



**Toward Continuous Engagement:
Supporting Young Children and Families in Transition
in Part-Time Jewish Educational Settings**

Prepared for The Jewish Education Project

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Executive Summary

Introduction

There are many times in a Jewish family's life when they can choose to opt out of the educational system in their community. As congregations and other organizations look to offer families a journey of continuous engagement, one way to accomplish this is by offering models of education that bridge the various moments of transition. This study focuses on one of those moments – the transition out of early childhood that typically begins before a youngster enters Kindergarten. The research and findings shed light on several educational models and trends happening across the country to help children aged four through seven and their families along a continuous journey of Jewish engagement through shared learning experiences and celebrations.

Methodology

The research was designed with a limited scope intended to illuminate a piece of the landscape, rather than provide an exhaustive study of the field. It began with conversations with colleagues at The Jewish Education Project and a brief review of academic literature and online materials. Telephone conversations with educators at national and regional organizations were conducted in order to identify the next round of interview subjects – a diverse group of educational practitioners at twenty congregations, federations and entrepreneurial entities across the country. Finally, in-depth interviews were conducted with educational leaders at eight settings, including the four chosen for documentation.

Criteria for Vetting Models

A set of criteria was developed to guide the search for educational models that support young children and families in the transition out of early childhood. These criteria prioritized settings where learning was: a. offered for children aged 4-7, b. designed to build strong peer relationships and deepen the bonds between children and teachers, c. part of a robust educational system, and d. seen as successful in retaining children from early childhood into the primary years. While family engagement would be a high priority, it did not necessarily have to be a feature of the model itself.

Bridge Model Documentation

This study documents models at four settings: the first is an entrepreneurial organization in Chicago and the other three are congregations – a mid-sized Conservative synagogue located in a NY suburb and two large Reform congregations in northern CA. These models are:

1. **The Jewish Enrichment Center** in Chicago, IL, is an after-school care and study model that offers project-based learning in small groups for children aged 3-11. Parents are invited to take an active role in children's exploration and in communal Shirah/Tefilla (Singing/Prayer) at the end of each day's learning session. Most children attend 7-10 hours per week.
2. **Jewish Building Blocks** at Hewlett East Rockaway Jewish Centre in L. I., NY, offers children aged 4-6 an opportunity to continue the playful and exploratory learning that began in Nursery School (NS). Led by NS teachers, it provides a multi-sensory experience where young children encounter Jewish values, engage in ritual observance, and explore their spirituality through music, art, movement, dance, and prayer.
3. **Connections** at Cong. Beth Am, Los Altos Hills, CA, is a family learning and mentorship model where 6-10 families organized in small groups experience Jewish community together under the leadership of a mentor. The families meet 20-30 times per year to celebrate Shabbat and holidays, join in learning activities and do fun things like hike, picnic and cook as a group.
4. **Yad b'Yad** at Temple Isaiah in Lafayette, CA, is a family learning model where children attend weekly and engage in multi-sensory learning through music, art, dance, stories, Hebrew prayer, and discussion. Parents join their children every other week for experiences where they learn and grow together and for separate adult learning with clergy.

Major Findings

This research demonstrated that bridge models vary greatly and there are many different ways to accomplish the goal of continuous engagement. Congregations and organizations can achieve high enrollment and meaningful learning during the primary years, especially when educators collaborate to achieve their goals. At many of these settings, where there has not been a retention challenge as a result of the transition, leaders have often not seen the need to create a "bridge model" *per se*.

Common Themes and Bridging Levers

Several themes are common to most bridge models in this study. These themes highlight strategies that leverage the communal resources to achieve their goals around continuous engagement.

- a. **Reimagining Role of Educators:** Teachers and lead educators can serve as human bridges when they are visible in the early childhood program as well as the religious school.
- b. **Strong Clergy Presence:** Clergy have the opportunity to begin developing relationships with young families in the early childhood program and can capitalize on those connections when families are transitioning to a new phase of life.
- c. **Financial Incentives:** Many congregations think creatively of how they can offer financial savings on tuition and membership to encourage young families to affiliate.

- d. **Small-Group Mentorship:** Educational leaders can serve as mentors, guides, role models, and connections to the larger community for young families.
- e. **Parental Involvement:** Creating models with regular parent participation is not only beneficial for the children, but also helps build community among the parents and allows them the space to continue to develop their own Jewish practice and beliefs.
- f. **Culture of Continuous Engagement:** Bridge models can be effective ways to offer a journey of continuous engagement that supports families at every age and stage of their lives.

Other Trends in Continuous Engagement for Young Children and Families

Three other themes may point to important trends in how organizations and congregations provide opportunities for Jewish education and engagement for young children and their families.

1. **Parent Connectors** can link families to different Jewish experiences and resources in the community, helping each family find a path that works for them.
2. **After-School Enrichment Opportunities** are another innovative way to keep families engaged and help fill the need for after-school child care.
3. **Project-Based Learning** can be used with young learners to help them take a lead in their own learning, see the connection between learning and life, and feel a part of the community.

This research study highlighted differences in perceptions of the challenges and opportunities of continuous engagement. Future studies are required to investigate these issues and address the need for common language and shared understandings.

Introduction

A cross-sector research study was undertaken to support The Jewish Education Project's efforts to spark innovation by sharing robust models of Jewish education across North America. This study addresses the idea that systemic structures for building a culture of continuous engagement can enable children and their families to transition in a seamless way from one stage of Jewish learning to the next. This report highlights four settings that have developed innovative approaches to Jewish learning for young children aged four through seven (in pre-Kindergarten through Second Grade). Three of these settings are congregations, while the fourth is an entrepreneurial organization that resides in a congregation that provides financial backing and a core group of participating families.

This research study by the Congregational Learning team builds on its growing collaboration with the Early Childhood and Family Engagement team. During the past two years, consultants from these two sectors have partnered to offer bridge model peer networks that support educator dyads in congregations on Long Island and in Westchester. The work of the two peer networks is

premised on the value of a Jewish early childhood education and the desire to maximize its potential for serving as a gateway into lifelong Jewish learning for children and families. This study builds on that premise and focuses on some of the ways that educators are working together to build a culture of continuous engagement where children can transition seamlessly from early childhood centers into the religious school setting.

Educators in our innovation initiatives are inspired by the learning models that have been making a difference for children, teens and families in many communities. Until now, the Congregational Learning team has tended to document models that target children in 3rd through 6th Grades. The model documentation is used and adapted by other educators as they design learning in their own congregations. While the models are typically designed for children learning in age-alike peer groups, there are some that offer family learning for children and their parents. In a few cases, there are also opportunities for children to learn with older children, teens and other adults. Although several models are geared for learners in the early primary grades (children in Kindergarten through 2nd Grade), this age group has been under-represented in the models we have documented to date.

As a consultant on the Congregational Learning team at The Jewish Education Project, I was asked to look across the country at what congregations and other organizations have developed that intentionally addresses the phenomenon of continuous engagement across the transition out of the early childhood center and into the religious school. This report documents four examples of “bridge” models that successfully support children and families during the liminal moments as they transition from early childhood into learning with their peers and/or families during their primary years. These models build on the momentum, sustain curiosity and deepen the relationships that began in early childhood. While other strategies can be successful during the transition, this study is confined to models that include children aged four through six learning together, and that report high rates of participation in Jewish learning and engagement throughout the early childhood and primary years.

Background

At Jewish early childhood centers in many congregations, young children delight in hearing Bible stories and learning about Shabbat and holidays. However, the joy and curiosity they experience in the early childhood center (sometimes called pre-school or nursery school, and typically called the early childhood center, or ECC, in this report) does not guarantee that their parents will choose to continue their education into the primary years. The Shabbat songs and Bible stories often give way to soccer practice and dance classes. The years of Kindergarten through 2nd Grade are a time when many American families choose to take a hiatus from Jewish education. Then when their child reaches 3rd Grade, the parents tend to enroll them in religious school.

For the past 18 months, consultants at The Jewish Education Project have been convening teams of educators in Westchester and Long Island in what we call regional “bridge model peer networks.” Early Childhood Center Directors and Education Directors in 15 congregations come together on a regular basis (about every six weeks) to consider how they can deepen the early childhood experience and increase retention into their religious school setting. They examine the various programs they currently offer and explore how they could collaborate to enrich each of their offerings and increase their impact. They are also open to creating new opportunities for connecting young families with one another, with educators and clergy, and with the congregational community. They are eager to learn about the strategies that help other congregations around the country to build relationships, strengthen Jewish identity, foster literacy, nurture community and promote enculturation.

Some of these educators are relatively new to team-based innovation initiatives, while others have spent more than a decade re-imagining Jewish education and re-designing the architecture of learning in their settings. These educators inspire one another with their visionary thinking and the innovative structures they create. They turn to each other and to us at The Jewish Education Project to find and document compelling models they can adapt for their congregations.

While we have many examples of successful models for engaging children in 3rd-6th Grade, there are few models geared for children in Kindergarten through 2nd Grade – and even fewer that include pre-Kindergarten children and their families. When we looked around the New York area, we realized that there were several examples of compelling models that targeted young children only after they reached Kindergarten age. While these models might provide a path to continuous engagement, we were interested in exploring settings that had created a model for this purpose and had intentionally included children before they reached Kindergarten age.

The Search for Bridge Models

We decided to scan the landscape for places that were successful in engaging children and families in a continuous way. We would look for settings that were accompanying children from the early childhood center directly into the religious school, where few students took a detour or a multi-year hiatus. We would investigate some of these settings and document the way learning was happening there. We use the term “bridge models” to describe these educational programs because they provide a bridge that leads directly from the early childhood center into the religious school.

We began this research thinking that we knew what a “bridge model” would look like: it would have pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten children (four- and five-year-olds) learning and celebrating together in a way that is age appropriate for these years – playful learning like they enjoyed in the early childhood center with content that is relevant to younger children. We also thought we knew what the family engagement component would look like: the parents of children in pre-Kindergarten

& Kindergarten would be engaged on a regular basis (at least monthly) in learning and living experiences that bring them together to build relationships and strengthen their connection with Jewish culture and community, as defined and natural in their setting. We came to learn that bridge models vary greatly and that congregations and other organizations can achieve continuous engagement without creating a bridge model.

Intentional Path of Continuous Engagement

In each case, we were looking to see an intentional path of continuous engagement for each child built on the personal relationships that children and families have with their peers and with teachers, educational staff and clergy. Furthermore, in each setting, we were looking to find collaboration that breaks down the silos – between educators and their staffs, and between professional educators and clergy and the lay leaders they serve. Since we were focusing on the transition between early childhood and religious school, we looked for places where early childhood center directors were working closely with religious school principals (sometimes called education directors) to create compelling ways for children and families to continue learning and celebrating together. We wanted to study the models in these settings and the various strategies they employed to minimize disruption along the Jewish learning journey.

