

# GLEANINGS

Dialogue on Jewish Education from The William Davidson School



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## Scaling Success in Jewish Education

What does it take to nurture small successes into larger successes in Jewish education? Often we take a program or initiative that works well in one setting (say one particular synagogue school or JCC) or city and attempt to replicate it elsewhere, yet it fails to flourish.

Yet there are, in fact, numerous stories of scaling success in Jewish education, with strategies that illuminate how this can be done. This issue of *Gleanings* aims to shed a

*continues on page 2 »*



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light on these stories and strategies, with the hope that you are inspired to apply within your particular site or area of Jewish education.

We start with Dr. Jonathan Krasner, who grounds our issue with a history on the challenges of scaling success in Jewish education, taking us back 100 years to Samson Benderly and the development of the modern religious school, noting its own successful scaling in the post–World War II period. We then learn about current challenges to and the possibilities of scaling success in the synagogue space today from Dr. Rob Weinberg, which is followed by a piece from Nachama Moskowitz outlining a series of steps for us to follow so we can scale success in curriculum development and design.

Scaling success is also about how we best spread good ideas in a manner that is supportive, nurturing, and generative, and that makes the best use of networking principles. Linda Gerard of UpStart and Rabbi Scott Aaron share their story of applying a multi-level approach to collaboration to spark change and scale success in synagogue schools throughout Chicago. Deborah Fishman shares a similar networking strategy from her work network-weaving teachers in Jewish day schools. Dr. Gail Dorph discusses the successful scaling-up models within the teacher training at the Mandel Teacher Educator Institute, and Beth Garfinkle Hancock and I share our story of building high-sustainable performers and a community of trust during our retreat-based cohort leadership training for JCC professionals, all of which helps successfully spread innovative ideas and best practices.

Finally, we seek to best understand how to bring all the voices and wisdom in our field to the foreground as we create and sustain movements that can realize the positive change we may already see popping up in various corners of our field, known as “bright spots.” Drs. Shira Epstein and Andrea Jacobs share their experiences of building such a movement, leading our work to advance gender equity and shared models of leadership in Jewish education.

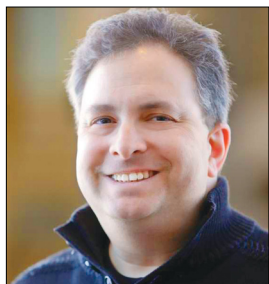
Scaling success may often feel like Sisyphus climbing up the mountain and always falling short, but we’d rather view it through the lens of Pirkei Avot 5:17, “A debate for the sake of heaven will endure; but a debate not for the sake of heaven will not endure.” Ideas and projects that achieve success on a small scale are often worthy of spreading and scaling. The question is: what is the best course of action in order to ensure that these successes endure and grow?

*B’hatzlacha*, (to your success!),

Mark S. Young  
Managing Director, Leadership Commons

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# The Best Laid Plans: Samson Benderly and Supplementary Jewish Education

**DR. JONATHAN KRASNER**

Today, congregational schools are dismissed by many as functionally and even irredeemably flawed educational institutions. It may then seem odd to think of the 20th-century growth of supplementary Jewish education as an example of scaling-up success. Yet this is exactly how the rise and rapid spread of the modern afternoon Hebrew school was viewed by many mainstream mid-20th century Jewish educators and communal leaders. The career of Samson Benderly, arguably the premier American Jewish educator of the early 20th century, is inextricably connected to the development and expansion of the modern supplementary school.

In 1910, Benderly was hired to become the founding director of the first North American bureau of Jewish education in New York City. It was a time when few modern Jewish afternoon schools existed and most children who received a Jewish education attended one-room, privately operated schools called *cheders*, or they worked with private tutors or attended Sunday school. A 1909 survey of New York's Jewish educational institutions, conducted by Mordecai Kaplan and Bernard Cronson, found each of these alternatives sorely lacking. Those families that opted for a more intensive education enrolled their sons—there were few intensive options for girls—in a handful of traditional yeshivas, which, rightly or wrongly, acquired the reputation of being “ghetto schools.”

Benderly gained notoriety in Baltimore at the Hebrew Education Society, running a progressive Hebrew school where students were taught Hebrew using the natural method, a foreign language-acquisition technique designed to mimic primary language acquisition. The emphasis in the youngest grades was on conversation rather than reading or writing. Eschewing translation, Benderly created an immersive Hebrew classroom, relying on pictures, manipulatives, pantomime, and the natural surroundings. Benderly wasn't the first pedagogue to apply the natural method to Hebrew instruction, but he popularized the technique, colloquially known as “*lvrit b'lvrit*” in North America.

Benderly's commitment to *lvrit b'lvrit* helped to cement his conviction that the afternoon supplementary school offered the best alternative for American Jewish education. The natural method of language acquisition required more hours per week than the Sunday school could offer, while the intensive Jewish education of the yeshiva was unappealing to most immigrants and their children. They viewed the public schools as an indispensable vehicle for economic advancement and social integration. Thus, the afternoon supplementary school, meeting three to five days (i.e., six to ten hours) per week, offered an attractive compromise.

Benderly had his requirements. He insisted that these schools operate along modern pedagogical and administrative lines, with credentialed teachers in suitable, up-to-date facilities. A doctor by training, Benderly was also keenly concerned about students' health and advocated for sanitary conditions, playgrounds for exercise and recreation, and a more abridged session than that which prevailed in more traditional afternoon schools and yeshivas, which often met into the evenings.

At the most basic level, Benderly's efforts to promote the afternoon Hebrew school were a resounding success. Over the next half-century, these supplementary schools “scaled up.” His disciples, known as the

Benderly boys, presided over many of the largest central Jewish education agencies in the country and thus were able to implement similar models. The percentage of Jewish children attending afternoon schools grew until in the 1950s, enrollment surpassed even that of the Sunday schools. Hebrew became a cornerstone of the afternoon school curriculum—so much so, that the schools became popularly known as “Hebrew schools.” This startling turn of events prompted the late JTS professor of Jewish Literature Alan Mintz to marvel at how “a small band of committed Hebraists kidnapped the Talmud Torah movement and retained control over it for several decades.”

Delve more deeply, however, and we notice where and why scaling up did not translate into large-scale success, with the limitations of this phenomenal growth becoming patently clear. It is not simply that few baby boomer graduates of the afternoon school recall their experiences fondly or that sociologists estimate that the impact of these schools on positive Jewish identity formation was modest at best. The reality is, first, that most of these schools did not remotely approximate Benderly’s progressive Hebrew Education Society school in their approach to teaching and learning. Second, the rapid growth of the afternoon school after World War II coincided with the reduction in the number of hours per week of instruction. The Talmud Torah, a four- or five-day-a-week school under communal auspices, gave way to the two- or three-day-a-week congregational school. Scaling up diluted or, in some cases, completely changed the original product.

It would be comforting but inaccurate to think that these shortcomings were a result of a lack of forethought or planning. In fact, when Benderly was hired in New York he laid out an elaborate plan for scaling up, which included the establishment of demonstration schools, the professionalization of the teaching force, the publication of curricula and resources, and the formation of a research department. As we know today, many of these plans did not come to fruition or resulted in only short-term reforms. Though it is impossible in the space provided to catalog the manifold reasons why these plans either failed to materialize or did not adequately provide the necessary guardrails to ensure quality control, we can point to a few overriding factors. First, the Jewish education system was (and continues to be) highly decentralized, which limits its susceptibility to top-down reform efforts. Second, a supplementary education system primarily relies on a mostly part-time teaching force, which significantly hinders efforts at professionalization. Third, there has been a lack of alignment between the desired outcomes of teachers and parents. This makes it impossible for educators like Benderly to cultivate a unified base of support for their reform efforts. Fourth, there was (and is) no consensus around a sustainable funding structure for Jewish education and a lack of appetite for the proposition that Jewish education was a communal responsibility, rather than simply a private matter. Finally, even the most meticulous planning could not anticipate historical contingencies and demographic changes. In the long run, events like the Great Depression and World War II, followed by trends like suburbanization and the growth of the Conservative Movement, played an outsized role in determining the shape, emphases, and intensity of supplementary Jewish education.

