

LESSONS FROM THE PINNACLE

Coordinated Innovation
Shifts the Landscape
of Jewish Teen Education
& Engagement

DECEMBER 2021



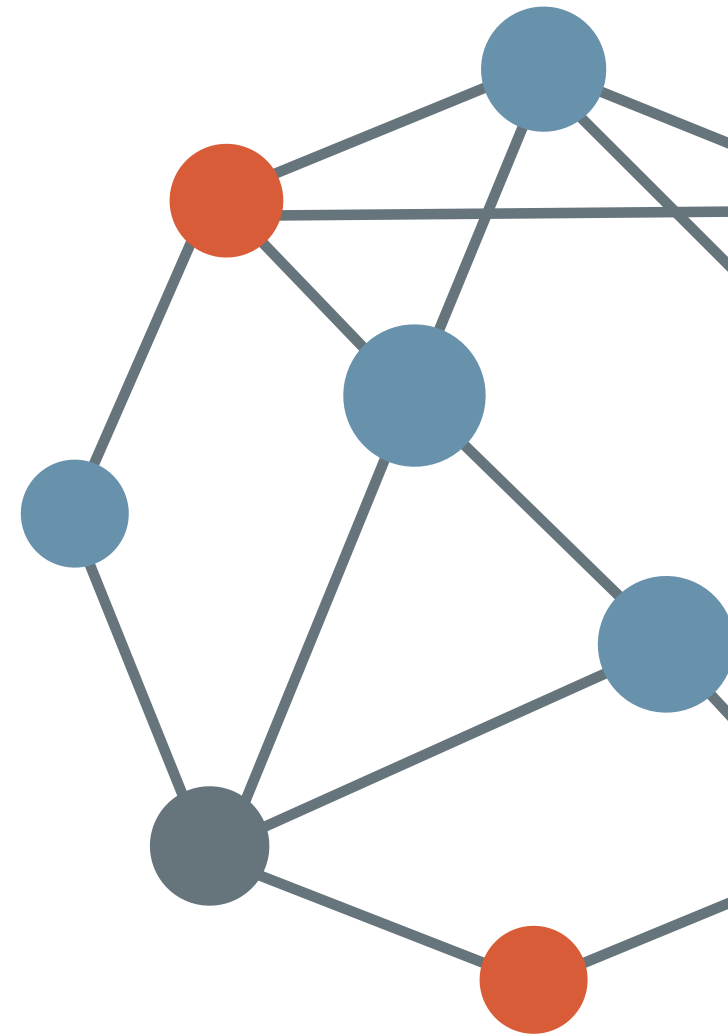
JEWISH TEEN
Education & Engagement
FUNDER COLLABORATIVE

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INTRODUCTION

It has been said that the most valuable perspective is the one you don't have. When it comes to Jewish teen engagement, I feel privileged to have viewed and influenced the landscape from multiple angles, acquiring important perspectives along the way. Creating 4Front Baltimore alongside my colleagues and funding partners was no easy task, but it offered an up-close view to the challenges and celebrations of this work. I'm grateful for those experiences on the ground and the constant engagement with teenaged participants and co-creators, their parents, and local youth professionals that such a position enabled. Cultivated and internalizing that empathy has served me well since transitioning to the balcony this past January, when I assumed a role with the Funder Collaborative itself. Here, I have the honor and task to hold the bigger picture, supporting the flow of work and sharing both progress and opportunities with our many interested friends and stakeholders. The pinnacle report on the Cross-Community Evaluation presented here is a unique sort of convergence of these two perspectives—and in many ways, conceptually at least, feels like a mirror to my own professional trajectory these past six years.

Our ancient rabbis suggested that a person should recite 100 blessings a day (Talmud Bavli, Menachot 43b). Those same scholars composed scores upon scores of such blessings, enabling people to fulfill this declared obligation. They authored blessings for nearly everything one could imagine, from once-in-a-lifetime holy experiences to daily occurrences. It is not surprising then that there is a well-known blessing for what the following report signifies. The *Shehechyanu* is a blessing to mark notable milestones and recognize the significance of a particular moment. Importantly, this prayer cultivates a sense of appreciation for the myriads of others who helped us to arrive at this time and place. In this sacred context, we are proud to share the following Pinnacle Report of the Cross-Community Evaluation.



