The Impact of New Models of Congregational Jewish Education

A report submitted to The Jewish Education Project

July 2015

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From 2009-2015, The Jewish Education Project, in partnership with the Experiment in Congregational Education (ECE), designed and implemented a strategy aimed at reimagining congregational education for children in grades K-8. The initiative, supported by UJA-Federation of New York, operated on the assumption that the prevalent model of "religious school," as a weekly 2-6 hour classroom model, was flawed by design and inherently produced poor, limited results. Efforts at improvement typically affected little more than isolated programmatic components, and resulted in little to no change overall. (Aron, Lee Weinberg, 2002). The ultimate goal of The Jewish Education Project's strategy was to generate positive learner-impact by supporting congregations in creating new models of Jewish education. The purpose of this study is to answer the question, *what is the impact on learners of new models of congregational education?*

To achieve positive learner impact, The Jewish Education Project first supported congregations' efforts to redesign their educational models from the ground up through provision of consulting, funding, and communal professional development. Following initial redesign, the Jewish Education Project helped guide congregations' realignment of professional development, leadership roles and responsibilities, and learning design and assessment to support new models. Congregations were also supported in efforts to change when and where learning takes place, in considering who should be regarded as a 'learner,' and in training educators to service each congregation's stated goals. New models emerged as a result of this process, which can be aptly categorized as follows: Camp/Chavurah models, Shabbat models, Online/Blended learning models, Family models, Intergenerational models, and Cross-Congregational models. For the purposes of this report, the term "model" should be understood as referring to a yearlong educational program in which children (and sometimes their parents) participate.

Throughout the 6 years that The Jewish Education Project provided support to congregations for re-imagining models of Jewish education, it conducted frequent assessments of how well congregations were developing aspects of their new models. Studies evaluated leadership capacity for change, the quality of teaching and learning, the degree to which congregations' leadership had achieved their stated goals, and whether congregations had conducted self-assessment and provided professional development opportunities. In a complementing effort, the ECE conducted a study that rated the extent to which congregations had changed when and where learning took place, identified learner and teacher profiles, and assessed whether organizational structures had developed in support of congregational goals. These research studies reflected a developmental approach to the creation of new models. They are illustrative of a fundamental belief that, in order to eventually achieve the goal of learner impact, congregations first need to build, at least to an extent, the foundations of a totally new model. A congregation, for example, with strong leadership and well-designed professional development could not expect significant impact on learners as a result of its efforts, unless it also changed the '*when*,' '*where*' and '*why*' of the learning experience. In autumn 2014, The Jewish Education Project began assessing the outcome of its efforts to ultimately achieve positive learner impact through model redesign, the results of which are contained herein.

Methodology:
Determining the impact of Jewish education on learners is challenging. As opposed to public education, Jewish education does not have common core standards or testing mechanisms within or across congregations or movements. We can find no study that has pursued the question of learner impact in new models. On the contrary, we have seen reports that document good models of Jewish education that also include an apology for not reporting on learner impact (Wertheimer, 2009 p. 4). The most current report on new models of congregational education notes the growth of various types of new models since the early 1990s, but does not address their impact on learners (Aron, 2014).

In an effort to enter this uncharted territory, The Jewish Education Project commissioned ICW Consulting to gather the observations of parents with children enrolled in the new models. Parental observations were seen as a reliable indicator of impact in the absence of common standardized tests. Focus groups and individualized interviews were held with 85 parents from a dozen new models. Analysis of these conversations identified four significant areas of impact demonstrated across all models. We also were able to identify that different models, reflecting their tailor-made designs, produced unique impact on learners.

We asked parents about what impact the particular model they were involved with had on their children, their family and themselves. Impact was defined as some visible behavior that a child exhibited that directly or indirectly related to the intent and programming of the new model.

It is fair to note that educational directors chose the parents who were interviewed for this report. Directors were instructed to identify a diverse group of parents ranging from those who were characterized as engaged and satisfied, to those who were just loosely involved. We don't see the results of this study as definitive. Rather, they represent the outcome of a first foray at measuring outcomes that will require additional study in order to relate conclusions with any concrete certainty.

Report Format
This report provides an overview of our process for conducting research, before moving on to discuss our impact findings, and then our conclusions. The format of this report follows a pattern of identifying key findings, followed by an explanation of each finding, which is subsequently followed by quotes, presented in italics, taken directly from parents during the focus groups and interviews. This pattern is used for overall impact findings as well as impact findings for specific model types. The end of the report also includes additional findings that do not address impact per se, but were nonetheless important to report. In our discussions with parents, we noted two types of impact:
- *Overall Impact Findings – four key impact findings*
- *Model-Related Impact Findings – findings that are related specifically to model types.*

In all cases, across models, there were four findings of impact that consistently emerged from conversations with parents, each of which is discussed at greater length in the "Findings" section of this report:
  - **Finding #1: Children are Learning and They Enjoy It**
  - **Finding #2: Parents Value the New Models**
  - **Finding #3: Children are Building and Strengthening Relationships**
  - **Finding #4: Families Feel Comfortable and Cared For**

We also cover model-specific impacts for the following models in the "Impact Findings by Model Type" section of this report:

> ➢ **Camp/Chavurah models**
> ➢ **Shabbat models**
> ➢ **Online/Blended Learning models**
> ➢ **Family models**
> ➢ **Cross-Congregational models**
> ➢ **Intergenerational models**

OVERVIEW

Over the last decade, The Jewish Education Project, working in partnership with the Experiment in Congregational Education (ECE) has sparked and spread new approaches to Jewish education that provide more meaningful, more valued and more impactful learning for children and parents in congregational settings. New models of congregational education have altered when and where learning takes place, and who the teachers and learners are. These new models are in service of goals that impact children's knowledge, sense of belonging, their lived Jewish actions and values. These models have been created to replace traditional classroom-only models, and have engaged thousands of children throughout the greater New York area.

The Jewish Education Project, funded by UJA-Federation of New York, initiated this learner impact study out of its commitment to innovation in Jewish education and the desire to learn what impact new models are having on children and their families. This learner impact study builds on previous research efforts to learn about the organizational capacities of New York congregations (*Survey of Education in New York Area Congregations*, Bloom Associates) and the extent to which congregations implemented innovative educational approaches (*Assessing the Implementation of the Design Principles*, Rosov Consulting). The Jewish Education Project and the Experiment in Congregational Education conducted internal research and evaluation as well to learn the extent to which congregations had regularized their innovative models and how much educators valued the various resources offered to their congregations. Final reports of each of these research projects are available from The Jewish Education Project.

This study worked with 12 congregations to identify the impact and the perceived value of new innovative models of Jewish education, through parent focus groups and one-to-one interviews. This report shares the findings from the focus groups and interviews with parents, all of whom had children in the new models, and in many cases were participants themselves in the models.

With the leadership of director Cyd Weissman and project manager Rabbi Michael Mellen, ICW Consulting Group interviewed 85 parents from 12 synagogues. Educational directors from the 12 congregations worked closely with The Jewish Education Project and ICW Consulting to organize parental involvement. By opening their doors without pre-conditions, these directors enabled this study to be completed. Because these new models work with young children and do not use traditional methods associated with schooling (i.e. tests), it was agreed that parents would be the best informants about impact the families experienced. The focus groups asked parents about the particular model they were involved with and what impact it had on their children, their families and themselves. Impact was defined as some visible behavior observed by parents that was an indicator that directly or indirectly related to intent and action of the new model. We also explored how parents and children valued these new models. The lessons learned from these interviews were illuminating both with regard to the impact of the new models and the new questions that emerged for further exploration.

Descriptions of the 12 models in the impact study appear in Appendix 2 of this report. To maintain confidentiality for the participating parents and congregations, this report does not make reference to particular models or congregations. Instead the term "model" is used, which should be understood to mean a regular, yearlong educational program in which the children (and sometimes their parents) participate. All of the new models are alternative programs to traditional congregational education models (religious school).

Note to Readers: It is important to understand that this report is intended to show the impact of the particular models investigated, experienced by the specific people who participated in the focus groups. The findings in this report are not intended to be recommendations that would work for all congregations or all families. Quite the opposite, while we believe these models can work in other settings and with other synagogues, we also found that in many cases the impact experienced was due to the model fitting the needs of the families in the community. Therefore, an important lesson for any congregation or organization considering implementing a new model of Jewish education is to carefully consider the needs, hopes, and dreams of the families that belong to the institution.