So what does this mean for us and those who want to scale up success in Jewish education today? As it happens, we are experiencing a new generation of reformers attempting to remake supplementary Jewish education. Some are succeeding in identifying compelling models of “schools that work,” creating a far more sophisticated systems-based change model than that of Benderly’s generation, organizing well-regarded and amply funded transformation projects, and working to scale up with partnering schools and congregations. The outcomes thus far though have been uneven and reforms often fleeting. It is perhaps ironic that the system of supplementary Jewish education that emerged in the first half of the 20th century, while seriously flawed, has been highly resistant to change.



If there is a lesson to be learned from Benderly and his disciples' efforts to forge a dominant pattern of Jewish education, it is not that reform initiatives are in and of themselves futile. Rather, these efforts must be approached with equal measures of conviction, humility, political savvy, and vigilance.

**Dr. Jonathan Krasner** is the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel associate professor of Jewish Education Research at Brandeis University. He is also the author of *The Benderly Boys* and *American Jewish Education*, a history of Samson Benderly and his disciples working to transform Jewish education in North America in the early 20th century.



## Why It's So Hard to Scale Success (And What to Do About it)

**DR. ROB WEINBERG**

"I'll have what she's having." In the 1989 film *When Harry Met Sally*, this is what the woman at the next table tells her waiter after Sally simulates physical ecstasy in the middle of Katz's Deli. The classic, hilarious scene demonstrates the logic behind the elusive desire to "scale success." If only, the logic goes, we could replicate what those who are successful do, we would be successful too. But that doesn't always happen. Why not?

I've spent much of my career wrestling with this question. Let me share what I've learned about why it's so difficult to scale success in Jewish education, what strategies are most promising, and where we might go from here.

Scaling success is what the organizational research literature calls "diffusion of innovation." It shows up under a variety of popular guises every decade or so. In the '70s and '80s it was about "critical incidents"; in the '90s, about benchmarking best practices; and in the current decade, we're all abuzz about "bright spots." But let's look at what it takes to identify these bright spots and to diffuse or scale them, examining how those conditions match with the realities of Jewish education.

First, we need to know what success is. For as long as I've been involved in Jewish education the debate has raged about what constitutes success. Is it assimilation prevention, Jewish literacy and ritual competence, Jewish identity formation, informed Jewish choice, lifelong engagement in Jewish learning, or adopting Judaism as a pathway to thriving in one's own life and striving for creative responses to a changing world? Educators face a dizzying and unattainable plethora of expectations from parents, board members, clergy, donors, and the learners themselves. Often what accompanies innovations in congregational education is a new and welcome conversation about what the desired outcomes ought to be. Yet without clear and shared outcomes, how can we identify which practices are successful?

Second, once we agree on outcomes, we need to measure those outcomes to determine which practices were successful. Dr. Jack Wertheimer was neither the first nor the last to recognize the incredible dearth of research evidence on outcomes in Jewish education, particularly in the congregational context where most of my work has focused. If we can neither define nor measure success, how can we purport to scale it?

Third, we need to agree on what it is that we seek to "scale." The foremost scholar of diffusion of innovations, Everett M. Rogers, defines an innovation as "an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption." But Jewish education is complex and multifaceted. Jewish educational

innovations are more like what Rogers calls “technology clusters,” in other words, bundles of innovations packaged together in which it is difficult to “determine where one innovation stops and another begins.” Take Mayim—the innovative congregational education model at Temple Beth Shalom of Needham, Massachusetts—as an innovation we might wish to scale. What aspect of it is the innovation? Is it their tailored application of project-based learning? Or is it *mifgash*, their adaptation of Morning Meeting from **Responsive Classroom**? Or their experimentation with Hebrew Through Movement, learner choice, or flexible scheduling? Or is it the welcoming, relational environment they create by having a volunteer receptionist stationed near the door to welcome each child by name or a half-dozen other identifiable aspects of Mayim? Different congregations may perceive various aspects of a multifaceted innovative model as new for different reasons.

In addition, Jewish educational systems are often embedded in broader (e.g., congregational) systems that are, themselves, embedded in communities. Thus, innovation in congregational education requires not only behavioral change but also complicated systemic and social change, which run up against long-held practices, investments, and attitudes. **Scaling success requires not only introducing the innovation itself but also a surrounding process of psychological and social transition to supplant existing skills, habits, and behaviors. All of this must take into account the context of socially mediated and constructed cultural norms, beliefs, and assumptions.**

Although many who advocate scaling seem to regard it as a technical challenge, it is clearly an adaptive one. Dr. Michelle Lynn Sachs has written about the social legitimacy of the paradigm of schooling as an impediment to change—colloquially I often talk about this by saying, “People only know what they know.” The yardsticks against which they measure a new educational approach or model are old yardsticks designed not only to fit old educational “technologies” but to measure old outcomes.

These conditions and more suggest that the spread of “successful” innovation is likely to be slower than any of us would like and to fail more often than we’d like. So what are the promising strategies and where can we go next? Some shareable lessons I have learned about scaling innovation:

**Teach Them to Fish:** Experience teaches that it is more important and productive to build *innovative capability* than replicate specific educational innovations. In a constantly changing world and ever-evolving field, diffusing a particular innovation may offer little more than a recipe for repeated obsolescence. Educational models and practices no longer have the century-long shelf life of the supplementary school model introduced by the Benderly Boys. Rather, educational leaders need to build their innovation muscles to innovate repeatedly both to come closer to enacting their educational visions and to be continually responsive to the changing needs of learners and families. Success is a moving target.

**Adapt, not Adopt:** Second, successful scaling is a matter of *adaptation* rather than adoption. In my work with colleagues at the Experiment in Congregational Education, we developed an Adaptation Continuum that extended from Adaptation, or Modification, at one end of the continuum to Mix and Match in the center to Inspired Redesign at the other end.



To explain, consider your options when purchasing a new home. You might purchase an existing home and redecorate a bit (Adaptation). You might purchase a home and remodel the kitchen to be more like one

you'd seen in another home and the bathroom in the style of yet a third home (Mix and Match). Or you might decide to build your own home from scratch, drawing design ideas from multiple places and inspiration from specific architectural styles and principles (Inspired Redesign).

Intentionally not included on the two ends of the continuum are direct replication (copying) and complete ignorance of existing practice. The former rarely succeeds due to the differences among organizations (effective diffusion requires a certain amount of reinvention). The latter is simply wasteful. It requires complete reinvention without benefit of others' experience and learning.

**It's the Principle of the Thing:** Stanford University Business School professor Dr. Jeffrey Pfeffer once wrote: "Don't copy what great companies do, copy how they think." Rather than seeking to implement universal best practices, we should seek to learn from and apply best *principles*. Rather than copying educational programs, we should seek to implement 21st-century educational-design principles and broad categories of practices (such as project-based learning), but tailor them in a way that suits each educational setting and its respective unique qualities.

**How's the Fit?:** Before introducing an educational innovation, first seek to understand the social system and the communal and organizational norms—the indigenous belief system and how compatible the innovation is with it. Deliberate and successful innovation can't be like a one-way message; it has to be more like mutual convergence around meaning. Consider the social relationships that impact adaptation of an innovation. Who is eager to please whom? What networks are relevant? Who are the social models, connectors, and opinion leaders whose involvement and endorsement might lead others to lend their support? Who are the change agents and are they perceived as similar to or aligned with those who must accept or support the innovation? Finally, are those supporting the innovation coming from an innovation-orientation or a "client" orientation?