Characteristics of Models

We were focused on finding “models” rather than programs or events. The concept of what constitutes a model is based on the work of the Coalition of Innovating Congregations and its partner, the Experiment in Congregational Education. A model is seen as normative in its setting where it is either the only educational choice or one among several considered to be of equal value and importance. It is regularized, not episodic, with activities that happen on a pre-arranged schedule and take place repeatedly throughout the year. A model has a name and a brand identity that helps when marketing to prospective participants. According to this theory, we would see intentional ways that the model was aligned with a vision for education, an aspirational statement of the difference the leaders hoped the educational experiences would make for the children and families in their community. Furthermore, we looked to find evidence of how the model and vision fit into the larger strategic plan of the congregation or organization. [See Appendix A for a full list of Model Elements.]

Criteria for Bridge Models

In consultation with other members of the Congregational Learning team, a set of criteria was developed for vetting the educational experiences offered for young children in each setting. These criteria would be used to choose the models to document in this study. Our criteria were as follows:

- Includes age range of 4-7 year-olds (learning begins by pre-Kindergarten, not Kindergarten)
- Aims to enroll and retain children in early primary years (Kindergarten through 2nd Grade)

- Builds relationships among participants and nurtures a sense of community among them
- Build relationship to community (congregation) that serves families after primary grades
- Engages the family, not only the child (a strong preference, but not a strict requirement)
- Has evolved into a robust model (or is a pilot that has most of the model elements in place)
- Is innovative in its approach to learning design

This last criterion was typically seen in settings that incorporated 21st century design principles and Whole Person Learning, concepts explained more fully in the LOMED Handbook and Coalition Handbook, Vol. 2, by the Congregational Learning team of The Jewish Education Project.

Implications for the Scope of the Study

These criteria meant that we would:

- Limit our research to settings where children started learning together by the age of four (in pre-Kindergarten)
- Count time when children learn with peers as well as family time (for the purposes of assessing the model's regularization)
- Consider models that were no longer being offered provided the reasons for their termination didn't invalidate the model's worth (such as changes in professional leadership)
- Include settings which primarily offer learning experiences on weekdays and Sunday, without opportunities for families to do social justice and/or celebrate Shabbat and holidays together

The last criterion required that we would look at entrepreneurial organizations and communal agencies, in addition to education taking place within congregations. It is believed that any of these models could be adapted for use in other organizations, including congregations.

Methodology

From the outset, this research study was designed with a relatively limited scope. It was not intended to be an exhaustive study of the field, but rather an environmental scan of a piece of the landscape of Jewish education at the intersection of early childhood and early elementary education. It was based on both primary and secondary research. The process included the following elements:

- online research to survey literature, including articles, essays and blog posts
- interviews of educators and other leaders at various national and regional organizations to identify settings and trends
- online research into the educational programs at more than 80 congregations and entrepreneurial organizations around the country
- interviews with educational practitioners at over 20 congregations and organizations
- brief interviews (approximately 30 minutes) with educators to screen their programs
- longer interviews with educators at 12 settings to vet their models
- in-depth semi-structured interviews with multiple educators at eight settings

- email and telephone follow-up with practitioners at four settings to complete model documentation

This process aimed for geographic diversity and broad denominational representation. Interviews were conducted with educators and practitioners in most major cities, including New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, Houston, Denver and San Francisco. Leadership was contacted at graduate schools and national organizations such as PJ Library which serves young families with children up to eight years old. Leads were generated through systematic professional networking as well as informal conversations. A diverse group of settings was vetted, including Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist congregations as well as pluralistic, entrepreneurial organizations.

Most of the national and regional educators found the idea of continuous engagement easy to understand and expressed their appreciation that someone was undertaking this type of research. However, very few of them could think of any congregations that had a transitional program like a “bridge model.” They would typically refer other colleagues of national standing who might help continue the search, and occasionally, they would also mention several congregational educators worth contacting.

As educators around the country were invited to be interviewed, it soon became clear that they saw these conversations as important and appreciated the opportunity to share their work. However, there wasn’t a shared language about continuous engagement or bridge models. There also did not seem to be a universal understanding of the problem – or even acknowledgement that there is a problem – and what it might mean for these settings or for the field of Jewish education. There was even less consensus about what might be needed to address the challenge of enrolling a majority of children in part-time Jewish education beginning at three or four years old and sustaining the learning and engagement into their late teen years. Furthermore, it became clear that continuous engagement is not monolithic and does not look the same from place to place.

Documentation of Bridge Models

There are four bridge models that are documented as part of this study. While they are similar in some salient attributes, they are different from one another in several ways. Three of them are created by congregations, one mid-sized Conservative synagogue in a New York suburb and two larger Reform congregations in northern California. The fourth model is being developed by an entrepreneurial organization housed in a synagogue. Two of the models feature family learning as a regular component, while one is primarily for children and another has successfully engaged parents on a voluntary basis. Three of the models take place in synagogues, primarily indoors, while the fourth meets in outdoor locations such as parks as well as indoors at homes and in the congregation.

The four models are:

1. The Jewish Enrichment Center in Chicago, IL
2. Jewish Building Blocks at Hewlett East Rockaway Jewish Centre – Congregation Etz Chaim in East Rockaway, NY
3. Connections at Congregation Beth Am in Los Altos Hills, CA
4. Yad b'Yad at Temple Isaiah in Lafayette, CA

The Jewish Enrichment Center in Chicago, IL

The Jewish Enrichment Center is an after-school care and study model that currently serves children from infants through 5th Grade. It offers project-based exploratory learning in small groups for children aged 3 through 11. The curriculum is based on learners' interests and questions. Most children are enrolled 7-10 hours weekly. Parents are invited to take an active role in children's projects and to participate in community-wide Shirah/Tefillah (Singing/Prayer) after each session.

The Jewish Enrichment Center (JEC) is an independent, entrepreneurial organization with a pluralistic outlook. It meets in Congregation Rodfei Zedek, a Conservative egalitarian congregation in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago, which provides financial support and a core group of participating families. Many of the teachers work full-time at the JEC and spend at least ten hours per week in professional learning and collaboration. The JEC has developed a new staff role, a Yetzirah specialist, who is integral to the children's learning experience. A full-time arts and creativity expert, she supports the learners' creative expression of their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in multiple ways through the visual and performing arts. [Note: The transliteration of the words Shirah, Tefillah and Yetzirah used here follows the spelling preferred by the JEC.]

Jewish Building Blocks at Hewlett East Rockaway Jewish Centre – Congregation Etz Chaim in East Rockaway, NY

Jewish Building Blocks provides children aged 4-6 an opportunity to continue and deepen the playful and exploratory learning that began in Nursery School. It provides a multi-sensory experience which invites young children to encounter Jewish values, engage in ritual observance, and explore their spirituality through music, art, movement, dance, and prayer. Jewish Building Blocks is led by Nursery School teachers who strive to ensure a seamless transition for children on their way out of the congregation's early childhood experience. There is no role for parents in the learning experiences offered by Jewish Building Blocks. For young families who avail themselves of family programming offered by the congregation, such as Shabbat services and holiday events, Jewish Building Blocks can serve as a bridge model not only for children, but also for the entire family.

Connections at Congregation Beth Am in Los Altos Hills, CA

The Connections model is a family learning and mentoring model where 6-10 families are organized in small groups under the leadership of a mentor. It is an innovative approach that enables families to experience Jewish community. Connections is targeted for families with children up to 5th Grade who want to come together on a regular basis to celebrate holidays, join in learning activities, and do fun things like hike, picnic, and cook as a group. The participants develop confidence in their ability to live a meaningful Jewish family life and pass this heritage on to the next generation.

The Connections model is also a bridge model that offers continuous engagement for young children and families who can choose to participate until their eldest child reaches 6th Grade. The newest Connections group that was formed in 2015 is comprised of young families with children who range in age from newborn to age four. For these families, Connections can provide the bridge that enables their children to continue learning in a seamless way. It is an alternative model that is designed to replace religious school for the children of families who participate in it.

Yad b'Yad at Temple Isaiah in Lafayette, CA

Temple Isaiah offers a parent-child class for pre-Kindergarteners every other week six weeks from February through May. Because parents accompany their children, this class provides a taste of the type of learning they can experience in Yad b'Yad (literally "Hand in Hand"). A family learning model for children K-2 and their families, Yad b'Yad is an alternative to the grade-level education program offered as a track within JQuest which is what Temple Isaiah calls their Religious School. Children in Yad b'Yad attend every Sunday morning September through mid-May and engage in Jewish learning through music, art, dance, stories, Hebrew prayer, and discussion.

Parents in Yad b'Yad join their children every other session (about 12-13 Sunday mornings during the year) in a family-oriented learning experience that includes separate child and adult learning as well as time for families to learn and grow together. Parents study with Temple Isaiah's Rabbis and Cantor, thereby deepening their own Jewish knowledge and strengthening their connection with the clergy of the congregation. When families participate in the six-week parent-child pre-K class and then opt into the Yad b'Yad family track with their children in Kindergarten through 2nd Grade, they have the benefit of a bridge that supports continuous engagement from the Temple Isaiah Gan Ilan Preschool into the primary years and beyond. When coupled in this way, the two offerings combine to serve as a "bridge model" that supports the transition for young children and families.

The Phenomenon of "Cluster Strategy" Congregations

Most of the congregations that were recommended by the national and regional educators and considered exemplary by their peers offer several educational offerings and tefila opportunities for young children and families. In their efforts to engage all of these children and families, they are pursuing what might be called a "cluster strategy" instead of a single bridge model. They typically

have a child-only learning model for the weekly K-2 learning experience that is supplemented by a web of programs and strategies aimed at engaging families. These programs often take place only on Shabbat and holidays, with most of the offerings happening monthly and some either bi-weekly or weekly. For those families that choose to avail themselves of several of these programs, they can have a highly regularized living and learning experience in the absence of a bridge model.

One example of a congregation offering this type of “cluster strategy” is Temple Beth Sholom in Roslyn Heights, NY. While it does not offer a bridge model *per se*, it has a successful ECC and religious school as well as a thriving day camp. It also offers a diverse set of learning and tefila experiences, including Shabbat a Lot (monthly Friday program for families of children in ECC, Gan and Aleph, or 1st Grade), Mini Minyan (weekly Shabbat experience for families with children ages 0-5), and Yedidim (a mentoring program for young children led by children in the Vav class). In addition, their Religious School Principal teaches Hurray for Hebrew, a weekly Hebrew language lesson for the four-year-olds in the ECC.

At most of these congregations, when educators were asked during telephone interviews about their offerings, they did not understand why their families might want or need a bridge model. Since most of them did not have a problem with retention from pre-Kindergarten into Kindergarten and from Kindergarten into Alef, they felt that they already had a path of continuous engagement. In most of these settings, the major reason why some families didn’t choose to register their children in the Kindergarten or 1st Grade class at the congregation was their decision to enroll their children in a Jewish day school. Educators at these congregations tended to be surprised when asked about the specific learning opportunities they offered to support young children and families as they were leaving the early childhood center. They answered with a series of practices designed to introduce the various learning options to families. From “Taste of Religious School” events to six-week mini-courses for children and parents, these congregations were often highly successful in helping their children make the transition out of the ECC and into the religious school. They reported high levels of family engagement during early childhood and high retention rates into religious (or day) school.

