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Prompt: How can education communities identify goals and measure impact?

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A Roadmap for Education in the Conservative Synagogue School

"If you don’t know where you’re going, any road’ll take you there" is a pithy reworking of an exchange in Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland. Unfortunately, it describes the reality of how many Jewish educational venues operate. We tend to focus heavily on our “inputs”—what we will present to students; but we attend far less to our “outputs”—What do we want our students, campers and trip participants to derive from their Jewish educational experiences? Or to put this differently: How clear are we on where we aim to take our students during their Jewish educational journey?

This reluctance to define the intended outcomes of our educational efforts is one of the key weaknesses of supplementary or, as many now prefer, complementary Jewish education. On several levels, this is hardly surprising. For one thing, supplementary Jewish education has been engaged over the past years in a deliberate effort to burnish its image after enduring decades of merciless criticism for its shortcomings. Educators have been stung by stale jokes about parents who inform their children that they must attend Hebrew school because “I suffered through it; now it’s your turn.” To break this unhealthy syndrome, schools understandably have focused on insure that today’s students are having positive Jewish experiences from which they will take away happy memories. For another, in-service for school heads and teachers has been seen as the best means of insuring classes will be fresh, rather than rote, that teachers will come to the classroom setting with new ways to teach and a deepened knowledge of the material. All of this has encouraged schools and the field more generally to place great emphasis on the input side. And to cite yet one more reason for avoiding the output question, with staff and students spending such limited time in the school setting, it has been assumed that evaluating learning and rethinking what we want students to take away from their studies are luxuries.

I would argue just the opposite: we can ill afford to continue operating with little sense of where we are going and what we aim to accomplish. The enterprise of Jewish education in any setting must begin with a set of clearly articulated goals and an established process to determine each year how well those learning goals have been met by students.
What would this look like? First, schools must devote time to developing a set of learning outcomes. Through a deliberative process that may involve all school stakeholders over a period of time, some consensus must be reached about what the school expects its graduates to have mastered by the time they drop out in grade 7, 8 or 12. The goal of this process is an agreed-upon set of expectations for what graduates will have learned about Bible, Jewish holidays, Israel, the prayer book, and basic Jewish concepts. The same kind of question must be resolved for Hebrew language goals: What are the school’s desired minimal levels of Hebrew proficiency—a student’s ability to decode Hebrew texts, follow along in the Siddur, and/or lead Tefila? In short, schools must develop a profile of the ideal graduating student—not a pie in the sky profile, but one that is realistic and ambitious.

Once a school has identified its goals for graduates, it can work backward to the achievements expected at each grade level. That way teachers of level Heh classes know what they will be striving to accomplish over the year that differs from their counterparts in level Vav classes. And both sets of teachers will have an understanding of how their efforts in the coming year fit into the larger game plan leading up to graduation.

To measure the outcomes, some baseline testing must occur early in September when classes begin and again at the end of the school year. Does that mean students must be subjected to written tests? In some schools, perhaps. But in many cases, evaluations can be done far more subtly through conversation with students. The larger point is that without some built in process of evaluation, how can a school know whether it is succeeding? Without some attention to the actual learning of students, all roads lead to some vaguely defined educational end goal.

Based on evaluations of student learning, schools need a process to determine how well goals were met and if, as is likely, efforts are judged to have fallen short, how they might do better next year. Ultimately, the process of evaluating outcomes is not only about how much students have absorbed, but how well the school, the teachers, and the curriculum succeeded in meeting goals. Where some or all of these educational components fell short, a process of self-reflection may lead to new thinking about ways to do things differently—and better—next year.

What should be clear is that measuring outcomes is not about judging student failure, but rather about how well a school develops a culture of self-evaluation so that all actors can continually re-calibrate what they are contributing to the educational process. By developing such a culture, schools can do wonders to improve the delivery of their Jewish education. And in the process, they can raise morale among their staff. What can be more stimulating than knowing that we are all engaged in a self-reflective process, we all are trying to learn new and better ways of teaching, and we are all committed to improving learning outcomes in our school?

I intentionally use the word school despite today’s fashionable talk about how supplementary education is not school. Promoters of this point-of-view prefer to see the
process as informal and more akin to a camp environment, rather than a school. I reject this approach, especially in supplementary settings under the auspices of institutions committed to Conservative Judaism. It is one thing to incorporate the experiential; it is another to define everything as informal education. Experiential components of supplementary education also must come under scrutiny: Why are we doing this program? What do we hope our students will take away from it? How can we help our students draw connections in their minds between what they have experienced in this program and what they have learned in other settings?

As to the emphasis on the informal: Conservative synagogue services are not for the uninformed. It is impossible to participate in them if one cannot decode the Hebrew liturgy. It is impossible to understand that liturgy without knowing something about the structure of the Siddur and the allusions sprinkled throughout the Siddur to other Jewish texts, especially in Tanakh. If the Conservative synagogue is to attract the next generation, young people will have to become “educated consumers,” as the ad tag line used to say. And if our goal is to transform these consumers into “prosumers,” proactive participants, all the more reason to educate them, and thereby insure they are literate and understand the categories of theology, belief, and practice for which the Conservative synagogue stands.

Dr. Jack Wertheimer is the Joseph and Martha Mendelson Professor of American Jewish History at The Jewish Theological Seminary. His area of specialization is modern Jewish history, with a particular focus on trends in the religious, educational, and organizational sectors of American Jewish life since World War II. Most recently, Dr. Wertheimer has written a number of studies about the rapidly evolving field of Jewish education.