METHODOLOGY

Consultants from ICW Consulting Group interviewed 85 parents from 12 synagogues. Education Directors recruited parents for focus groups based on guidelines offered by The Jewish Education Project. The criteria were framed as follows:

- Parents or primary guardians who have a child in the model, preferably those who have had their child <u>in the model for at least one year</u>.
- Parents who are articulate and are comfortable discussing opinions and issues in a group setting.
- A diverse set of responses that are representative of the family units present in your congregation (i.e., moms, dads, primary caretakers, etc.).

Jamie Betesh, Associate Director of Strategic Research and Insights at The Jewish Education Project, developed the focus group guide, see Appendix 1, in consultation with a number of The Jewish Education Project team members and outside consultants. In September 2014, The Jewish Education Project assembled a group of key advisers to provide guidance on how to approach the focus groups and what questions to ask. The following people supported Ms. Betesh in developing the guide and/or participated in the day-long session: David Bryfman, Ph.D., Chief Innovation Officer; Abby Knopp, Chief Operating Officer; Rabbi Michael Mellen, Communal Education Consultant; Nancy Parkes, Education Director at Temple Israel Center; Bill Robinson, Ph.D., Dean of Davidson Graduate School; Jessica Rothbart, Project Manager; Evie Rotstein, Ph.D., Director of New York School of Education at HUC-JIR; Bob Sherman, Chief Executive Officer; Rabbi Jodie Siff, Associate Rabbi and Education Director at Reconstructionist Synagogue of the North Shore; Ilene Wasserman, Ph.D., Founder and President of ICW Consulting; Rob Weinberg, Ph.D., Director of the Experiment in Congregational Education; Cyd Weissman, Director of Innovation in Congregational Learning; Meredith Woocher, Ph.D., independent consultant; and Jonathan Woocher, Ph.D., President of the Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah.

Facilitators used the focus group interview guide (see Appendix 1) to explore what kinds of impact children and their families experienced from the models. The focus group guide asked about what impact the particular model with which the respondents were involved had on their children, their family and themselves. Impact was defined as some visible behavior and/or action-based example that directly or indirectly related to intent and action of the new model. Education directors recruited parents for focus groups. The guide began with a set of questions that were designed to help facilitators connect with parents and learn about their family lives. The questions also invited parents to think about their own hopes and dreams for their children and to relate that to their choice of congregation and particular program. As with standard focus group practice, the opening questions

were intended to help create the conditions for parents to open up about their experiences with the model and with the synagogue community. Parents were encouraged to be in touch with the staff from ICW Consulting after the interviews if they had any further thoughts they wanted to share.

Originally, ICW intended to collect all data through focus groups in order to elicit feedback efficiently from parents across the 12 congregations. In special circumstances where scheduling was challenging (e.g., weather issues), ICW conducted one-on-one interviews with parents instead. The Jewish Education Project determined that parents, rather than the children themselves, would be the best focus group participants because they would be better able to express their thoughts and reflections in relation to the types of questions being asked in this research. Overall, parents responded very favorably to the invitation to share their stories.

FINDINGS

This report is organized into two types of findings of impact:
- *Overall Impact Findings – four key impact findings*
- *Model-Related Impact Findings – findings that are related specifically to model types.*

The format of this report follows a pattern of identifying key findings, followed by an explanation of that finding, which are then followed by quotes, presented in italics, taken directly from parents during the focus groups and interviews. This pattern is used for overall impact findings as well as impact findings for specific model types. The end of the report also includes additional findings that do not address impact per se, but were nonetheless important to report.

Overall Impact Findings

Across the twelve models in the Impact Now project, researchers identified four types of impact that families experienced. As to be expected, these impacts were experienced in varying degrees in different model types and communities. However these four stood out across the models. The next section will examine impacts experienced in specific model types.

➢ **Finding #1: Children are Learning and They Enjoy It**

Parents in the focus groups described their children's experiences positively. Although the prevailing narrative of congregational learning is often negative, these parents had a very different story to tell. Respondents, across the board, expressed that their children were engaged, wanted to learn, and said things like: "I don't want to miss it."

- *My kids like to come. They really have created a powerful community here.*
- *I see a difference in that she never says she doesn't want to go. "Is it a [model] day?" I never have to torture her about practicing [Hebrew]… So different from when I was a kid.*
- *At first kids did not want to go, but now there's more excitement. When you have a beautiful person running a program it shows through. Having them [younger kids] move and be experiential after school is great.*
- *Teaching through skits and sketches based in the Torah is fun and accessible; prayers are interwoven. Learning doesn't seem like part of religious school – it is accessible and children don't even realize they are learning.*
- *Most of the kids have to be serious in school during the week; this is a nice change of pace for them.*

- *This is not the way I was raised (that Shul could be fun and relaxed). When I was raised, I had to go to Shul just because that is what we did. Here, the kids want to go.*

Not only did parents report that their children enjoyed their learning experiences in the new models, many also reported that their children have absorbed what they learned and applied it in various settings. Some parents shared examples of their children applying values that they learned in the models in real-life settings.

- *I feel like all of the lessons and values they are teaching get reinforced with real, everyday modern examples. And they can all bring to the table their experiences that can relate to that. And they are taught the Hebrew word for that, which I never knew.*
- *I have seen a development from understanding the situation to asking now: "What can we do?"*
- *We found $91 in the parking lot the other day. We spoke about it and the first reaction of the kids was to use it to buy a new toy. First we went into stores and told them we found it. Then the kids decided to buy supplies [for a shelter]. We made a trip out of buying this and delivering it [to the shelter].*

Other parents shared stories of witnessing their children's learning. Parents had the opportunity to see their children's learning first-hand in the models that engaged parents in the models or in the online-technology models where parents listened in to the sessions.

- *In the beginning I used to sit on the couch and read the NYT and listen in [while my child participated in online learning sessions]. There are great topics: how to be a good person, lead a good life. It didn't feel like Hebrew school.*
- *In the end, I think that children learn their behaviors from their parents. This does relate to [the model] because I am showing them how to do mitzvot and they see me there along side them. I don't believe in drop off. If they have to be there, I am there, too.*

> **Finding #2: Parents Value the New Models**

Across the focus groups, parents reported a high level of satisfaction with the new models. More than just satisfaction, parents highly valued the new models. This finding was quite apparent in how they shared their children's positive experiences, their own experiences (when they were themselves involved in the models), and their new relationships with educators and clergy. In many cases, parents made new and/or greater commitments in order to make it possible for their families to participate in the models.

Parents contrasted their childhood experiences with Jewish education with the experiences of their own children. While some parents had positive experiences of Jewish education growing up, many more shared negative experiences, such as how little they felt they learned in Hebrew school for the amount of time they invested. These same parents reported that their children have had overall positive experiences and have learned more in less time per week.

- *I feel enveloped by Judaism and connection to Temple that I didn't feel growing up.*
- *I went [to Hebrew school] for 6 hours a week, and I did not get the deep knowledge that I hoped. I came away not liking to go to services. I think that my 10 year-old knows more history, more about the holidays, and the prayers than I knew after all of that time invested.*
- *I went [to Hebrew school] and hated it. And my children love it and are happy.*

Those parents who are engaged directly in the learning, reported high satisfaction with their involvement in the models. Some of the models engage parents occasionally throughout the year; others engage parents for most or all of the learning sessions. Parents appreciate spending time with the clergy, advancing their own Jewish learning, and spending time with their children and spouses.

- *The first time I 'had to go' and didn't want to go. [The cantor] ran the adult learning group and it was the fastest hour and then the kids were coming.*
- *My spouse has been studying for Bar Mitzvah and will become Bar Mitzvah. [The model] gave him the exposure. It was a real influence on family.*
- *I love the opportunity to learn with people in my age group and the educators are so great.*
- *It's all tied together between the parents and the classroom. It's relevant!*

When parents reported their satisfaction with the models – both for their children and for themselves – their reasoning was closely tied to their appreciation for the educators and clergy who led the sessions. They appreciated how the educators paid close attention to their children's specific needs. Clearly staffing matters when determining impact and satisfaction.