This designation, “pinnacle,” is an apt one, as the document captures the peak of this initial and principal climb to significantly improve, increase, and broaden meaningful Jewish teen education and engagement. Yet, as the report itself suggests, there are still plenty of mountains to be conquered. The work of each initiative in the ten Funder Collaborative communities and that of the national Funder Collaborative itself will continue in different capacities still for years. The lessons offered here are the most universal across the ten communities and, most importantly, the implications of those lessons can inform any teen education and engagement effort. While we cannot reflect the entire body of work, accomplishments, or challenges in any given community, we strive to offer vital reflections on an ambitious, coordinated, large-scale effort in the hopes of contributing to ongoing communal change.

We are grateful to all those who dedicated their skill, resources, wisdom and hearts to this meaningful work. Your diligent efforts and untiring commitment both to and on behalf of the teens at the center of this investment made possible this pinnacle moment in time.

Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech haOlam, shechyanu, v'kiyamanu, v'higyanu la z'man hazeh. Blessed are You, Eternal One, Ruler of the universe, for giving us life, for sustaining us, and for enabling us to reach this season.

Rabbi Dena Shaffer

Director of Learning and Engagement

Jewish Teen Education & Engagement Funder Collaborative



BACKGROUND


Launched in 2013, The Jewish Teen Education & Engagement Funder Collaborative is an ambitious effort to change the culture and practice of how Jewish educational programming is designed and experienced by thousands of young people in 10 different communities across the United States. Spurred by a recognition that teen education and engagement was for many years the “poor relation” of pre-B’nai Mitzvah programming and of efforts to engage college-age students, the Funder Collaborative sought to rebalance the playing field of Jewish educational investment and activity.

This broad goal was distilled into a set of six **Shared Measures of Success**:

1

NUMBERS OF ENGAGED TEENS


Dramatically increase the number of teens in targeted geographic areas engaged in Jewish learning during their high school years.



2

DIVERSITY OF ENGAGED TEENS


Involve Jewish teens who come from diverse Jewish backgrounds.



3

TEEN LEARNING AND GROWTH AS JEWS


Provide Jewish teens with experiences that will contribute to their Jewish learning and growth during their high school years.



4

SUSTAINABLE MODELS


Build models for Jewish teen education and engagement that are sustainable.



5

TEEN EDUCATION AND ENGAGEMENT A PRIORITY FOR LEADERS AND PARENTS


Establish Jewish teen education and engagement as a priority for local Jewish community leaders and parents.



6

SUPPORTING YOUTH PROFESSIONALS

Ensure youth professionals feel well-prepared with appropriate skills and knowledge, and feel valued as professionals.



While these Measures of Success served as a common set of aspirational goals for the communities and the national funding partners, the community-based initiatives themselves were established as a series of distinct locally formed enterprises and intentionally did not adopt a shared programming template. In this way, they could be sensitive to local needs, build on existing strengths, and uncover or create new innovative programs. To derive deep learning from the initiatives themselves, as well as from the effort overall, each community retained an independent evaluator and the Funder Collaborative retained the services of a Cross-Community Evaluation team. That team developed four distinct research tools that were utilized by the community-based evaluators with the intent of generating a “cross-community” picture of what was taking place across the country. These shared tools helped document:

1. Who the **teens** were that participated in programming and what they gained from these experiences (a special contribution of the specifically developed Teen Jewish Learning and Engagement Scales);
2. What **parents** thought of these experiences and what they hoped their children would gain;
3. Who were the **teen professionals** served by the initiatives, what they learned from professional development, and what they wanted to learn further; and
4. The extent to which efforts to change the **local teen landscape** had truly taken root (explored through what became known as the Sustainability Diagnostic Tool).

Through mining aggregated data gathered from teens, parents, and teen professionals in all 10 communities, the Cross-Community Evaluation team produced a set of reports providing a picture of the teens participating in local programs, the professionals who

lead these programs, and some of the outcomes produced for the participants. In addition, the Cross-Community Evaluation team also produced a series of [three case studies](#) that documented the Funder Collaborative’s genesis and how its governance, organization, and operation evolved.

At this time, eight years after the first local initiative was launched in Boston, we explore what has been accomplished to date. We examine to what extent the Funder Collaborative’s goals were realized and the main educational lessons learned from this project. We employ a high-altitude view to search for patterns across the 10 participating communities and across the arc of multiple years. We draw on findings already produced by local evaluators in each of the communities and on the insights gained by those evaluators, as gathered in their annual reports. These insights have been further supplemented through structured questioning of the local evaluators by the Cross-Community Evaluation team. In this way, we construct a picture of the educational and engagement strategies employed, achievements reached, obstacles faced, and implications for future work in this field—key findings are bolded throughout. Ultimately, this pinnacle report provides an opportunity to explore the extent to which philanthropic leadership and coordinated programmatic interventions can induce a largescale shift in how and for whom Jewish education and engagement is practiced.

The story is far from over.

