

Impact of JECE on Family Engagement

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Does Jewish early childhood education impact the engagement of families in Jewish life? This is indeed the case, according to sophisticated statistical analyses that were conducted on the results of an online parent inventory that was completed by 1,159 parents. The analyses also revealed that this is a far more complex process than simply intensifying the Judaic content of the educational program. The most important predictor of families' Jewish connectedness after enrolling their children was the quality rating that they assigned to different aspects of the programs' operations. For many parents, the promotion of their children's Jewish identity is not an important criterion when choosing a Jewish early childhood educational (JECE) program. However, if they perceive and experience the JECE programs as excellent and well-run, they will become more engaged in Jewish actions as a "side effect." These findings validate JECEI's approach to change: The most effective leverage for enhancing families' engagement in Jewish life is improving the underlying operating system of Jewish early childhood education."

How important were the following in selecting this preschool for your child - what were the 3 most important factors?

JECEI VANGUARD SCHOOLS	PALM BEACH	DENVER BOULDER	MILWAUKEE /TE'ENA/ STEPHEN WISE	
7	7	9	6	NUMBER OF SCHOOLS
692	467	723	451	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS
12%	29%	19%	17%	Accreditations or quality ratings
4%	5%	4%	10%	<i>Availability of infant care</i>
8%	9%	10%	13%	<i>Availability of an after-hours program</i>
16%	29%	26%	18%	<i>Class size</i>
7%	15%	15%	13%	<i>Cost</i>
19%	15%	22%	19%	<i>Distance from your house or work</i>
4%	5%	8%	9%	<i>Hours of operation</i>
5%	5%	8%	7%	<i>Knowing other families who attend</i>
33%	34%	20%	19%	Preschool's general reputation
3%	2%	7%	3%	<i>Preschools relationship to your synagogue, JCC or day school</i>
28%	17%	23%	17%	<i>Providing exposure to Jewish life</i>
52%	50%	46%	54%	Quality of the child development programming
20%	7%	11%	11%	<i>Quality of the Jewish life programming</i>
20%	12%	13%	15%	<i>Quality of the physical space and resources</i>
66%	62%	63%	67%	Quality of the staff and teachers
1%	1%	1%	1%	<i>Special needs services available at the school</i>
1%	0%	0%	1%	<i>Student diversity</i>
2%	1%	3%	4%	<i>Tuition discounts and admission policies for siblings</i>

The broad question that is worth pursuing when looking at the JECE finances, is how do the host institutions and the broader community see their EC programs?

1 – If they see their program strictly as a SERVICE for parents to keep the children safe while they work, then there is nothing wrong with these programs producing income for the host institutions. In this case Jewish content is strictly an extra and is not critical to the success of the program. In this model, for example, there is no need for the Rabbi of a congregation to be involved in the program.

2 – If they see their program as JEWISH EDUCATION then the next question is whether the education is restricted to children or includes the whole family? Again, how the key stakeholders regard the program has consequences for the finances. If the focus is on the whole family the role of the Rabbi of a congregation may be very important. This in turn has important consequences for the finances.

3 – Finally, if they see their program as an INVESTMENT in the future because many of the families were originally not involved in the Jewish community and now because of the JECE programs have become involved, then the financial analysis will be different. It may be that just like we subsidize day schools and supplementary schools because we see them as investments in the Jewish future we may want to consider subsidizing JECE programs.

It is legitimate for each institution to come to a different understanding. What doesn't work well, is when within one institution there is a significant lack of agreement. If, for example, the treasurer strictly see the program as a SERVICE while the Rabbi sees it as an INVESTMENT it will be hard to design a financial model. In order to get the key stakeholders within an institution on the same page it is necessary to have the key lay leaders and professionals involved.

The tool I designed is basically a P & L (profit and loss) instrument. It uses functional accounting for allocating indirect expenses so it requires involvement by people who have access to all the financial data including confidential info. There are ways of collecting the info and still keeping it confidential. I would be happy to give advice. Just the process of analyzing the percentage of the time spent by the Exec. Director of a JCC or the Rabbi in a congregation can help when reflecting on the goals and functioning of the JECE program.

Finally, if we consider the JECE program an INVESTMENT my tool will be inadequate since it only provides a snapshot similar to a P & L. In that case we need to come up with ways of measuring the long-term effect of the JECE program. For example, how many Jewish families joined the host institution as their first Jewish adult involvement when they enrolled their first child in the JECE program and how many of them stayed members of this institution or another Jewish institution after their youngest child graduated? Also, since our research has shown that a high quality Jewish program has a positive effect on non-Jews' attitudes towards Jews how do we measure that long-term impact?

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