- *[The educator] has this unprecedented ability to give kids something to do that they like and drawing the kids in... I watched him this last Sunday take a few high school kids – they were standing there not looking happy – and he said, "I want you to do this and this and this." And split them up and engaged them. They went from being sad to being really involved and happy.*
- *[The educators are] attentive to individual children's needs, not just in passing, but through observation and action. This is true of children with special needs and with children who are more motivated or knowledgeable.*

Interestingly, many of the models in this study required more from parents than traditional models (school). For example, a model might meet on a Sunday evening to accommodate schedules, but that model would also require parents to be full participants in the model (instead of dropping off the children). Or in another example, children meet primarily online for maximum flexibility, but the family is also required to attend Shabbat gatherings regularly in person. These two seemingly opposite qualities – flexibility and asking more of parents – often manifested in the significant impact of parents changing the rhythms of their lives, and enjoying it. Some parents talked about how they organized their family time in coordination with the model. While many of the families were first attracted to the model because of its flexibility, they also told stories about how they had changed their routines to align with Jewish learning in ways they had not anticipated. Some also found that the community activities helped them structure their family time.

- *I love that we end at 5:30 on Sundays. I love 5:25–5:40. It's really a great time for winding down the week. My kid goes in whining and screaming and by the end is so happy with friends. I love the feeling that says, "This is the way we close the week." Something nice about that continuity. Notice change in light to darkness across the seasons. We start with jackets and it's pitch dark, and then, it's light out and really warm and we are able to get ice cream after.*
- *If you had told me 8 years later that I would be so involved, I would have said, "Who are you kidding?"*

In a few cases, parents reported that they chose the model because it asked more of them. The parents wanted to be involved in their children's learning experiences. Some working parents appreciated the opportunity to spend meaningful time with their children. For example, one parent explained:

- *Part of the reason [I signed up for this model] is that I want to experience it with him. I don't want to just drop off. I don't want to dump and indoctrinate. People really connect.*

> **Finding #3: Children are Building and Strengthening Relationships**

Across the twelve models in this study, parents reported that their children built new relationships or strengthened existing ones. These relationships fell into four categories: child to educator, child to older child, child to peer, and child to family members. Regardless of category, parents had very positive language to describe these relationships. In many cases, parents discussed their children's relationships as a new kind of impact or experience, a change from traditional congregational education.

Child to Educator. Many parents spoke enthusiastically about "accessible" teachers and clergy. For some, it provided personal access to clergy that they had not felt before. For others, it made a difference that the educators reached out to families, took care to include every child, and made it clear that they really knew the children. Models often had small group and customized learning which supported the relationship building between educator and student. Informal settings like homes or holiday celebrations also fostered these relationships which contrast with the more formal mores of a classroom.

- *Within the religious school, especially with [the director], it has been more than welcome and incredibly supportive. [My] children feel connected in some way.*
- *Even though it's a massive operation, you feel like you get special attention. Doesn't feel like a factory.*

Child to Older Child. In some models, children spent time with children in different age cohorts, such as teens. Parents spoke positively about their children developing relationships with teens or other age cohorts.

- *I do want to share one very touching moment that happened recently during the Purim carnival. I was working with my daughter and some little girl comes up and hugs her! My daughter was so happy for this hug and she then let me know that this is her buddy. I was so happy to hear and see the lovely relationship she has with this younger girl.*
- *[The model] is led by teens who are positive role models. Seeing children who are older and engaged with a positive role model. Group of teens going out to do charitable work, great role models.*

Child to Peer. Many parents spoke about developing a sense of community and appreciated that their children had friends in the models. In some cases, the friendships were pre-existing from secular schools and were strengthened through the model. In other cases, the friendships developed in the model itself.

- *Going to Temple is not a chore. Our kids are happy to go to see their friends.*
- *Depending on the week, our kids don't want to sit with us [during* tefila*]; they want to sit with friends. That's really nice.*
- *Our kids all know each other and they are friends.*

Child to Family Members. In models that included families – as either regular or occasional participants – parents reported that their relationships with their children were strengthened through new kinds of interactions or understandings of one another. For example, parents reported that the models opened up conversations about faith and values that they had not had with their children before. They also spoke about witnessing their children as Jewish learners for the first time. Parents often noted that even when they were not the designated learners, learning came home in a way that engaged them. For example, parents spoke about discussing values learned in the model at home. They also spoke about doing acts of *tzedakah* as a result of what their children had learned.

- *[During the model,] we really connect with each other [me and my child].*
- *We struggle to find a place with [our interfaith] marriage and find a place with ourselves and be on Jewish journey with our children. This is THE place because it's not drop off and pick up. Judaism and God are important issues and there are no right or wrong answers. Being on this journey together. Peace in our home and going on this journey together.*
- *It's a challenge, but you work as a family. The [model] experience with b'nai mitzvah- it's not the kids doing it alone, but it's doing it together.*

> **Finding #4: Families Feel Comfortable and Cared For**

Parents throughout the focus groups used the word "comfortable." They reported hoping their children would feel comfortable in Jewish spaces, with Jewish people, with Jewish liturgy, and generally in Jewish experiences. Parents reported that they and their children indeed felt comfortable in the new models and also felt cared for, a closely related feeling.

- *[In the model], it was a whole family connection and worked together as a family unit. Makes it feel like home.*
- *My kids are already comfortable and singing all the prayers. They could walk into any temple and recognize the songs and traditions of the services.*

Feeling comfortable and cared about was related in many cases to one of the following three attributes. First, the structures of the models helped children and educators spend time in smaller groups or one-on-one, which helped them more easily get to know one another, either online or in person. Second, engaging in their own learning helped the parents themselves feel seen and heard and helped the educators to learn more about the children. And third, the flexibility of the models helped parents feel like their diverse needs were cared about and being met by the congregation.

Get to know one another. The models in this study employed a variety of approaches to create one-on-one or small-group time with educators. The personalized attention helped children and parents alike feel cared for and comfortable. For many of the models this happened through the use of technology, either in small group learning online or private online tutoring. Although one might assume that technology would lessen relationships, these online learning sessions were designed to offer close attention to each individual child, bringing them closer to their educators and less able to hide – so to speak – in the classroom.

- *[The teacher] is so special and so warm. Everyone is involved and knows your children so well.*
- *There's never any grief (from my kid) about going to the computer. I hear lots of giggling. Each of the Skype teachers has gotten to know my kids. The teacher knows about each kid.*

- *[The teacher] wants to talk with parents. He gets to know child and parents. He even talked to my older son when we weren't home. He asked my 12 year-old if we were home. He said we weren't. So, [the teacher] asked to speak with his older brother.*

In other cases, the models changed the roles of the educators to include personalized attention to learners. Many parents described the great lengths to which the educators went to take care of their learners.

- *[My child's teacher] seeks out parents. He gets to know the child and parents. He even talked to my older son when we weren't home. (After the session he asked to speak with us. When he heard we were not home, he asked to speak with my older son.)*
- *[The educator] has this unprecedented ability to give kids something to do that they like and drawing the kids in… I watched him this last Sunday take a few high school kids – they were standing there not looking happy – and he said, "I want you to do this and this and this." And split them up and engaged them. They went from being sad to being really involved and happy.*

Engaging Parents. Parents also reported feeling cared about as a result of getting to know other families and staff through regular learning. For example, one family told their story of a tragic loss that they experienced. They shared the multiple ways that the other families in the model had cared for them including bringing food and visiting.

The learning experiences designed to engage parents were notable for parents. In many cases, parents had little Jewish education, did not remember much from their own Jewish education, or were not raised as Jews. In these cases, they were able to support their children's learning because they were also gaining a foundation. For other parents, they were happy to have the opportunity to advance their own learning and appreciated the congregation recognizing that wish.

- *I like when rabbis and cantors talk with us in adult ed… They join the education experience and they are on the same level. We're having a normal conversation and connecting with them. It's nice to feel that I learned something and to hear different people's views.*
- *I grew up without meaning; my husband was kicked out at 11 years old because he missed too many [sessions]. He never had a bar mitzvah. It was important to do something together. He wanted to have a positive experience. Even just he and I doing Torah together is really great.*

Flexibility. Most of the models in this study offered flexibility in some way when compared with traditional congregational education. The flexibility accommodated families' needs in new ways by offering alternative days and times of the week for learning, fewer required days each month, and technology options to login from anywhere. The flexibility offered by these models also helped children, and sometimes parents, engage in Jewish learning where they might not otherwise have been able to do so. For some, this had to do with scheduling and logistical issues. For others, children were more comfortable for a variety of reasons, such as feeling better with their parents in the room, going at a quicker pace in a one-on-one setting, or feeling more confident logging in from their homes.