Common Themes and Bridging Levers

There are several themes that are common to most of the bridge models documented in this study. These themes highlight strategies that leverage the communal resources to achieve their goals around continuous engagement. While these findings pertain to the bridge models, some of the levers are also relevant to the “cluster strategy” congregations and other settings as well.

- a. Reimagined Role of Educators:** The role of educators that work in both early childhood centers and religious schools is often reimagined in ways that promote continuous engagement. In all of the congregational bridge models documented in this report, ECC staff members also teach in the bridge model in the religious school. Parents benefit from knowing the staff who will be teaching their children in the early primary years. In this way, these highly respected

educational leaders and teachers can serve as a human bridge easing the transition for the child and the family.

There are also congregations that don't offer bridge models where the role of educators has been similarly reimagined. Religious school principals may teach in the ECC, sometimes offering Hebrew enrichment as part of the weekly pre-Kindergarten experience. For example, this happens at Temple Israel Center in White Plains, New York, on a weekly basis. At Temple Beth Sholom in Roslyn Heights, New York, the religious school principal leads Hurray for Hebrew each month. Whether it occurs in conjunction with a bridge model or in its absence, this practice fosters a familiarity with the religious school principal that these congregations report leads to greater enrollment in Kindergarten, thereby supporting a smooth transition between phases of the children's learning journey.

- b. Strong Clergy Presence:** The rabbi(s) and cantor assume a visible leadership role in each of the bridge models. With the exception of Jewish Building Blocks, parents of children in these models are invited to participate in learning and tefila (prayer/worship) experiences along with their children. These clergy-led experiences often occur weekly and include community-wide tefila experiences as well as pre-Shabbat celebrations. In these moments, the clergy have the opportunity to lead the community in prayer and song in a way that is authentic to their style of worship. Clergy are also typically involved in graduation or "moving-up" ceremonies that help young children and families to transition between early childhood centers and religious school. The relationships that young children and their parents develop with clergy during these years provide a foundation for continued connection and a strong incentive for affiliation with the congregation. At the Jewish Enrichment Center, the bridge model in this study that is not under the auspices of a congregation, their prayer experiences function in a somewhat different way. In this model, the lead educator is a rabbi who leads the daily Shirah/Tefillah and other community-wide celebrations. She also finds opportunities to partner with the rabbi and cantor of the congregation where they are located and which serves as their financial sponsor.
- c. Financial Incentives:** There are several ways that congregations reduce the cost of an education to entice families to enroll their young children in the early years of religious school. Some provide free or heavily discounted tuition for pre-Kindergarten, and some continue this practice during Kindergarten. Some do not charge dues for young families until their oldest child reaches 1st, 2nd or 3rd Grade. Whatever its form, these various types of financial incentives serve to encourage parents to enroll their children and smooth the transition along their learning journey.
- d. Small-Group Mentorship:** Small group learning with a mentor is a feature of three of the four bridge models documented in this report. It is a core component of the bridge model offered for families at Congregation Beth Am in Los Altos Hills, CA, through their Connections initiative. While the mentors' status can vary – some are clergy of the congregation and others are part-time professionals hired specifically for this purpose – they often form deep relationships with participating families and serve as important role models and guides. While it is one of the

primary characteristics of the Connections model, small-group learning is also a feature of two other bridge models, the JEC and Yad b'Yad at Temple Isaiah. In these settings, the mentorship component is present, but less salient.

In addition to the bridge models documented here, small-group mentorship is a key element in models offered by several entrepreneurial organizations, including Shalom Explorers and Wilderness Torah, both in the San Francisco area. Shalom Explorers offers small group learning for families in Marin County and Wilderness Torah offers Wilderness B'hootz, a mentorship program for children in Kindergarten through 5th Grade.

- e. **Parental Involvement:** At three of the four bridge models documented in this report, parents engage in regular learning as well as prayer experiences. In these models, the entire community is invited to participate in prayer at the end of each session. Whether children meet on Sundays or several times during the week, there is a community-wide prayer component each time they learn. In each case, parents and caregivers are invited to participate along with the children. So it has become common practice for these adults to “drop in” for 20-30 minutes of singing and prayer led by their clergy in a way that is natural to their community. This type of experience not only can enrich the parents’ spiritual life, it also is a tangible demonstration of the parents’ personal interest and commitment to Jewish spiritual practice. This type of experience also elevates the idea that prayer happens every day, not just on Shabbat and holidays. Communal prayer is offered in the full range of settings: entrepreneurial, pluralistic, post-denominational and denominational.
- f. **Culture of Continuous Engagement:** Although bridge models are not the only effective way to create such a culture, these models can be highly successful in achieving their objectives. They accomplish this task through several strategies that convey the importance of lifelong Jewish learning that begins in early childhood and continues in an uninterrupted way throughout the various ages and stages of life. For example, ECC directors and religious school directors are well-known and maintain a regular presence in the learning spaces of each other. The ECC director, teachers and administrative staff serve as concierges helping parents make the choice to enroll their children in the religious school (or day school). These educators build deep and meaningful relationships with the children and their parents, and many continue to connect with them for years after the children leave the ECC. Religious school directors and teachers are present during the ECC years, often teaching in the early childhood center and participating in holiday and weekly Shabbat celebrations. Where congregations do not offer a bridge model to support the transition out of early childhood centers and into a religious school setting, they may still engage in similar strategies that support successful transitions during these liminal moments of a child’s life.

Other Trends in Continuous Engagement for Young Children and Families

During this research, many interviews were conducted and different types of programs and models were vetted. In addition to the findings about bridging levers presented above, there were several recurring themes. These may point to trends in the way that communities, entrepreneurial organizations and congregations provide opportunities for Jewish education and engagement for young children and their families.

- 1. Parent Connectors:** There is a growing number of communities where people serve in the role of Parent Connector or Family Connector. These connectors function as concierges helping Jewish families connect with one another and connect with the various community resources available in their neighborhood and their region. They may be professional staff members or volunteers, and they do their work from several hours monthly to more than 20 hours per week. Some examples are the Metrowest Family Connectors in New Jersey and the Community Connector Project in Baltimore. The first program is sponsored by the Partnership for Jewish Learning and Life and the second is sponsored by the Louise D. & Morton J. Macks Center for Jewish Education. Both of these initiatives and the agencies that sponsor them are supported by the Jewish Federations in their locale.
- 2. After-School Enrichment Opportunities:** Some congregations and JCCs offer after-school enrichment programs for young children that expand the hours when Jewish education happens for young children in their community. Sometimes these options are a response to the schedule when learning is available at public schools in the neighborhood. For example, at Temple Emanuel in Westfield, NJ, they developed a Kindergarten enrichment program starting at 11:30 am and running until 2:30 pm (or 6 pm with after-school care options). This was as a result of the very brief Kindergarten day offered by the public schools, with a shortage of spaces in the free afternoon extension available only on a lottery basis.
- 3. Project-Based Learning:** There is a growing number of congregations that have decided within the past several years to offer project-based learning (PBL) models, sometimes with children as young as three years old. These settings report that the PBL models help participants take a lead in their own learning, see a connection between learning and life, and feel a part of the community. The Jewish Enrichment Center in Chicago, one of the bridge models documented here, falls in this category. At the JEC, children engage in sustained project-based inquiry beginning at age three. Some of the project-based learning models offered by other congregations include Mayim at Temple Beth Shalom in Wellesley, MA, and Sulam at Temple Chayai Shalom in Easton, MA.

Implications for the Field and Future Study

This research highlights several implications for the field and avenues for future study. The findings, trends and model descriptions are presented here as hypotheses, not as prescriptions or proven claims. The models are available to be studied, and it is our hope that this will lead to inquiry and experimentation. The educators who developed these models were generous with their time and insights. They were also open about the significant challenges they faced during initial launch and subsequent development. Future research will be needed to determine the extent to which bridge models – these examples and others – are effective at providing continuous engagement for young children and families. Additional study could also highlight and evaluate the efforts of congregations and others to adopt and adapt such models for use in their own settings.

This report made significant assumptions about the value of a Jewish early childhood education and its potential for enhancing future engagement and fostering lifelong learning. More research is needed to test these assumptions. As part of this process, it will also be helpful to develop a common language for speaking about the opportunities, strategies and challenges involved in creating a culture of continuous engagement. Finally, this report has implications for engaging unaffiliated children and families beyond the mainstream Jewish community and legacy institutions. We look forward to seeing the results of future studies in this arena.

Acknowledgements

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I want to thank my colleagues in Early Childhood and Family Engagement (EC&FE) for their leadership and assistance in pointing me in helpful directions. Shellie Dickstein, the Director of EC&FE, has long been a leader in the field of early childhood education and family engagement. I was fortunate to have her guidance at the outset of the study. She introduced me to the role of parent connectors in communities around the U.S. and encouraged me to look for congregations that might be incorporating parent connectors in their models. Shariee Calderone provided a helpful list of educators around the country whose work included community-based parent connectors.

This study builds on the pioneering work of the bridge model peer networks led by Susan Remick Topek and Suri Jacknis in Long Island and by Susan Poltarak and Rabbi Jennifer Goldsmith in Westchester. They paved the way with their foundational work, especially the identification of key levers that help support continuous learning and engagement for young children and families.

Finally, I offer a special note of appreciation to all of the educators who agreed to be interviewed, some for several extended appointments. The model documentation could not have been completed without their assistance. There were also educators whose work is not featured in a recognizable way in this report, but who provided important insights into the opportunities and challenges educators face today. This research project benefitted from each interview and from the educators' generosity, openness and commitment to the field.

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Appendix A

Model Elements

Has a purpose, and/or a definition of success

There is an overarching goal (or goals) for the educational experience over time, capturing the aspirations for participants —children, adults and families.

Regularized, not episodic

Its activities happen on a pre-arranged schedule, and take place repeatedly over the course of a year, (with a frequency of at least once per month)

Considered normative

Rather than being seen as an alternative, a supplement, an experiment, or as “lesser,” it is the only educational choice or one choice among several considered by the congregation to be of equal value and importance.

Alignment of processes with the goals

The “how” of education supports the “why” of education. Procedures, structures, and activities are designed intentionally to lead to the goals and are conducive to the accomplishment of the goals.

Structure to organize time, place, people/roles

There are established arrangements for when learning takes place, where learning takes place, who the learners are, who plans the learning, and who guides the learning.

Set of procedures

There are established processes for conducting all aspects of the educational enterprise.

Language for defining and communicating about players/roles, procedures, time, place, purposes, values

There is a vocabulary to name and describe all aspects of the educational enterprise. These are used in formal and informal communication, with agreed upon definitions by participants in the system.

Integration/Coherence

The elements of the educational enterprise are connected to one another, and to other aspects of congregational life. Education is not an isolated function in the congregation. There is consistency across the goals and principles of all educational offerings—within and across age cohorts.

