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Enhancing Jewish Learning & Engagement in Preschool Life

Executive Summary

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Prepared for
Jim Joseph Foundation
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Prepared by
Ellen Irie,
Beth Cousens, &
Tina Cheplick

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INTRODUCTION

Preschool is an extraordinary time of connectedness and openness for children as well as parents. At no other time will parents be so involved—so literally present—in their children’s schooling. During the early childhood years, parents reshape the way they spend their time, who they spend it with, and who they turn to as advisors. Children are also eager to learn and are developing socio-emotionally, cognitively, and spiritually.

To take advantage of this time in families’ lives, in 2011 the Early Childhood Family Engagement Initiative (ECFEI) of the Jewish Community Federation and Endowment Fund of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties, with significant support from the Jim Joseph Foundation, launched the Jewish Resource Specialist (JRS) Initiative. The JRS Initiative is intended to make the early childhood years a true gateway into Jewish life for children and their families. With ongoing coaching, mentoring, and supports from the JRS faculty at ECFEI, a teacher or other staff member is designated to spend 10 hours per week as a preschool’s JRS educator. In this role they are tasked with deepening Jewish learning at the preschool and increasing family engagement in Jewish life more generally. The JRS Initiative is designed to help Jewish early childhood education (ECE) programs realize their commitment to build a Jewish experience and environment for children and families.

The JRS Initiative also addresses the dearth of leaders working to build the field of Jewish 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 small cohorts of JRS educators who then bring ideas and guidance to their schools.

The JRS model has demonstrated, over two cohorts of ECE programs, that it can effectively address these needs during a three-year cycle of grant funding, educational curricula, and corollary supports. Evidence from an evaluation of the JRS pilot and subsequent data collected in 2017 provide evidence of lasting change (see sidebar and page four).

THE GOALS & APPROACH OF THE JRS MODEL

The JRS Initiative utilizes a cohort model, bringing together a group of ECE programs for collaborative learning experience. Each ECE program in a JRS cohort hires an existing teacher or staff member to be their JRS educator. Each JRS educator works on the Initiative within their school for ten hours per week (in addition to their classroom work), receiving ongoing coaching, mentoring and resource support from JRS faculty at ECFEI. JRS leaders have identified a list of past experiences, characteristics, and skills that make for successful JRS educators (included in the full model documentation report). Collectively, the JRS educators, their school directors and the JRS faculty learn together in a supportive community of practice.

The JRS educators are the most essential component of the model, and they 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; teachers and parents deepen their learning as well

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE JRS PILOT EVALUATION

An independent evaluation of the JRS pilot (2011–2014) found that the JRS Initiative is linked to:

- More explicit integration of family programming and classroom learning
- Jewish content integrated into typically secular family programs
- More Jewish classroom content that is more meaningful and relevant
- Holiday programs that draw more deeply from Jewish tradition
- High parent satisfaction with opportunities to explore Jewish life
- New opportunities for teachers to explore Jewish ECE and to enrich their focus on Jewish education in their curriculum
- Teachers’ increased confidence in bringing Jewish content into the classroom
- Families participating in additional Jewish events around their community
- Parents choosing a Jewish educational framework for their preschool graduates

- **Engage families in Jewish life:** Connect families to Jewish opportunities at the preschool, within the preschool’s host institution and 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 five critical supports to JRS educators:

- **Coaching:** In monthly 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 bi-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 study specific educational topics within a Jewish framework and develop systems that will help them in their work, among other professional development experiences.
- **Conferences and seminars:** ECFEI 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, strengthens 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, which is critical for real growth and change within the community. JRS educators succeed when they see themselves not as specialists transmitting ideas but as facilitators 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 work to bring collective professional development opportunities to their schools. Some of the strategies JRS educators use are:

- 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 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 school to home
- 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.

JRS Initiative staff look for the following as indicators of an ECE program's readiness for JRS:

- Evident commitment to Jewish education in early childhood programs
- Stable leadership of the program or school
- Good candidates for the JRS position from within the program or school
- Ability to take on the responsibility for JRS funding at the end of the grant period.
- Broad support for Jewish ECE from the host institution (e.g., synagogue, JCC)

CHANGE THAT LASTS

The ECE programs that have participated in the JRS Initiative say they continue to see benefits of their participation years after the end of their Initiative grant. **ECE programs from the pilot cohort have found the resources to retain a position in their schools that continues the JRS role of encouraging and working with classroom teachers to deliver Jewish content.**

The continuing position is usually held by a classroom teacher who is allocated six to ten hours a week to dedicate to this, but there are other variations, including sharing the work across two teachers and dividing the responsibilities between the school director and a teacher.

The ECE programs in the pilot cohort report that family engagement programs developed during the three-year grant period have not faded away, but continue to serve new families. **New teachers are able to engage new families and continue classroom programs using resources and structures put into place by the JRS educator during the years of the grants.**

But there are deeper changes, as well. School directors and JRS educators from past cohorts say that being in the JRS Initiative changed expectations of what quality Jewish content looks like in the classroom. Written frameworks and operating procedures prepared by the first JRS educator to match the needs and context of the school have made it easier for teachers and staff to offer Jewish learning activities on a regular basis. **With the resources and coaching available from a JRS, more classroom teachers feel comfortable discussing Jewish elements of the curriculum with parents.**

Leaders of ECE programs that went through the JRS Initiative report a lasting shift in the prevalence of Jewish content throughout the school. Three years after their grant ended, one school director says “there’s more of a Jewish flavor here,” referring to the more frequent and more visible Jewish components throughout the school. School leaders noted that Jewish values are visible not just during program activities but also as part of classroom management. **The increased levels of Jewish content are giving greater definition to the Jewish nature of these ECE programs.**

The professional development approach of the JRS Initiative also stimulated some lasting changes. **Increased openness among teachers to sharing ideas is often noted as a result of a JRS educator’s work.** According to one school leader, “JRS inspired us to do peer-to-peer learning [among our teachers]. That changed the culture here. We now do more to support teachers to create in their own way and to help their peers.”

Because JRS-sponsored professional development opportunities are selected to align with the larger context of the schools, they often catalyze school-wide developments. For example, a site visit to an urban Jewish teaching farm opened the eyes of educators at one school to how they could use their own outdoor space to teach Jewish content. That idea was further expanded through the JRS approach of engaging families as well as inviting teacher input and creativity school-wide. “It has really stuck,” says a JRS faculty member. “In the course of three years, a small side yard patch became a beautiful, natural garden. We could see that what they were doing three years later in the classrooms was much more nature-based. It has changed the school.”

The changes in an ECE program created by the JRS Initiative can be long-reaching, as well as long-lasting. A JRS educator moved from her community but, says her school director, “all that training was not lost. Instead, it’s had a double effect.” The JRS educator took her learning and enthusiasm to an ECE program in her new community and, according to her former school director, the JRS approach “completely transformed” the Jewish content in that school, too.

“Through JRS we established some parent programs that are now integral to who this school is.”

– School Director

MOVING FORWARD

By 2017, the JRS Initiative was working with its third cohort of JRS educators, bringing to 21 the total number of Jewish ECE schools in the JRS Initiative.

The JRS Initiative set out 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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2040 Bancroft Way, Suite 400
Berkeley, CA 94704
tel 510.665.6100
fax 510.665.6129

informingchange.com