

THE TEEN AS SUBJECT NOT OBJECT

In the early years of the initiatives, as reflected in the Funder Collaborative's Measures of Success (see page 4), there was a strong focus on recruiting more Jewish teens to Jewish programming. The task was to engage those who were at best under-engaged or, more challengingly, who, until now, were unengaged.

Addressing this challenge meant, first, determining where to find these young people. By definition, the contact information of unengaged individuals does not appear in organizations' contact lists. The approach taken by many initiatives was to design attractive and interesting programs and experiences that would compel the teens to find them and opt-in—an “if you build it, they will come” philosophy. This strategy was especially common where there wasn't much on the landscape in the first place; what economists call “blue ocean.” The early phases of the initiatives saw creative program design: new service-learning experiences in San Diego, innovative spring break opportunities in Chicago, and out-of-the-box “day camp” experiences for teens in New York. Few of these creations gained real traction, however. Local evaluations repeatedly reached the same conclusions: “the programs in the Initiative continue to attract teens who already have some connection with Jewish life” and “Teens with a ‘substantial’ Jewish background were much more likely to be engaged in the programming.”

Over the last few years, two related changes have occurred in respect to teen engagement. First, many initiatives moved away from the “if you build it, they will come” philosophy and increasingly approached the engagement challenge by mobilizing more engaged teens to identify and recruit their less-engaged peers; this was the strategy behind the Peer Leadership Fellows mentioned earlier. The hope, originally, was that peers would recruit peers to programs. This proved unrealistic. **What was**

undoubtedly successful was teens identifying substantial numbers of contemporaries who were previously off the communal radar.

In Cincinnati, the evaluation team estimated that 10% of the teens reached by Peer Leaders were previously unknown to the community. In San Diego, it was estimated that in its first year this program helped identify 100 “new” Jewish teens. This is a major step forward: communities now know where to find the unengaged.

This shift to activating and empowering teens to identify and engage their own peers was mirrored by a second development present at the start of some initiatives and more widespread over time: giving teens a strong voice in the development and design of initiative offerings. Initially, at least, the thinking was that if programs were designed and shaped by teens, they would likely be more appealing to their peers. It was also assumed that these programs would enable young people to develop valuable leadership skills. Data from Cincinnati suggest that the outcomes from these efforts were mixed. The community's Venture Awards program (a teen microgrant initiative) drew participants who would have mostly participated in Jewish programs anyways, although those who did participate unquestionably engaged in valuable life-skills learning.

Cincinnati's experience was replicated elsewhere, including Boston, Denver-Boulder, and San Diego. Microgrants do not substantially widen the circle of engagement, but they considerably deepen the engagement of those within the circle. In these communities, it became clear how delicate the work of empowering teens is and how much it depended on recruiting a nimble organizational partner. **There's more: a balance must be struck between providing structure and accountability, on the one hand, and creating space, on the other. Teens might appreciate being given a voice but do not necessarily want either the responsibility or**

stress of bringing to fruition things they previously trusted adults to create. It is also evident that their lives are already very full, particularly with extracurricular opportunities at school. Youth professionals must calibrate what a teen can actually do, not just what teens say they want to do. They must tactfully insert an “invisible” adult hand to nudge or support the project to success. **Indeed, a decisive insight from the evaluation of these efforts is that “giving teens a voice” is less about the teens being involved in program design and more about the program providing teens with a chance to explore the things that matter to them.**

The moves toward activating teens as peer engagers and as program designers were undeniably related. Fundamentally, they reflect a shift from seeing teens as objects to seeing them as subjects, viewing young people as partners and agents in the experiences in which they participate. This is an important shift in emphasis in the grounding principles of Jewish teen education and engagement even while it has long been an important principle for some youth serving organizations. It is possible, therefore, that these developments will ultimately see both a greater number and greater variety of teens getting involved in Jewish programming, but it will take time. For the moment, that has only happened to a small degree. Engaging the unengaged is a painstakingly slow and challenging task, and as Jewish communities become more diverse, and teens’ lives become even more programmed, it only gets more challenging.