- *My daughter is very shy. The idea that I'd be dropping her at another place was tough. [This is a] great alternative for a child who needs it 'softer.'*
- *We were supposed to commit to many things, but there was a lot of flexibility. There was a lot of acceptance. The expectations were laid out at the beginning – 8 events and the online learning. There was total acceptance even if you were not able to "live up to all of it." They were so glad you were participating and a part of this. It was run really, really*

well. In Judaism, you are not allowed to shame anyone and they modeled this. They were glad for what you could do.

Impact Findings by Model Type

This section looks at six types of models included in the Impact Now project. The impacts in this section are those that the parents highlighted consistently within model types. Each type of model includes data from two congregations. For descriptions of the 12 congregational models, read Appendix 2.

Model Types:

Camp/Chavurah: Community Synagogue of Rye (Chavurah) and Temple Israel New Rochelle (Chavayah)

Shabbat: The Reconstructionist Synagogue of the North Shore (Shabbat School) and Congregation Beth Am Israel (Beit Midrash)

Online/Blended: Temple Beth El of Great Neck (HEBREWTime and FACETime) and Temple Israel of the City of New York (TILearn)

Family: Park Avenue Synagogue (The Covenanting Group) and Temple Shaaray Tefila (MASA)

Cross-Congregational: Temple Israel Center of White Plains (Shorashim) and Merrick Jewish Centre (Family Mitzvah Day)

Intergenerational: Temple Beth Sholom, Roslyn (Yedidim) and Temple Emanu-El of New York City (Tribes)

The Camp/Chavurah Model

Model Definition

The *Camp/Chavurah* models primarily focused on regular use of camp-inspired, camp-like, or small-community learning. This may include change in language (e.g. madrichim instead of teachers), a shift in location (e.g. meeting outdoors instead of classroom), a focus on relationship building, cross-age role models, or a change in type of learning (active hands on learning) that moves towards learner questions or camp-like community focused experience.

Camp/Chavurah Models:

Community Synagogue of Rye (CSR): Chavurah and Temple Israel New Rochelle (TINR): Chavaya

Impacts of the Camp/Chavurah Models

The *Camp/Chavurah* models placed heavy emphasis on building micro-communities with cohorts. The emphasis on community resulted in two kinds of impact: new and strengthened relationships as well as children feeling deeper Jewish identity and pride.

> ➢ **#1: Children Build Relationships with Peers, Staff, and Family Members**

These models, which focus heavily on building community among the learners, have been successful in building and strengthening relationships between children and three groups: 1) their peers, 2) educators and other participating synagogue staff, and 3) their own family members.

- *My kids like to come. They really have created a powerful community here.*
- *This is a community and a place you go for additional support.*

Some of the parents reported how the communities developed through the synagogue helped the children connect to other students whom they would not otherwise have known due to attendance at different secular schools.

- *The kids from [our city] don't really know one another. In [our model] it's been great to have [this city's] Jewish kids to connect with. It feels like a community.*
- *[Our model] is good for kids to bond with other Jewish kids in [our city].*

Parents reported that the quality of their children's connections was influenced by group size. Smaller groups were more conducive to forging connections.

- *My daughter had a great experience. She's still friends with all five kids. She was in a small group. We did group Shabbats together and still get together. With my son it took longer; it was a larger group.*
- *One group was just too big. Couldn't name all the parents. And no one is inviting families for Shabbat [like the smaller groups did].*

> ➢ **#2: Children Strengthen Jewish Identity and Pride**

Parents reported in the focus groups that they looked to their synagogue to help their children develop Jewish identities and feelings of pride in being Jewish. Similarly, parents in the *Camp/Chavurah* models reported that the models had an impact on identity and pride for their children.

- *I like the idea that they [the educators] have prioritized instilling a love of being Jewish and being a part of the Jewish community. And from this you can spring to many different branches and range.*

- *When someone says something about the Jews, I see my daughter proud and wanting to defend her faith. My daughter has a small confident identity.*
- *[The model] reinforces the children's Jewish identity.*
- *My older son takes s*** for being Jewish in [our city]. But my son won't back down and says, "I'm a Jew." Even if it's not easy.*
- *Sense of belonging. It's a place that reinforces identity as Jewish.*

Related to Jewish identity, parents spoke about the emphasis of Jewish values in the *Camp/Chavurah* models. Respondents especially noticed their children understanding these values through learning experiences that connected Jewish texts with social justice projects and/or helped the learners understand how the values played out in real life.

- *My younger son really liked it. He said, "Can I do it again?" He wanted to connect with the social justice experiences of his older, high-school-aged brother.*
- *Even at a young age they are teaching the children good values, helping others. [They are learning that it's] important to focus on others rather than just themselves.*
- *My 7th grader likes to ask questions around ethics. For example: "What would you do if you found a $20 bill on the ground?" [Her camp] has also fed into this, brings it full circle in the summer.*

The Shabbat Model

Model Definition

The *Shabbat* models primarily focus on experiencing and living Shabbat. The models do more than simply change the time of school to Shabbat. Rather these models place Shabbat at the center of the learning experience. These models often focus on building relationships between young families and the larger congregational community.

Shabbat Models

The Reconstructionist Synagogue of the North Shore (RSNS): Shabbat School and Congregation Beth Am Israel (BAI), Penn Valley, Pennsylvania: Beit Midrash.

Impacts of the Shabbat Model

Traditionally, Shabbat has been observed primarily at home with family and friends. Similarly, the *Shabbat* models helped children to feel "at home" in the educational model and to feel stronger ties to their own family members.

> ➢ **#1: Children Feel at Home**

In the focus groups, parents shared that they and their children felt a strong sense of "home" and "family" in the *Shabbat* models, closely related to the community building on which the models focused.

- *This is home. We are a community of parents/families, not just children*
- *It's an opportunity for me to meet and socialize with other parents which likely wouldn't happen in a Drop and Drive system*

The *Shabbat* models seemed to have a greater impact on the sense of feeling known, seen, and heard, for both children and parents.

- *When a parent couldn't be present [for a family experience], the community knew and that child was embraced by the community.*
- *I wanted to be known at my child's bar/bat mitzvah – not to be someone that people looked at and said: Who is that?*

> ➢ **#2: Strengthened Relationships within Family Units**

Parents reported that the *Shabbat* models had impacts on their relationships with their own family members. One important component of the *Shabbat* models included in this study was how integrated the parents were in the learning. This integration afforded parents the opportunity to see their children in new ways and for children and parents to perceive each other as learners. Parents expressed deep appreciation for the power of coming together with their children to share what they each learned with one another.

- *I like it because I get to see my kids and see what they did and share what I did.*

- *Kids see us there and know it's for the whole family. There's no issue of hypocrisy about kids needing to be there but not parents.*
- *The kids enjoy joining the adults in the sanctuary on Shabbat.*

The Online/Blended Learning Model

Model Definition

The *Online/Blended Learning* models are those where technology or online elements are a central tool used in learning. These models often feature regular online (e.g., Skype, Hangout, WebEx) learning components. They may also include increased use of technology during in-person educational experiences. While technology or online experiences are at the center, these models also have meaningful in-person experiences. Blended learning models enable learners to experience in-person and online learning.

Online/Blended Learning Model

Temple Beth El of Great Neck (TBE): HEBREWTime and FACETime and Temple Israel of the City of New York (TINYC): TILearn.

Impacts of the Online/Blended Learning Models

While the *Online/Blended Learning* models highlight the technological approaches to learning, the impact was notably related to the integration of technology or online "distance learning" with in-person activities. Additionally, the technology helped families find new ways to engage in Jewish learning where they might not have otherwise and, in some cases, improve the learning experience for their children.

> ➤ **#1: Children Find More Opportunities for Engagement**

The *Online/Blended Learning* models alleviated logistical burdens for families by allowing them to login from anywhere and in some cases anytime. This convenience led to additional impact for the learners. For some, it allowed them to engage in Jewish education where their schedules might have otherwise prevented them. Additionally, parents reported that some of their children felt more comfortable with technology and they were more engaged than they had been in classrooms.

- *No impact is taken away — maybe it's even added — that they were seeing this in their own spaces, from their own perspective. They were drawn in, captivated by that.*
- *So for her, online is a safer space since she's a shy quiet kid.*
- *I could not otherwise get my kid there.*
- *School doesn't interrupt my kid's life.*

> ➤ **#2: Online Setting Improves Learning Experience**

Parents reported that their children in *Online/Blended Learning* models had better learning experiences that in previous classroom settings. For some, this had to do with the one-on-one approach (Skype). For others, the online format allowed them to feel relaxed during the learning. Many parents felt that their children were learning better through the online program because they were better able to focus and were not distracted by some of the behavioral issues that are more prevalent in the classroom.

