

BRINGING YOUTH PROFESSIONALS TO THE CENTER

Alongside the shift in how teens were viewed and engaged was a similar, no less significant change in relation to Jewish youth professionals in local communities who work with teens. Before the launch of the initiatives, if local youth-serving professionals were not employed by national organizations, they had limited access to professional development and were often quite isolated as the sole youth professional in their organizations. **The initiatives changed this reality by enabling locally based youth professionals first to become part of a larger collective, and second to experience the kinds of professional learning to which they previously had limited access.**

When the Funder Collaborative started and established its Measures of Success, none of the five measures specifically focused on changes to the status and support of youth professionals. Of course, it was understood that youth professionals would play a critical role in bringing about the Funder Collaborative's larger goals—professional development was an important piece of every initiative's work—but, implicitly, providing support for these educators was secondary to the larger objective of transforming the experiences of teens. This is no longer the case. **Over the last three years, the goal of "supporting youth professionals: ensuring that youth professionals feel well-prepared with appropriate skills and knowledge and feel valued as professionals" became a desired outcome and measure of success for which all participating initiatives are held accountable.**

Establishing a specifically stated outcome of this kind reflected the reality that emerged over the first few years of the various initiatives as communities saw positive results by connecting and investing in their local educators. The local initiatives themselves

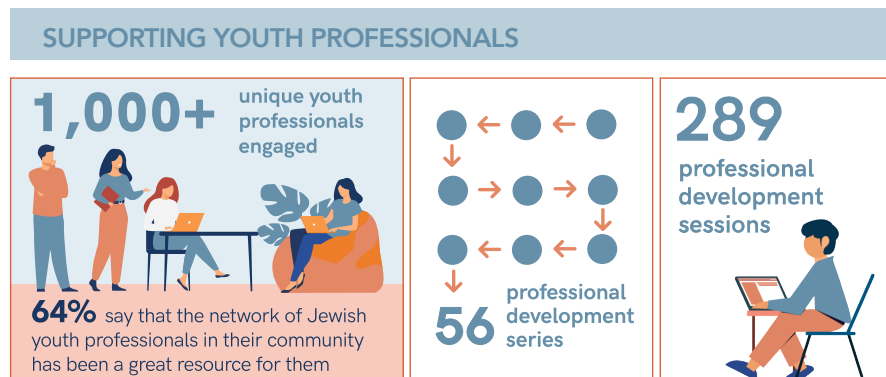
actually pushed to articulate this outcome as a goal of the Funder Collaborative. This provided additional stimulus to placing support of youth professionals at the forefront of communal efforts. **Investing in local educators may also prove an important ingredient in longer-term changes to the landscape of teen programming in local communities.**

The initiatives' efforts with youth-serving professionals tended to include two overlapping components. First, nurturing networks of previously isolated professionals, providing them with opportunities to learn from one another and to participate in shared experiences that help crystalize a shared identity. Many youth professionals are often in their first post-college job. Their professional identities are still unformed. The employment path before them is unclear too. Creating networks of this kind is consequential; these networks help ground professionals' work and identities in a set of shared practices while also elevating their professional status. While youth professionals' salaries are not generous, these educators appreciate being the beneficiaries of investment in their professional development and growth, with many indicating that such opportunities contribute to their likelihood of staying in the field.

For those at an early stage of their professional lives, accessing meaningful networking opportunities would be valuable in and of itself. But the value of these connections was deepened further by a second component: the opportunity to learn about matters very relevant to their work. Local evaluation data confirm how across the country the initiatives provided professional learning opportunities previously unavailable to Jewish youth professionals in their communities. Participants in these experiences report that learning—often for the first time—about topics such as adolescent development, parent engagement, and adolescent health and wellbeing enhanced their capacity to perform their job. In a field

where few employees experience preservice preparation before a first job, these opportunities have the potential to make a difference in professionals' day-to-day performance.

Two additional phenomena were amplified by deeper investment in youth-serving professionals. First, it is now clear that supervisors play a critical role helping staff access and appreciate the value of these professional development experiences. In Denver-Boulder, the initiative's leaders started out with an assumption that if scholarships were made available to youth professionals, they would identify and access their own learning experiences. This did not prove to be the case; the professionals needed more direction and a tighter framework within which to access opportunities. Similarly, in Chicago, it was assumed that youth professionals would inform each other about opportunities for learning. It turns out that employers had to encourage and share knowledge to make these experiences known to staff. **Evidently, supervisors are key facilitators, enabling and encouraging professional development, and intensifying positive outcomes back in the workplace for participants in these experiences.**



A second phenomenon concerns the consequences of this investment. By creating opportunities for fellow professionals to learn side by side, those professionals not only come to think about their own work differently, they also think differently about the work of their peers. Bringing people together from different, and often competing, institutions for shared learning cultivated an environment in many communities in which educators are now less likely to see themselves as competing for the attention of individual teens and more likely to view their work as part of a larger endeavor. In Los Angeles, youth professionals expressed a change in how they view their communal role, shifting from serving their organizations to now serving teens. If a teen joined a colleague's program, that's still a success! In Baltimore, interviews with professionals and their supervisors revealed a similar sentiment in which professionals described themselves as collaborators rather than competitors. They no longer saw teen recruitment as a zero-sum game.

In sum, just as youth-serving professionals now think differently about the teens with whom they work, they also now think differently about themselves, their roles, and their relationships with their colleagues in other organizations. These changes have shifted the center of gravity for teen education and engagement; now both the teens *and those who work with them* are at the center of this field. The question is whether this reorientation puts communities on a new path in their approach to educating and engaging Jewish teens. Is Jewish teen education and engagement truly on a new trajectory?