. The curriculum has been tested intensively, which is both its strength and weakness: strength, because it offers teacher-training for its proper implementation; weakness, because of the enormous expenditure of resources necessary to teach it properly. As a result of the latter, congregations are phasing it in slowly. Thus far, under two dozen congregations are using the curriculum.

Now that grade 8 materials are being finalized, the current plan is to prepare materials for grades 4 and 5. Figures are not yet available on how widely the curriculum is employed. (See http://www.uscj.org/Curriculum\_Component5970.html)

No one disputes that, for the most part, Conservative synagogues are abandoning the threeday-a-week format for one of the more flexible models. One hears of some exceptions: in a few cases, congregations employing the Etgar curriculum have actually increased their weekly time expectations. However, the overall trend has been toward diminished school hours.

# **CHABAD**

Chabad is a relatively new player on the scene whose influence and reach bear watching. The highly decentralized character of Chabad's schools complicates any effort to track their impact and programs. Plans are afoot to produce educational materials at the central office of Chabad in Brooklyn; for the meantime, much of the education in Chabad synagogues relies upon the volunteer efforts of young post-seminary women. One Chabad *shaliach* has extolled the creativity of these teachers in their early 20's who captivate their students with creative teaching and play. The phenomenon warrants attention, particularly as Chabad schools are expanding their share of the student market.

# AN AGENCY FOR SUPPLEMENTARY JEWISH SCHOOLING

JESNA has recently involved itself more actively in supplementary schooling. It has re-named a Department of Day School, Congregational and Communal Education Initiatives, which recently convened key innovators in the field.

JESNA and the Jewish Funders Network are actively involved in efforts to launch an agency to support supplementary Jewish education called the Partnership for Effective Learning and Innovative Education (PELIE). Some 12 to 15 philanthropists gathered in September 2005 under the auspices of JESNA to explore the creation of such a supporting body. Since then, the group is coalescing and will soon hire an executive director. It is not clear how the new agency will collaborate either with central agencies or with the denominations, two important forces on the local and national scenes.

# THE ECE MODEL— A CONGREGATION OF LEARNERS

Based at the Rhea Hirsh School of Jewish Education at the Los Angles campus of the Hebrew Union College, ECE—Experiment in Congregational Education—has sought to engage the attention of congregations by encouraging adults to create their own initiatives for congregational change. ECE emerged after family education and adult education had gone through a revival, and therefore was able to draw upon a cadre of parents who had an interest in Jewish education. ECE encourages the fusion of adult education and the religious school in order to develop family learning.

One of the model congregations in the ECE project, a Reform temple in the San Francisco Bay area, identified the key changes that would make a substantial difference in its educational program as follows: heightened parent involvement; connecting Jewish learning with Jewish living; creating memorable moments as part of the learning experience; building community; making Jewish

education "the thing to do;" insuring the serious involvement of the rabbi; aligning various synagogue committees to work cooperatively rather than at cross-purposes; and engaging adults in text study. Each congregation participating in the project has developed its own such set of goals over an extended period.

At least five
models have emerged
in participating
ECE congregations.

The ECE leadership prides itself on its thoroughgoing reworking of synagogue schooling and its encouragement of creativity within each school. It has intentionally rejected the tinkering approach to school improvement in favor of what its leader calls "significant intervention to change the grammar of schooling." Clearly this requires a heavy investment by a congregation and a readiness to change. Only a

select number of congregations are able to make such a commitment and, hence, ECE works with individual congregations scattered around the country, rather than with cohorts of neighboring synagogues. (For information on ECE, see http://www.eceonline.org)

At least five models have emerged in participating congregations:

- a. The school becomes a Family School. One congregation in the Bay area created a new track called *Shabbaton*, in which children do not enroll in the school, but attend programs weekly on Shabbat afternoons to engage in family education along with their parents.
- b. The congregation assumes responsibility for education, meaning that there are no professional teachers; potentially every member teaches.
- c. Day care is linked to the religious school as a means of serving family needs. Some of the time is then devoted to snatches of Hebrew conversation—e.g., snack-time is for spoken Hebrew.
- Rather than offer classes, the school tutors each child individually—and the tutor pays home visits.
- e. Particularly knowledgeable families have assumed special responsibility to enrich the school.