Appendix B

Documentation of Four Bridge Models

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The Jewish Enrichment Center Chicago, IL

Model Summary

The Jewish Enrichment Center is an after-school care and study model that currently serves children from infants through 5th Grade. It offers project-based exploratory learning in small groups for children aged 3 through 11. The curriculum is based on learners' interests and questions. Most children are enrolled 7-10 hours weekly. Parents are invited to take an active role in children's projects and to participate in community-wide Shirah/Tefillah (Singing/Prayer) after each session.

The Jewish Enrichment Center (JEC) is an independent, entrepreneurial organization with a pluralistic outlook. It meets in Congregation Rodfei Zedek, a Conservative egalitarian congregation in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago, which provides financial support and a core group of participating families. Many of the teachers work full-time at the JEC and spend at least ten hours per week in professional learning and collaboration. The JEC has developed a new staff role, a Yetzirah specialist, who is integral to the children's learning experience. A full-time arts and creativity expert, she supports the learners' creative expression of their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in multiple ways through the visual and performing arts. [Note: The transliteration of the words Shirah, Tefillah and Yetzirah used here follows the spelling preferred by the JEC.]

What is the 30-Second "Elevator Pitch" of the Model?

The Jewish Enrichment Center staff believes that they can introduce it most effectively by showing it to prospective parents who are encouraged to visit and observe. When talking to parents in the neighborhood about the JEC, they might say: It's a Jewish place where children can play and explore Judaism in ways they want, with materials that spark imaginations. It's a Sunday and after-school program that fosters friendship, curiosity, critical thinking, and empathy. The long-term projects let children express their ideas about Judaism in clay, conversation, blocks, dance, and a hundred other "languages," as part of the long tradition of Jewish conversation.

The JEC is a place where children get to ask questions that matter to them, and design their own Jewish experience based on who they are in a community of their peers. We do that through asking big questions and then listening carefully to the children. By partnering with children in creative, long-term exploration that involves the whole child, we can support their learning, individualized discovery and meaning making.

How Does the Model Align with the Vision for Learning?

According to their website, the Jewish Enrichment Center has articulated a vision for learning that guides its work with children and families:

The JEC wants every child to have the knowledge, skills, confidence, and capacities to take part in the ongoing Jewish conversation – the one that’s been taking place for generations. All Jewish children are welcome and valued at the Jewish Enrichment Center, including unaffiliated, congregational, and day school families. By engaging these families in dialogue with Jewish tradition and 21st century values, the JEC helps children and families build dynamic relationships with their Jewish identities.

The following values drive our work together:

קהילה KEHILLAH {Community} : The Jewish Enrichment Center fosters children’s empathy by teaching skills and language for collaboration and problem-solving.

סקרנות SAKRANUT {Curiosity} : The Jewish Enrichment Center taps into children’s natural desire to explore. Investigative play teaches children to reinterpret, see alternate perspectives, and think critically.

שותפות SHUTAFUT {Partnership} : The Jewish Enrichment Center partners with families to create meaningful Jewish experiences, and with local Jewish organizations to strengthen Jewish community.

כבוד KAVOD {Dignity} : The Jewish Enrichment Center believes children are resourceful, capable, and imaginative. We provide innovative materials related to Jewish living and let children’s interests and questions guide our exploration.

Who are the Learners?

The Jewish Enrichment Center currently enrolls infants through Grade 5, and is growing one grade each year. Parents and other lay leaders are invited to take active roles in their project-based learning units. They can serve as mentors for children working on their projects and are invited to join the audience when projects are displayed at the culmination of each unit.

The JEC has the following groups of learners:

Ages 0 - 3 and their grown-ups: *Shalom Chaverim* (“Welcome, Friends!”)

Ages 3 - 4: *Shorashim* (“Roots”)

Kindergarten Children: *Shteelim* (“Saplings”)

First and Second Grade Children: *Nitzanim* (“Buds”)

Third, Fourth, and Fifth Grade Children: *Anafim* (“Branches”)

All age children and adults (parents, grandparents and/or caregivers) are encouraged to join together for *Shirah/Tefillah* (Singing/Prayer) at the close of each session. [Please note: the spelling for Shirah and Tefillah used here are the ones used by the JEC.]

Who are the Educators/Learning Facilitators?

Teachers are called “Morot, “Educators,” or “Facilitators.” The JEC also has a new type of staff person: the Yetzirah specialist. Her role is to support the learners’ creative expression of their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in multiple ways through visual and performing arts. The Yetzirah specialist is a key person in supporting each of the children in this important

work that reinforces their personal connection to their inner self and the ongoing narrative of the Jewish people.

Educators work a range of hours, from Sunday only (4 hours per week for infant-toddler staff) to some who work each day. The Education Team devotes over 10 hours each week (paid time) to professional development and collaboration. There is daily professional learning for the educators and reflection time for 30 minutes after each session. The educators focus on what they are learning about themselves and about individual children.

Ideal educators are highly creative, passionate about learning, work well on a team, love a good challenge, and are flexible risk-takers who hold themselves to high standards. The JEC educators believe that people of every age, including children, are capable, resourceful, and able to learn. Beginning Hebrew knowledge is required of all educators.

In addition, parents and other lay leaders are invited to take active roles in the children's project-based learning units. They can serve as mentors for children working on projects and support them as they research their topics and develop creative expressions of what they've learned. Parents and other members of the community are invited to attend project presentations at the end of each theme-based unit.

Where Does the Learning Experience Happen?

Most of the learning happens in the building. Every mixed-age group has their own space (such as Beit Nitzanim) and a Yetzirah Studio. A community gathering area is used for mixed-age group activities. There is also a place for physical play with Hebrew games. In addition, the JEC uses the chapel and sanctuary of the synagogue, and a park and field that are across the street. JEC educators infrequently take groups out of the building.

What is the Nature of the Learning Experience?

By choosing a Jewish theme, like a biblical character or a piece of Jewish text, and exploring it for eight to ten weeks, the Jewish Enrichment Center provides multiple ways for children to explore Jewish content via five lenses: biblical, rabbinical, historical, cultural, and personal. They draw on the work from Harvard, *Making Learning Visible*, which focuses on the power of a group as a learning environment, and documentation as a way to shape, extend, and make visible how and what we learn. Principles from the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education and from project-based learning help the JEC meet their commitment to partner with children in Jewish exploration.

Curriculum emerges from children's interests and questions. Educators are co-learners with children. They set up environments rich in possibilities and provocations that invite children to engage in ongoing exploration and problem solving. As children explore, educators document children's activity in pictures, transcripts, and videos. Educators use this documentation to understand more deeply what children are grappling with and to help children reflect on their play. Together, educators and children develop long-term projects, often in small groups, where children can practice cooperation, responsibility, and empathy.

Hebrew is embedded in the auditory and visual environment, and in the routines of each day, so children pick up the language naturally. Children of all ages play games in Hebrew, often getting to choose how they would like to engage with the language that day. Hebrew is woven into their physical play time. Comfort with the Hebrew language, and a working vocabulary, are essential to developing confidence in owning the texts of the centuries-old Jewish conversation. A child who owns these texts can play with Judaism, creating a Jewish life and community most meaningful to him/her.

Furthermore, drawing on Reggio Emilia and project-based learning helps the Jewish Enrichment Center be mindful of the many kinds of relationships they foster: among children, between children and their environment, children and educators, educators and parents, children and parents, educators and the larger Hyde Park Jewish community. In particular, they want children from across the community to become friends and value each other's skills and experiences. They ask questions like: how can children be resources for one another? How do educators support one another in continuing to grow as professionals? How are children using the materials available to them, and how might educators change materials so that children see new possibilities for play? How does the Jewish Enrichment Center partner with parents and community members?

Partnership with parents is a core part of their educational approach. A child's home environment and parents play a tremendous role in growing the attitudes and capacities which the JEC values. As part of their partnership with parents, the Jewish Enrichment Center documents major moments in children's Jewish growth, such as the first time a child reads publicly from a Jewish scroll, and a child's burning questions about the Torah. Parents share in this multi-year portfolio, and they can add to it various artifacts, including videos of children singing *Mah Nishtanah* (The Four Questions) at home, or photos of family Jewish celebrations.

The JEC begins teaching children at age 3 about responding to their peers. By 1st Grade, learners are working on "Pair Share" and "Make a wondering" about a text with their *chavrutah*. Children practice listening and sharing skills around the snack table. Sometimes educators provide sentence stems to scaffold this work. JEC staff note the progress and create a medium, such as a Mosaic Bench, which allows learners to see their own growth.

When Does the Learning Experience Happen?

The JEC meets Sunday mornings from 9:00-11:45 am and four afternoons each week, Monday through Thursday from 1:30-5:45 pm. During the first hour on weekday afternoons, children arrive at different times based on when their schools end. While two weekly sessions is the minimum for children in Kindergarten and older, many of the children come three or more days. Children are welcome to attend as many sessions per week as the family chooses. Although the JEC offers almost 20 hours of learning per week, most children attend 2 or 3 sessions, totaling between 7 and 10 hours.

At the end of every session, the entire community gathers together for twenty minutes for Shirah/Tefillah (Singing/Prayer). They sing in Hebrew and English, and children learn the words to the primary Jewish prayers through song. It's a time to hear special news from the

day, for parents and caregivers to get a sense of the big ideas their child is grappling with, and to find out what to ask their child(ren) about at home. The JEC strongly encourages parents to make Shirah/Tefillah a regular part of their weekly schedule.

JEC families are encouraged to enroll their children in additional enrichment days and weeks. There are full days of Jewish enrichment, called Special Days, offered when local schools are closed. There are also full weeks of Jewish Enrichment Camp during selected school breaks. Children spend Special Days and Camp days playing and exploring a Jewish person (e.g., Marc Chagall) or an idea (e.g., the tastes of Passover), culminating in a big project by the end of the day or week.

During the summer, the JEC meets on two Sunday mornings to play in parks around the city, including some Enrichment Center-style fun. Plus, they send children mail over the summer, with Hebrew games and puzzles and cards. They believe children should get to keep their Hebrew skills sharp over the summer, and see their Enrichment Center friends as well. Jewish Enrichment Camp runs for two weeks at the end of the summer.

What Were You Trying To Achieve With This Model?

The JEC started with a group of families that wanted high-quality after-school care for all Jewish children in the Hyde Park area. They wanted an educational approach that would value every child, where every person would matter and where the ways that different families practiced Judaism would be welcome and valued. It opened in 2011 with children from infants to 8 years old. It has grown one year at a time and currently serves children ranging from infants through 5th grade.

Rabbi Rebecca Milder, the Founder and Director of the Jewish Enrichment Center, was motivated by a desire to serve the needs of her children and the larger community. The JEC conducted a community organizing process to learn what might be needed. Rebecca designed the educational approach and started to implement it. It was easier for parents to see the benefits and processes after it was tangible.

How Do You Define Success?