If we have learned anything from the application of Human Centered Design to innovation in Jewish education, it is the importance of focusing on the needs, wants, pains, and gains of the users (learners and their families), as well as the secondary audiences of decision makers and influencers. **Successful scaling of innovations depends on knowing the ground into which you will plant the seed and choosing seeds you know are compatible with the conditions in the field.**

**Shout it from the Rooftops:** Jewish educational innovations are largely hidden in plain sight. Educators exert above and beyond effort to keep their educational programs running and introduce innovation at the same time. They lack time, energy, funding, and channels through which to publicize and tell their stories. Further, our values in the field promote modesty. Those who go out of their way to blog and publicize are worried about being seen as boastful grandstanders. We need new and robust channels to share innovations—both innovations in Jewish educational practice and, more importantly, innovative principles and the contextual characteristics behind them. Some efforts exist to share online but more and more robust channels are needed. Flat, two-dimensional descriptions don't cut it. We have to find ways to bring innovators into dialogue with one another. In one such example, Rachel Happel of Temple Beth Shalom took participants in Chicago's CHldush project on a "virtual visit" to the Mayim program, making it come alive and interacting to share vision, motivations, principles, and experiences and answer their questions.

**Crawl Before You Walk; Walk Before You Run:** Finally, policy makers, foundation professionals, federation leaders, and others need to keep in mind the complexity of that mission. We need to be prepared to scaffold the process of innovation and adaptation with training to build innovative capacity. We need to share so-called bright spots not for purposes of replication but for inspiration and confidence building.



We also need to engage the wider community in the conversation about the real purposes of Jewish education in the 21st century and to build buy-in to new yardsticks for success. We need to fund serious professional learning for educators to stay current with 21st-century educational principles and practices and then scaffold their process of adapting those principles to Jewish education.

Lastly, we need to be patient and supportive if and when early efforts at innovation fail. We need to regard these as part of the learning process, not an invitation to pull the plug. Scaling success in Jewish education is a marathon, not a sprint.

If we learn our lessons and do it well, scaling success is less about “I’ll have what she’s having” and more about “I need to know what she knows and what she knows and what he knows.” Only by looking at successes and learning how they were achieved will we really learn how to accelerate innovation that builds (and continually rebuilds) compelling Jewish education.

**Dr. Rob Weinberg** serves as a coach, consultant, and facilitator helping individuals, teams, organizations, and networks to find clarity, chart direction, and navigate change. Current clients include Shinui: The Network for Innovation in Part-Time Jewish Education, Kenissa: Communities of Meaning Network, the Union for Reform Judaism, and the Jewish United Fund of Metropolitan Chicago. Previously Rob served for 16 years as national director of HUC-JIR’s Experiment in Congregational Education. He holds a PhD in Organization Behavior from Northwestern University’s Kellogg School of Management.





# Scaling Curricular Initiatives: Five Approaches

NACHAMA SKOLNIK MOSKOWITZ

In 1987, Cleveland's Bureau of Jewish Education began supporting an intensive curriculum development partnership between its Curriculum Department and individual local schools and educational programs. In its earliest years, this work was known as Project Curriculum Renewal (PCR). It involved a formal three-year process that moved through the stages of research, curriculum design, and development (year one); implementation, coaching supports, evaluation, and revision (year two and then again year three); and finally sharing the document with other educational programs. In 1993, the project was included in the initiatives adopted by the BJE's successor, the Jewish Education Center of Cleveland (JECC).

This intensive process of curricular improvement was site-specific and classroom-based. It did not focus on an entire congregation or institution, nor was its goal to scale up. Rather, PCR built the capacity of a program for curricular change and ensured that the needs of a particular school or educational program were met.

Thirty years later, the formality of PCR has disappeared. And, while site-based curriculum development has been at the fore of JECC's Curriculum Department's work, its staff has learned that it is possible to enlarge and scale curricular efforts without special grants and funding. The department does this by raising up, teaching, sowing, sharing, and galvanizing.

- **Raising up:** Generally, Cleveland's most successful community-wide initiatives have bubbled up from the field, with JECC staff grabbing onto ideas and raising them up, offering supports that lead to forward momentum. One of the most successful examples emerged late in the day at a congregational education directors' retreat when a core group expressed interest in collaborating on a community-wide curriculum for sixth graders. The JECC's Curriculum Department and Retreat Institute raised up the idea and supported the education directors in developing "Count Me In," a three-to-four week unit that culminated in a community-wide event for students with a parallel event for parents. The classroom-based unit had at its center the midrashic text, "Everyone has three names: the name their parents give them, the name others call them, and the name they earn for themselves." Amazingly, all 12 Cleveland congregations with education programs chose to be "in" and now, seven years later, it is still an integral part of everyone's sixth-grade program.
- **Teaching:** At the turn of the millennium, the Curriculum Department began developing curriculum using the process known as Understanding by Design (UbD). Its staff gained great expertise in UbD and supporting others to utilize its framework. With a desire and willingness to spread the power of UbD, for eight summers the JECC hosted an intensive three-and-a-half-day, college-credit-optional Understanding by Design seminar. An average of 15 to 20 local and national educators attended annually, thus, approximately 150 in total over time. Each returned with the skills to apply UbD to their own curricular needs.

Teaching as a way to bring to scale a curricular initiative may also be currently seen in the JECC's work with Hebrew Through Movement (HTM). This learning approach—brought to life by Dr. Lifsa Schachter, while a professor at Cleveland's Siegal College—introduces Hebrew language in a playful, kinesthetic way. Before Lifsa retired, she developed a robust curriculum guide that supported the approach. The curriculum department created a 10-hour, asynchronous, online seminar that

complemented Cleveland's approach to professional development. By hiring two master teachers as learning facilitators, the online seminar became self-sustaining, making it easy to offer it to teachers beyond Cleveland. Over the last five years, 1,100 educators representing over 350 different educational programs have registered for the seminar. This created a quick tipping point for the nation-wide adoption of HTM's energizing approach to Hebrew language for more than ten thousand learners.

- **Sowing:** The developers of Understanding by Design stated at a seminar that their intention was not to tightly control the adoption of UbD. While offering supports (books, workbooks, articles, blogs, seminars, a website, etc.), their approach was in stark contrast to other educational change projects that required its adopters to complete specific training, receive targeted coaching, and “swear allegiance” to the original structure. This lack of concern for how other educators adopted or adapted a curricular approach greatly impacted the JECC's Curriculum Department; it became apparent that curriculum could be offered to interested educators without tying up staff in the follow-up. As a result, the JECC's curriculum is available for free download from [the JECC Marketplace](#) and Hebrew Through Movement offers training, curriculum, and a Facebook group, but places no implementation expectations on those adopting it. The result, for better or worse, means that carefully developed, piloted, and researched educational initiatives take on different looks in other educational programs.
- **Sharing:** For many years, the JECC's “Immediate Response Curricula” were the most well-known, respected, and depended-upon sharing efforts of the agency. Responding to national or international crises, JECC staff dropped current work obligations and collaborated to publish an Immediate Response Curriculum in time for teachers to access by midafternoon. Each multipage document included background on the current situation and supports for addressing the crisis, including Jewish texts, learning activities, and response suggestions. Over the course of 15 years, the JECC's response curriculum accumulated tens of thousands of downloads and shares (no mean feat in an age prior to the proliferation of social media). In 2014, as a result of shifting staffing patterns at the JECC, this project was put to bed, though not until a more generic [Responding to Crisis website](#) was developed with 24/7 access. Other examples of the JECC's outward sharing of its materials include a number of websites (some for [teachers](#) and others for [students](#)), as well as free and immediate downloads of curriculum via the [JECC Marketplace](#).
- **Galvanizing:** In the last year, the JECC's Curriculum Department began circling back to some of its earlier efforts to transform Hebrew learning in part-time/congregational settings—what might be the impact of conference presentations, consultative phone calls with colleagues, and supportive curricular materials on the hoped-for changes? It was discovered that almost a dozen Jewish educators had moved their Hebrew education programs dramatically forward. To galvanize their efforts and give energy to the change process, the JECC invited a handful of education directors to Cleveland. Their sharing of experiences and openness to discussing challenges led to [#OnwardHebrew](#), a growing national [conversation](#) that is leading to a sea change in Hebrew teaching and learning.

