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**LEARNING FROM
THE CUTTING EDGE
IN EDUCATION**

COMMUNITY CHANGE:

ENGAGEMENT OF FAMILIES WITH YOUNG JEWISH CHILDREN

by PATRICIA BIDOL PADVA

COMMUNITY CHANGE

Citizens in rural and metropolitan areas across the country are experiencing major challenges in such areas as poverty, quality of public school education, minimal health and social services for the economically-challenged, and structural racism.

People are demanding a voice in improving the quality of life for themselves, their families, their neighborhoods and their communities. More and more citizens are linking with each other through participation in deliberative forums to create their own futures, and they are connecting via blogs and other virtual options. The use of these inclusive, community-change approaches can result in consensus-based change strategies.

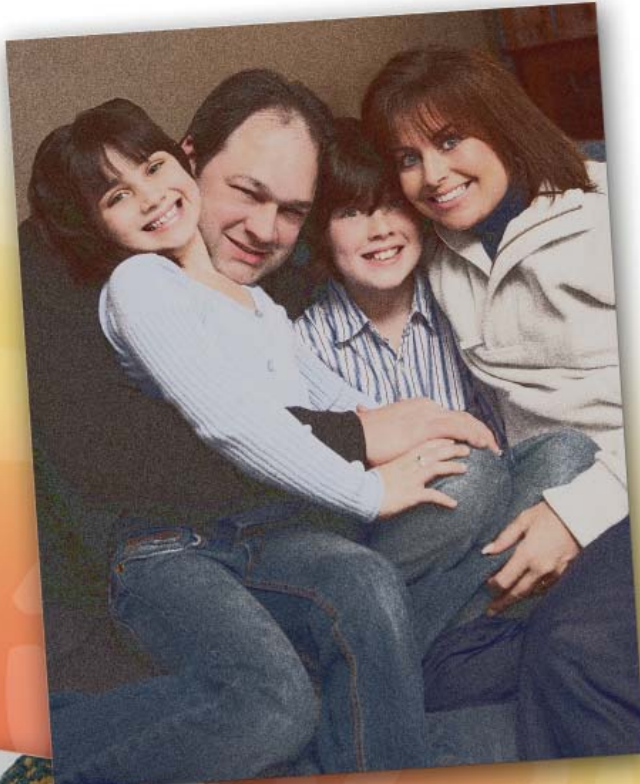
Inclusive community-change approaches are being used to create desired change strategies. In order for a change strategy to have a sustainable outcome, a viable network of impacted parties needs to be created and maintained. As the parties explore and share their needs and interests, they form relationships, analyze complex data, create a mutually beneficial, strategic-change plan, and conduct ongoing evaluation of the outcomes of the change. In order for the coalition to keep their issues visible on the community agenda, they must have a compelling communication strategy.

It is also important to have non-profit intermediaries who can engage residents, civic groups, political leaders, grassroots organizations and the private sector. The intermediaries need to identify and build relationships with influential policy makers and community leaders and provide them with data-driven change initiatives that persuade power-brokers to actively support the change.

JEWISH EDUCATION

The ultimate goal of Jewish education is to engage youth, families and adults in a pursuit of lifelong Jewish learning and affiliation with the community. In the Western world, the engagement of Jewish individuals in lifelong learning is a daunting task. Jewish individuals are able to participate freely in their country's educational, economic and social institutions with or without acknowledging either their individual Jewish identities or connections to a broader Jewish community. The challenge is to create Jewish experiences that meet the needs of individuals and families.

Systemic community change initiatives for Jewish



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education that compel stakeholders to create, implement and sustain a fundamental shift in the vision, mindset, culture and protocols of the sponsoring organization (e.g., synagogue, school, JCC) and of the formal and informal educational options are transformational change efforts. All transformative change process models include ways to address such factors as how to support inclusive engagement among diverse parties; create consensus-based strategies; build supportive relationships; and create deep-seated changes in mindset, values and behavior. These change models are implemented using consensus-based system thinking tools and other approaches that include informed and passionate dialogue along with advocating one's views and a genuine inquiry into the views of others.

JEWISH EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION INITIATIVE

The Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative (JECEI) was founded by several philanthropic institutions in 2004. It was created as a passionate response to the concern that too many families with young Jewish children were either not engaged in or alienated from Jewish life. These families are at a pivotal time in terms of making decisions about the identities of their children and the values that they want to transmit. Families with young Jewish children seek out communities and institutions that can help support and inform their choices.

JECEI uses a transformative change model that enhances the capacity of Jewish early childhood centers to become centers of excellence that are also compelling family centers. The JECEI transformative change model is inspired by a synergistic blend of Jewish values and ideas, Reggio Emilia philosophy, emotionally responsive practices and customized change approaches for an individual center and for a communal network of JECEI centers. JECEI's work with Jewish early childhood centers helps them to increase the number of families with young Jewish children who are engaged in Jewish living and learning that meets their individual needs and connects them with other Jews.

COMMUNITY CHANGE APPROACHES INCREASE ENGAGEMENT OF FAMILIES

JECEI's family engagement options are often intensive and customized experiences that meet the needs and values of the current generation of adults who have young Jewish children. These innovative and customized options are resulting in an increase in Jewish living and learning for families and an increased connection between participating families. They enable this generation to access the rich resources of their heritage and inspire them to revitalize the Jewish community and ensure its future.

When JECEI works with a Jewish early childhood center, it works with the center's educators, lay leaders and parents to help it become a "school of early childhood excellence" and to increase the engagement of the families with Jewish living and learning. The JECEI family engagement processes begin with the joint efforts of educators and parents. When families continue to participate in the customized Jewish living and learning options, they become more active in both designing the options and in reaching out to other families. The parent engagement sessions are based on dialogue, and during the planning of these events, the parents and others consider the following questions:

- How can we enhance our capacity to talk and think more deeply together about what matters to us as parents of young Jewish children?
- How can we use our mutual intelligence and wisdom to create meaningful connections that support our personal and collective journey of Jewish living and learning?

These customized Jewish living and learning options usually include components such as dialogue, prayer, study, culture, music and social action. The young families feel connected to their friendship circles and to the Jewish early childhood center. They often affiliate only with other formal and informal Jewish education options when they perceive that these educational options fulfill the needs of their families. They want educational entities that are open to parents of Jewish youth to become leaders who can

shape the educational options offered to their children. JECEI is also working with the communal network of centers so they, in turn, can work with their community's formal and informal educational providers to make them more attractive to families with young Jewish children.

JECEI'S COMMUNITY CHANGE GUIDELINES

JECEI's organizational and community change model is based on the best practices of sustainable change. The basic assumptions of this model are:

- By providing opportunities for dialogue, joint decision-making, envisioning and creating customized Jewish living and learning options, parents with young Jewish children are more likely to become more engaged.
- By providing meaningful engagement in consensus and inclusive events, a network of ad hoc parties who are engaged in Jewish living and learning will be created.
- By teaching participants how to use JECEI's state-of-the-art, consensus decision-making, dialogue, and systems thinking tools, participants will be able to use them without the assistance of a consultant.
- By using a variety of large-system change approaches such as future search, open space technology, world café, and appreciative inquiry, the community will be able to create the future rather than respond to past events.
- By using the JECEI website that allows participating JECEI schools to create websites for their educators and parents, the connections between individual schools in a community will increase.

The use of inclusive and customized community-change models in Jewish education will increase the number of young adults and families with young Jewish children who are engaged in ongoing Jewish living and learning. The Jewish community will be vitalized by young Jews who create options that meet their personal needs and also connect them to the rich resources of their heritage. ■