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Summary of Research on New Models of Education as Applied to Part-time Jewish Education

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Context

Part-time Jewish education has developed along the same path as American secular education for over 100 years. It has been made very clear through teachers, principals, superintendents, legislators, and parents that the system of American secular education no longer works for all the students it must accommodate. If we continue to model our part-time Jewish educational settings on this broken secular model, this form of Jewish education will also not meet the needs of the learners it is intended to serve. When we add to this equation both decreasing synagogue affiliation and lack of family involvement, the challenge to part-time Jewish education is increased. We can work toward a solution by considering new models for part-time Jewish education that stress meaning-based learning in which the learner is a co-creator, families are engaged, and technology is integrated into the fabric of the learning, allowing for Jewish education to happen beyond the walls of any one institution. Jewish Learning Venture proposes to do precisely this through its newest initiative, LeV: Getting to the Heart of Jewish Education.

Trends

In 2007, Miriam Heller Stern, Dean of the Fingerhut School of Education at American Jewish University, wrote, “Your children---Will they be yours? Educational strategies for Jewish survival, the Central Jewish Institute, 1916—1944.” This paper was a historical case study of the achievements, challenges, and unforeseen consequences of reinventing education as a strategy for Jewish continuity and used New York’s Central Jewish Institute (CJI) as the case study. CJI introduced progressive curricular and pedagogical reform, as well as a variety of experiential education programs outside the classroom including Camp Cejwin, which became one of the pioneer Jewish educational summer camps. ***Stern discovered that no matter how compelling the institutional mission was, social forces more powerful than an institution or its leaders’ vision deeply impacted the transition from theory to practice.***

Today, nearly one hundred years later, we continue to grapple with the tension that Stern identified. American social forces that require American Jews to balance the role of religion with the demands of their secular lives remain more powerful than our Jewish institutions for nearly all of the non-Orthodox members of our Jewish



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community. Our solution to this problem has been that Jewish community and education leaders model part-time, congregational-based education after the best of American, secular education regardless of the difference between the two environments and missions.

American secular education leaders - Danielson, DuFour, Jacobs, Marzano, McTighe, Popham, Reeves, Robinson, and Wiggins - are now moving beyond simply tinkering with new teaching strategies, additional teacher professional development, continual assessment through standardized testing, outreach to families, and integration of technology. They have come to realize that:

1. new teaching strategies do not overcome student/family apathy toward education;
2. new or increased teacher education does not improve the conditions (crowded classrooms, underfunded school budgets, increasing disrespect for the work teachers do) under which those teachers work;
3. no standardized test can measure learning results for non-standardized students;
4. outreach to families and technological gadgetry alone cannot overcome the despair over what the American educational system has become.

Researchers in education have come to the consensus that the current model of secular education, based on an assembly-line model straight out of the Industrial Revolution, is not effective for the ways our students learn and need to function in our current circumstances, let alone in the future.

Today's general model of Jewish education is based on the same assembly line, industrial model. Students move down a conveyor belt from grade to grade as teachers "attach" identical bits of information and "load" identical skill sets onto them. In an age where consumers want almost everything customized specifically for their individual use, we still default to this one-size-fits all model of Jewish education. Declining enrollment and membership numbers in our institutions clearly show that one-size does not fit all. Many families are either searching for alternative ways to educate their children Jewishly or have stopped searching altogether. Many synagogue members have a tacit belief that Hebrew school is an unavoidable evil that



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their children and they must endure. This cannot possibly be the best situation for anyone.

In American, secular education, many previously assumed ideas are being challenged. Students do not all need to learn the same thing. They might need some common core of information and skills, but beyond that, students can be guided by their interests and vocational objectives and still lead productive, fulfilling lives. Not all children learn the same way. They develop at different rates, in different communities, and with different support systems. Some children need a great amount of learning support. Others are willing and able to learn more independently and feel frustrated when they must stay with their class. Similarly, Jewish families practice Judaism and participate in the Jewish community differently. We know all these things to be true. Like their secular education colleagues, the research provided by Aron, Flexner, Goodman, Moskowitz, Petroff, Weisman, and Woocher (articles/books cited below), clearly shows that incorporating choice, learner interest, development, and other personalized elements into our educational models will increase the likelihood that education will be a satisfying, meaning-filled experience.

Conclusion

The solution to the problem of part-time Jewish education requires that we change the current model and incorporate high-impact practices so that customization and individualization are valued and available. While there is no one specific model that will guarantee success, this work requires:

- disruptive change,
- abandoning of old models and assumptions, and
- focusing on learners and their ability to co-create meaning with their families.

Jewish learning need not be limited to the secular school year or to a particular room or building. The content and form of Jewish learning for children and their parents needs to move beyond tinkering with our current system to embrace the possibilities that are around us. Twenty-first century Americans, Jews and non-Jews, are demanding change in religious education. Secular and religious educational scholars are in



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support of their demands because it makes for good education, deep learning, and commitment to life-long engagement. We have the tools. We can rebuild it. Some of our area congregations have embraced these demands and Jewish Learning Venture is prepared to provide the scaffolding and support to them through LeV.

LeV is designed based on the theories outlined above. What we believe to be true is that a successful model for Jewish living and learning will incorporate three components:

- **Experiential Learning** - Jon Woocher states in *Design Principles for the 21st Century*, “Jewish learning must be ‘life-centered,’ addressing the totality of our aspirations, concerns and experiences.” Some refer to this as the “Camp Model,” and it does draw from lessons of Jewish camping. It is based, however, on what we know about the importance of meaning-based learning in which the learner is a co-creator.
- **Whole Family Learning** – Creating opportunities for family learning and celebration and “doing Jewish in Jewish time.”
- **Technology integration as a tool for extending and expanding learning** – thinking beyond the walls of a building to create learning opportunities that include home-based and on-line study.



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Sir Ken Robinson: Bring on the learning revolution!
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r9LeIXa3U_I

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Bar and Bat Mitzvah

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Changing Up The Bar And Bat Mitzvah Experience

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Models in Specific Congregations

At a Waltham Sunday school, Brandeis students become the teachers

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Research on Non-Jewish Religious Education

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