

# CONCLUSIONS

While the partners in the Funder Collaborative were devoted to supporting a mosaic of diverse communities—10 initiatives each situated within a distinctive culture of Jewish education and Jewish community—their investments were neither separate from nor unrelated to one another. As we saw, the development of each initiative was part of a bigger picture with implications relevant to all 10 communities and beyond.

## **A COMMUNAL, RESOURCED “HOME” IS KEY TO SUSTAINABILITY**

A foundational question for all the initiatives was where within a community they each should be housed. As we have seen, there was no optimal location. There were advantages to being situated within a Federation, a body perceived to be genuinely cross-communal. This structure also placed initiatives in most cases close to their sources of funding, typically an advantage especially if the initiative was to be sustainable. But this was only a suitable scenario if the local Federation was positioned as a program provider or implementer, was staffed appropriately, and had an appetite for risk. Without such conditions, there was potential for confusion about whether the initiative was a service provider, a funding mechanism, or an implementer. With the demise of central agencies for Jewish education in most of the communities, few initiatives had the luxury of being situated in an institution mainly staffed by educators and identified as genuinely cross-communal. JCCs could fulfill that role in some communities, but they were not an optimal solution. These tensions offer a salutary lesson in what has been lost with the termination of so many central agencies and bureaus for Jewish education.

## **INSIDE THE BOX INNOVATION IS EFFECTIVE**

When it came to launching new programs, once it was determined where they should be located, the story of the various initiatives suggests that inside-the-box rather than outside-the-box innovation was more likely to survive and thrive. It was very difficult to sustain new programs and organizations created from scratch.

Across all 10 initiatives, no more than a handful of programs transitioned from genuine startup to well-positioned ongoing offering. And yet, almost every initiative can point to promising outcomes produced by tweaking and building on existing models.

Evaluator reports reveal how the expectation to innovate created pressure to start from scratch, to create new models, and—most prized of all—to uncover a magical solution not previously considered by the field. It was especially instructive to see how rarely such intentions yielded a truly sustainable product. Even if grounded in high-quality concepts, these “magical solutions” struggled to capture the attention of enough of the audience in a crowded marketplace. While programs might be able to withstand financial pressures resulting from undersubscription, they cannot maintain excitement around a program when there are only a few people in the room. It is difficult to resist market forces even with a strong appetite for risk inside any one organization or across the broader communal landscape. When programs can build on an existing brand name and can tap already established pipelines of potential recruits, they are not forced to sprint from a standing start. And when this is the case, they tend to go further.

## PILLARS AND PRINCIPLES RATHER THAN PROGRAMS CAN DRIVE CHANGE

In related fashion, we saw evidence that the most powerful ways to engineer the kind of far reaching change the Funder Collaborative sought depended less on the successful launch of new programs and experiences and more on addressing in systemic fashion the factors that previously inhibited success in this field: the difficulty of locating and involving unconnected young people and the relatively isolated, unsophisticated, and under-professionalized status and practice of those who work with them. While it was exciting to see the birth of new programs and new models, the efforts that have made the greatest difference to the teens’ experiences and that continue to have the best chance of being sustained over time are those that directly address these inhibitors in a deep-seated fashion.

The central pillars in the activities of the initiatives—what we called “treating teens as subjects, not objects” and “bringing youth professionals to the center”—

have potential to underpin a continued effort to educate and engage Jewish teens more deeply. Some of the tools employed to construct these pillars—such as teen microgrant initiatives and the more laissez faire approaches to stimulating professional learning—have proved less effective than hoped. Other tools have been more effective, especially the creation of community-level positions for educators who help teens navigate to well-matched programs, and the forming of venues and spaces for youth-serving professionals to convene and coordinate. Both of these tools fuse teen education and engagement efforts into a larger local whole. More important, the pillars (“treating teens as subjects, not objects” and “bringing youth professionals to the center”) constitute appropriate and promising strategies in and of themselves, regardless of the tools used. No doubt other tools could be developed for the same purposes.

## FOCUS ON THE HORSE AND THEN THE CART

Local initiatives were launched with the headline goal of increasing the number and diversity of Jewish teens that participate in Jewish programming. For many communities, success in their early years was all about moving the dial on these matters. This was fully aligned with these outcomes being the first two of the Funder Collaborative’s Measures of Success.

In retrospect, it seems that this was a case of putting the cart before the horse. Communities found how difficult it was to make headway with these teen recruitment objectives before they brought about change in other, more foundational ways. They found that the horse that pulls all else along was the quality of the youth professionals in their community. “Supporting Youth Professionals” had not been one of the Collaborative’s original Measures of Success; it was adopted after a few years at the prompting of the local initiatives. The initiatives found that if they could enhance the capacities of their youth professionals and provide the supports to enhance their work, then changes in teen recruitment would follow. Not only that, but if they also took steps to ensure the sustainability of their work (Measure 4), then they would be better prepared for the prolonged effort required to improve participation numbers over time. Once out on the dancefloor, they came to see how best to choreograph these various complex steps.

