

TO CREATE NEW PROGRAMS OR GROW EXISTING ONES?

The Funder Collaborative took shape out of a desire to repair a chronically underperforming segment of the Jewish education and engagement field. Fulfilling this desire did not necessarily require creating new educational models and experiences. In fact, the 2013

report that in part prompted the Funder Collaborative's formation, *Effective Strategies for Educating and Engaging Jewish Teens*, identified examples of scalable and innovative programs that engaged teens. The report's purpose was to provide a vision of what was possible for the field. Implicitly, it indicated that repairing the field did not mean creating programs from scratch. Programs and models already existed that could be applied to new contexts and communities.



There was a desire to seed new community-based experiments which might also take root. The overwhelming majority of the community initiatives began with an explicit intention to create new and innovative programs. In New York, the initiative's most visible goal was to create and incubate new models for summer experiences for teens. Chicago had a similar goal for spring break programs, as did Atlanta (in its first 18 months) for developing and stimulating 1–2-week content-based “intensives.” Denver-Boulder also initially looked to incubate new programs, doubling down on teen-initiated program concepts. And in the Bay Area, initiative leaders made clear from the start that their accelerator and microgrants were intended to enable innovation and experimentation—in other words, the creation of new programs.

This emphasis on innovation was driven by what the Funder Collaborative partners established as some of their primary goals for success. The Funder Collaborative's first Measure of Success was to “dramatically increase the number of teens in targeted geographic areas engaged in Jewish learning during their high school years;” its second was to “involve Jewish teens who come from diverse Jewish backgrounds.” Many community leaders assumed that these goals, and especially the second, could not be accomplished without developing genuinely new models and products for the field. How else could one imagine disrupting a situation that had been so disappointing for so long?

Within a couple of years, the initiatives modified their strategies in all cases referenced above. In a shift from outside-the-box to inside-the-box innovation, the second cohort to join New York's incubator was recruited from legacy organizations rather than from entirely new entities or partnerships. This new cohort included, for example, a slate of niche Israel experiences, each of which constituted a variation of a known entity. In Chicago, where newer programs repeatedly struggled to recruit participants and often could not run as result, the Initiative leaned more heavily on already well-established organizations. In Atlanta, halfway through the second year of the initiative, JumpSpark shifted its emphasis and also began to partner with and support existing teen programs; this effort gained greater traction than its previous focus on short-term “intensives” even while it continued to generate its own programming. In Denver-Boulder, large parts of the initiative's activities were consolidated around school-based clubs, a venture it supported in its first year that thrived and expanded. Finally, in the Bay Area, the initiative purposefully shifted in the second year from focusing on innovation to focusing on relational engagement, reflected in an evolving Theory of Change, grant offerings, and professional development offerings.

Those communities that started out with less radical aspirations saw steadier program growth over time. In Baltimore, the initiative started out by offering teens a mix of year-long program options, including some that already existed and some that were completely new. Only as the initiative's brand name, 4Front, became better known and its reputation deepened, did it expand its new program offerings. Progress was steadier once the initiative had gained some traction. On a different scale, but employing a similarly balanced approach, the Los Angeles initiative funded two cohorts of existing teen programs that included a mix of longer established and newer programs. This latter category included JQSA, a teen program of JQ International, and a Federation-led teen internship summer program with placements in Jewish organizations around the city.

These experiences underline how challenging it can be to create and sustain genuinely new programs. Out of the 14 programs in New York, just one, Sababa Surf Camp—a mix of Jewish spirituality and surfing—made the move from entirely new entity to ongoing enterprise. At the same time, another half a dozen programs that involved a mashup of already existing forms and frameworks—teen travel and internship experiences, social justice work, and travel—found their feet and are thriving. More progress was made with the adaptation of older products than with creating entirely new ones.

Across all 10 communities, the arc of change saw a move from establishing new products to establishing new practices that are no less consequential to teens' experiences. Thus, while new programs did not take off in Denver-Boulder quite as hoped, community professionals today celebrate the extent to which their offerings now give teens a voice in the design and delivery of their programming. This kind of recalibration and reinvention was just as meaningful in the Bay Area. Increasingly, innovation there meant *not* developing something new for the field; rather,

developing something new specifically for the participating organizations. For one organization, for example, empowering teen voices was a deeply meaningful innovation. For another organization, the innovation was meeting teens where they were, close to home, instead of drawing them out to their programs. In Boston, the consolidation of existing programs rather than the creation of new ones enabled a more efficient and coherent web of experiences for young people to take shape. In this instance, smart subtraction was just as valuable to the teen landscape as any addition might have been.