The JEC defines success in various ways. They are aiming for competency in Hebrew language, knowledge of core Jewish texts and ideas, ability to study classic Jewish texts with a study partner, and a commitment to participation in Jewish communal life and ongoing Jewish learning. Before graduation, students complete a final, multi-faceted final project that demonstrates the full range of a student's Jewish identity. The certificate of completion is accompanied by the student's portfolio, which demonstrates a student's growth through the years in Jewish thought, expression of ideas, and Hebrew language. (See Sample Materials; Additional Notes; B'racha Unit for a more detailed example of portfolio work.)

Different themes drive different types of work. The JEC does a theme related to each of Torah, Avodah and Gemilut Hasadim each year. At the end of theme, all of those projects

come together as a big installation that they offer to the community. This is final documentation work and adults get to see these ideas through children's eyes. Parents, grandparents and the whole community are invited to this celebration. They honor children's eyes partly by seeing them, and also by giving them opportunities to wrestle with the text and big ideas.

How Have You Measured Success?

From the professional side: At the end of each theme, there is an assessment of what children have learned. Then at the end of the year, educators do a larger assessment of learning. The JEC has developed a matrix of what children should be able to know and do by the end of each year. This has very specific benchmarks with a rubric of what it means to be approaching, meeting, or exceeding the benchmarks. They are in the process of developing this type of rubric for their *chavrutah* system.

Eighteen months ago, the JEC did a values survey of all enrolled families to assess their priorities. They learned how little value many of their families placed on learning Hebrew, including speaking and reading the language. Families wanted a general familiarity with Hebrew, but it wasn't a strong value that children could be comfortable walking into any type of service and participate in Hebrew. The most important value for families was that the children could read texts on their own and decide on a Jewish path for themselves. Almost nobody said it was important for their children to believe in God or to have a very strong connection to the State of Israel.

The JEC followed up with several focus groups to further inform what they were learning. They recently had a conversation with families of 4th and 5th grade children. They explored what responsibility and community mean at this stage of their lives. They are considering several options for personalizing the Bar/Bat Mitzvah experience, including customizing the prayer service and creating alternative non-traditional experiences.

Challenges and Trouble-Shooting

There are several challenges posed by this particular model. It requires educators to have many different skills that they are working on simultaneously. It requires a visual environment that is rich with auditory input, Hebrew mixed in with English, as well as very specific language that transmits the idea that learners need to listen and share. JEC educators need to practice engaging in "observation without judgment" and respond in the moment in a flexible way with the educator saying "I wonder." At the same time, in addition to learning the pedagogic approach and developing the various skills they need for working with children and parents, they have to study text together as grownups. It takes a while for educators to "settle in" and grow into their diverse roles.

It is also challenging to invest so much time and money in new people. The educators at the JEC meet as teams every day and the JEC is investing in their work as teams. They spend time reflecting on what they are hearing and learning about each child, and on how they can improve their ability to support their inquiry.

Project-based learning is time-intensive and it has taken time to learn how to do it well. After 5 years, the JEC leadership feels that they now understand what needs to be in place in advance of launching a project. They also recognize different ages as needing different types of support, and believe that the staff is well-trained in strategies for scaffolding learning throughout the project-based learning process.

Relationship of Model to Congregational Learning System

The JEC is an independent, entrepreneurial organization that meets at Cong. Rodfei Zedek. Because of the success of the JEC, the synagogue has stopped offering learning for children ages 3 through 5th Grade. The partnership between the JEC and Rodfei Zedek is a mutually advantageous one. The synagogue works actively to bring new families into the building, and new JEC families usually choose to affiliate with the synagogue.

What is Inspiring about This Model?

Rabbi Milder reflected that it is hard to pick just one compelling story of a learner's or family's journey. She shared the following story: The mom is of Sefardi descent and the dad is not Jewish. They came to the intake interview with Rabbi Milder and explained that they hadn't shared with their children that their dad is not Jewish. The mom is an organizer and had not found a place for herself in the organized Jewish community. They both wanted their child to have a connection to Judaism. The mom said that at the JEC she has finally found a place where she could speak her values out loud. She had participated in a small group conversation and a values survey with JEC parents. She was so empowered by that experience that she decided to become more involved in the local synagogue. She recently gave a d'var Torah from the bima. She found a place where she could express herself. In addition, her child needs various therapies to be successful. Finding the JEC has been a real surprise because they have found a place where each of them can be welcomed and supported on their human and Jewish journey. She noted that the dad comes at end of the day to Shirah/ Tefilla where the community sings and prays; and he feels comfortable.

Rabbi Milder also shared a curricular success story from a recent theme: educators wanted to make it possible for 3rd-5th grade children to choose the modality to express their ideas. They created 15 different projects and 15 different ways to express themselves. One child created a billboard with a public service announcement about B'rachot: "You just saw that mountain and you have to say a b'racha." Another child studied the ancient text of the Priestly blessing and the *ketef hinnom* scrolls that were discovered in 1979 where the text first appears. The child was so taken by this ancient source and the words of the blessing that he chose to make his project out of clay. One child chose to make a project out of felt, another out of watercolor paints, and another using origami. They are still coming from the community to see this b'racha installation and take photos.

How Do You Describe Your Organization?

The JEC is an independent, entrepreneurial organization with a pluralistic outlook. It operates separately from Congregation Rodfei Zedek, the synagogue where it is located and

which serves as its financial sponsor. It is located near the University of Chicago in the Hyde Park neighborhood on the south side of Chicago. It is proud to be one of several new and innovative developments on the Jewish scene in that neighborhood.

Budget

Staff members are full-time and earn \$32,500-35,000 per year. Tuition does not cover the costs. The JEC is very heavily supported by grant funding as well as individual donations. Congregation Rodfei Zedek has contributed facilities and space. The JEC is also generously supported by Crown Family Philanthropies. As a member of the Nitzan Network, it is one of several non-denominational Jewish after-school learning programs in North America that receive support from UpStart. These pluralistic programs are not affiliated with any one synagogue or denomination, and benefit from resource sharing and cross-sector collaboration with other network members engaged in a similar mission.

Governance

There is an advisory board which operates independently of the congregation in which the JEC is located. When it first started, the board was comprised entirely of parents of JEC families. These parents were all affiliated with Congregation Rodfei Zedek, although some were not active. The JEC is currently shifting and expanding the advisory board to include some who are not JEC parents and have no connection with the congregation. There are people in the larger Chicago metropolitan area and around the country who have expressed an interest in what the JEC is doing and in helping it grow. There are also some lay leaders who are offering significant volunteer time and don't sit on the advisory board.

What Makes This Model a Compelling Bridge Model?

The Jewish Enrichment Center model:

- Provides an opportunity for continuous learning and engagement for children and families
- Exemplifies and cultivates lifelong learning
- Offers a seamless transition for children learning from year to year
- Calls on parents to demonstrate their ongoing commitment to Jewish living and learning
- Links learning to living in an authentic way
- Provides learning and living activities that are age-appropriate and relevant to participants
- Offers learning that is highly personalized and allows children to make choices
- Avoids differentiation between pre-school and religious school so it doesn't need to break down silos
- Provides significant time and support for educators to collaborate and attend to each person's needs

Sample Materials that Support Model Documentation

For a more detailed outline of the daily schedule visit: <http://jewishenrichment.org/enroll-now-for-fall-2015/schedule>

Current tuition costs and payment information are at: <http://jewishenrichment.org/enroll-now-for-fall-2015/tuition-and-payment-info>

There is a public blog with pictures of the various projects at: www.jewishenrichment.org/blog

See also <http://www.slingshotfund.org/directory/jewish-enrichment-center>

Article by Rebecca Milder, “Child-Centered Jewish Exploration” in *Hayidion: The Ravsak Journal*, Summer 2013 [<https://prizmah.org/child-centered-jewish-exploration>]

Sample Theme Units (included below):

- Some Reflections on the B’racha Theme Unit
- *Shema Theme Unit* in Kindergarten/First Grade After-school Program

Some Reflections on the B’racha Theme Unit:

When this model was initially documented, they were close to the end of the B’racha Unit. These are some of Rabbi Rebecca Milder’s thoughts captured during a conversation.

We are in the 7th week of the *B’racha* unit. 3rd-5th Grade learners have already chosen their projects. Each child has developed their own idea and articulated their own artist statements. (An artist statement is the child’s verbal expression of their idea, including an explanation of their art work and how it connects to the big idea about the theme.) They have explored text and had conversations with peers. It’s visible in their final projects and the work they are sharing.

Each project is different from the next. The specific skills we’re working on: access to text, text reading; *chavrutah* triangle with me, my *chavrutah* and text each having a voice; social and emotional learning makes that possible; Reggio 100 languages of learning; in Yetzirah studio, each student will choose materials and modalities. Some draw, use watercolors or pastels, and some make word art. We can access their Hebrew learning – each theme has specific goals. We ask: what does a child know and is able to do by the end of K? by the end of 1st Grade? An overall goal is to contribute to the growth and development of each Jewish child with confidence and skills and the recognition that “I have my idea and my idea matters.”

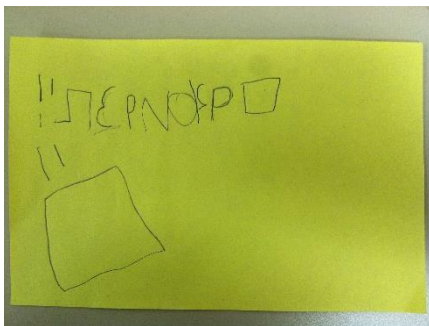
***Shema* Theme Unit in Kindergarten/First Grade After-school Program**

Children attend at least two sessions/ week. The following experience took place over eight weeks. The theme we were exploring was *Shema*. We educators decided to explore the idea that the *Shema* connects Jews across space and time: that Jews around the world young and old, know the *Shema*, and that this shared knowledge carries a certain closeness, a sense of home, no matter where we go. We weren't approaching *Shema* as a statement of belief. We asked our kindergarten and first grade children to become *Shema* researchers. The children asked: do most grown-up Jews know the *Shema*? We went down the hall to the Chapel, introduced ourselves in Hebrew to folks in the *minyan*, asked them if they knew the *Shema*, and made a chart – yes, they all knew the *Shema*!



We sent the same chart home with children, asking them to call or Skype grown-up Jews they know. Many children made their grown-ups prove that they knew the *Shema* by asking them to sing it! Children said, "Okay, sing it for me so I can be sure." By tallying our results, we discovered that, indeed, most grown-up Jews know the *Shema*. Not only did children see that Jews around the world know the *Shema*, but parents and grandparents were now clued in to our *Shema* exploration. In the next stage of our *Shema* exploration, children continued their *Shema* research on site, while we reached out to families and community directly, asking them to share the content of their connection to the *Shema*. On site, children continued to research the *Shema*. One day, children were offered a sheet of paper with the *Shema* and asked, Does our mystery page have the same *Shema* as in the Torah? Our kindergarten and first grade children looked for clues, then drew conclusions.

A kindergartener's research notes: ת (Torah has) 3 P (paragraphs). NO (not in the *mezuzah*! followed by a vertical line). 2 P ם [(two paragraphs in a *mezuzah*, with a final *mem*, standing for *mezuzah*)].