- *Your children are seen. It's harder to tune out.*
- *My daughter is easily distracted by other kids, so she gets more focus staring at the computer screen once every five weeks than she would sitting in class with other kids twice a week.*
- *The Skype teachers [one-on-one learning] tell their cooperating Hebrew teachers what the kids are having trouble with and provide mnemonics for the reading.*

The online learning components also gave some parents the opportunity to find out more about the learning experiences by listening in. Other parents reported that their children liked keeping the online learning time to themselves and that it felt special for them.

- *She does it in the living room, in the corner of the office, her feet are up on the desk - and when I come in with breakfast she says "get out of the camera you are in PJs!" In the beginning I used to sit on the couch and read the NYT and listen in. There are great topics- how to be a good person, lead a good life - it didn't feel like Hebrew school.*
- *I haven't sat in this year at all but she logs in by herself. She wanted it to be her own.*
- *They [the children] take ownership over it.*
- *They feel like it's so special.*

> ➤ **#3: In-Person Time is a Priority**

The congregations with Technology/Blended Learning models have complementary in-person components. The in-person programs are required parts of the model and, in one of the congregations, actually created a greater total time commitment for the families than that of children in the traditional religious school model. The impact of that in-person time was clear from the focus group respondents. Parents shared that these programs offer quality time with their children and time to connect with other families.

- *We were hesitant to commit to Friday nights. But I look forward to this special time to spend with my two sons.*
- *One time my older son (who was the one in the program) was away and when Friday night came around, I dragged my younger one from the pool to go. These services have become the highlight of the week. We really look forward to it.*
- *It is nice to have time together with people that they don't see during the week in daily life. This fosters a nice sense of community and more time to get to know other members of the community.*

The Family Model

Model Definition:

The *Family* models primarily make engaging parents or other caretakers and children on a regular basis the focus of the ongoing educational experience. While the other models may have family components, the family experience is placed at the center of these approaches.

Family Models:

Park Avenue Synagogue (PAS): The Covenanting Group and Temple Shaaray Tefila (TST): MASA.

Impact of the Family Model

The *Family* models emphasized learning and living Judaism within the family unit. The parents in these models reported that in addition to learning with their children, they were building community with other families and organizing their family time around Jewish learning.

> ➤ **#1: Families Organize their Time Around Jewish Learning**

Parents reported that the *Family* models became important to the rhythm of their regular lives and that they organized their family time around the scheduled learning. Some parents specifically noted that they love having the community activity to structure their family time.

- *I love that we end at 5:30 on Sundays. I love 5:25 – 5:40. It's really a great time for winding down the week. My kid goes in whining and screaming and by the end he is so happy with friends. I love the feeling that says, "This is the way we close the week."*
- *[There is] something nice about that continuity. I notice change in light, [the change in] darkness across the seasons. We start with jackets [in the fall], and it's pitch dark, and then [in the spring] it's light out and really warm and we are able to get ice cream after.*
- *I enjoy that it is the end of the week. It is a sanctuary with family and friends. Singing songs that 50 years from now my kids will know. We block out 3:00 pm until bedtime. We finish at 5:30 and then go out to dinner together. It is like a family retreat.*
- *It has structured our Shabbat life.*

> ➤ **#2: Parents and Children Build Communities (Differently)**

Parents in the *Family* models reported a strong sense of community through these programs. Interestingly, parents reported experiencing community in different ways from their children. Parents appreciated the depth of connection they felt with other families. They reported that their children enjoyed the synagogue and family experiences, felt comfortable, and had friends.

- *We felt a deeper connection. The program connected you to so many different parts of synagogue…more face time with rabbi, educator, other families. It was a connection to the synagogue as a whole that you don't always get in the synagogue.*
- *People know your name and it adds a level of intimacy in a very big place.*
- *[My children] enjoy coming to synagogue. They like seeing friends, the feeling of coming back to a place that's comfortable.*
- *It is a family experience. My younger two come and are welcome… not just my one son going, but the whole family being involved and committed to learning and community.*

The Cross-Congregational Model

Model Definition:

The *Cross-Congregational* models primarily focused on developing relationships across various structures of the synagogue (services, youth group, formal educational experience, adult learning, connection to home and community) or across various sub-communities within a synagogue, in particular bridging between different age cohorts or generations.

Cross-Congregational Models

Temple Israel Center of White Plains, (TIC): Shorashim and Merrick Jewish Centre (MJC): Family Mitzvah Day.

Impact of the Cross-Congregational Model

By engaging different groups within the congregation and breaking down the silos often felt in congregational life, parents in the *Cross-Congregational* models reported that they developed new and/or stronger connections with synagogue professionals. They also reported observable development in their children's character

> ➤ **#1: Connections with Synagogue Professionals Foster Engagement**

In the *Cross-Congregational* models, children and parents are making deeper connections with their synagogue professionals – clergy and educators – through ongoing regularized learning experiences. Families not only build deeper connections with the professionals, but they also have more opportunities to build those connections through these models. These relationships in many cases led to greater engagement and participation from the families.

- *To have teachers who can both bring my kids out of their shell (in one case) or to contain them a little bit and to look out for them (in another case); to have such terrific teachers, my children WANT to go! What more would you want in life? My children want to go and want to learn and are so proud of themselves for learning. They put on their backpacks without hesitation with a positive attitude and expectation.*
- *Now when we go into the temple, my kids ask me to go into the Rabbi's office…or even when I am not there, my kids feel comfortable to go into visit the Rabbi in his office…and the teachers know my face and feel comfortable to talk to me about stuff…*
- *Now I see her [the educator] all the time too. She recently asked me to make Haroset with the kids. Because she knew me better, she felt comfortable going over to me to ask me to help.*

> ➤ **#2: Parents Notice their Children's Character Development**

Parents reported that their children in the *Cross-Congregational* models demonstrated observable character development. In particular, they spoke about empathy turned into action, such as a desire to do for others or buy for others. Parents also told stories of their children having more compassion for others whose situations are different from their own.

- *I notice that their questions are becoming more empathetic as time goes on. I have seen a development from understanding the situation to asking now: What can we do? This is key to building and keeping community. We are only here a certain time on this earth and there needs to be a new generation to carry on.*
- *My children were compassionate before, but [the model's programs] have brought them to a new level and depth of compassion.*

- *My kids come home from [the model] feeling like a million bucks. Now they have fun and really enjoy it. In time they will get even more out of it.*
- *Confidence. [The model] is making my children feel like they can do things, that they can make a difference. They feel good about themselves as human beings. When we leave, it is fun and exciting and you leave with knowledge and understanding of other people in other circumstances. And this is NOT something that you can learn in a book or from school.*
- *"Pride" is my word. I feel like this is the feeling that I get and my children get (from participating). You feel good about yourself and the community and the people that you are helping, to know that you can do things to give back and to be a better person. It is doable.*

The Intergenerational Model

Model Definition

The *Intergenerational* models primarily focused on developing relationships across different ages of children, often with an aim of deepening youth communities, providing older children or teens with meaningful leadership roles, or establishing generational role-models.

Intergenerational Models

Temple Beth Sholom, Roslyn (TBS): Yedidim and Temple Emanu-El of New York City (Emanu-El): Tribes.

Impacts of the Intergenerational Model

The *Intergenerational* models brought together children of different age groups. In these models, the children developed relationships with children in different age groups, which fostered a sense of community for them. For the older children involved in these models, they demonstrated ownership and commitment to the Jewish learning.

> ➢ **#1: Older Children Take Ownership and Responsibility**

In the *Intergenerational* models, the older children involved in the models – of varied ages – took on additional responsibilities. Many parents shared stories of how their children in these new roles perceive themselves as role models and see living up to the responsibility they took on as important. These children were so committed that parents shared many examples of their children choosing the congregational obligations over other competing commitments.

- *My son had a test in regular school that he had to study for today, but he really wanted to come into Hebrew school. He told me "this is my responsibility." He takes it seriously.*
- *My son is one of the leaders of [the model]. He feels responsible and is doing something. The sense of being a teacher (getting in front of younger kids), he feels responsibility. He feels proud of it and knows he has to prepare.*

> ➢ **#2: Cross-Age-Group Relationships Foster Community**

Parents talked about how relationships have been formed between younger children and older children. These relationships have fostered a sense of community within and across age cohorts.