In the meantime, in some communities there is a palpable sense that norms are changing in relation to how teens are regarded and engaged. In Baltimore, many of these changes came together in one place. Today, at the JCC where the local initiative is housed, there is a fully functioning Teen Advisory Board; additionally, two teens now sit on the JCC Board. Teens have helped shape the design of new programs, too, especially since the onset of COVID-19,

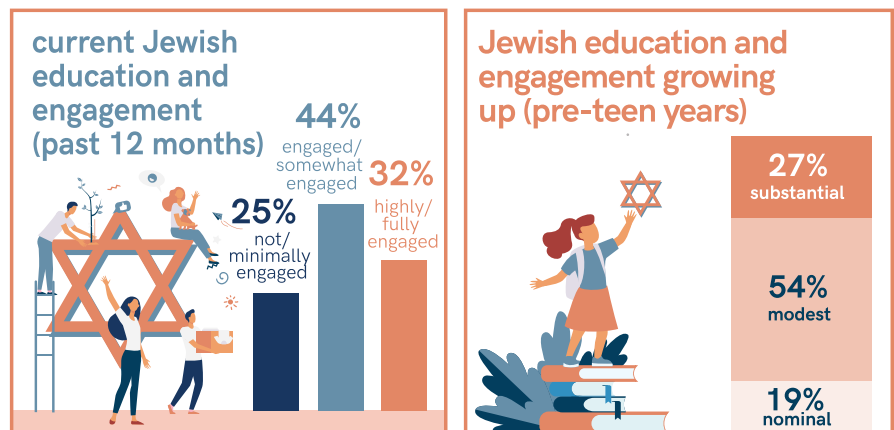
and a Peer Leadership Fellows program cultivates a network of less-engaged young people. All told, young people now have an opportunity to be active agents in their own experiences if that’s a role they want.

JEWISH TEEN GROWTH AND LEARNING

Each year, local evaluators have gathered both profile and outcomes data about the teens touched by each of the local initiatives. These data—when aggregated by the Cross-Community Evaluation team—open a window on the more than 25,000 teens who have participated in local initiative programs and some of the ways in which teens have been impacted by these experiences.

In respect to the demographic profile of teens, the analysis has involved (i) ascertaining teens’ **Jewish background** pre-high school, whether nominal, modest, or substantial (based on the extent of their Jewish education and other Jewish experiences during those years); (ii) determining the intensity of their **Jewish engagement** during the most recent 12 months, whether not at all, minimal, moderate, high, or full (based on the extent to which and intensity with which they attended Jewish activities); and (iii) classifying their **families’ Jewish composition**.

DIVERSITY OF JEWISH TEENS



Across communities and year after year, the initiatives have reached a similar mix of teens: slightly more than half can be defined as having modest Jewish backgrounds, about a quarter have substantial Jewish backgrounds, and the remainder, about a fifth, have nominal backgrounds. About a quarter report that their families are comprised of some people who are Jewish and some who are not. A plurality (44%) can be classified as having been moderately or somewhat engaged during the most recent 12 months, while about a quarter have not been at all engaged or minimally engaged, and about a third highly or fully engaged.

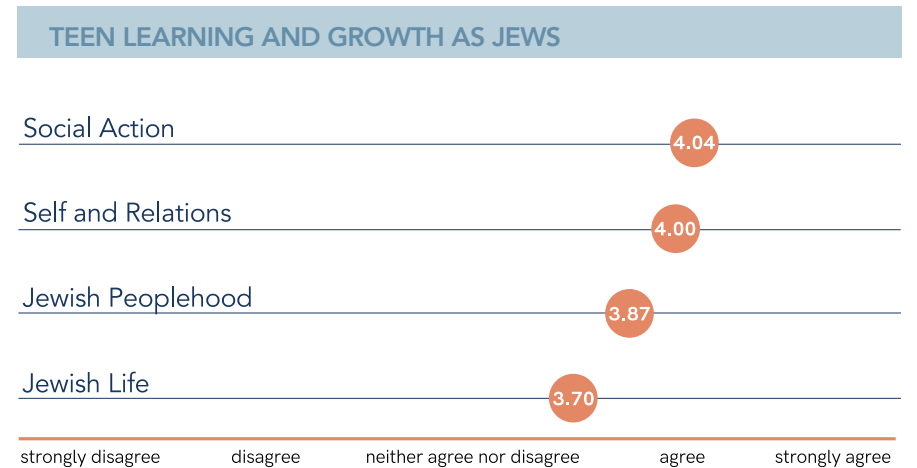
The task of identifying the contribution of the programs to the lives of teens has been analytically complex but has been substantially aided by the development of a common outcomes measurement tool, the Teen Jewish Learning and Engagement Scales (TJLES). The tool is grounded in a set of **14 outcomes** associated with Jewish

teen education and engagement efforts developed in the course of an extended deliberative process by The Jewish Education Project. The 14 outcomes cluster into four areas: two relating to universal themes (“Social Action” and “Self and Relations”) and two relating to Jewish themes (“Jewish Peoplehood” and “Jewish Life”). The outcomes were operationalized* through the work of the Cross-Community Evaluation team as the lens through which to explore the activities of the Funder Collaborative communities in respect to teens.

