

# Enhancing Jewish Learning & Engagement in Preschool Life

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*Executive Summary*



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## ADDRESSING A NEED IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD YEARS

The Jewish Resource Specialist (JRS) Initiative, designed in 2008 by the Early Childhood Education Initiative (ECEI) of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties (the Federation), in partnership with the Jim Joseph Foundation, positions the early childhood years as a gateway into Jewish life for children and their families. It is a response to several catalyzing factors. First, preschool is a critical time for young families. Children are eager to learn and are developing socially, emotionally, cognitively and spiritually. For parents, at no other moment will they be so involved in their children's schooling. They are also choosing how they spend their time and with whom they spend it. The JRS Initiative came about to leverage this unique time for families.

Second, the JRS Initiative also addresses the dearth of leaders working to build the field of Jewish early childhood education (ECE). Those who want to focus on Jewish ECE and build communities of engaged Jewish families with preschool-aged children are challenged to find the support, mentors and professional development opportunities they need to craft a career path. The JRS Initiative seeks to meet these field-wide demands by developing the skills and Jewish knowledge of the JRS educators who then bring ideas and guidance to their schools.

## THE GOALS & APPROACH OF THE JRS MODEL

The JRS Initiative is led by the Federation's Early Childhood Education Initiative (ECEI). It includes a cohort of Jewish ECE programs, each of which hires a teacher or staff member to be their JRS educator. Each JRS educator works on the Initiative for ten hours per week within their school. Collectively, the JRS educators form the JRS educator cohort, and receive ongoing coaching, mentoring and resource support from the JRS faculty.

The JRS educators work to further the Initiative's two goals:

- **Deepen Jewish learning:** Strengthen the opportunities available in the school curriculum for children to engage in Jewish learning experiences.
- **Engage families in Jewish life:** Connect families to Jewish opportunities at the preschool, within the preschool's host institution, as well as in the broader Jewish community.

To achieve these goals, the JRS Initiative focuses on building the school's capacity—among educators, school directors and in the school infrastructure itself. JRS educators use curriculum, professional learning and ongoing coaching with their colleagues to build Jewish knowledge and to enhance the ability to create rich classroom and community experiences. Through these strategies, JRS educators expand the school's capacity to lead relevant and meaningful Jewish learning.

The Initiative frames its pursuit of Jewish learning with a constructivist philosophy of education—an approach to education that emphasizes experience; reflection; student-driven learning; and the active conversation that can happen when content, teacher and learner meet. With this framing, the JRS Initiative, and the educators and directors involved in it, focus students and parents on a select number of subjects in deep, intimate and personal ways—rather than attempting to teach in broad strokes about Jewish life.

## ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF THE JRS MODEL

### JRS Faculty Supports to JRS Educators

To accomplish the Initiative's goals using constructivist approaches to change Jewish preschools, the JRS faculty offer several critical supports to JRS educators:

- **Coaching:** In coaching sessions, JRS educators and the JRS faculty work together to brainstorm strategies and organize them into annual, monthly and weekly work plans. Coaching sessions integrate systems for reflection, based on the Initiative's broader goals and tailored to each JRS educator's school-specific goals.
- **Community of practice:** These monthly meetings bring together the JRS educators to create a network of colleagues who support one another, offering a space to learn and strategize as a group.
- **Classes, days of learning and retreats:** Throughout the year, JRS faculty organize learning opportunities for JRS educators to improve management skills or to examine specific educational topics, among other professional development experiences.
- **Conferences and seminars:** ECEI sponsors subject matter experts to create various webinars and seminars for JRS educators and their school site colleagues.
- **Israel seminar:** The Israel seminar, offered in the second year of the JRS Initiative, is intended to strengthen the JRS educators' identities and capacities as Jewish early childhood educators by deepening their personal connection to Israel and empowering them to facilitate a personal connection between their learners and Israel.

### JRS Educators Work within their Schools

The JRS Initiative seeks to inform and empower all Jewish ECE teachers to be confident, knowledgeable leaders of Jewish content through their work with their schools' JRS educators. To do this, JRS educators start from a place of trust, respect and camaraderie with their co-teachers. In contrast to an external advisor, JRS educators have the trust of the staff to instigate real growth and change from within the community. JRS educators succeed when they see themselves not as specialists transmitting ideas but as enablers of their colleagues' own creativity and potential. With tailored coaching and tools from the JRS faculty, JRS educators learn how to be the "go-to" resources for their colleagues.

Together with their school directors, JRS educators mentor their co-teachers and bring collective professional development opportunities to their schools using the following strategies:

- Identifying resources to support teachers
- Creating opportunities for staff professional development
- Framing and reframing school happenings around Jewish values
- Providing Jewish resources for the entire school
- Sparking new ideas around opportunities for Jewish learning and engagement
- Deepening Jewish learning in the curriculum
- Creating new resources for teachers

Ultimately, the JRS educators work to create change in the preschool institution through the curriculum and ongoing practices of the school—such as in the opportunities parents have for involvement. Examples of ways JRS educators and their co-teachers increase families’ engagement in Jewish life include:

- Planning new and enhanced programs
- Adding Jewish content to existing family programs
- Creating opportunities for parents to learn
- Creating resources for families
- Organizing informal parent and family gatherings
- Strengthening parent communications
- Helping parents translate the Jewish curriculum from home to school
- Connecting families to Jewish communal life, especially post-preschool

## FINANCIAL MODEL

The JRS faculty designed the financial model of the Initiative with great intention, recognizing that the following principles would be crucial to the Initiative’s success:

- **Ample support for the JRS educators’ time:** It is important that the JRS educators have dedicated time to spend on JRS work so that they do not have to squeeze the work into existing responsibilities.
- **Ample support for the professional development of JRS educators and other ECE teachers:** This support allows time for educators’ participation in community of practice meetings and related retreats and seminars, as well as funds to cover professional development activities for all teachers.
- **A cascading grant structure:** The JRS Initiative initially provides full financial support to schools and then reduces the level of support each year. This gives the host institution leaders time to experience the value of the work and time to raise needed funds to continue the project after the initial three-year program.

## MOVING FORWARD

As of this writing, the JRS Initiative is working with its second cohort of JRS educators. As a result of this cohort and the pilot that came before it, there is now a growing community of ECE educators in the San Francisco Bay Area who are dedicated to synergistically enhancing Jewish early childhood education. JRS is an initiative that intends to systematically change Jewish ECE programs. To this end, the Initiative puts forth this model documentation to serve as a roadmap for others to consider for replication or adaptation in their own settings, all in the spirit of supporting Jewish families in their formative years to strengthen and deepen Jewish communal life overall.



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