- *This is just what they do here. The kids don't come home and tell me…it is just the way the culture is. These buddies become their special friends.*
- *I see the kids being able to establish their own community, just like we do as parents. They make friends that will stick with them.*

> ➢ **#3: Younger Children Have New, Positive Role Models**

Parents in the *Intergenerational* models reported that their younger children looked to the older children as role models. They also noted that the teenagers who participated in the models were positive role models because they were engaged in the congregation, participated in social action work, and took responsible leadership roles. This was all enhanced because the teenagers were perceived as "cool."

- *Seeing children who are older and engaged creates a positive role model for Jewish identity and belonging.*
- *A group of teens going out to do charitable work are great role models.*

- *Seeing older children stay connected makes it easy for the younger children to want to attend.*
- *They have a lot of high school volunteers and assistants who work in the school. My daughter loves these high school kids. They add a 'cool factor.'*
- *He thinks that it is cool that he has a mentor from an older grade.*

Additional Findings

This impact study was conducted to learn what kinds of impact families in new models of congregational Jewish education have experienced. The findings throughout this report reflect the impact that we learned about. As is to be expected, we learned many things throughout the process. Three findings listed below did not necessarily reflect impact (in the way we defined it) but we felt they were nonetheless important to share with leaders engaged in re-imagining Jewish education for our times.

> #1: There is Less Concern with "Substance" Where Communication is Stronger

When asked about their hopes and dreams for their children, two themes emerged from the focus group respondents: parents reported that they wanted their children to 1) be engaged and enjoy learning, and 2) to experience substantive and meaningful learning. Many parents struggled to see how substantive learning could also be engaging or fun. However, there were two categories of parents from the focus groups that did *not* express concern over substantive learning: 1) those who themselves were regular and active learners themselves in the models; and 2) those in congregations that paid careful attention to communicating with parents about the new kinds of learning their children would experience.

Because school is the prevailing model of education today, most parents do not have a well-developed understanding of how experiential and other learning approaches lead to substantive learning nor do they have a vocabulary or metrics to assess it. For example, one parent explained, "I hated it [Hebrew School] but could recite the 12 tribes. Here my kids are not able to recite the 12 tribes, but that is how I measure success."

The two categories of parents who did not express concern indicate that the more parents are aware of the content of and approach to the learning experiences – either through participation themselves or in very clear communication with educators – the more likely they are to understand the link between engaging "fun" learning and "substantive" learning. Work in the field demonstrates categorically that experiential learning and acquisition of knowledge do not have to be mutually exclusive.

> #2 Strong Leaders and Teacher Connections Support Impact

Parents in this study often mentioned particular educators, clergy, or staff involved in the models. For many parents, if not most, it was clear that *who* led the model mattered a great deal. Additionally, in many of the models, clergy took on additional roles, such as teaching or leading *tefila*. In some cases, it also seemed that the parents perceived that the clergy were around more, or became more accessible to the family through their participation in the model.

It was clear that the quality of the educators mattered a great deal to the parents. Many parents told stories of teachers or clergy who reached out specifically to their children or their family, who listened, and who made sure they felt comfortable and included in the community. Conversely, there were places where parents spoke highly of the model and were still critical of the staff, indicating that the staff mattered a great deal – good and bad.

> #3: Personalized Learning Supported Impact

As discussed in the Overview section, much of the impact of these models seemed closely related to how well they were designed to meet the needs of the particular community. Parents shared stories

about how their particular child's needs were being met. For example, one parent was happy to be able to participate with his child because she was very shy. In other examples, parents were happy that children were able to move at their own pace – both quickly and slowly – because of the individual attention from teachers. This theme – meeting individual needs – indicates that one size of education does not fit all. Instead, the models demonstrated impact where they were able to meet particular needs of families, including psychological and logistical needs. Some of these models were structured in such a way to meet these needs (i.e., online learning sessions) and others provided educators who paid close attention to families' needs and were able to adapt the learning to the particular participants.

Questions for Further Exploration

The parents in the Impact Now focus groups provided a tremendous amount of information about their families' experiences with the new models. As so often happens, questions inspired further questions. The following are a list of questions for further investigation regarding the new models.

> **What influence does the congregational community have on the success of the model (and vice versa)?**

In many instances, parents' experiences of the model were intertwined with their experiences of the congregation. When asked about the model, they talked about other aspects of the congregation, such as worship services. On the other hand, there were cases in which parents reported that they were satisfied with the educational model *despite* their dissatisfaction with the congregation. Further questions for exploration: To what extent do families that are satisfied with the congregational community find satisfaction in the model? To what extent do the models build community among families, such that they feel more satisfied with the congregation as a whole? In the case where families are dissatisfied with either the model or the larger congregation, how do those experiences influence one another?

> **What influence do the focus groups themselves have on parents' experiences and perceptions?**

Many parents offered positive feedback regarding the interview process. Further investigation is warranted to learn what impact these focus groups had on parents' experiences. How might adapting this process help congregations provide greater transparency and communication with parents, especially about their structures, content, philosophies, and intended outcomes?

> **What is the difference between online one-on-one tutoring (i.e. Skype) and other kinds of one-on-one learning?**

Parents in the focus groups were very satisfied with the Skype Hebrew lessons (for those that were utilizing the option). They reported that the children learned more, at their own pace, and felt known by their tutors. It was impossible in this project to separate out the impact of one-on-one tutoring and the flexibility of Skype. On one hand, a student is likely to learn very well in a one-on-one situation and it makes sense that s/he would feel a personal relationship with the teacher. On the other hand, Skype offers tremendous flexibility in time and location, which allowed the children to learn at a time and place of maximal convenience and comfort.

> **What helps parents expand their understanding of substantive learning for their children and themselves?**

As discussed earlier in the report, many parents felt two of their hopes for the children's learning were in tension with one another: that it be both fun and substantive. In two contexts, we noticed parents did not experience that tension – where parents were directly involved in the learning or where the congregation regularly and intentionally communicated with parents about the learning experiences and outcomes. This finding warrants much more investigation. If congregations would like to support their parents in expanding their understandings of what Jewish education looks and feels like as well as what the outcomes could be, then they should also know what methods are most effective toward that result. What kind of communication is most effective and about what? How involved in the learning must the parents be? What tools can be shared with children or with parents to better communicate or ask about the learning? What new vocabulary and yardsticks can help parents evaluate the success of new models more meaningfully and effectively?

CONCLUSIONS

The focus groups in the impact study with 85 parents from 12 congregations led to important findings of impact across the new models in the project and also specific to the six types of models included in the project. We can anticipate that the future of Jewish education in congregational settings is extremely bright if we are able to adapt learning models to the changing realities of our learners and their families.

New Models Make a Positive Impact

This study asked: "*What is the impact of new models of congregational education on learners?*" The answer came back clearly from parents that new models are having a positive impact. Parents who have children attending new models of congregational education, regardless of type, shared specific behaviors and attitudes expressed by their children that were attributable to engagement in the Jewish learning experience. Parents reported that their children are learning and enjoying the experience, are building and strengthening relationships, and families are increasing their Jewish connections and comfort with Judaism and the congregation. This positive narrative is in direct contrast to the negative story about congregational education that persists in the community. We can anticipate that the future of Jewish education in congregational settings can be extremely bright if we are able to adapt learning models to the changing realities of our learners and their families.

Parental Concern
With few exceptions, parents were concerned that the model they had chosen was not striking the right balance between content and engagement. Parents wanted their children to enjoy and be engaged, but more often worried they might not learn enough. This scenario was less likely to emerge when parents were engaged in the learning themselves or when the congregation was very careful to communicate expectations. Educational leaders and parents need to be in conversation to manage expectations. Disappointment in education may come in part from expectations, like "I want my child to speak Hebrew" while engaging in learning three hours a week. Shared conversations between parents and educational leaders will lead to more realistic expectations and expectations for what can be achieved.

Engaging Parents

The very act of asking parents about their hopes and dreams for their children's Jewish learning and living was a positive intervention. Parents consistently expressed appreciation for being invited to share their stories. Hearing other parents' stories was often a new and welcomed experience for parents. Educators may find that holding these kinds of conversations helps build partnerships, relationships and trust. Information emerges that can direct model development within a frame of appreciation as opposed to a culture of criticism. For example, one director heard how much parents appreciated the online learning and that they wanted more of it. This led the director to adjust the model and increase online time.

The involvement of the parents in these models was critical to the impact they created. There were many ways to involve parents – as learners themselves, through thoughtful communication, by making the learning transparent online, and by reaching out to the parents to make personal relationships. The parents in these focus groups expressed a strong desire for their children's Jewish educational experience to be different and better than their own. They wanted their children to be engaged, to have friends, and to have strong Jewish identities. Outcomes such as these are not achieved in a few hours a week. Parents must be active participants in their children's education in order to see these outcomes realized.