The JECC Curriculum Department's experiences illustrate that while local Jewish education agencies have community-specific missions, there is great potential to share work on a broader scale with modest financial support and without Herculean efforts by staff. The JECC has been able to grow its local initiatives by raising up ideas, teaching in areas of expertise, sowing ideas, sharing resources, and galvanizing Jewish educators, leading to dramatic steps forward on behalf of our students, teachers, and their educational programs.

**Nachama Skolnik Moskowitz** is the senior director and director of curriculum resources for the Jewish Education Center of Cleveland.



# CHIdush: Sparkling Change in Synagogue Schools Through Collaboration

LINDA GERARD and RABBI SCOTT T. AARON, PHD



“The answer is not ‘Build it and they will come’; it’s closer to ‘If they build it, they will come.’”

—CHIdush participant

How has our world changed from the 1950s until today, and how have our synagogue schools changed with it? At a retreat in Chicago, synagogue educators, clergy, and lay leaders armed with Post-it notes mapped out the shifts across decades in family structure, technology, education, and more—from *Ozzy and Harriet* of the 1950s to today’s *Modern Family*. The big “aha” from the era-mapping exercise? Despite dramatic shifts in our social, political, and cultural landscapes, our traditional synagogue education models haven’t always changed with them. The opportunity? To reimagine Jewish education in synagogues to meet today’s learners where they are and to expand our focus from surviving to thriving.

This mandate was at the heart of an 18-month change effort called CHIdush, undertaken by a forward-thinking network of synagogue teams in Chicago through a partnership between UpStart and the Jewish United Fund (JUF) of Metropolitan Chicago (made possible by the generous funding support of the Crown Family and The Jack and Goldie Wolfe Miller Fund). “The program allowed us to see that the world our kids are experiencing in their lives and in school doesn’t always square with what’s going on with synagogue learning,” noted Joy Wasserman, CHIdush project manager for JUF. CHIdush brought together seven diverse synagogue school teams to identify challenges and opportunities in their communities and to design meaningful solutions to them—drawing from bright spots locally and nationally. This piece will share stories of impact from the inaugural CHIdush cohort and highlight lessons learned for scaling success across a field of Jewish life.

## AN APPROACH FOR SCALING IMPACT

The name “CHIdush” puts a Chicago spin on the Hebrew and Yiddish word for a new idea or insight. CHIdush established the conditions for these ideas to flourish by leveraging the foundational principles of Design Thinking and Adaptive Leadership through a methodology called Adaptive Design. Pioneered by UpStart cofounder and associate Maya Bernstein and Marty Linsky and laid out in their [seminal Stanford Social Innovation Review article](#), Adaptive Design helps people generate new ideas in a way that integrates community needs, embraces creative experimentation, and produces rapid results—while equipping them to manage the change process.

At its heart, this process is deeply collaborative. In the context of Jewish education, Stanford education professor Ari Y. Kelman and Maya Bernstein, authors of “[Working Across and Working Between](#),” suggest the best innovations thrive because they leverage the contributions of important stakeholders and create opportunities for them to work together toward a solution.



Through CHldush, we integrated three layers of collaboration in order to scale success:

### 1. Collaborate with your learners:

**Congregation Solel** posed the design challenge: “How might we engage seventh graders in Jewish learning and community post-b’nai mitzvah?” According to Solel Cantor Jay O’Brien, students were “invited to be collaborators in building a seventh-grade, project-based, learning program,” shaping everything from the topics explored to the location and food to their interaction with the clergy. After each session, the CHldush team met with the teens during gatherings called “*Lifnot*” (your turn) to receive real-time feedback and rapidly evolve their program design. Through CHldush’s workshops, tools, and coaching, Cantor O’Brien’s team was able to build empathy with their learners, tap into their hopes and yearnings, and partner with them to imagine a better future. Cantor O’Brien credits recent increases in seventh-grade post-b’nai mitzvah retention to genuinely inviting learners to collaborate in building authentic Jewish experiences.

### 2. Collaborate with your community:

**Anshe Emet Synagogue** expanded their initial focus from redesigning a class for preschool families to a broader vision: “How might we create new pathways to Jewish life and community for young families?” This question led them to possibilities beyond the walls of the classroom, requiring the partnership and buy-in of an expanded group. Their success lay in their ability to embrace this approach wholeheartedly, using adaptive tools to collaborate with a diverse team of leaders, along with a robust advisory group made up of young families. “Working with partners and lay leaders and being intentional about getting their feedback was a game-changer for us,” said Maxine Segal Handelman, director of Family Life & Learning at Anshe Emet. (You can read more about Anshe Emet’s radical collaboration and rapid experimentation in developing their Little Builders program [HERE](#).) This new way of working yielded not only new approaches to education, but also transformative changes to culture. As Rabbi Rachel Weiss of the Jewish Reconstructionist Congregation (**JRC**) of Evanston reflected, “Our entire congregation is asking, ‘How might we?’” This simple reframe has been a rallying cry for them to view challenges as opportunities, from redesigning their ritual practices to reimagining Jewish education.

### 3. Collaborate with your field:

CHldush’s model centered around shared opportunities for learning and cross-pollination in order to accelerate success not just in one synagogue, but across a field. “Knowing there were others doing this work alongside us has inspired us,” said Dr. Roberta Goodman, education director of **North Shore Congregation Israel** (NSCI), where they are reimagining their fifth and sixth grade model to empower learners with more choice. “By doing this as part of a community process, we not only received resources and recognition, but also the permission to try new things and a framework to support us along the way.” Many participants were eager to drive change in their communities, but found that the CHldush framework—team-based coaching, learning experiences with their peers, and community visibility—gave them the tools and *hekhsher* (stamp of approval) they needed to accelerate the success of their efforts. In addition to inspiration from peers, participants had opportunities to learn from “bright spots” across the field. For example, the CHldush teams embarked on a “virtual visit” via video chat with Rachel Happel of **Temple Beth Shalom** of Needham, Massachusetts, who introduced teams to their innovative model and led them through a day in the life of her learners. These bright spots helped open up the network’s thinking to new possibilities, creating a bigger window to imagine what might be, extract principles of success, and express them in ways that met the needs of their own communities. The seventh-grade project-based learning model that Congregation Solel piloted was inspired in part by a “bright spot” from another community (**Temple Beth Elohim’s “Omanut” program**).

CHldush itself was the result of a critical collaboration—between JUF and the participating congregations. While Federation involvement in synagogue education varies across the country, JUF realized its direct

investment and energy could play a critical role in spurring innovation in the congregational education space. JUF recruited the cohort, gathered the needed resources, partnered with Upstart to work with the congregations, and committed to supporting the CHIdush congregations beyond the initial project. This type of collaboration gave the congregations access to resources that would not have been possible on their own and increased the probability that these efforts would achieve long-term sustainability.