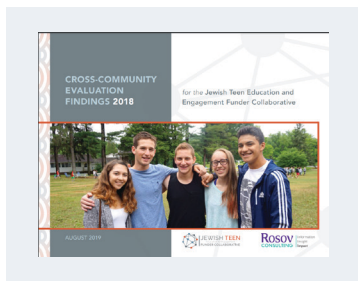
Core Questions	8 Dimensions	Outcomes
Who am I?	How Active I Am The Self Dimension	• Jewish teens have a higher sense of self and have been more active in their own lives.
With whom and what am I connected?	How Active I Am The Knowledge Dimension	• Jewish teens have developed deeper and more meaningful connections and relationships with their families, friends, and community.
To whom and for what am I responsible in this world?	How Active I Am The Social Dimension	• Jewish teens have taken action and created meaningful social impact and change.
How can I bring about change in this world?	How Active I Am The Social Dimension	• Jewish teens have taken action and created meaningful social impact and change.

Learn more about the 14 outcomes at jewishedproject.org/generationnow

Holding constant the backgrounds of participating teens, the cross-community analysis examines the extent to which outcomes exhibited by teens are associated with the intensity of their Jewish engagement during the previous 12 months. The findings produced have offered encouragement to Jewish youth professionals in the local initiatives. **They indicate that whatever the background of participants, more frequent engagement in Jewish youth programming is associated with higher outcomes scores, even for those who come from the most substantial backgrounds.** This seems to be a case of “the more teens keep going, the more they keep growing.” The findings also indicate that across the population of participants as a whole, universal outcomes (those concerned with “Social Action” and “Self and Relations”) are stronger than particular Jewish outcomes (those concerned with “Jewish Peoplehood” and “Jewish Life.”



* The 22 items in the TJLES were collapsed into four dimensions using the method of factor analysis. Factor analysis is a tool that uncovers underlying dimensions (aka latent constructs, or factors) that are not easily measured directly. The technique provides a more reliable approach to analyzing the data—relying on condensed information rather than on individual items. These four dimensions were confirmed in several studies that were conducted under the auspices of the Funder Collaborative as well as the *GenZ Now* study conducted by The Jewish Education Project and Rosov Consulting with over 17,000 teens across North America.



These findings have been consistent over the years of the Cross-Community Evaluation. Here we draw on examples from the [2018 Cross-Community Evaluation Findings](#) where these patterns were especially clear:

- ▲ For teens with nominal Jewish backgrounds, there is a pronounced relationship between higher levels of engagement and the Jewish outcome areas (“Jewish Peoplehood” and “Jewish Life”), although, as might be expected, for teens from nominal backgrounds it takes high levels of engagement to produce outcomes (across all areas) on par with those from modest and substantial backgrounds.
- ▲ Across all background groups (nominal, modest, and substantial), minimally engaged teens have significantly higher outcomes in the universal areas (“Social Action” and “Self and Relations”) than those who are not engaged at all. Thus, even the most minimal engagement in initiative offerings seems to be a “foot in the door” to get teens to be more engaged, which, in turn, might lead to even higher universal outcomes.
- ▲ In all outcome areas, there is a significant difference in outcomes scores when comparing the highly engaged with the fully engaged. The “bump” is generally the biggest for those teens who come from nominal backgrounds. These teens who are fully engaged reach almost the same level of outcomes as fully engaged teens from modest backgrounds (in the Jewish outcome areas) and as fully engaged teens from substantial backgrounds (in the universal areas).

- ▲ The outcomes associated with participating in Jewish programming seem to be contingent on the richness of their Jewish content. The majority of teens (69%) participating in local initiative programs estimated that many-to-all of the programs they attended contain Jewish content. It turns out that the presence of Jewish content in these education and engagement programs is a strong predictor not just for the Jewish outcomes, but for all outcome areas. In other words, the more teens are engaged in programs that have Jewish “stuff,” the higher the outcomes. By the same token, regardless of the number and frequency of activities teens attend, if the vast majority have no Jewish content, little to no improvement is observed in any of the outcome areas.

These findings have served as both a caution and inspiration to those leading the initiatives and have implications beyond the participating communities. The findings confirm how even though the initiatives have been quite effective at reaching teens with modest Jewish backgrounds, so far it has been difficult to reach those with nominal Jewish backgrounds, an audience the Funder Collaborative very much wants to engage and believes could be reached in the long-term. The findings indicate, nevertheless, how impactful Jewish teen programming is for those teens when they are reached, especially when the programming includes Jewish substance. Finally, the findings prompt a question about what accounts for stronger universal than Jewish outcomes among participants in these programs: to what extent is this because of the content and emphases of programs and to what extent are Jewish teens simply more receptive to universally oriented stimuli?