An additional challenge for the field is to bring this new story of Jewish education to the larger community. Educators are challenged to break the persistent negative narrative of congregational education. As Jeff Kress writes "Negative preconceptions and limited involvement constitute a negative feedback loop. Parents with a negative schema are unlikely to become involved…" (2007). This report reveals a positive schema held by parents and holds potential for greater involvement and for breaking the negative feedback loop associated with congregational education. Educators will often express the challenge of engaging parents. These new models show that it is possible to meaningfully engage parents and it is essential to achieve impact on learners.

Relationship Building is Core

Relationships were a key theme in the parents' discussions. They came up in many forms – community building, caring for and getting to know the individual children and families, bringing families together in new ways, and providing comfortable "space" (online and on-land) to connect. The more children and parents felt comfortable – a word used quite often by the parents – the better they were able to learn.

New models do not create impact in a vacuum. Repeatedly stories were shared about relationships with specific staff. Parents deeply appreciated their opportunities to get to know teachers, directors and clergy. They told stories of staff who reached out to them and attended to the specific needs and challenges of their children.

Implications for the Larger Synagogue Community

Today, synagogue leaders are challenged to find ways to engage members in meaningful ways. The stories parents told about connection, relationships and value can serve to inform synagogue leaders' quest to create vibrant congregations. These new educational models provide lessons learned for leaders seeking to increase congregational engagement across ages. Additionally, synagogue leadership could benefit from understanding the role that these new models play in achieving the

larger congregational mission. New educational models can serve as inviting doorways for adults, not just children, to Judaism and to the congregation.

More work to be done

Educational leadership can be encouraged to continue experimenting with new models of Jewish education. Change is possible. New educational models are making a positive difference. Changing an educational model takes dogged determinism. Having initial data that indicates the positive impact on learners should inspire the field as it moves to re-imagining the landscape of Jewish education. Educational leaders will need to be clear about their priorities and goals in their experimentation with models. No model meets all needs. Each model is best suited for specific impact.

"The Impact of New Models of Congregational Jewish Education," is a study that acts as a first step in understanding the impact on leaners that results from altering the multiple aspects of the Jewish educational model. *We've uncovered numerous additional questions for study including:*

- What influence does the congregational community have on the success of the model (and vice versa)?
- What influence do the focus groups themselves have on parents' experiences and perceptions?
- What is the difference between online one-on-one tutoring and other kinds of one-on-one learning?
- What helps parents expand their understanding of substantive learning for children and themselves?

Possibly one of the most important questions left is what are the tools that will help congregational leaders to identify and assess worthy impact on learners?

Appendix 1: Interview Guide

I. Introduction & warm-up   **3 minutes**
Interviewer will introduce him/herself and thank interviewee for his/her time.
Interviewer explains:
- The importance of gaining candid and honest opinions from respondents – no wrong answers
- The point of this research is to learn your perspective on these issues, so please be as honest and open as possible when sharing your point of view. While information will be shared, it will not be attributed to any one person.

Interviewer asks:
- Your children's names/ages, and tell us a quick story about the last time your child made you laugh.

II. Judaism Exploration   **4 minutes**
Interviewer asks:
- Let's start by telling me some of the things you like to do with your family. Tell me a little bit about your family, what you like to do together, etc. For example, what did you do last Saturday?
- I'd like to learn about your children and understand how they spend their time outside of school, what recreational activities they participate in (both organized, and unorganized)
- Now, we're going to switch gears a bit and talk a little bit more about Judaism and the role it plays in your lives.
    - Thinking about your family, what one Jewish event or moment do you feel is most meaningful to you? Take a moment to think about that.
        - What do you remember as being most meaningful to you?
    - Let's start by telling me some of the ways you currently express Judaism. What are some of your favorite "Jewish" things to do?
        - **Probe**: Activities, rituals, cultural things, values, connect with friends, eat food, attend services, belong to a shul, read books/sing songs, etc.
        - Are there things that you don't enjoy doing as much, but still do anyway?
        - How come you don't like them as much? And how come you do them anyway?
- Consider each of the Jewish experiences you talked about doing:
    - What do you and your family get out of doing each?
        - **Probe**: What is it adding to your family? What do you like most about this?
    - What motivated you to start doing this in the first place?
    - What benefits are you getting out of this (as a parent) and what benefits do you think your child is getting out of this?
- Thinking about religion when it comes to raising your children, how would you describe your hopes and dreams?
- Thinking about raising your children, what does it mean to raise your child Jewish (both looking back, and now)?
    - **Probe:** Observe holidays, go to synagogue, bar/bat mitzvah
- Thinking a little farther ahead, what's your vision for your children's future Jewish life? Adolescent Jewish life? Adult Jewish life?
    - **Probe:** For both general values and Jewish values
- Are there other "Jewish" things you hope to/plan to do with your family?

▪ **Probe**: Visit Israel, go to Jewish school, learn Hebrew, observe certain holidays, etc.

III. The Covenanting Group Exploration   5 minutes
Interviewer Explains:
- Now we're going to move on to our next topic: The Covenanting Group
- Your family is part of the Covenanting Group.

Interviewer Asks:
- Please, share your favorite thing about your child's experience with this group and your favorite thing about the family experience with this group.
- As best as you can, can you please describe your child's and your family's experience to me? What do you do there? Who do your children connect with? With whom do you connect? How do the members of your family feel about it when they're there? When they're home?
- Thinking back to when your child first started, can you tell me what motivated you to participate in the Covenanting Group? What did you hope you and your family would get out of it?
    - ▪ **Probe:** Life cycle events, Jewish knowledge, Jewish friendships, etc.
    - ▪ Who or what was influential in your decision process?
- What do you like most about the Covenanting Group experience? What motivates you to continue with your family?
- What, if anything, would you change about the experience? (**Allow them to speak about this then move the conversation along)**
- How would you say this experience is different than the other organized activities your child or family participates in? What benefits are you getting that you don't get from the others?
    - ▪ Probe: Can you tell me a story that shows what you've described?
- Thinking back to our conversation a few minutes ago about the hopes and dreams you have for your children, how do you (or don't you) feel the Covenanting Group is helping achieve your hopes and dreams?
    - ▪ Probe: Please, tell me a story that illustrates this?
    - ▪ Probe: How is it helping your child/children do the work of "growing up?"

IV. Impact Exploration   10 minutes
Interviewer Asks:
- Now, I'd love for you to share one word, sentence, or phrase, the ONE TOP BENEFIT OR IMPACT you feel your children or your family are getting out of the Covenanting Group experience. Please be as specific as possible…
- Now let's build on this. In your own words, can you describe what additional benefits or impacts you believe your child or your family is getting from this experience? What benefits are you getting as a parent?
    - ▪ **Probe:** What uniquely Jewish benefits? What general benefits? **(MODERATOR: SEPARATE THE TWO TYPES OF BENEFITS)**
    - ▪ **Probe: Please, tell a story about how what your family has done as part of the Covenanting Group has played out in your lives or in the life of your child?**
    - **FOR ALL BELOW- ASK PARENTS TO GIVE A BRIEF EXAMPLE**
- ▪ Knowledge and Skills – As a result of their experience, what do they <u>know</u> and what <u>skills</u> have they acquired?
    - ▪ What have they learned?

- What information do they reference?
- What knowledge do they seem to appreciate?
- What knowledge do you appreciate?
  - How do they show you they've learned something?
- **Doing and Action -** As a result of their experience, **what do they <u>do</u>?**
  - What actions have they taken/behaviors have they shown resulting from Hebrew School? **(Probe: Tikun Olam, Hebrew language, Mitzvot, etc.)**
  - What things are they doing with you as a family (led by you)?
  - What things are they doing on their own?
  - What things do they do that they seem happy about?
  - As their parent, what do you think motivates them to **do these things?**
- **Belief/Value – including Identity development** - As a result of their experience, **how do they <u>feel, what do they believe, how have their values been impacted</u>?**
  - What have you noticed (if anything) in the attitude of your children as a result of their experience? (Probe: more compassionate, accepting, open, etc.)
- **Relationships/belonging/community -** As a result of their experience, **who/how are they <u>connecting</u>?**
  - **To other peers**
    - What role do friends play in the Hebrew school experience?
    - How large or small a role does this play in motivating them to go/keeping them going?
    - How do they connect with their Hebrew School friends outside of Hebrew School?
    - How do they talk about their Hebrew School friends?
    - How are Hebrew School friends different than other friends?
  - **To mentors/teachers, etc.**
    - How are your children connecting with Hebrew School staff? (Including teachers, clergy, etc.)
      - **(PROBE: DO THEY KNOW THEIR NAMES, DO THEY TALK ABOUT THEM, ETC.)**
    - What benefit are they getting out of these relationships?
- We've covered a lot in terms of how The Covenanting Group is impacting your children, you and your family. Do you have anything to add that we didn't yet discuss? What other benefits do you notice or feel they've gotten?

