

Career Trajectories of Jewish Educators

Summary of CASJE Study

Insights & Recommendations

Learning No.1

INSIGHT

Jewish education is no longer a single field.

CHALLENGE

The fracturing of the field of Jewish education constitutes a major departure from its historic composition. This change has resulted in a reality where employers seek wholly different sets of skills in those they hire, and educators have profoundly different professional development needs, depending on where they work.

OPPORTUNITY

It looks, increasingly, as if the preparation of educators and their professional development in these different fields of endeavors need to be tailored to the specific practices and purposes associated with those fields.

RECOMMENDATION

Encourage the continued diversification of the supply side of the marketplace.

With the field of Jewish education having fragmented to the degree that the term “Jewish educator” no longer conveys a singular meaning, and with educators entering the field with such varied “origin stories,” the continued diversification of the supply side of the field is worth encouraging. Educators (however these people are labeled) have different preparation and professional development needs, depending on the sectors in which they work. Yes, this diversification has challenged legacy institutions that historically designed programs and degrees to serve the field of Jewish education as a whole, a process documented in the Mapping the Market strand of CASJE’s major research project.

While those institutions have an important role to play, their roles may begin to shift to be more sharply focused on serving the needs of specific sectors and learners. Alongside these institutions, newer and newly emerging providers can service the diversifying needs of the field, too, and should be encouraged to do so. If the programs offered can meet consensus standards for effective professional development, the competition will be good for the field.

Learning No.2

INSIGHT

A sense of mission matters.

CHALLENGE

Despite the fracturing of the field and the unevenness of the landscape, Jewish educators are nevertheless motivated by a shared mission or a common calling. This sense of mission distinguishes educators from those who have never worked in the field at all, and, even more so, from those who once started work as Jewish educators and then left.

OPPORTUNITY

Mission is a key element in resisting the structural inhibitors that drive people away from the field. To improve rates of educator retention, it is vital to ensure that those who entered the field because “the opportunity was available” have occasions to find such a personal sense of mission themselves. Mission can indeed be cultivated and sustained. It’s not all or nothing.

RECOMMENDATION

Nourish a mature passion.

While the field diversifies, those who work in it do nevertheless share a distinguishing and distinguished passion, what we characterized as a sense of mission to enhance others’ lives with Jewish meaning. It is critical to spark and nourish that sense of mission. It brings many educators into the field and keeps even more of them there. The most powerful forms of professional development deepen professional know-how and at the same time fuel this sense of mission—they cultivate both skills and commitments. This dual task is not easy to accomplish.

Organizational and individual consumers of professional development should make sure that the services they employ deliver on this dual promise, providing both utility and ultimate meaning. By means of this duality, professional development helps contribute to career commitment, professional self-efficacy, and educator satisfaction (which have been shown to be strong predictors of educational outcomes), ultimately keeping a sense of personal mission aflame in its most mature forms.

Learning No.3

INSIGHT

Mission has a dark side.

CHALLENGE

A sense of mission or calling is a critical factor in educator retention, and yet it also contributes to one of the most problematic aspects of Jewish education as a field of employment: the poor compensation educators receive for their work. When a sense of calling is viewed as an all-or-nothing quality, it also seems to suppress investment in professional development; its presence can be used to excuse a lack of professionalism.

OPPORTUNITY

When educator development intentionally fuses the personal and the professional, it can harness the best possible outcomes of the educator's sense of personal mission.

RECOMMENDATION

Reward educators in better ways.

It is unlikely that the pay levels of Jewish educators, or of educators more generally, will significantly improve in the near-term. The costs involved would likely be unsupportable, especially if they have to be passed on to the fee-paying consumer, as is invariably the case in private, parochial systems. Surely, though, it is possible to improve the benefits packages many Jewish educators receive and to ensure that educators' passion for their work does not enable employers to take advantage of them economically. Such measures can be financially sustainable.

Moreover, investing in improved benefits packages and paying greater attention to workplace conditions (providing educators with more opportunities for professional development, more intensive mentoring, a career ladder with leadership roles, and greater recognition for their efforts, for example) would not only be morally correct, it would contribute to greater educator retention and cultivate career commitment, satisfaction, and self-efficacy—a trifecta that research suggests will surely enhance outcomes for learners and other program participants.

Learning No.4

INSIGHT

Current mental models obstruct recruitment.

CHALLENGE

Prospective Jewish educators are often limited by their own early experiences of Jewish education, their own “extended apprenticeship of observation.” They cannot imagine the wide variety of opportunities for work in various sectors of this field which they never experienced themselves, and simply don’t apply for positions.

OPPORTUNITY

A general marketing campaign is needed to communicate the great variety of opportunities and roles that do in fact exist the field. (More challengingly, where support for Jewish education is positioned within community ecosystems also needs to be updated to reflect the field’s diversification.) If more “Seed Sector” alumni knew what the work of Jewish educators involves today, they might give it a serious second look.

RECOMMENDATION

Update the model.

Jewish education has an image problem, and that problem is reinforced by the structure of Jewish community systems. Jewish educators are widely assumed to be either teachers or rabbis. If more people knew that there are many more ways to enrich others’ lives with Jewish meaning, they would probably explore entry to this field in greater numbers.

A broadly imagined marketing campaign to communicate this changed reality, targeting the thousands of young people located in what we called Seed Sectors (settings like summer camps and Israel experiences from which historically Jewish educators have disproportionately come) would help challenge the mental models that keep prospective recruits away. Similar campaigns have changed perceptions about teaching science and math. The image of Jewish educators’ work would benefit from a similar makeover.

Learning No.5

INSIGHT

Market forces erode Enabling Opportunities.

CHALLENGE

Educators who participate in “Enabling Opportunities”—early career frameworks that provide their participants with know-how, enhance their sense of personal mission, and build professional resilience—are more likely to commit long term to the work of Jewish education and be successful at it. And yet, today, fewer and fewer employers require new hires to be formally prepared in this way.

OPPORTUNITY

While it won't be possible to turn back the clock in the face of the market forces that have shaped this reality, it is critical to find other ways of assisting and incentivizing early-career educators to participate in such experiences given the special benefits associated with participating in them. If pre-service is no longer an attractive paradigm, then it's worth exploring how an in-service model might gain traction.

RECOMMENDATION

Get the timing right.

Enabling Opportunities contribute to educator retention, resilience, and sophistication. And yet, employers and educators have a diminished appetite for these experiences as entry ramps into the field. If educators who have made it beyond an induction phase (years one and two) but are still relatively new to the field (within the first five years) had more opportunities to participate in such programs, many more of them might choose to stay in the field longer and would make a positive contribution in doing so. It's all about timing. Currently, very few programs serve educators at the liminal moment between induction and being truly settled in the field. If educators could

participate in such experiences between their third and fifth years in the work, our data suggest that the odds in favor of retention and growth could shift profoundly. Ultimately, a career in education requires a commitment to ongoing learning. Well-conceived programs of professional learning across the career arc of Jewish educators can benefit educators and learners and allow teacher-leaders to provide a critical service to their peers and organizations.

Questions:

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