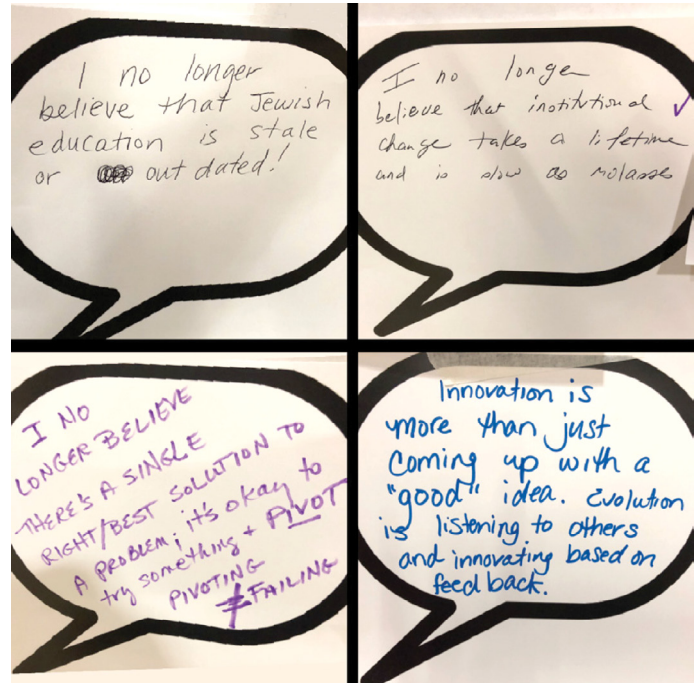
## BECOMING THE BRIGHT SPOTS

At the program's closing *siyyum* (communal celebration), the synagogue teams again took to the wall, this time posting reflections on their transformative journeys. "I now believe we have a rubric for change—one based on creating partnerships among parents, learners, and educators," wrote one participant. Perhaps this was the most important *chidush* to come out of the program—the realization that change can't happen in a vacuum. It is collaboration across stakeholders that will ensure innovation efforts will truly take root.

Ultimately, CHIdush inspired a new cohort of synagogue leaders armed with the tools to create ongoing change. "We had the privilege of participating in a living educational laboratory, where the principles of design thinking are directly applied to the challenges of Jewish education based in synagogues," noted Rabbi D'Ror Chankin-Gould of [Anshe Emet Synagogue](#). "The only way the Jewish people can thrive is to take sincere risks and design a stronger future based on the wisdom we gain along the way."

**Linda Gerard, MBA**, is the chief program and innovation officer at [UpStart](#), which fuels and connects the ideas, leaders, and organizations that reimagine how—and why—people engage with Jewish life.

**Rabbi Scott Aaron, PhD**, is the executive director of the Community Foundation for Jewish Education of the [Jewish United Fund / Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago](#). JUF is the one Chicago organization that impacts every aspect of local and global Jewish life, providing human services for Jews and others in need, creating Jewish experiences and strengthening Jewish community connections.







# Networks: Spreading Ideas Peer to Peer

DEBORAH FISHMAN

Being a classroom teacher can be an isolating experience. You may not know where to turn for new ideas and wish there was a way you could benefit from the experimentation and expertise of others in classrooms like yours across the country. Fortunately, in the past few years, Jewish day school educators have been able to find networks designed to incubate and spread ideas and practices. As a network-weaver working at [the AVI CHAI Foundation](#), I have an interest in understanding and documenting these networks, which could range from organized programs, such as the [JDS Collaborative](#), for which I serve as program officer at AVI CHAI, to a much less formal Twitter chat. Let's look at what these networks are, which ones are more likely to scale through successfully spreading ideas, and why.

Ariella Falack, a teacher of Torah and halakhah at Magen David Yeshivah Celia Esses High School, was an early adopter of game- and project-based learning at her school. She was able to explore this interest through the JDS Collaborative, a program of [Prizmah: the Center for Jewish Day Schools](#) led by Educannon Consulting. JDS Collaborative puts together educators from multiple schools to implement a project in their own school's context, with continual opportunities to collaborate, learn from implementation at other schools, engage in workshopping challenges, and share and document ideas and solutions in a continuous feedback loop. Each project is designed to further some aspect of schools' Jewish missions. In this case, the focus was on applying game-based learning to the Judaics classroom. As her personal way of implementing the project in her school, Falack experimented with creating an escape room-style experience. She designed this game and executed it in her school, and then posted her game on the Basecamp site used by the collaborative and on JEDLab on Facebook, looking for feedback and suggestions from fellow educators. Falack also presented what she was doing and learning to participants at the 2017 Prizmah Conference, along with Alanna Kotler, project manager for the collaborative.

"In that room, the excitement for this was unbelievable. When it was actually done using Judaic material, the teachers saw the possibilities for their own classrooms," said Kotler.

As a result of this presentation, five of the teachers got their schools on board to participate in a new collaborative project specifically built around the escape room methodology ("breakout"). The project included a five-part webinar series led by Falack that broke the methodology down into pieces. Then each participant designed his/her own escape room game for use in his or her own classroom.

"It wasn't easy. It took some educators 20 hours to develop a breakout, but the cohort kept them accountable. They had Ariella to support them, and sharing the challenge of it was a motivator. The network and their fellow teachers kept them going. Now they have a relationship with Ariella and can continue the enthusiasm," Kotler said.

Ideas spread when networks of peer educators come together to share ideas. This methodology is powerful and most effective when three components are present: trust, a coordinating network-weaver, and documenting and sharing.

First and most importantly, successful networks are built on trust. Teachers trust other teachers in what Kotler calls an "unspoken understanding: they're more likely to take a risk themselves based on what other teachers doing." This comes in part from the common language between them, including the challenges and

expectations in place. A network can provide the safe space to which teachers can return to address challenges or to celebrate successes.

Andrea Hernandez, associate director of Teaching and Learning at Prizmah, agreed that ideas spread more effectively among educators as opposed to in a top-down way. “There’s a huge difference between things that are marketed to me and things I hear from my fellow practitioners. I tend to be more interested in things that come my way from a fellow practitioner. There’s a difference in the intentions behind sharing: selling a product or sharing honest reflections. Educators are more likely to give a more tempered description with pros and cons.”

While Twitter chats and other informal networks built on trust can spread ideas, they are more impactful when managed by a network-weaver. For instance, Kotler is able to devote her time to project management of the collaborative, increasing accountability through setting deadlines and next steps to make sure the projects remain on track. Another example is the Prizmah affinity groups known as Reshetot, which are run by Prizmah network-weaver Debra Shaffer Seeman. She keeps in close touch with many people and gets to know their passions, strengths, and challenges. She is thus able to develop a birds-eye perspective on the field. Her understanding of the common patterns, hot topics, and emerging ideas allows her to connect the appropriate people to have the conversations that will move their work and, through many such conversations, the entire field forward.

A final aspect of effective networks is sharing and documenting. “Our responsibility is to share. When you’re doing something new and different, take the time to document and share with your network,” said Hernandez. While this sounds easy, it can be hard to find the time and discipline for it—but doing it can be so impactful for others in the field. For instance, Hernandez is working with Jewish day schools that are piloting the Altschool and Summit Learning personalized learning platforms to contribute to the Personalized Learning Platforms blog, with funding from AVI CHAI. These platforms are online tools that help students set and track goals, learn content at their own pace, and complete deeper learning projects.

