The community needs to revamp education to reach all children

In psychotherapy, the YAVIS client is “Young, Attractive, Verbal, Intelligent and Successful.” YAVIS clients have the best prognosis, yet remain the longest in treatment. Therapists like such highly motivated clients and eschew those who are less engaging. Likewise, in Jewish education, we focus our attention on those who are most highly motivated. Both resources and opportunities are directed to the children of the most highly engaged families, and we provide relatively few resources to those who need Jewish education the most.

In North America, our flagship Jewish educational institutions are full-time day schools, and they garner the bulk of resources devoted to Jewish education. Nearly 190,000 elementary through high school students are served by day schools, according to data gathered by Marvin Schick for the AVI CHAI Foundation. It is difficult to estimate the cost of this system, but it is likely to be $2 billion to $3 billion annually.

Day school education is near-universal for children from Orthodox families, but fewer than 4 percent of children from non-Orthodox families participate. Instead, most children from non-Orthodox homes receive formal Jewish education in part-time schools, which educate up to 250,000 children and adolescents in any one year. The total cost of day school for the non-Orthodox population is, however, nearly double the cost of part-time schools that serve a significantly larger portion of the population.

Although much of the cost burden is shouldered by parents and the comparison of investments is not quite fair because day schools provide secular and Jewish education, the disparate investment is still a dilemma. Jewish education cannot just be the concern and responsibility of Jewishly engaged parents, but must be handled from a communal perspective. If our educational institutions and resources remain focused on the most highly motivated parents, we undermine the vitality of American Jewry.

Investment in day schools notwithstanding, we need to invest in both formal and informal education that will assure education for all of the children of our community. Beyond dollars, we also need to invest time: to rethink, restructure and retool the system of Jewish education.

Collaboration is needed across sectors—early childhood education, day and part-time schools, day and overnight camps, academic and campus programs, and the like. Collaboration across sectors that serve different age populations is also needed. Jewish education should be lifespan education; artificial termination points, for example after bar/bat mitz-

By Leonard Saxe

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vah, need to be eliminated. The putative system of Jewish education is fragmented and, as a number of commentators have noted, Jewish education operates in silos. These silos make it difficult to connect with families and ensure continuity.

If the Jewish community treats education as a set of distinct and “autonomous” experiences, it is not surprising that we have a set of competing Jewish educational institutions. What would it take to integrate these institutions and, more important, ensure that we are providing effective, well-funded education for all, not just those who seek intensive Jewish education? How do we create highly motivated Jews who seek Jewish education opportunities?

An answer requires thinking about Jewish education in new ways, starting with systematic information. We need to gather information that will help us understand “the lay of the land” of Jewish education and give us the tools to assess our educational efforts. Nuanced data are needed – both at the institutional and individual levels – that will enable us to understand how families and children are served at various stages in their life journeys. The current Jewish education system is like an aircraft flying through clouds without radar. The technology exists to gather better knowledge, and it is essential to apply these tools to enhance the accessibility, reach and quality of Jewish education.

One way to understand better what can be accomplished is illustrated by a system my colleagues and I at Brandeis University have developed. JData (www.JData.com) is a sophisticated institutional data collection system that gathers detailed information about each sector of Jewish education in North America, from early childhood education through Jewish studies at universities. It allows users to conduct their own analyses of the information. In numbers and graphs, JData gives us a picture that includes information about which institutions provide Jewish education and how many children participate.

Knowing the institutional landscape is, however, only one way to understand the system of Jewish education. We also need evaluative data that assess how well the system functions. Descriptive data that tells us what is done is insufficient to know how to allocate resources and improve educational programs. Outcome data are needed that measure learning and its effects. These data can help to ensure that our resources are being used wisely and can be used both to support effective efforts and to stimulate innovation and reform.

To do such studies, outcomes need to be compared – before and after an educational intervention as well as across groups. Too often, understanding of Jewish education reflects our emotional assessment. Organizations, and even the philanthropists who fund them, seek validating information. They eschew rigor for easier approaches that cost less to implement and are more likely to yield positive answers.

Assessors of educational outcomes face a fundamental dilemma, the so-called “selection artifact.” The most highly motivated gravitate to the most intense settings, and the success of... Continued on Page 4
Putting money where it’s needed

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these institutions in providing Jewish education is a result both of who studies there and the program. An objective assessment of the contribution of the family and setting – and their interaction – is essential.

Providing Jewish education for all will require, first, that we connect the disconnected institutions that form the backbone of the system. Day schools need to be part of the system of Jewish education, not simply serve a particular segment of the population. They need, for example, to find ways to make their physical plants and teachers available to serve the community at large. Similarly, our network of informal Jewish education needs to find ways to connect to both day schools and part-time schools. The community is not well served when its educational institutions are simply competitive programs in a Jewish catalog.

Ensuring more broadly utilized and effective Jewish education also means providing parents and communal bodies with the systematic information that can be the basis of decision-making. We need to rationalize communal allocation of resources and link it to measurable outcomes. Data can help us create a more integrated system of education that provides high quality education for all ages and interests. Undoubtedly, it is a challenge to find the resources to support an integrated system of Jewish education, but better collection and use of information can assure that the system uses its resources well.

Parashat Va’etchanan, this week’s Torah portion, includes the Sh’ma, and the injunction to teach our children: “Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. Impress them upon your children” (Deuteronomy 6:6-7). The community has a fundamental obligation to ensure that its children are educated – we have no choice but to use the best tools available to assure this task is accomplished.

Leonard Saxe is Klutznick Professor of Contemporary Jewish Studies at Brandeis University and director of the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies and the Steinhardt Social Research Institute.