

**Independent Third Party Evaluation
Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative**

**Summary of the
Impact of JECEI Based upon Logic Model Outcomes
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SUMMARY OF THE IMPACT OF JECEI BASED UPON LOGIC MODEL OUTCOMES

Introduction

The Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative (JECEI) was launched in 2004 by a group of visionary philanthropists to increase the engagement of young Jewish families in Jewish living and to encourage their ongoing participation in the Jewish community. Its 2008 logic model and accompanying assumptions specify that the mission of JECEI is “to transform Jewish early childhood centers into Jewish family life centers that ignite a desire and commitment in families to continue Jewish learning and living beyond the early childhood experience.” The core assumption underlying JECEI’s approach is that by developing excellent Jewish early childhood centers that incorporate meaningful Jewish learning experiences for the children and their families, parents would come to value the richness of Jewish life and that this would motivate them to remain engaged in Jewish living and learning in the ensuing years.¹

This report summarizes the results of an eighteen month independent third party evaluation of JECEI. . The study assessed:

- JECEI’s approach in centers, the process by which it was implemented, and how the different components of the JECEI model interact at the center level; and
- How the activities in the Jewish early childhood centers working with JECEI have influenced the families of the children who attended them.

Since JECEI will no longer be implemented in the way that it was during the study period,

¹ Parents and staff use the terms “center”, “school”, or “preschool” in different parts of the country. For simplicity and ease of reading, we use the terms “center” or “early childhood center” throughout the report.

this summary focuses the issues that are of most relevance to those who may choose to continue similar approaches in the future, i.e., on the study findings and conclusions that are most closely related to program implementation and outcomes at the center level.

Our report is based upon several major interdependent sources of data and analysis strategies: two or more site visits to nine JECEI centers in New York City, Milwaukee, and Denver; surveys, developed by the evaluation team, of JECEI teachers and parents at ten JECEI centers, that were administered in late spring 2010, ongoing interviews JECEI consultants and staff; and review of JECEI documentation, including accreditation materials and reports, other studies about JECEI as well as other research that was relevant to Jewish early childhood education. The site visits entailed interviews with centers' professional top and second tier leaders, focus groups of parents and of teachers, observations in classrooms and special events, and conversations with others associated with the centers.

Major Findings

The major evaluation findings about the JECEI model and its implementation at the center level are summarized below:

- There is widespread evidence of high quality Jewish early childhood education in the nine centers that we visited. In addition, our surveys of teachers and parents in ten centers, along with further evidence in the JECEI accreditation reports and other documentation that pertain to all centers, show evidence of this high quality, although there is still room for improvement. The vast majority of parents and teachers feel that their centers are excellent and continuing to get better and the vast majority of teachers report that they are familiar with the key elements of JECEI, although fewer say they regularly utilize them.
- The vast majority of Jewish and interfaith parents who were not already deeply engaged in Jewish living who participated in our surveys reported that, since enrolling their children at JECEI centers, they are more positive about Jewish life, more engaged in Jewish living and learning, and anticipate increased engagement in the future.

- JECEI still faces a number of implementation challenges at its centers. For example, higher proportions of teachers understand the Reggio-inspired way of teaching and JECEI's Jewish lenses than report that they consistently use them in the classroom.

Major Conclusions

Our findings have led us to develop a set of broad overall conclusions and several subsidiary conclusions.

Overarching Conclusions

JECEI has developed and refined a solid, high quality, and usable model for melding the best practices in early childhood education that can be found in the Reggio philosophy with best practices in Jewish education. The current JECEI model provides a strong foundation for high quality Jewish early childhood education, but it needs to be modified to make some of the intended outcomes more specific.

Thus, JECEI has enabled centers to refine their pre-existing approaches and/or develop a vision of what high quality Jewish and Reggio-inspired early childhood education entails and has helped them to take major steps to turn this vision into reality.

This, in turn, is leading to substantial increases in involvement in Jewish living and learning among the vast majority of Jewish and interfaith families whose children are enrolled in the centers.

Implementation Conclusions

Time Matters in Efforts to Promote Systemic Change

Teachers in the centers that have worked with JECEI for the most time tend to show higher

levels of growth and more comfort with and use of JECEI's Jewish and constructivist approaches.

Need for Differentiation in Approaches

The differences in teachers' and families' needs and learning styles, both across and within centers, should be addressed by those who work to promote change in centers.

Recognition of Time Commitments on the Part of Center Educators

JECEI is a multi-faceted approach that challenges many of the professionals and lay leaders to expand their repertoires and reorient their ways of thinking. This requires a large time investment, leading to questions about teacher compensation that go beyond the JECEI model, but will need to be faced by any community and center that seeks to implement such an ambitious approach.

Need for Training and Support in Ways to Work with Parents and Other Professionals

JECEI requires that teachers engage more readily with parents and other professionals at their centers. This is not easy for some teachers and they would benefit from more training and support in this realm.

Accreditation Approach Helped Centers Progress

The accreditation process helped centers put what they have learned into a useable framework and recognize the many achievements they have made since the beginning of their work with JECEI. This let them orient themselves in terms of planning and carrying out future efforts to improve program quality and effectiveness.

Effectiveness Conclusions

Powerful Reported Impacts on Participating Children and Families

Our surveys, focus groups, and individual conversations with parents of children at JECEI centers **all support the conclusion that the Jewish-related experiences of children and parents at the centers have begun to positively affect the vast majority of participating families' attitudes and reported intentions about future Jewish living and learning .**

Even if one allows for some possible exaggeration on the part of their parents, and some inevitable lack of follow through on stated intentions, it is clear that the experiences of the majority of parents in JECEI centers are contributing to far greater involvement in Jewish activities in their homes, in the centers, and elsewhere in the Jewish community, and leading to greatly increased anticipated Jewish involvement in the future. Among these activities are Jewish holiday and Shabbat celebration on their own and with other families, going to Jewish programs at the synagogue or JCC that sponsors their center, planning ongoing Jewish education for their children, and talking more with other adults as well as with their children about things related to Jewish living and learning.

Greater Impact on JECEI Leadership Teams

Our surveys, focus groups, and individual conversations with parents at the JECEI centers all support the conclusion that playing a role on a JECEI leadership teams seems to promote the likelihood of even greater engagement with Jewish activities in the home, center, and community. While this may not be causal, i.e. people already engaged in Jewish life might be on these teams, there is some evidence that taking leadership positions stimulates increased involvement.

Greater Impact over Time

It is difficult to generalize from the limited numbers of centers in our study, but JECEI impacts seem to increase as the centers involvement with JECEI lasts over longer period of

time.

Concluding Thoughts

JECEI's attempt to infuse best practices in Jewish and constructivist education into the culture of early childhood centers requires significant time in order to fully bear fruit. Teachers and leaders need to learn new concepts and practices, begin to feel comfortable, and consistently use them in the classroom, and learn from the experience. The literature on educational change teaches us that complex change needs many years to take hold in *any* complex institution. This conclusion is corroborated by our data that show that the teachers and families at centers that had more years with JECEI were more positively influenced than those at the newer centers.

It is important to recognize that JECEI worked with centers that were *already* considered to be very effective. Thus, to different degrees, JECEI helped the leadership and staff of each center it worked with to develop a shared vocabulary by recognizing and naming what they were doing as they worked to further enhance quality. It also helped each center create innovative ways to meld the best of constructivist education with the best of Jewish education in their approaches to parents and children. In these ways JECEI enabled the participating centers to become ever-more-effective and this is beginning to become evident in precisely the kinds of changes in attitudes and behaviors of the young Jewish families that the founders and leaders of JECEI hoped would occur.

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