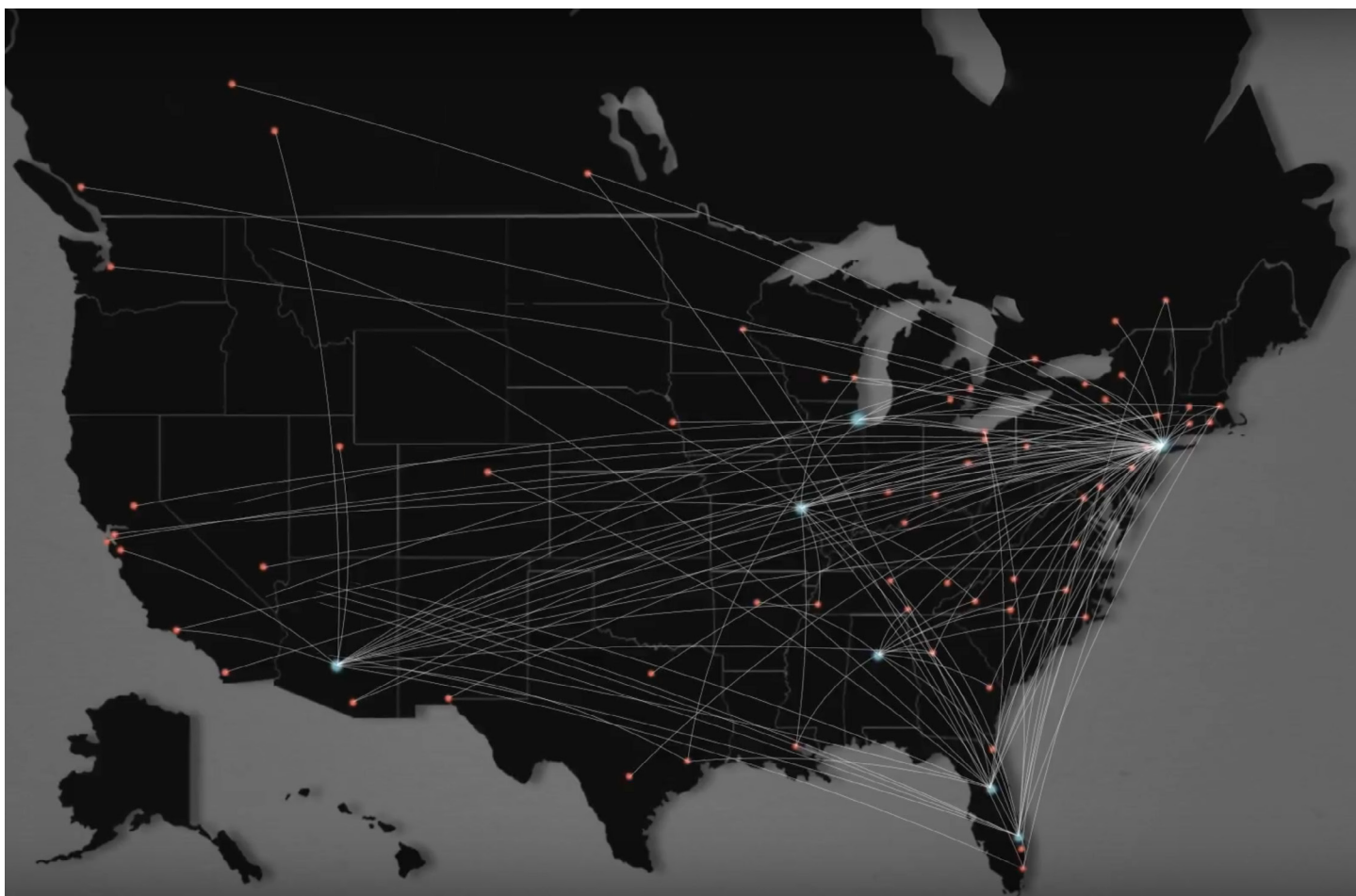
“They’re learning a tremendous amount from what they’re doing. By documenting and sharing it with other educators who are toying with or curious about the idea, they can learn in a way that would make them feel more primed to pay attention and make decisions based on fellow educators’ work. I tried for a long time to learn more about Summit Learning that wasn’t airbrushed by the company. I never understood what it was or if it was as good as they say. Now that I’m hearing from educators, I’m much more inclined to do it.” Hernandez said.

Personalized learning, Maker Spaces, STEAM, and STEM—these are all ideas that are gaining traction and interest in Jewish day school networks, as is using those pedagogies and spaces as a way to shift school culture from learning being linear (you seek to learn something, you learn it, and then it’s completed) to valuing experimentation.

Kotler said, “An idea might be shared into a network of teachers, but what’s interesting is to watch it change as people grow the idea together. That’s a powerful thing. With social media, ideas spread quickly whether they’re good or bad. Within the collaborative, there’s a shared understanding and a trust that will allow good ideas to spread effectively.”

Networks like the Collaborative are spreading ideas, even as they improve and build on those ideas through an iterative process. At the end of the day, these networks are about the relationships and trust between educators—with the end result being that they will feel less alone, great ideas can be shared, and success can be adapted and occur on a greater and greater scale.

**Deborah Fishman** is director of communications at the AVI CHAI Foundation.



In the past few years, Jewish day school educators have been able to find networks designed to incubate and spread ideas and practices.



# The Mandel Teacher Educator Institute (MTEI): People Are Our Product

**DR. GAIL Z. DORPH**

The Mandel Teacher Educator Institute (MTEI) has fostered a unique approach to scaling up quality teaching and learning in Jewish education for over two decades by populating the field with a new kind of educational leader. MTEI has impacted both the principles and practices of the field through the learning and leadership of its 250-plus graduates who are in more than 60 communities in the United States, Israel, and Canada. We have learned from our graduates that these principles and practices not only enable them to do their current jobs differently, they also serve them in future roles they play as their careers develop. (See our website, [mtei-learning.org](http://mtei-learning.org), for further enumeration of these principles).

To place MTEI in historical perspective, in 1991, the North American Commission for Jewish Education published *A Time to Act*, the findings of a two-year study that made two suggestions related directly to the problem of improving Jewish education at scale. They were: 1) Focus on building financial and political will to champion Jewish education as a priority, and 2) Create a cadre of educational leaders able to transform the system at its core.

MTEI was the first educational leadership capacity project that was designed based on these recommendations. The MTEI leadership team designed the program to grow the kind of educational leaders who could leverage the system. When MTEI was launched in 1995, improving the quality of teaching was at the heart of national educational reform efforts. Researchers suggested that in order to make deep changes in the current educational system, the focus had to be on improving the quality of teaching. This meant helping teachers learn new ways of thinking and acting. Previously, instructional leadership had been defined in terms of defining the school mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive school learning climate. Now the concept of instructional leadership was expanded to include a broader view of leadership focusing on establishing and promoting a school culture in which teaching and learning could flourish. (Holtz, B. W. Dorph, G. Z. and Goldring, E. (2002). Educational Leaders as Teacher Educators: the Teacher Educator Institute—A Case from Jewish Education. *Peabody Journal of Education*. 72 [2] 147-166.)

At that time most teaching and learning in Jewish education focused on facts and skills and there was little emphasis on the “big ideas” of Judaism. Further, Jewish educational leaders lacked serious professional training and knew little about how to support teacher learning in the service of meaningful learning. There was no ongoing substantive professional development for Jewish educational leaders, especially related to instructional improvement, in particular. (Goldring, E. B., Gamoran, A., & Robinson, B. (1996). Educational leaders in Jewish schools. *Private School Monitor* 18:1, 6-13.)

The MTEI leadership team designed an intensive two-year program for educational leaders across denominations and settings that consists of six four-day seminars with assignments between gatherings. The MTEI curriculum intertwines best practices in teacher education and professional development with Jewish texts and big ideas. Our target recruit was, and still is, individuals already serving in educational leadership roles, for example, a head of school or key leader in a school setting; a head of an agency or educational consultant who works in a national or communal organization; or an educator who is developing a new initiative or institution.

The program rests on several beliefs about learning: people learn best when knowledge is presented in authentic contexts; long-lasting learning requires social interaction and collaboration; and learners need scaffolded opportunities to see and practice what they have learned. All of MTEI's activities, including the seminar-based and home-based activities, are designed to situate learning within the real work of educational leaders and to build in opportunities for practice, feedback, critique, and partnership.

The program is designed to help participants develop ongoing, substantive, professional learning experiences for their teachers, and build a collaborative learning environment for them and their students. Our unique strategy for successfully scaling up instructional change results from preparing leaders who educate their teachers who, in turn, impact their students.