Over the course of seven years, ECE has worked with 14 Reform congregations, an enormously slow process and one touching a small fraction of the movement. To remedy this, ECE has spun off another initiative called Re-Imagine, which aims to short-circuit the process and limit it to an 18 to 24-month period. Thus far, 43 congregations have joined Re-Imagine, including over 20 in the New York area whose participation is funded by the NY UJA-Federation and the Covenant Foundation. Re-Imagine is more focused on changing the school than the shul, but it does encourage the rethinking of both.

# BEHRMAN HOUSE BOOKS AND ALTERNATIVES IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

For the sake of completeness, we should note the role of independent publishers who produce curricular materials and textbooks. Behrman House is a leader in this field, as is an outfit called Alternatives in Religious Education (ARE), based in Colorado, which since 1973 has issued textbooks for supplementary schools. Like Behrman House, ARE offers mainly curricular materials, including workbooks and packages devoted to the holidays and other themes. Its reach is not negligible. And if anything, it will play an even larger role in

the years to come, since it was bought by Behrman House during the summer of 2005. Its web address is http://www.behrmanhouse.com.

# BABAGANEWZ

A new addition to the scene is the journal *BabagaNewz*, a monthly magazine for classroom use published by Jewish Family and Life! aimed at day and congregational schools. *BabagaNewz* has a circulation of some 34,000 students in a large percentage of congregational schools. The magazine focuses on teaching Jewish values, especially an attachment to Israel and the Jewish people, as well as on contemporary topics and noteworthy Jewish leaders. Because its editors aspire for *BabagaNewz* to serve as a classroom tool, the journal offers a website (http://www.babaganewz.com) and teachers' guide designed to facilitate discussion.

### LOCAL INITIATIVES

# **CENTRAL AGENCIES**

Some BJEs are especially active in encouraging the credentialing of teachers. The BJE of Los Angeles, for example, has taken this on as a major part of its mission, based on a firm conviction that rigorous credentialing and monitoring of personnel will upgrade the quality of teachers. BJEs also take a strong interest in the compensation of teachers and strong directors. For example, the website of the Auerbach CAJE in Philadelphia offers a formula for hourly compensation based on years of service. (See http://www.acaje.org/content/synagogueSchools/salary Scale/salaryScaleIntro.shtml)

Other central agencies are also providing ongoing training for school directors and teachers. The UJA Federation of Greater New York has raised money to fund a program co-sponsored by JTS and HUC to upgrade the education of school directors, the Leadership Institute for Congregational School Principals. (See http://www.leader-institute.org)

These efforts are augmented on the national scene by the large religious denominations. United Synagogue runs a program to train teachers to assume directorships. This effort gathers teachers during the summer for an intensive conference and then maintains contact with them over the course of a year via conference calls. The program culminates with the conferral of a certificate. To date, 140 teachers have successfully completed the program and have graduated to directorship positions. The Reform movement also offers teacher training primarily geared to the *Chai* curriculum. Online courses and personal consultations are available through the URJ to help teachers implement the curriculum.

## **NESS**

NESS, Nurturing Excellence in Synagogue Schools, is an initiative of the Auerbach Central Agency of Philadelphia. The precipitating factor motivating this program was concern about high attrition rates at synagogue schools during the post-bar/-bat mitzvah years. With 85 percent of Philadelphia school children enrolled in synagogue schools, the Auerbach CAJE resolved to improve the school experience dramatically to prevent a high dropout rate, which would in turn translate into weakened Iewish identification.