V. Model Exploration (in relationship to other PAS experiences)   **5 minutes**
Interviewer Explains:
- We've been speaking at great length about your experience of TCG overall. Now I want to focus for just a few minutes on some specific elements of this.
- Your whole family is part of TCG program at this synagogue. Can you please tell me a little about how you made the choice to participate in this program in addition to the traditional Hebrew School track?
  - **Probe:** Less commitment/different type of commitment, timing, family focus, etc.
  - **Probe:** I'd love to hear the story
- In your own words, what's special about the TCG program? What do you think it adds to your child's educational experience? How has it impacted him/her/you beyond the walls of the synagogue?

- Now let's talk about the family aspect of the TCG program. How have you had the opportunity to connect with other families who live close by? What's good about doing this? What do you think it did/does for your family?
    - Probe: Please, share a story about these relationships.
- How have you had the opportunity to connect with the entire congregation? What benefit has this had? What do you think it did/does for your family?
    - Probe: Please, share a story about your relationship with the congregation.
- What are your thoughts on the time commitment for this program? How do you feel about this vs. the more traditional way of being in class 2 days per week?
- Finally, how do you, as parents, feel about being very involved in the program as learners and educators? What benefits do you feel? What challenges does this create?
    - Probe: Please, share a story about how you feel this has impacted you.

VI. Wrap Up   5 minutes
- Is there anything else you'd like to say/add about your children's Hebrew School experience?
- Is there anything else you'd like to add about your Jewish hopes and dreams for your children?
- Thanks so much for your time and valuable feedback.

Appendix 2: Congregational Model Descriptions by Model Type

Camp/Chavurah Models:

Community Synagogue of Rye: Chavurah

Chavurah is an alternative model from the traditional two-day per week model for learners in grades 5 to 7 and their families. *Chavurah* builds community through meaningful Jewish learning and lived experiences. Learners meet weekly with a *moreh derech* (guide/teacher) in each other's homes as well as around town at locations such as Starbucks and Whole Foods to explore Jewish answers to everyday questions. With no set curriculum, student questions and interests guide the sessions. In addition, there are monthly learning opportunities for the whole family, touch points throughout the year with the greater synagogue community and Hebrew tutoring via Skype.

Temple Israel of New Rochelle: Chavaya

Chavaya is a camp inspired model for all learners in grades K to12. *Chavaya* uses camp language, feel and hands-on approach throughout the educational experience to inspire their learners and engage them in their learning. The model is highlighted by a multi-age experience that divides students up into *eidot* (communities) and *baytim* (houses) to experience *chuggim* (electives) such as art, drama and music. Each *eidah* (community) comprises about 60 children from two consecutive grades (grades 3 and 4, etc.). Each *bayit* (house) has 12-15 mixed grade students from a single *eidah*.

Shabbat Models

Reconstructionist Synagogue of the North Shore: Shabbat School

The Shabbat School experience is an opt-in alternative family learning model for students in grades 1 to 6 and their families. Students come together two times a month on Saturday mornings and one time a month on a Friday evening to explore Torah through a number of different lenses including technology, art, drama, teva (nature), and pop culture. In addition, parents participate with children on one additional Saturday morning each month, beginning with separate learning for adults and children, then coming together for services and community time. Students also attend Tuesday afternoon for Hebrew instruction and school community programs.

Congregation Beth Am Israel: Beit Midrash

BAI's family-focused, Shabbat model (Beit Midrash) engages children and parents in learning, prayer and community every week. Beit Midrash takes place on Shabbat mornings. Children spend time with other children and their teachers and then come together with their parents and the broader community for parts of the morning service. The whole community is part of the Shabbat experience. Parent-led Torah study is a regular part of the experience, and family services are regularly scheduled on Shabbat.

Online/Blended Learning Model Descriptions

Temple Beth El of Great Neck: HEBREWTime and FACETime

Temple Beth El of Great Neck's Model has two components:HEBREWTime and FACETime. HEBREWtime is monthly one-on-one Hebrew tutoring for learners in grades 4 to 6. Families choose between in-person and Skype tutoring. The tutoring is personalized, focused on relationship, and allows for focused, ongoing tracking and assessment. FACEtime (Family and Children Engagement Time) is grounded in the teaching of Rabbi Nehorai that "the only way to truly understand Torah is to study as a community." Families with learners in grades 4 and 5 come together for ten Friday nights to experience the spirituality of Shabbat, the lessons of Torah, and the sanctity of tikkun olam (repairing the world).

Temple Israel of the City of New York: TILearn

TILearn integrates technology into every area of the learning community, including teaching instruction, student collaboration, student work, and evaluation. When students are on campus, teachers use SMART Board technology to actively engage students. Students learn during the weekdays by logging into a virtual classroom at home or anywhere they have access to a computer and the Internet. The TILearn program uses the Shalom Learning curriculum, specifically designed for this approach, which focuses on Jewish themes and modern day issues through Jewish values.

Family Model Descriptions:

Park Avenue Synagogue: The Covenanting Group

The Covenanting Group engages a group of families who are interested in developing deeper communal connections and engaging in ongoing parent/child learning. To do this, families commit or covenant to participate in the group. This includes a series of adult gatherings, a family retreat, family gatherings on Shabbat and at other times, and online learning for parents and students together.

Temple Shaaray Tefila: MASA

MASA is an alternative, camp-inspired, family learning model for learners in grades K to 5. Along with holidays, families come together primarily on Sunday afternoons approximately twice a month to learn in an informal, experiential environment. Gatherings include learning as a whole family as well as parallel learning with adults and children learning separately. Families choose between two different content tracks for a given year. Learning takes place in a variety of settings including the synagogue, sites around New York City and individual homes.

Cross-Congregational Model Descriptions:

Temple Israel Center: Shorashim

Shorashim aims to create a cross-congregational community, where children's learning and community live beyond twice per week classroom learning. Full-time community educators work with children learning Hebrew and Jewish studies in interactive, experiential modes. They also serve as service leaders, youth program advisors, and adult study leaders. Learners in Shorashim engage in learning in all facets of synagogue life, seeing and connecting with each other and with the community educators in each of these settings. This model encourages educators to go beyond the classroom by engaging learners at the synagogue, in home as well as in the community.

Merrick Jewish Centre: Family Mitzvah Day

Family Mitzvah Day is a monthly family experience that is focused on social action supported by storytelling on topics related to social justice. Families are introduced to key mitzvah concepts beginning with stories from older congregation members. The storytelling helps develop relationships between members and brings people in for Shabbat. Students can also earn badges for a variety of mitzvah focused activities.

Intergenerational Model Descriptions:

Temple Beth Sholom, Roslyn: Yedidim

Temple Beth Shalom's model, The Yedidim Program brings together three pairs of big brothers and sisters: Alef and Vav (grades 1 and 6), Bet and Daled (grades 2 and 4) and Gimmel and Hay (grades 3 and 5). The older students act as older "siblings" or "buddies" to the younger students as they pursue activities together. The intent of the program is for the pairs to learn to look out for each other, appreciate each other, enjoy doing Jewish and every day things together and to foster an overall feeling of belonging to a community that is larger than any one grade. The older students are prepared for their roles as madrichim – teachers or counselors - through leadership tips, lessons and conversations as preparation before working with the younger students.

Temple Emanu-El of New York City: Tribes

The Tribes model of Temple Emanu-El of New York City aims to build community and strengthen relationships among learners across grades. It creates an opportunity for learners to see teens in the Emanu-El community as Jewish role models. Rituals allow learners to feel like they are a part of a special, caring community within the larger school. Tribes is centered around weekly, twenty-five minute teen-led learning experiences built into the Jewish enrichment curriculum for learners in grades 3-5. Learners of different ages are integrated into four tribes, and engage in immersive activities to learn about Jewish values. Tribes is facilitated by teens (tribal chiefs), who design and implement the day's immersive activities.

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