MTEI graduates work with diverse learners in a variety of settings in the Jewish world, always encouraging the same kind of active and meaningful learning modeled and practiced in our MTEI program. In this way, they gradually transform the very cultures of their institutions. That is both our theory of learning and the method by which the project works to achieve its scaling goals.

So, what is the MTEI's theory of change as we work to change the field of Jewish education at scale? Our very first principle can be attributed to the vision of our philanthropist Morton Mandel, who from the very beginning said: "Invest in good people." We have followed his guidance, recruiting strong leaders and providing them with a robust program based on best practices of learning and professional development. We have also created a vibrant network of graduates who share a vision of collaborative collegiality and who benefit from a listserv, video-conference learning opportunities, an Edmodo online platform that allows for sharing resources and opportunities for unlimited storage and asynchronous learning, and periodic graduate seminars. All these allow graduates to connect both with one other and with MTEI faculty on an ongoing basis.

Evidence suggests that this theory of change is having our intended impact on the field of Jewish education across settings and environments.

Here are only three examples of how MTEI graduates are transforming the Jewish education landscape:

*Graduate A designed one of the first afterschool programs for children between the ages of four and twelve that emphasizes, in particular, three of the MTEI principles: the centrality of Jewish content, the fact that how we talk with each other matters, and the importance of collaborative inquiry.*

*Graduate B created a Jewish educational consulting practice using the dialogic nature of havruta learning as the backbone of an initiative. The MTEI principle of the centrality of Jewish content in creating an intentional community was key to the design and enactment of this program, which helped educators integrate technology into their own practice.*

*Graduate C developed a community-wide mentoring program for principals and lead teachers based on the collaborative approach to educative mentoring espoused by the program.*

As MTEI now educates its eighth national cohort and begins recruitment for the next cohort to begin in November 2019, this sustained 20-year program continues to develop educational leaders who are catalysts for change in the field of Jewish education.

**Dr. Gail Z. Dorph** is the founding director of the Mandel Teacher Educator Institute. Her research interests are teacher development and the relationship between Judaic content and pedagogy. Prior to her work with the Mandel Foundation, she directed the Fingerhut School of Education at AJU (formerly the University of Judaism).



# Lech L'cha: Role-Modeling Self-Care and a Community of Trust as an Approach to Scaling Success

BETH GARFINKLE HANCOCK and MARK S. YOUNG



“The LORD said to Abram, ‘Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing.’”

—Genesis 12:1–2

At the Leadership Commons, we design each of our leadership institutes to adapt to particular target audiences. Yet, whether we are training aspiring heads of day schools or newly minted directors of Jewish early childhood education centers, all of our institutes share several core principles. Perhaps the most critical of these is the building of community and the cultivation of self-care through intensive cohort retreat experiences.

Each institute participant, often referred to as a fellow, completes our programs with a cohort of peers. We whisk away cohorts from their “native lands” (i.e. their organizations) to new places physically, intellectually, and spiritually, filling their mental reservoirs with new people, ideas, and skills. Each enters as an Abram, engaging in a journey to become an Abraham, feeling renewed and energized to excel in their work and to be a blessing to others upon their return.

We take great care at our intensives to develop a community of trust and promote high-level self-care, creating the foundation that we feel success rests upon. We foster the scaling of success by nurturing the role modeling that takes place among fellows. We will discuss role modeling in detail a bit later. Let us first examine the importance of this foundation.

## **BUILD A COMMUNITY OF TRUST**

At our retreats, fellows are encouraged to explore ideas freely and openly. Fellows enter our programs with accomplishments and specific successes and we provide forums to share and invite peers to explore how they can adapt each other’s successes in their own shop. In addition, fellows receive timely, judgment-free feedback that nurtures a culture of healthy experimentation and failing forward. This all builds communal trust.

In addition, the first retreat in all of our institutes, which typically span 1-2 years and multiple retreats, not only focus on building a strong community of peers, they also set the stage for how one practices self-care to become a sustainable high performer.

The two of us partner with excellent collaborators at the JCC Association to direct one of our newest institutes, the JCC Leadership Training Institute (JCCLTI), preparing talented and accomplished mid-level JCC professionals who work throughout the continent to assume the high-responsibility and often stress-inducing executive roles at JCCs. JCC executives are trusted to ensure their center meets its broad mission, nurtures innovation, maintains financial health, and provides an overall high-quality experience for users and



staff. It's a tall order. Thus, our starting point is to invest in practices to nurture their physical, psychological, and spiritual health.

## INVEST IN SELF-CARE

At our first program retreat, we partnered with TIGNUM (“beam” in Latin), the firm that selected JCCLTI as their non-profit partner program for 2018. TIGNUM’s philosophy is that while every organization, and indeed every person, may have a slightly different structure, we all need a strong foundation of support, or beam, that will allow us to function at a sustainable high-performance-level of work.

TIGNUM focuses on four areas: mindset, movement, nutrition, and recovery, outlined in Jogi Rippel’s and Scott Peltin’s book, *Sink, Float, or Swim*. Chiefly, we practice and promote during our retreats a positive mindset. A positive mindset is a healthy way of thinking that gives us the best chance to produce successful results. It is also a thinking process that is in direct alignment with realizing success. We also learn together a ritual of movements to perform throughout the day, as well as healthy nutrition, and schedule time for recovery. In particular, we stress movement. We teach easy self-massage techniques to do at one’s desk, going on a midday walk, or taking the stairs instead of the elevator. We cannot begin to scale up ideas unless we have the stability, energy, and focus for the hard work it takes. Therefore, increasing our metabolism, raising our heart rate, and improving strength helps us get there. We also model the essentials of the other TIGNUM areas at our retreats, including providing healthy food and drink and building recovery time into our schedule (more on recovery below). In doing so, we are modeling that leaders of Jewish organizations can be high-energy, intentional, enthusiastic people primed for effective leadership. We then encourage and provide tools for fellows to continue and embrace these practices after they return home.

## STRENGTHEN OURSELVES TOGETHER: ROLE MODELING

This translation of the *V’ahavta* prayer commands us: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your mind with all your strength and all your being . . . teach them faithfully.”

At our retreats, fellows learn from our facilitators, yet the most important learning is when they share their own ideas and challenges with each other. By sharing with their like-minded peers to whom they relate and are beginning to trust, they inspire one another. For example, our cohort craved ideas on how to improve the effectiveness of their time, part of working in a positive mindset. We learned strategies to set our daily tasks, lead meetings with intentionality, and eliminate time wasters and traps. As the cohort modeled these ideas and shared their own with each other, they gave each other energy toward a healthy and productive use of time. Their sharing and role-modeling to each other feeds the notion that we can all achieve our goals with a positive mindset. We then encourage fellows to model the mindset concepts to staff and lay leadership at their JCC, spreading the ideas so they go viral.

With role modeling, fellows also give each other a **permission to create change**. As Maimonides states in his *Eight Levels of Tzedakah*, “The greatest level, above which there is no greater, is to support a fellow Jew by endowing them with a gift or loan, or entering into a partnership with them, or finding employment for them, in order to strengthen their hand so that they will not need to be dependent upon others.”

It can be challenging for organizations to implement new initiatives or scale up success; as it is easy to remain stuck in their habits. Yet, in JCCLTI, we thrive on pursuing change. We change our behaviors, whether it is in how we run meetings, how we engage in healthy communication strategies with others, or how we collaborate, to meet our performance goals with fellows cheering each other on. We give each other the permission to discover what we can do differently and better. Creating change in one’s personal

practices too, being more intentional about what we eat, how much we sleep, and our movement during a workday, impacts our professional work in many areas. The “gift or loan,” in this case, is the development of partnership, creating relationships at the retreats with each other and our respective organizations that encourage and celebrate change.

