

Rethinking Our Communal Approach to Jewish Teen Education

By Josh Miller

Jewish teens seeking to explore their Judaism and connect with Jewish peers have a menu of program options from which to choose. Nationwide, tens of thousands of teens enroll in Jewish high schools, take classes on Jewish topics, participate in youth groups, attend Jewish camps, travel to Israel, and sign up for a range of other ongoing and immersive programs. Research demonstrates that these experiences significantly influence participants and lead to further involvement in Jewish life. On the surface, the narrative is one of success and – for funders investing in the future of Jewish life – is heartening. We are compelled to support these opportunities for Jewish teens to ensure that they remain strong and accessible.

But the reality is that another side of this story exists. Of the 320,000 high-school aged Jewish teens in this country, roughly 80 percent do not opt into any of these meaningful Jewish experiences. If we listen to these teens, the message they are sending is clear—the current offerings are simply not compelling enough to win the competition for their time.

At the Jim Joseph Foundation, where the commitment is to ever-increasing numbers of young Jews engaging in ongoing Jewish learning, we seek to provide engaging, relevant educational experiences for all Jewish teens: those who currently opt in and those who currently do not. Which forces the question: how can we reconceptualize our approach to Jewish teen education to dramatically broaden its appeal to teens?

It was this very question that led our Foundation to invest in an 18-month research process that ultimately produced the newly released report entitled [Effective Strategies for Educating and Engaging Jewish Teens: What Jewish Communities Can Learn from Programs That Work.](#)

Conducted by research consultants at [BTW informing change](#) and [Rosov Consulting LLC](#), this report identifies strategies that are prevalent among some of the most successful programs serving young people today. With the guidance of a research advisory group that included national funders, local funders, Jewish teen education experts and Jewish teens, the researchers identified twenty-one respected programs from inside and outside the Jewish world to examine and compare. The goal: extract key learnings from the achievements of these exemplars to inform funders, community leaders and practitioners about what works with today's young people.

As a national funder, the Jim Joseph Foundation is committed to taking a leadership role in coordinating and sharing learning with our funding colleagues, identifying opportunities for co-investing in their efforts, and helping to fuel a national conversation about the importance of Jewish teen education and engagement.

We believe that the findings from this report provide rich fodder for communal discussions on a re-examination of current approaches to Jewish education for teens. For us, reading about exceptional programs that attract today's young people sheds light on innovative approaches that merit adaptation and sparks ideas for a range of new potential interventions.

But how do we determine which ideas have greatest merit for communal investment? With the goal of long-term, enduring solutions, we believe that our work must be crafted around the

needs of local communities and developed through partnerships forged with the local funders, communal leaders and practitioners who know their communities best.

As part of the broader conversation, a series of blog posts over the coming weeks will offer reactions to this report from a range of perspectives.

We hope that as you review the report you will find opportunities to add your own voice to the conversation, helping our communities to design, develop and support the most effective strategies to educate and engage a new generation of Jewish teens.

Josh Miller is a Senior Program Officer for the Jim Joseph Foundation, which seeks to foster compelling, effective Jewish learning experiences for young Jews in the United States.