NESS is premised on a systemic approach that seeks to transform education by engaging the entire congregation in a change process. In this sense, NESS parallels the national program of the ECE. It strives to build collaboration between lay and professional leaders, develops a democratic process of decision-making, seeks to engage all stake-holders (lay leaders, educators, clergy, etc.), works to integrate the school into the life of the shul, and focuses sharply on aligning the school and synagogue with a clearly defined mission. In the view of its leadership, there is no shortage of curricula ready

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Sharon M. Ravitch, "Engaging and Retaining Jewish Youth Beyond Bar/Bat Mitzvah: An Action Research Study." The Auerbach Central Agency for Jewish Education, 2002.

for use. The challenge is to get beyond curriculum to changing the way the congregation implements Jewish education.<sup>11</sup> (For more on NESS, see http://www.acaje.org/content/ness/NESSInitiative.shtml)

The NESS program is a three-year "whole school intervention, custom-designed to meet the needs of each synagogue school." Its approach is laborintensive and based upon keeping a mix of efforts moving forward in each of the schools. Although all 61 local synagogue schools were encouraged to apply, only six could be brought into the first cohort.

The Auerbach CAJE offers professional development seminars for educational directors in the NESS program through Foundations, Inc., a national nonprofit organization that provides "technical assistance to schools, school districts, and other educational and community organizations" to develop a Jewish school assessment and school improvement process. A team of assessors visits each school and, after talking with all the "stakeholders," offers a report and makes recommendations for school improvement.

NESS schools participate in a 30-hour on-site seminar for their educators. Their approach is "to create meaning-centered, collaborative learning environments in the classroom." One should not underestimate the time and effort that goes into NESS's work with each school.

NESS has built into its approach a three-part assessment plan: 1. the training components of the project; 2. the implementation of school plans for improvement; 3. the impact of NESS on students' attitudes, knowledge and behaviors. Clearly, ongoing evaluation is highly prized by the program. At present, however, evaluations in the third category are not yet available.

To its great credit, the NESS program has structured its work so as to have an impact beyond

the confines of the Philadelphia Jewish community. An advisory committee of top Jewish educational leaders from across the country has been formed, which connects the program to the denominational organizations, JESNA, some leading philanthropists, and local Philadelphia Jewish leadership. The leaders of NESS, moreover, have laid the groundwork for the replication of NESS in other communities. A doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania is writing a dissertation on one aspect of its work, and training materials have been collected to enable other communities to build upon the work of the NESS initiative. This foresight is noteworthy and commendable, particularly when we observe how often major programs do not create a paper trail for proper assessment, let alone imitation.

It is too early to assess the impact of NESS, but it is evident that its developers have taken an unusually farsighted approach that may yield rich benefits not only for local congregational education, but also for similar programs in other communities. NESS selfconsciously strives for the replication of its program.

NESS is also noteworthy for its direct relationship with organizations outside of the Jewish community, such as the Pennsylvania School of Education and Foundations, Inc.; these contacts confer upon NESS a measure of status and credibility that does not always result from a more conventional Jewish communal route. The program's founders have been quite deliberate in their stress on thorough research as a means to build credibility with donors and to demonstrate the seriousness of the enterprise.

Equally significant, NESS is funded by private philanthropists. Its renown has encouraged the local federation to contribute a small sum to the effort. NESS thus represents the anomaly: it was created and is driven by a central agency without significant federation support or funding. Perhaps the independence of the agency accounts for its success; perhaps it is the drive of the CAJE director. This unique lineage may make it difficult to replicate.

This is not to suggest that NESS ignores curriculum. It encourages schools to engage in a curriculum review and offers them resources to facilitate such a process.

# La'ATID IN HARTFORD

La'atid is a program based in the Hartford Jewish community and coordinated by the local federation's Commission on Jewish Education. Now in its third cohort, the program currently works with seven local schools, all housed in either Conservative or Reform synagogues. The program strives to deal with schools "holistically." It works with school directors, rabbis, cantors, Jewish family educators, teachers, administrators and lay leaders in each congregation, but also brings these people to learn together, to hear from experts outside the community, and to share experiences and ideas.