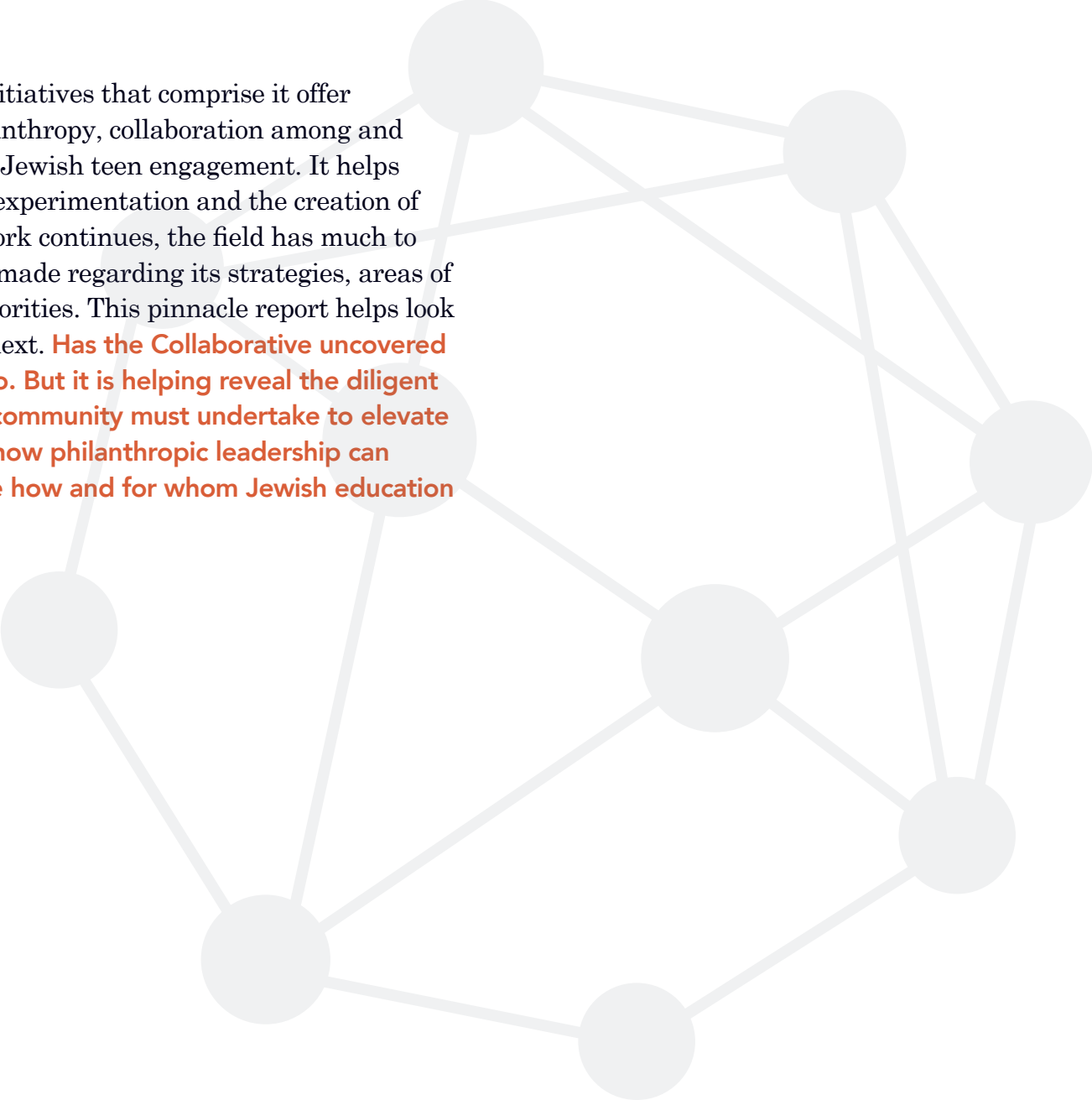


## GREATER COMMONALITY OF PRACTICE AND NOT JUST COMMONALITY OF PURPOSE CAN STRENGTHEN A MULTIPLIER EFFECT

The initiatives understandably reflect their local contexts, but they may have gained greater visibility and gathered more momentum if, on the ground, they had been better branded as part of a single effort, not just at the level of partner funders. They have shared a powerful common purpose but relatively few common practices.

This does not mean there should have been one central headquarters to run the initiatives; no evidence leads to that conclusion. But being more closely united under the same name and around a common, although not uniform, set of practices may have led to a stronger multiplier effect. While the jury is still out on relational strategies' influence on the increased involvement of unengaged teens, undoubtedly those who brought this program to their communities benefited from learning about the experiences of their peers with the program and were inspired by evidence of its successes. Few initiatives launched either identical programs or similar iterations on the same concept. If anything, it seems that appetite to innovate led initiatives to design their own unique offerings and not only adapt successful offerings from elsewhere. This was a case of “letting a thousand flowers bloom” as opposed to “transplanting seedlings.” While seedlings might have a uniform appearance, they usually survive much longer than flowers. It is noteworthy that today the Funder Collaborative is a more mature entity actively pursuing a scaling-up strategy to bring promising programs, practices, measures, and metrics from the 10 original communities to an increasing number of other communities in the country.





The Funder Collaborative and the 10 initiatives that comprise it offer important insights about strategic philanthropy, collaboration among and between funders and practitioners, and Jewish teen engagement. It helps clarify how to maximize the promise of experimentation and the creation of new educational models. Even as the work continues, the field has much to learn from the decisions each initiative made regarding its strategies, areas of focus, structures, and programmatic priorities. This pinnacle report helps look back and looks forward to what comes next. **Has the Collaborative uncovered a silver bullet for teen engagement? No. But it is helping reveal the diligent work and cooperative efforts that any community must undertake to elevate its Jewish teen offerings. It is showing how philanthropic leadership can catalyze investments seeking to change how and for whom Jewish education and engagement is practiced.**