Children also explored how the bedtime *Shema* connects Jews across space and time through an art project that lasted over a month, in which children screen-printed their own *Shema* pillowcases, decorated them with Judaica stamps of their own design, and learned through this process about positive and negative space.

To keep families informed about their children’s new discoveries, we updated our ongoing blog. Readers of the blog felt invested, we saw an increase in our blog readership, and even a few comments. Near the end of our exploration, children took part in preparing for a *Shema* pajama party, which included a *Shema* project that connected older and younger children, adult text study, dinner, story time in family units, *havdalah*, and, of course, the singing of the *Shema*. Every family in the program that was in town that weekend participated in our *Shema* pajama party. While children continued their *Shema* research on site, we invited families and community to share a memory, or a story, about the *Shema*, and to send in their stories in whatever format they chose: email, iPhone voice memo, recording a Skype chat with a grandparent.

Three generations of Jews shared powerful stories. Grandparents who had been reading the blog sent stories. Community members who heard about the project sent stories. Children wrote about their own experiences with the *Shema*. One woman wrote about how the *Shema* was the first Hebrew prayer she learned before her conversion, and she learned it from her two-year-old daughter. Another mom shared how, as a girl, she felt entirely disconnected from the Holocaust stories told to her, yet now, as a mom, she can’t deny how they motivate her to teach her young son the *Shema*. After our children revisited morning *minyan*, one first grader wrote about the experience of saying *Shema* with a group in prayer: “I felt like I was singing alone, except listening to others.”



We placed our community’s *Shema* stories, along with the storyteller’s picture, on a wall in a well-traveled hallway: the word *Shema* in the middle, with string connecting the word *Shema* to each person’s story. Some of the stories are printed, and other stories may be heard in the storyteller’s voice (through a QR code that may be scanned with a smartphone). People still stop in the hallway to read these stories, remarking on how they’ve just learned something new about our community. Children and grown-

ups passing by get a tiny reminder of the richness of our *Shema* exploration: how exploring the idea that the *Shema* connects Jews across space and time connected *us* more deeply with each other and Judaism.

Two years later, children continue to tell us that they sleep on their *Shema* pillowcases. Two years later, the *Shema* map still graces the wall of our synagogue and the conversations and the learning continue.

Jewish Building Blocks

Hewlett-East Rockaway Jewish Centre – Congregation Etz Chaim

East Rockaway, NY

Model Summary:

Jewish Building Blocks provides children aged 4-6 an opportunity to continue and deepen the playful and exploratory learning that began in Nursery School. It provides a multi-sensory experience which invites young children to encounter Jewish values, engage in ritual observance, and explore their spirituality through music, art, movement, dance, and prayer. Jewish Building Blocks is led by Nursery School teachers who strive to ensure a seamless transition for children on their way out of the congregation's early childhood experience. There is no role for parents in the learning experiences offered by Jewish Building Blocks. For young families who avail themselves of family programming offered by the congregation, such as Shabbat services and holiday events, Jewish Building Blocks can serve as a bridge model not only for children, but also for the entire family.

What is the 30-Second "Elevator Pitch" of the Model?

The congregation speaks about Jewish Building Blocks to parents as a "gift" that the congregation offers to them and that the parents can choose to "give" to their children. It continues to strengthen the bonds among Nursery School families and helps their children deepen their love of Judaism and their awareness of its power in their lives. It currently meets each Sunday for two hours from 9-11 am, and will expand to three hours in the fall of 2016 when it will run until 12 noon. It is taught by four talented Nursery School teachers who provide a fun, developmentally appropriate curriculum for all children ages 4-6. Children learn Jewish traditions through Bible stories and fun activities including music, art, movement, baking and dance. They celebrate Shabbat and Holidays in a multi-sensory way that permits them to see, taste, hear, smell and touch Jewish ritual life.

How Does the Model Align with the Vision for Learning?

The Jewish Building Blocks model aligns with the way the congregation sees its mission and its vision for learning. They are committed to providing innovative experiences that:

- Foster lifelong learning from pre-school through adulthood
- Celebrate their Jewish heritage
- Deepen the sense of community among their Congregational family
- Promote religious involvement of all members, and enhance their spiritual experience
- Encourage intergenerational cooperation
- Nurture the State of Israel and their relationship with it
- Serve the needs of their members, the local community, the United States and *K'lal Yisrael*, the Jewish people throughout the world.

Who are the Learners?

The learners are children aged 4-6, or pre-Kindergarten through 1st Grade. They are typically called “kids” or “Building Blocks kids.” They are considered full-fledged students in the Religious School. There are 30 children in the current cohort which varies somewhat in size from year to year. Most of the four-year-olds enrolled in the Nursery School during the week also participate in Jewish Building Blocks on Sundays. There is no ideal size for a cohort and there is no limit placed on registration. This model focuses on learning experiences for children and does not specifically include adults in the learning. The families of Jewish Building Blocks children are encouraged to participate in Family Shabbat services which meet monthly.

Who are the Educators/Learning Facilitators?

The four Jewish Building Blocks teachers also work in the Nursery School. There is one head teacher and three assistant teachers. One of the teachers is Israeli and supports Hebrew letter recognition as well as provides a natural integration of basic Hebrew vocabulary into the various activities.

When Does the Learning Happen?

Learning happens on Sunday mornings from 9-11 am, the same time that older children are in the Religious School. Beginning in September 2016, they will be expanding to three hours per week, running from 9 am - 12 noon on Sunday.

Where Does the Learning Happen?

The learning happens primarily in a classroom that is shared by the Nursery School and Religious School.

What is the Learning? How is it Designed?

The learning in Jewish Building Blocks is similar to what the children enjoy doing in Nursery School. It is designed by the lead teacher in consultation with the Religious School Principal. Through stories, songs, and hands-on experiences, children encounter Jewish values and the role of Jewish values in their everyday life. Children engage in spiritual development through music, art, movement, dance, life events and prayer. The children experience Jewish rituals through the tastes, sounds, sights and smells of Shabbat and holidays. While the activities are similar to the pre-Kindergarten child’s weekday experience, the teachers are cognizant of the need to avoid duplication. They design Jewish Building Blocks in a way that ensures that the learning feels exciting and different. In that way, the content can deepen and enrich the weekday experience or function on a standalone basis for children no longer in the Nursery School during the week.

What Were You Trying to Achieve with this Model?

Jewish Building Blocks began as a dream of the Nursery School leadership. They saw that many of the children who were most engaged in pre-K did not choose to continue into the Kindergarten class of the Religious School. Many of the children did not have a way to continue their education and deepen their love of Judaism during the early primary years, but rather returned to enroll in 2nd or 3rd Grade in the Religious School. Prior to the launch of Jewish Building Blocks, the congregation had revamped their Religious School to start in 2nd Grade with Alef rather than in 3rd Grade. Over the last five years, the Alef class has benefitted from the success of Jewish Building Blocks and the change in culture from hiatus after Nursery School to continuity into Religious School.

The educators are inspired by the writings of Maxine Handelman on integrating Jewish concepts into everyday life. They also utilize many PJ Library books and programming ideas. The congregational leadership believes that this model makes a significant difference for children and families in the community by enabling them to continue their learning experience during the early primary years. It provides a solid age-appropriate foundation in the areas of Jewish Values, God and Spirituality, and Ritual Observance.

Key First Steps and Recruitment Plan:

Jewish Building Blocks was launched in 2010 and is currently in its sixth year. According to the Nursery Director, 2010 was an ideal year for starting this model because they had the right parents on board. They held a parlor meeting with some of the most highly committed Nursery School parents who loved the concept and shared their enthusiasm with others. The model was initially launched with the aid of a grant from United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism and led by a USCJ family learning consultant.

Awareness of the model continues to spread by word-of-mouth. 30 children are currently enrolled in Jewish Building Blocks, which represents about 90% of the 4-6 year-olds in the congregation who are not attending day school. Most four-year-olds attend Nursery School and also choose to participate in Jewish Building Blocks on Sundays. When parents enroll their first child in the model, they receive the gift of synagogue membership for up to three years until that child enters the Religious School Alef class in 2nd Grade. The cost of membership is then stepped up gradually each year. When Jewish Building Blocks initially launched, the idea of giving “free membership” to families was a new concept to the congregation.

The model is advertised in-house to the Nursery School parents who see it as the normative choice. The key to its initial success was in identifying several parents who would be open to this type of model and could see the foundation it would offer to their growing families. When introducing the idea to prospective parents, the leadership speaks about it as a “gift” that it offers to them and that the parents can choose to “give” to their children.

Role of Governance and Clergy:

The Religious School and Nursery School Directors collaborate on the model. They have monthly meetings with the Board of Education and make a yearly presentation to the Board of Directors of the congregation. They arrange for publicity about their successes in this model in local newspapers to help spread the word in the larger community. In this way, they can reach those who are not affiliated with the congregation and who might be interested in sending their children to participate in Jewish Building Blocks.

The Religious School Director oversees the model which takes place on Sundays when he is present and the Nursery School Director is not. They also share responsibility for providing professional learning for the staff. The Hazzan (Cantor) leads singing with the children every Sunday. The Rabbi meets with the parents on some Sunday mornings while their children are in Jewish Building Blocks. The clergy also participate in various Shabbat and holiday programming for families.

Budget:

During the 2015-2016 program year, tuition and family membership cost \$925 for one child. There is an additional cost of \$400 for enrolling a second child. This reduction in tuition cost per child also applies for those families with other children in the Religious School. While their children are enrolled in Jewish Building Blocks, families are given membership in the congregation. Jewish Building Blocks teacher salaries are the same as the salaries paid to teachers in the Religious School, which is competitive with what other part-time teachers earn in the area.

Hiring Needs:

Teachers should have a strong background in Jewish education and solid experience with early childhood Jewish education. They need to understand child development and what is age-appropriate for children ages 4-6. It is essential that they have their own love of Judaism that they can share with the children and families. They need to be able to develop warm, caring and positive relationships with parents.

Relationship of Model to Congregational Learning System:

This model serves children aged 4-6, in pre-Kindergarten to 1st Grade. It is the only formal education model that the congregation offers for children in Kindergarten and 1st Grade. The pre-Kindergarten children typically attend the Nursery School during the week and Jewish Building Blocks on Sunday.

How Do You Describe Your Congregation?

Hewlett-East Rockaway Jewish Centre – Congregation Etz Chaim (HERJC) is a traditional-egalitarian Conservative congregation with about 550 families. It is located in Nassau County, Long Island, and is served by two clergy (a rabbi and a cantor) and three lead education staff (the Directors of the Religious School, the Nursery School and Youth).

What Makes This Model a Compelling Bridge Model?