The actual process of La'atid is one designed to bring "system change." This is accomplished in academic courses through the Hartford Institute of Jewish Studies, an affiliate of the University of Hartford; in conferences, workshops and Torah study sessions; through a process of team building within each congregation to involve the key "constituencies;" by spurring congregations to develop a "distinct vision, mission statement and plan of action;" and by providing a survey instrument to gather data on congregational needs. Onsite, La'atid consultants then help congregations implement their plans, work to develop the professional and lay leadership, and assure ongoing evaluation. The goal is to create "communities of learners" and "communities of teachers." In addition to the program and personalized attention each participating congregation receives, La'atid also offers challenge grants to enable congregations to meet some of their goals.

La'atid draws inspiration from the burgeoning literature on organizational change, whose gurus are Michael Fullan and Peter Senge, as well as lesser-known educational theorists who work specifically on school reform. Not surprisingly, the buzz words of such efforts are drawn from the literature on organizational change—mission, shared vision, "learning organizations," etc. Like NESS, it is based in a single community and brings together

local congregational leaders to help one another. *La'atid* is funded by the Hartford federation, its endowment fund, and the Covenant Foundation.

It needs to be stressed that like its ECE model, *La'atid* engages in a sweeping effort to bring about synagogue change. School change, however, is a central goal. A recent evaluation of the program offered evidence of important changes in the way educational directors conduct their business, improved morale among the teachers who are far more engaged in curricular planning and are learning new skills, and higher expectations among lay and professional leaders. The collaborative approach seems to help all the schools.<sup>13</sup>
Nevertheless, it would be premature to judge their impact on learners, families and congregations.

# INDIVIDUAL SYNAGOGUE EFFORTS

Informed observers of the field also note the efforts of quite a few congregations engaged in a serious reconfiguration of their synagogue schools quite independent of any larger initiatives. Undoubtedly, these efforts draw upon some of the ideas promoted by the ECE and other systemic change advocates. Still, the driving force within congregations comes from engaged lay people and professionals who are prepared to work together to improve the school. School directors with energy and commitment are indispensable. And the partnership between the rabbi and cantor or education director is critical in such a process, as is the active involvement of a cadre of lay leaders. No one has collected reports on how individual congregations have remade their schools, and it remains to be seen whether these congregations have left a paper trail that might benefit other schools.

<sup>12 &</sup>quot;La'atid: Synagogues for the Future." Unpaginated.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> My remarks about La'atid are based on an interview with Dr. Sandy Waldman Dashefsky who heads the program and who provided me with some written material on the program, including unpublished evaluations prepared by JESNA. The program was featured in an article entitled "La'atid: Synagogues for the Future—An Experiment in Synagogue Revitalization," *Jewish Education News*, Winter 5762, pp. 50-53. See also the paper by Sandy Waldman Dashefsky and Leora W. Isaacs, "La'atid: Synagogues for the Future—Factors for Successful Organizational Change in Three Congregations," presented to the Network for Research in Jewish Education, June 2004.

Not surprisingly, rabbis are often identified as critically important promoters of improvement, or as hindrances. The growing interest of some pulpit rabbis in Jewish education as a means to enrich synagogue life has helped some schools turn around. Conversely, when pulpit rabbis are not engaged, their aloofness can serve as a major obstacle. As the field advances, it will have to encourage rabbinical seminaries to foster a commitment among their students to regard Jewish education as critical to their mission. It will also be important to expose rabbinical students to positive teaching experiences and models of well-run schools. If future rabbis observe only failing schools during their formative years, they are more likely to avoid engaging with their synagogue school when they assume a pulpit.

Among the models created by individual congregations are family education programs in lieu of formal schooling; creating a "camp" atmosphere, rather than a school environment as a substitute for formal synagogue-based education; infusing the preschool with spoken Hebrew; and introducing a heavy environmental focus to entice high school students. Clearly, experimentation is currently in vogue.

Some federations are active participants in this process. In places such as Boston and Cleveland, the federation serves as a spur to congregations or as a partner. In other communities, individual congregations are taking the initiative on their own without federation support.

