

Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative's Model of Change

The Challenge and the Opportunity

Early childhood education represents a unique opportunity to engage both young children and their parents in a rich and meaningful Jewish communal life. The Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative (JECEI) transforms preschools into Jewish early childhood education (ECE) schools that ignite a desire and commitment in families to continue Jewish learning and living beyond their Jewish ECE experience and inspires increasing numbers of new families to enroll in Jewish early childhood schools of the highest quality.

At this stage of their lives, parents of young children are open to considering questions of identity and connection for themselves and their children. The raising of young children offers Jewish communities an unrivaled opportunity to engage young families and deepen their Jewish journeys.

A New Approach

In meeting this challenge, the Jewish ECE school will need to change and grow. It will need to offer children the highest quality education. It will also need to become a center of Jewish life based on learning for the whole family and a community of support and celebration steeped in Jewish values.

To achieve this, we require a new approach to Jewish education that will embody the best practices in early childhood and adult education.

JECEI has been creating living models of this new approach offering a synergy of “big” and relevant Jewish ideas and values with the best in progressive and constructivist education, as embodied particularly in the world renowned schools of Reggio Emilia in Italy and the understandings from emotionally responsive practice.

JECEI has established a set of core Jewish values and ideas that guide our work in constructing Jewish ECE schools. Understood as “lenses,” they enable us to see our world more clearly and in a particularly focused way. Through study and discussion of these lenses, teachers and parents create a shared vision and sense of belonging.

JECEI places unparalleled emphasis on the importance of serious Jewish inquiry and dialogue on the part of the entire family in the community of the ECE school. A central goal is to significantly upgrade the Jewish experience and commitment of families who enroll in a Jewish ECE school. Independent of family background, immersion in Jewish values, community and life will transform the face of families with whom we are involved.

This synergy of Jewish ideas and values and Reggio inspired constructivist education can be viewed in the seven JECEI accredited schools that are the fruit of three years of intensive labor. JECEI's accredited schools are demonstration sites where early childhood directors, teachers, parents, funders and other interested stakeholders in the Jewish community can learn from this new, dynamic approach to Jewish ECE.

Overview of JECEI Change Process

JECEI works with Jewish ECE schools through a four year school-wide and community change process that employs several, mutually supportive strategies:

- JECEI staff works directly with the school leadership and parents to enhance parent involvement and learning.
 - JECEI provides a consultant to the professional leadership teams from each school to cultivate their leadership skills to significantly improve teaching and learning.
 - JECEI pairs each school with a consultant who works directly with the teachers to transform their educational practices.
 - JECEI brings the director and 2nd tier leaders of the participating schools together with those from other partner communities to create a unique national community of practice.
 - JECEI provides grants to each school to facilitate this work.
 - JECEI conducts ongoing evaluation of its work and learns from continual, critical reflection on our practice.
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