Finally, role modeling in a community of trust creates **accountability**. Fellows hold each other accountable, for example, to take time to recover. We cannot sustain high performance if we do not power down regularly. We discussed at our retreat how to reexamine our Jewish professional schedules and behaviors. We recognize and validate the challenges in prioritizing all that we must accomplish in a workweek. Many JCCLTI fellows are also “on” during Shabbat and Jewish holidays. Though Shabbat and many of these holidays are built-in Jewish time for recovery, between entertaining and preparing for all of the holiday events in our calendar, it still feels like work. Thus, we role model recovery at our retreats, scheduling individual time to do what each fellow needs to recover and re-energize. Recovery is also important for learning, so we prioritize time for reflection. We schedule time to further develop relationships and share insights and best practices to break down the material presented, which helps our learning stick.

By role-modeling high level self-care and a community of trust that gives peers permission to change and creates accountability, our fellows are better positioned, encouraged, and skilled to adapt and scale up those programs or initiatives they may learn from their JCC peers or build up what is already working in their own shop. Our fellows can then role-model these new behaviors and ideas to their staff and users back in their “native lands,” (i.e. their JCC). Each fellow can model giving permission to change and hold colleagues accountable for the changes they aspire to make. Role-modeling self-care and a community of trust can extend sustainable high-performance behaviors further, which can nurture success in Jewish communities throughout the continent.

Role-modeling behaviors and ideas fellows learn on their journeys away, as well as the relationships they form, can help spread the energy and thoughts necessary to help the journey of the Jewish people, and people of all faiths who engage in our communities, to new successes and heights. This is a blessing to us all.

**Beth Garfinkle Hancock** (DS '03) is the program manager of the JCC Leadership Training Institute, a partnership between the Leadership Commons at The William Davidson School and JCC Association.

**Mark S. Young** is the managing director of the Leadership Commons at The William Davidson School, and part of the faculty planning team of the JCC Leadership Training Institute.



# Reimagining Expertise: Curiosity, Shared Purpose, and Who We Invite into the Room

DR. SHIRA D. EPSTEIN, EDD, and DR. ANDREA JACOBS, PHD



We have all experienced the typical gathering of Jewish educational leaders and funders many times over: Launching the day with a keynote speaker, notepad and pen provided, followed by creation, in small groups, of bullet points on large Post-its smacked askew to the walls. Sneaking out during a breakout session to chat with an old friend, as it is the only opportunity for connection. We furtively return emails during a frontal presentation, as we cannot relate to the advice the panelist is sharing; it feels too distant from our own experiences. A wrap-up with a moderated panel at the end of the day where new ideas are offered. The conversations are often rich and textured. Yet, once we leave, the dialogue is complete and our notes are relegated to the bottom of a pile in our offices. We are so used to this model that it is often looked to as the gold standard. What happens when we design a convening, or gathering, through the lens of “relational leadership” and a stance of “emergent strategy” rather than expert solutions?

When the Leadership Commons launched its Gender Equity and Leadership in Jewish Education Initiative this past year, we wanted to imagine a different way of designing convenings that could be replicated both within our programming and offered as a model within Jewish educational leadership. We set the intention of bringing people together to both consider alternative models of leadership that might be implemented and to hear from institutions that support adaptive, systemic change. Through our work with Didi Goldenhar, co-author of *Leveling the Playing Field*, and Dr. Elana Stein Hain, scholar in residence and director of faculty at the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America, we reflected upon our assumptions of why we bring people together, starting with re-visioning: “Who is an expert?” “What is expertise?” Didi and Elana supported us in starting from a place of curiosity, designing a series of convenings where we would begin with asking questions, rather than launching from a modeling of solutions.

We recognized early on that our project was not simply *about* equalizing the numbers of men and women in leadership. Informed by feminist principles, we would need to question the models of sharing our expertise that had become the norm, as well as make transparent the choices that we made in pushing against these norms. Our choices in crafting the convenings were informed by *Emergent Strategy* by Adrienne Marie Brown, who espouses a “relational model” of leadership: “We would organize with the perspective that there is wisdom and experience and amazing story in the communities we love, and instead of starting up new ideas/organizations all the time, we would want to listen, support, collaborate, merge, and grow through fusion, not competition” (Brown, p. 10). We approached this year and our mandate to develop convenings from the perspective of what it looks like to gather and share expertise in a different way. Thus, we informed our design by *who was invited* into conversation, as well as how we can support those in the room to interact and guide them to be present.

We asked ourselves: What do our convenings look like when we start from a place of cultivating curiosity about change, rather than the assumption that we are gathered together to learn solutions from a small group of experts? What if we adopted the stance that we all bring expertise to the conversation and our job is to find those people who can push our thinking deeper? With this approach, strategies for change emerge *from* the group in the context of relationships—asking questions, sharing learning, and adopting an experimental mindset. All participants, through dialogue and experimentation, are able to identify

interventions and strategies that are most relevant to their context. Those in attendance feel a deeper sense of ownership to the emerging ideas. Thus, they will be motivated to continue to explore and implement, with a greater chance of larger-scale success taking root.

We also drew upon this “relational model” in recognizing that there were others in our networks who had created similar programs with the goals of generating new ideas and questions. We reached out to them and asked them to share how they engaged in their own processes. What questions did they ask? What worked? What didn’t?

We started the day by asking participants to engage in thinking together. The convenings this spring in NYC and Chicago took participants through a process of examining:

- Via *Women and Power*: **What are our assumptions about what constitutes Jewish leadership? What models do we favor and employ?**
- Via a panel of offering alternative models of text teaching, imagining leadership, and using a gender lens in schooling: **How can we ask the “What if?” questions and arrive at this from a place of curiosity?**
- Via small break-out sessions: **How can we question ourselves around what we could try out and employ? What could we accomplish if we had more support to try, fail, and learn? What risks to create change might we take?**

This approach to convenings melds with “design thinking,” considering how a day is structured in order to enable generative conversation, where the challenges we face are not solved through any one solution, but rather by asking new and different questions, trying different strategies, learning, and adapting. The preparation for these conversations launched from the moment we reached out to potential presenters. We invited those who have been engaged in trying out new ideas and models of leadership to share; we let them know that the emphasis was on what they learned in their efforts rather than presenting a polished result.

To guide our panelists, we asked them to present based upon the following questions:

- What was the challenge that sparked an exploration to try something new in your setting? What was the catalyst for change?
- What have you tried?
- What could you try?
- What have you learned and how does that lead to your next step?

The convenings are a model of how one fosters an inquisitive stance and engages within these day-long gatherings as a learning community. The goal is to apply lessons from success and failure to generate new ideas relevant to our own contexts and to recognize the shared challenge of creating change. We are each part of larger emergent wholes that can work together and support each other in making respective successes a reality under a unifying, shared purpose. We aim to shift from a solution-driven model to focus on the day itself as an opportunity for movement building and networks of support that are infused with shared curiosity, a sense of purpose, and a real opportunity to instigate large-scale change.

**Dr. Shira D. Epstein, EdD**, is assistant professor of Jewish Education in The William Davidson School, serving as area coordinator in Jewish Education, as well as coordinator of the concentration in Pedagogy and Teaching. Shira has authored curricula for JWI and MyFace, focused on healthy relationship building and choosing kindness. She served as founding director of the Evaded Issues in Jewish Education project and co-created Educational Jewish Moments—a methodology for addressing gender issues in schools. She is currently writing a book on using drama as pedagogy for engaging learners in “power talk.”

**Dr. Andrea Jacobs, PhD**, is the project director of the Gender Equity and Leadership in Jewish Education Initiative for the Leadership Commons at The William Davidson School. Andrea is also cofounder and partner at Rally Point for Collaborative Change, a consulting practice that focuses on working across differences to facilitate transformative change. As an educator, researcher, and organizational consultant, she focuses on developing resources and training programs to address gender equity, LGBTQ inclusion, and racial justice for a wide range of educational and communal organizations.





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