# **EVALUATION**

What has been the impact of the new efforts in supplementary education? Most of the initiatives build in an evaluation process, usually performed by outside consultants, drawn either from other communities, national agencies such as JESNA, or from schools of education. Generally, these evaluations pose some of the difficult questions and are not merely sugar-coated. On the positive side,

these programs have brought hope. Where once congregational schooling was regarded as a futile enterprise, now there is a sense of excitement. At the least, educators can experiment with a mix of formal and informal education, with new approaches to curriculum, with more flexible time configurations, and with renewed support from lay leaders and rabbis. In some of the more ambitious systemic change efforts, a vast infrastructure for change has come into existence, drawing upon new resources and personnel from within each congregation, from across local communities and from national educational leaders. All this contributes to a new sense of forward movement. The creative involvement of lay leaders with expertise in organizational change also fosters a climate of change. Still, caution is in order, if only because a fraction of all supplementary schools are engaged in any of these efforts.

When pressed to quantify the impact of such efforts, educational leaders associated with these programs focus on three important developments:

- 1. Children seem to remain in supplementary schooling for *longer periods of time*. As a consequence, there is less pressure to compress all of Jewish education into a three-year period prior to the bar/bat mitzvah milestone. It has become more common, some claim, for children to enroll from pre-K to grade 8, *with growing numbers in some communities or congregations* who stay on for high school programming. (These claims warrant verification.) Added school years, some contend, offset the reduction in weekly class hours.
- 2. The second piece of evidence adduced is less quantifiable—a perceived improvement in the atmosphere of schools. Observers claim that children are less resentful of the supplementary education imposed upon them after "school" hours. More generally, improvements in curriculum, the elimination of unnecessary repetition, the mixture of cognitive and affective learning, and the involvement of parents in

family education and adult education are reshaping the learning environment so that students feel more positively about the overall experience. Educators claim fewer disciplinary problems than in the past. They also claim to hear more about family dinner conversations sparked by what was learned in school. By their own admission, those who speak of such trends are sharing their *impressions*; they are not able to cite hard data.

3. Lastly, as a result of the systemic change initiatives, a new criterion for assessment has emerged. How many parents are engaged in serious Jewish education? The reasoning here is that if parents serve as positive role models, their children will benefit because the entire family will take Jewish education more

seriously and parents will serve as educators of their children. Some congregations, in fact, have begun to quantify these changes: it is not unusual to hear educators boast that in Congregation X one quarter of the adults are engaged in ongoing learning, and that in Congregation Y, all parents are involved in some aspect of Jewish education.

Significantly, several of the new initiatives quite explicitly reject some of the standard criteria for success that might be measured through testing. Systemic change advocates generally do not evaluate their efforts by testing for content knowledge. Rather, they seek to create moments of personal meaning for children, to build community, to "enculturate" young Jews. It is not clear how such efforts dovetail with skill-building and the acquisition of knowledge.

Moreover, there is a great deal of agnosticism masquerading as experimentation in the field concerning the objectives of Jewish education. Goals are loosely defined, and no one is prepared to set standards of achievement. Without such articulated goals, it is hard to evaluate success in an objective fashion. Hence, responses to questions about the impact of change initiatives are highly subjective.

...there is a great deal of agnosticism masquerading as experimentation in the field concerning the objectives of Jewish education.

When pressed still further, the heads of the various initiatives admit that it is impossible to answer the "\$64,000 questions." Is there a way to ascertain whether children are learning more and are more engaged with Jewish life due to change initiatives? And is there any way to gauge the longer term impact of these changes? It is not easy to find an educator who is

prepared to affirm that the answers to these questions are known. The best we can hope for is to survey graduates of the reformed and improved supplementary system 15 years from now in order to judge how engaged they have become in Jewish life. This, we should note, was the method used to study the impact of Jewish educational experiences in the past. It is an imperfect method of measurement and by the time we know the answers, another generation will have passed through the system. In the short-term, we can test students at regular intervals to determine how their knowledge and skills grew during particular school years and how their experiences in the supplementary school altered their levels of Jewish participation. But the field currently functions with little attention to "outcomes assessment."