The Jewish Building Blocks model:

- Places the culture of continuous Jewish journeys into family conversations and decision making
- Provides a seamless continuation of the learning children enjoyed in Nursery School
- Offers learning in multi-age cohorts that builds peer-to-peer relationships between learners
- Fosters the children's love of Judaism in age-appropriate ways
- Enables Nursery School teachers to serve as a human bridge into Religious School
- Maintains and expands the children's contact with the clergy, especially the Hazzan
- Gives parents an opportunity to study with the Rabbi periodically during the year
- Deepens the social bonds children have with their peers and with children a year or two younger or older
- Regularizes the children's learning and encourages them to continue in a seamless way from year to year
- Breaks down the silos between Nursery School and Religious School through collaborative leadership and professional learning
- Provides opportunities for ongoing family engagement when parents choose to participate in family programming, such as Shabbat services and holiday events

Sample Materials to Support Model Documentation

Marketing Brochure

From Facebook Page for HERJC Jewish Building Blocks:

5 Things about Building Blocks that You Wanted To Know but Were Afraid to Ask!!

1. Maintain your friendships from the Hewlett East Rockaway Jewish Centre Nursery School
2. When is it?? One day a week; Sundays from 9-11
3. Learn Jewish Traditions through Fun Activities (Music, Art, Story time and Baking)
4. Celebrating Shabbat, Holidays, reading Bible stories and making them come to life!
5. Taught by 4 incredibly gifted and talented nursery school teachers, who spend a great deal of time developing a fun, developmentally appropriate curriculum for all children ages 4-6.

And the best part of all: Along with your enrollment in Building Blocks comes the gift of membership at the Hewlett East Rockaway Jewish Centre.

Connections Congregation Beth Am Los Altos Hills, CA

Model Summary:

The Connections model is a family learning and mentoring model where 6-10 families are organized in small groups under the leadership of a mentor. It is an innovative approach that enables families to experience Jewish community. Connections is targeted for families with children up to 5th Grade who want to come together on a regular basis to celebrate holidays, join in learning activities, and do fun things like hike, picnic, and cook as a group. The participants develop confidence in their ability to live a meaningful Jewish family life and pass this heritage on to the next generation.

The Connections model is also a bridge model that offers continuous engagement for young children and families who can choose to participate until their eldest child reaches 6th Grade. The newest Connections group that was formed in 2015 is comprised of young families with children who range in age from newborn to age four. For these families, Connections can provide the bridge that enables their children to continue learning in a seamless way. It is an alternative model that is designed to replace religious school for the children of families who participate in it.

What is the Congregation's Vision for Youth Education?

The Connections model was developed to help the congregation achieve its vision more completely. According to their website, Beth Am's Vision for Youth Education, drafted by their Re-Imagine team and adopted by the congregation, is as follows:

"Youth and families involved in education programs at Beth Am experience what it means to live in a *kehillah kedoshah*, a sacred community. Children, parents and family members who engage in our programs develop confidence in their ability to live a meaningful, informed, authentic Reform Jewish life and pass this heritage on to the next generation.

"We believe that every family in our community is on a Jewish journey, and adults and children who engage in our programs have meaningful experiences that move that journey forward. Jewish learning at Beth Am is exciting, relevant and memorable, and we provide an array of opportunities for students to connect Jewish learning with Jewish living – by celebrating Jewish holidays, trying out different Jewish rituals, mastering certain Jewish skills, studying Jewish texts and wrestling with significant Jewish ideas.

"Our congregation is a loving place where children know that they are loved for who they are – precious, holy, each created in the Divine image. Within our education programs we establish smaller learning communities where participants develop deep, long-lasting friendships and a sense of safety and refuge from our high-stress culture.

"In all of these ways, we inspire youth and families to be committed, knowledgeable, participating Reform Jews."

How Does the Model Align with the Vision for Learning?

Families in Connections groups tend to create a strong bond with their mentor and with the other families in their group. Each Connections group is like a smaller sacred community within the larger sacred community of the congregation. Children, parents and family members in Connections develop confidence in their ability to live a meaningful, informed, authentic Reform Jewish life and pass this heritage on to the next generation. At various points during the year, Connections groups enjoy different types of opportunities for connecting Jewish learning with Jewish living – by celebrating Jewish holidays, trying out different Jewish rituals, mastering certain Jewish skills, studying Jewish texts and wrestling with significant Jewish ideas. The mentors get to know each family and each family member. When they are functioning according to plan, Connections groups are smaller learning communities where participants develop deep, long-lasting friendships and a sense of safety and refuge from our high-stress culture.

Who are the Learners?

Families with children aged newborn through 5th Grade can choose to participate in Connections. The families are placed in groups of six to ten families, based primarily on the age of the children. This year, a new cohort of young families with children up to age four joined to form a new Connections group.

Who are the Educators/Learning Facilitators?

Connections groups are led by “mentors” who are highly knowledgeable about Jewish life and learning. They are committed to their own Jewish journeys, and know how to inspire and engage children and adults in crafting Jewish journeys of personal significance. One mentor is assigned to each cohort and leads events and activities for Connection group families throughout the year. Some mentors are clergy educators at Beth Am, while others are professionals hired for this purpose on a part-time basis. The mentor of this year’s newest cohort of families with four-year-olds is a rabbi/educator who has served as the Director of Connections at Beth Am since its inception.

When Does the Learning Happen?

The mentor works with the families to create a calendar of about 20-25 events per year from September through June. Events can be designed by the mentor for just one Connections group or several groups, or for a group to participate in an event that is open to the whole Beth Am community. The events will take place primarily on weekends and holidays. One Connections group with older children offered a full weekend camping trip for its members, while another group – also with older children - opted to participate as a group in the annual congregational camping trip. The groups that cater to younger children (four and under) typically have fewer than 25 events in a year. In addition to the events scheduled and planned by the mentor, families will sometimes invite other members of their Connections group to join them at social action experiences or services at Beth Am as well as other events that are open to the larger community.

Where Does the Learning Happen?

The events can happen in diverse venues - indoors at a museum or library, and outdoors at a park or camp. When the events are at Beth Am, they can take place throughout the building and outdoors.

What is the Learning? How is it Designed?

There is an annual curricular theme for each Connections group that provides coherence to its learning events. Annual themes have included prayer, Torah stories, *middot* and *mitzvot* (values and commandments) and Jewish superheroes. Some of the events are designed primarily to build community within the group, while other events build a connection with the larger Beth Am community. Some are largely cultural, such as cooking, and others revolve around a holiday celebration. Some are content-rich, including those that provide an opportunity for participants to study Jewish texts and wrestle with significant Jewish ideas. Taken as a whole, these events provide an opportunity for families to celebrate together, deepen their bonds with one another, and grow in their connection to Jewish life.

What Were You Trying to Achieve with this Model?

Congregation Beth Am is committed to supporting each child and family on their Jewish journeys and is focused on ways to connect Jewish learning with Jewish living. It has participated in several initiatives to “re-imagine” and transform its educational system. One of the original cohort of synagogues in the Re-IMAGINE Project of the Experiment in Congregational Education, it participated in another intensive transformation process several years ago. This new effort yielded two important new elements piloted in Youth Education at Beth Am in 2013-14, Camp Beth Am and Connections.

The Connections model targets families with young children aged newborn through 5th Grade. It is an alternative model which is designed to replace participation in religious school. The Connections model helps Beth Am move closer to fulfilling its vision for youth education by achieving each of the main elements: learners are on a Jewish journey, they are learning by doing, they are committed to making Jewish friends at Beth Am, and there is significant parental involvement.

For several families, the Connections calendar provides all of their Jewish communal involvement. Most Connections families, however, also participate in other Jewish living and learning experiences at Beth Am and beyond. In some cases, parents have chosen to meet almost weekly, by adding their own play dates with other families. Connections group mentors typically schedule some events on Shabbat to coincide with Family Shabbat services and Tot Shabbat. In addition, parents sometimes arrange to meet other families at Beth Am for additional Shabbat family experiences.

For the first two years after the model was piloted, there was an outside evaluation consultant who assessed the success of the model and made significant recommendations for improving it. The staff is currently working to implement many of the consultant’s

ideas, such as achieving greater clarity around the roles of mentors and other staff members, and strengthening the support and oversight that the Director provides.

Key First Steps and Recruitment Plan:

Following a year of preparation and planning, Connections was launched in 2013 with five groups under the leadership of different mentors. This was an ambitious pilot phase which has proved challenging to sustain. Over the past few years, there have been several groups that have disbanded because of the loss of a mentor. While some other groups have formed, it has been challenging to maintain most of these groups into their second year.

One of the earliest groups is still ongoing under the leadership of its original mentor. This group of families – called the “Chaggers” – has formed deep connections to one another, to their mentor and to the congregation. Some of the parents have taken on leadership positions within the congregation. For these families, the model has been highly successful, meeting and exceeding its goals with respect to the quality of relationships, depth of learning and level of engagement in Jewish communal life .

This year, the congregation chose to form a new group comprised of families with children from newborn to four-year-olds. In the case of this new younger cohort, some of the children have been together in Preschool and now, in pre-Kindergarten, they have a chance to continue their Jewish journey together with their Connections group. They are learning by doing as they participate in events where learning is embedded and implicit as well as other activities where learning is more explicit. The children see their parents making an ongoing commitment to participate in Jewish living and learning through the various events of their group.

Role of Governance and Clergy:

All congregational clergy (five rabbis and a cantor) are involved in leading adult study which is an important part of learning at Beth Am. Each Connections group offers family learning experiences which include parallel learning sessions for parents and children. Congregational clergy take turns facilitating the adult study portions of these experiences. Parents in Connections also have other opportunities to study with various members of the clergy during the year.

Besides the rabbi/educator who serves as the Director of Connections, the cantor has a particularly close and ongoing relationship with Connections. Relatively new to the congregation, she has twin children in Kindergarten. She and her family have joined the Chaggers group and are active participants. She has also led adult study twice with her group and once with another group.

Budget:

Families in Connections pay the same tuition for their school-age children as they would if their children enrolled in Sunday Program, the congregation's traditional educational track. The current cost is \$600 per child in pre-Kindergarten through 5th Grade, and will increase to \$650 for 2016-17. The second child in a family is charged a reduced rate. For families with younger children (aged 0-4), the tuition cost to join a Connections group is \$100 per child. All families must also be dues-paying members of the congregation in order to join a Connections group.

The congregation is committed to subsidizing the costs of all of their education programs and models, including Connections. However, Connections is a very high-cost model that currently serves only about 25-30 children of Religious School age (6-10) and another 10 aged 0-5. The small number of children and families poses a serious challenge to the long-term viability of the model. In order for Connections to become financially viable and sustainable, the cost per participant will need to be reduced.

Hiring Needs:

One of the rabbi/educators has served as the Director of Connections, and has been responsible for finding mentors and supervising their work since the model's inception. She has also been a mentor for one of the Connections groups. As the lead educator for Connections, she has provided leadership, guidance and supervision to the program team.

The Connections Director looks for mentors with a strong background in Jewish education who are creative and have demonstrated leadership skills. They need to be able to communicate a love of Jewish learning and connect effectively with parents and children. They serve as teachers and role models for each member of their Connections group and should be comfortable working with various ages.

