

Toward a Teen-Centered Jewish Future  
By Lisa Farber Miller with Samantha Hea

The Jim Joseph Foundation report “[Effective Strategies for Educating and Engaging Jewish Teens](#)” sounds the alarm that Jewish communities are failing our teens and suggests new ways to engage them locally. For a national Jewish funder to suggest that community-based approaches must be at the forefront of new, innovative teen engagement and learning—and to say that the Jim Joseph Foundation will consider investing locally with others—is refreshing and bold.

Here in Denver, we consistently observe teens dropping out of Jewish life. At Rose Community Foundation, we believe teens have so much to contribute that we cannot afford *not* to have them engaged in Jewish life. We have experimented with many different approaches to help our Jewish communities engage teens and see them as powerful partners, rather than problems.

Our first approach was to walk the talk and integrate teens into our foundation by establishing Rose Youth Foundation in 2001. This philanthropic leadership program for high schoolers reverses the power dynamic: Jewish teens have \$60,000 to grant and they decide their grant priorities, make site visits and give grants. Every year one of their priorities has been to improve Jewish teen programs. Foundation staff works closely with the teens, serving as facilitators and mentors. We also frequently have teen interns working in our office.

Three years ago, we commissioned a survey of all available research on Jewish teens to inform our grantmaking ([rcfdenver.org/reports/CurrentTrendsInJewishTeenParticipation0210.pdf](http://rcfdenver.org/reports/CurrentTrendsInJewishTeenParticipation0210.pdf)). We then solicited grants for innovative new programs aimed at stemming the tide of teen disengagement. Some have been more successful than others. And, we have served as a community convener, bringing together diverse stakeholders to discuss what works and what doesn't.

Our parents, teens and teen providers told us that teens will respond to a teen-centric community, one that is built around teens' interests and needs, and our research survey affirmed this advice. Instead, like many communities, we tend to be program and institution-centric, driven by supply rather than demand. Institution walls and turf often inhibit building relationships with teens to meet their needs. And our teens are responding by walking out on us.

Our experience as well as the findings from the Jim Joseph Foundation report lead to an important conclusion: *how* we work with teens is more important than actual program content. For example, effective programs are those designed by teens and adults in partnership. Programs created only by adults, without teen input, and conversely, teen-only led initiatives are much less successful.

But until now there was no guide to best practices in Jewish teen engagement, relationship-building and learning. Now we have one. “Effective Strategies for Educating and Engaging Jewish Teens” provides a blueprint to plan for a more teen-centered future that will lead to more meaningful Jewish experiences. This report challenges communities to think differently about how they relate to teens. Two of the report findings especially resonate with a local funder like us and will inform our future initiatives and programs.

“Location, Location, Location” is the first of nine guiding issues for local community approaches that help teens explore what being Jewish means to them: programs need to reach into and be in the spaces where teens already are. We learned from our grantee, the Jewish Student Connection, that it is powerful to have Jewish teen culture clubs in our local high schools where it is easy for teens to spend their lunch hour with their friends and a dynamic Jewish educator.

“People, People, People” is the second key issue: how to design experiences enabling teens to build meaningful relationships that will advance their Jewish journeys. The report ratifies what we learned from our research: numbers of programs or participants will have to take a back seat to supporting Jewish friendships and mentoring. This will require an emphasis on building relationships between and among participants as well as with adult staff or volunteers who work with teens. Teens desire these substantive relationships much more than more programs crammed into their already busy lives.

We hope this report will encourage more Jewish communities to experiment with new ways to engage, mentor and provide a seat at the communal table for teens. We need more trained adults who can serve as mentors to work with teens. And it just so happens that this mentorship serves more than just the teens—it is good for the adult mentors and institutions.

Our foundation staff gains as much as it gives when working with Rose Youth Foundation: while listening to teens debate the problems they want their grants to address, staff is educated about what matters to teens. We see the world through their eyes and this vision improves our grantmaking. Teens give us a jolt of energy and optimism, meaningful relationships and insight into the vibrant Jewish future we need to build with them.

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