# AVI CHAI'S ENGAGEMENT WITH THE FIELD

he field of supplementary Jewish education currently operates with few, if any, up-todate studies. Relatively little new research has been done to describe and analyze types of schools within the denominational and nondenominational spheres, the numbers of students, enrollment patterns, the variety of school models, the range of school configurations, the nature of new initiatives, and the outcomes of new approaches to supplementary Jewish education. Perhaps the strongest recent contributions to the field have been a "Best Practices" compilation entitled Supplementary School Education, edited by Barry W. Holtz14 and Joseph Reimer's Succeeding at Fewish Education: How One Synagogue Made It Work. 15 Both volumes appeared over a decade ago and reflect research conducted even earlier.

In order to stimulate thinking in the field of supplementary Jewish education, AVI CHAI intends to launch three research projects in 2007 with the goal of bringing new findings to the attention of educators and makers of Jewish educational policy.

# A CENSUS OF ENROLLMENT FOR THE 2006-07 SCHOOL YEAR

At present, educators are working in a data vacuum: some have information on trends within their own community; more often, they have no data. <sup>16</sup> A

census will help clarify key questions of school size and enrollment trends. Specifically, it will determine when the bulk of students begin and end their studies, how extensive enrollments are beyond the bar/bat mitzvah years, and how many hours children engage in Jewish education. Undoubtedly, a census will also shed light on the large variety of supplementary configurations now available for families—i.e., the mix of days, hours, types of educational experience, etc. The census will also strive to assess the impact of communal context: which communities succeed better than others in retaining teenagers? In order to avoid needless duplication, AVI CHAI is actively seeking partners in national agencies, such as JESNA and the Department of Lifelong Jewish Learning at the URJ, which are surveying related dimensions of the field.

# CASE STUDIES OF TEN SUPPLEMENTARY SCHOOLS OF VARYING MODELS

Particularly in light of the many school experiments currently underway, the field and its supporters would benefit from extensive descriptions of how various types of schools are structured and the variables that shape their efforts.

A team of academic researchers and practitioners will engage in qualitative research designed to bring to light the extent to which schools are succeeding according to their own stated criteria of success.

Based on these ten case studies, broader conclusions will be drawn about the complex interaction of factors that school reformers at other institutions will need to consider in order to assess the opportunities and constraints within the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Published by the Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education in 1993 and 1996.

<sup>15</sup> Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1997.

As this report went to press, two important surveys were under way—a survey of educators sponsored by the Jewish Education Services of North America, and a survey of Jewish learning within the Reform movement, sponsored by the Department of Lifelong Jewish learning of the URJ.

supplementary school field. Factors to be considered will include: the role and interaction of professional leadership (school heads, educators, rabbis and cantors); the relationship of these professionals with lay leadership on the synagogue board and the education committee; the recruitment and retention of educators in these schools; the development and utilization of curricula; and the impact of denominational organizations and published curricula.

The goals

## ASSESSMENT AT THE CENTER

To date, much of the conversation about supplementary schools focuses on new efforts to improve their functioning—e.g., investments in teacher training and in-service training for school directors; new curricula; creating a warmer, more enjoyable class environment; incorporating informal education and

experiential opportunities into the life of the school; and re-thinking school hours and the use of time. By contrast, little is said about the

outcomes schools hope to achieve. This project is designed to rebalance the conversation from an almost exclusive emphasis on "inputs" to one that takes "outputs" seriously.

A team of experts on outcomes assessment drawn from within the field of Jewish supplementary education as well as from general education will

develop tools designed to help schools engage in self-study to measure the short-term impact of their programs. Since schools differ considerably, it will be necessary to create a range of measures. The goal would be to develop rigorous evaluative instruments that would yield conclusions about the links between articulated goals, models to achieve them, and outcomes. If properly designed, such evaluative instruments could be a boon to schools and educators, as

well as help the entire field of supplementary education to engage in outcomes assessment.

The goal would be to develop rigorous evaluative instruments that would yield conclusions about the links between articulated goals, models to achieve them, and outcomes.

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