Taken together, these experiences challenge the notion that the choice for teen initiative leaders was either to create or to grow.

Positive change took different and sometimes unexpected forms. In the long run, more modest inside-the-box changes (i.e., intrapreneurial) proved to be more consequential for teens than some of the bolder efforts to change the landscape.

This conclusion is consistent with a perspective on educational change that suggests that tinkering with educational forms often yields more significant results than attempts to transform them. The changes that the initiatives ended up making, rather than those they had first intended to make, are more likely to meet another of the Funder Collaborative's Measures of Success—the aspiration that the initiatives' efforts are sustainable and scalable.

HOW MUCH OF A DIFFERENCE DID IT MAKE WHERE INITIATIVES WERE HOUSED?

A noteworthy facet of the initiatives' non-standardized construction is the different institutions that house each initiative in their communities. Some (Atlanta, Bay Area, Chicago, Los Angeles) operate out of community Federations, others (Baltimore, Cincinnati, San Diego) out of JCCs, and some within another entity, either preexisting (as in New York) or created specifically for these purposes (Boston, Denver-Boulder). These choices were often

complex, reflecting the need to balance multiple concerns: that the initiative's home be genuinely cross-communal and, if needed, an organizational hub (in some communities a problem with the JCC option); that it have a good chance of outliving the lifespan of grant funding (a problem with creating entirely new entities); and that it could function as home to a team of educators and organizers who would have credibility across the community (a problem in some Federations).

In a few instances, the "housing option" adopted ultimately failed or had ongoing challenges. And yet, these difficulties say less about whether a particular model could ever work and more about the application of the model to a particular context. In Cincinnati, for example, the housing of the teen initiative at the JCC was challenging from the start. The initiative had to continuously justify itself as a "community project" rather than the "J's project." These concerns made it difficult to engage local organizational partners, although over time the JCC formed new relationships with other youth-serving entities, such as synagogues. Similarly, 4Front Baltimore was established as a community-wide initiative housed and managed by the JCC. From the start, there was an inherent tension between the JCC serving as a site of active programming, on the one hand, and a provider of support to other organizations offering teen programming, on the other. With intention and significant effort, over time that tension resolved, and 4Front has become a hub around which teen programs have coalesced. The JCC functions today as a home for many of the initiative's newest programs, a palpable contribution to the community.

The inside-Federation model, where adopted, had the fewest challenges and also offered the best chance of achieving financial sustainability. But much depended on the existing structure of teen programming within the Federation and the level of stability of the Federation itself. The Los Angeles Federation, which houses its local initiative, already was positioned as a leader of teen programming

and further enhanced that position through its initiative. The Federation's size and community footprint enabled the initiative's sustainability, fundraising capabilities, and influence on Jewish community leaders, as well as its access to local and Federation talent. The only downside is that the Federation's visibility around Jewish teen engagement and Jewish teen wellness eclipsed or was perceived as competition for other organizations.

The Bay Area also benefited from its initiative being housed at the Federation, with an outside partner managing professional development. However, the full benefits of this housing structure were not initially apparent. With changes to key Federation personnel and the integration of the East Bay Federation with the San Francisco Federation, it was challenging to clarify the relationship between the initiative and other teen programs that already existed under the Federation. The initiative had to gain the trust of certain grantee organizations. With these process challenges now resolved, the teen agenda today is considered a pillar in the Federation's new strategic direction and an example of what is possible when the Federation works to build the capacity of its community to address a critical issue.

The most challenging model to establish and sustain was that of creating new institutional hubs for local initiatives. This approach was attempted in Denver-Boulder with the goal of establishing a new hub to facilitate connections between the new entities and the existing ecosystem. The new hub was discontinued after three years due to confusion about its role, territoriality, and staff turnover. Today, the initiative is situated under the roof of its local funding partner. This was a sound short-term move but one that will make it difficult in the long term to build grantee sustainability with no external candidate emerging to take leadership of the local teen ecosystem. A similar story played out in Boston, where the JTI (Jewish Teen Initiative) started out as an independent entity and has now been absorbed into Combined Jewish Philanthropies (CJP).