While the hourly pay for mentors is competitive with other part-time teaching salaries in the area, the required skills and level of knowledge are very high. In addition, although the qualifications and expectations are extensive, mentors work less than 25 hours per month. This has made it challenging to find people with the requisite skills who are available to work as mentors on such a limited basis. The scarcity of qualified mentors has limited the growth of Connections and restricted the number of groups that can be offered and maintained.

The congregation is currently rethinking its strategy for Connections and the future of this model is uncertain. They are hiring a new educator to be called the Director of Family Learning who will oversee the Connections model. The new hire will be responsible for developing a plan for the growth and sustainability of Connections.

Relationship of Model to Congregational Learning System:

Connections is an alternative model, so children whose families are in a Connections Group do not participate in Sunday Program, the traditional religious school track offered by the congregation.

How Do You Describe Your Congregation?

Congregation Beth Am is a Reform congregation with over 1650 members, served by six clergy (five rabbis and one cantor). There are four educators, including one rabbi/educator, who share responsibility for leading the various components of the youth education program at Beth Am.

What Makes This Model a Compelling Bridge Model?

The Connections model:

- Brings families together on a regular basis to experience Jewish living and learning in community
- Creates small groups of learning communities who can grow together
- Supports learning in multi-age cohorts that build peer-to-peer relationships between learners of various ages and between families
- Places culture of continuous Jewish journey into family conversations and decision making
- Builds and nurtures relationships between participants and mentors
- Fosters deep relationships between participants and clergy, esp. clergy mentors
- Develops strong connections between participants and the congregation
- Exemplifies and cultivates lifelong learning
- Calls on parents to demonstrate their ongoing commitment to Jewish living and learning
- Takes Jewish learning out of classrooms and situates it in natural environments
- Links learning to living in an authentic way
- Offers learning and living activities that are age-appropriate and relevant to participants

Sample Materials to Support Model Documentation

Sample Connections Group Calendars for Younger and Older Connections Groups

A. Calendar for Group of Families with Older Children (aged 5-10)

| Connections Master Calendar 2015-2016 (5776) for Chaggers Group | | | | |
|--|----------------|--------------------------|---|--|
| Date | Time | Location | Notes- Activity/Ed. Theme | |
| SAT 8/29/15 | 3 - 5 PM | Peers Park | Shabbat Play date: Intro to Heroes, Noah | |
| <u>SEPT</u> | | | | |
| SAT 9/19/15 | 1- 4 PM | Open Space | Hike & Learn: Adam & Eve (Jen) | |
| SAT 9/19/15 | 6 - 9 PM | Restaurant | Adult Dinner & Feedback | |
| SUN 9/27/15 | 4 - 7 PM | Beth Am | Sukkot Festival | |
| <u>OCT</u> | | | | |
| SAT 10/3/15 | 1-3 PM | Sobel's | Sukkot Hangout- Avram & Sarai | |
| SUN 10/4/15 | 5-7:30 PM | Beth Am | Simchat Torah Service | |
| SAT 10/10/15 | 3:00 - 5:30 PM | Beth Am | Learning Session: Abraham & Lot- Sodom & Gemorah Consecration | |
| FRI 10/23/15 | 6:15 - 7:45 PM | Beth Am | Shabbat Service w/Dan Nichols | |
| <u>NOV</u> | | | | |
| SAT 11/7/15 | 2:00 - 4:00 PM | Open Space- Location TBA | Hike & Learn: Isaac & Rebecca (Rabbi Heath) | |
| SAT 11/14/15 | 3:00 - 5:00 PM | Beth Am | Learning Session: Joseph & His Brothers | |
| SAT 11/14/15 | 6:15-9:15 PM | Dinner: Dish Dash | Feedback & Hangout | |
| SAT 11/21/15 | 3:00 - 5:00 PM | Beth Am | Learning Session: Joseph- the musical | |
| <u>DEC</u> | | | | |
| SAT 12/5/15 | 3:00 - 5:00 PM | Beth Am | Learning Session: Jacob, Leah & Rachel (Rabbi Heath) Jeremy W. Leads adults | |
| SUN 12/6/15 | 4:30-7:00 PM | Altamiranos House | Chaggers' Potluck Chanukah Dinner Party | |
| SAT 12/12/15 | 3:00 - 5:00 PM | Beth Am | Hagigah Performance @ 4 PM | |
| THUR 12/31/15 | 7 PM | Elman's House | New Year's Party (unofficial) | |

| | | | | |
|---------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|--|-------------------------|
| <u>JANUARY</u> | | | | |
| FRI 1/8/16 | TBD | Host Family Homes | Shabbat Dinners | |
| SAT 1/9/16 | 6:15-9:15 PM | Dinner Location Viva La Sol | Feedback about Shabbat Dinners & Hangout | |
| SAT 1/23/16 | 3 - 5 PM | Beth Am | Learning Session: Tu B'shvat with Debbie T. | |
| FRI 1/29/16 | 5:30 - 7:30 PM | Beth Am | Shabbat Sha-Boogie | |
| <u>FEBRUARY</u> | | | | |
| SAT 2/6/16 | 3:00 - 5:00 PM | Beth Am | Learning Session: Joshua Jeremy W. Leads Adults | |
| SAT 2/27-28/16 | Full weekend | Camp Newman Family Retreat | Most families are attending | Canceled original event |
| <u>MARCH</u> | | | | |
| FRI/SAT 3/4-5/16 | 3:00 - 5:00 PM | Host Family Homes | Shabbat Hangout: - maybe a story about DAVID? | |
| SAT 3/5/16 | 3:00 - 5:00 PM | Beth Am | Learning Session: Moses & Miriam NEED Adult ed leader | |
| SAT 3/12/16 | 3:00 - 5:00 PM | Beth Am | Learning Session: Esther Hamentaschen Baking | NEED Adult ed leader |
| SAT 3/12/16 | 6:15-9:15 PM | Dinner Location TBA | Feedback & Hangout | |
| SUN 3/20/16 | 10:45 AM - 1:15 PM | Beth Am | Kids' Purim Spiel and Carnival | |
| <u>APRIL</u> | | | | |
| FRI 4/1/16 | 5:30 - 7:30PM | Beth Am | Shabbat Sha-Boogie | |
| SAT 4/29/16 | 5:00-8:00 PM | Host Family Hallert/Koritos | End of Passover Pizza & Beer Party | |
| <u>MAY</u> | | | | |
| SAT 5/7/16 | 11:30 AM - 2:30 PM | Open Space- Location TBA | Picnic, Hike & Learn: Elijah (Jen) | |
| SAT 5/14/16 | 4:00 - 7:30 PM | Beth Am/Restaurant | Hagigah Performance plus Dinner- all family or just kids for feedback? | |
| <u>JUNE</u> | | | | |
| FRI 6/3/16- SUN 6/5/16 | Whole Weekend | Portola Redwoods State Park | Beth Am Family Camping Trip | MAY BE CHANGED |

B. Sample Calendar for Families with Younger Children (aged 0-4): Jan. to June

Note: The Younger Family Cohort has an average of 20 “official” events scheduled during the year.

| Date | Time | Location | Description | Confirmed additional staff |
|----------------|-----------------------|------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|
| SAT 1/16/16 | 10:00 - 11:30 AM | R. Jennifer’s house | Play date w/Bagels & Story (unofficial event b/c holiday weekend) | Jennifer W. |
| SAT 1/23/16 | 3:00 - 4:30 PM | Beth Am | Learning Session: Kids’ Activities and Parent Learning | Natalya M. |
| SAT 1/30/16 | 6:30 - 9:00 PM | TBD Restaurant | Adult Dinner | N/A |
| SAT 2/6/16 | 9:15-10:30 AM | Beth Am | Tot Shabbat Service & Activities | N/A |
| SAT 2/27/16 | 3:00 - 4:40 PM | Beth Am | Learning Session: Kids’ Activities and Parent Learning | Jennifer W, Natalya M. |
| SAT 3/5/16 | 10:00 - 11:30 AM | TBD Park | Play date w/Bagels & Story | Natalya M. |
| SUN 3/20/16 | 11:15 AM - 1:30 PM | Beth Am | Unofficial: Kids’ Purim Spiel and Carnival | N/A |
| SAT 3/26/16 | 10:00 - 11:30 AM | Beth Am | Learning Session: Kids’ Activities and Parent Learning | Jennifer W., Natalya M. |
| SUN 4/3/16 | 6:30 - 9:00 PM | TBD Restaurant | Adult Dinner | N/A |
| SUN 5/1/16 | 4:00 - 5:30 PM | Host Family Home | Post-Passover Pizza and Beer Party | Jennifer W., Natalya M. |
| SAT 5/14/16 | 10:00 - 11:30 AM | TBD Park | Pot-Luck Picnic Brunch | Jennifer W., Natalya M. |

Yad b'Yad Temple Isaiah Lafayette, CA

Model Summary:

Temple Isaiah offers a parent-child class for pre-Kindergarteners every other week six weeks from February through May. Because parents accompany their children, this class provides a taste of the type of learning they can experience in Yad b'Yad (literally “Hand in Hand”). A family learning model for children K-2 and their families, Yad b'Yad is an alternative to the grade-level education program offered as a track within JQuest which is what Temple Isaiah calls their Religious School. Children in Yad b'Yad attend every Sunday morning September through mid-May and engage in Jewish learning through music, art, dance, stories, Hebrew prayer, and discussion.

Parents in Yad b'Yad join their children every other session (about 12-13 Sunday mornings during the year) in a family-oriented learning experience that includes separate child and adult learning as well as time for families to learn and grow together. Parents study with Temple Isaiah's Rabbis and Cantor, thereby deepening their own Jewish knowledge and strengthening their connection with the clergy of the congregation. When families participate in the six-week parent-child pre-K class and then opt into the Yad b'Yad family track with their children in Kindergarten through 2nd Grade, they have the benefit of a bridge that supports continuous engagement from the Temple Isaiah Gan Ilan Preschool into the primary years and beyond. When coupled in this way, the two offerings combine to serve as a “bridge model” that supports the transition for young children and families.

What is the 30-Second “Elevator Pitch” of the Model?

Yad b'Yad is a special opportunity for children Kindergarten to 2nd Grade to learn with their parents every other week. Children also attend on the alternate Sundays without their parents so that they learn each week. JQuest is Temple Isaiah's youth education model for children starting in pre-K and running through 7th grade. It is an exciting journey of Jewish learning and discovery for children, and an opportunity to develop and strengthen Jewish identity, knowledge, and community. The Hebrew and Prayer curriculum incorporates several modalities. One of these is Hebrew through Movement, a natural approach to learning Hebrew through listening and moving to key vocabulary words.

In Yad b'Yad, we seek to instill in our children and families a sense of commitment to and excitement about Jewish life and Jewish peoplehood. We strive to enable them to understand the Jewish past while being inspired and empowered to create a Jewish life in the present that is committed to tikkun olam. The philosophy and atmosphere of JQuest invites our students to develop a love of the Jewish tradition and the study of Torah, along with the questioning that our tradition encourages. Our goal is for children and families to be challenged, inspired, and energized by the power of Jewish ideas and traditions.

What is the Vision for Learning?

On its website, Temple Isaiah describes itself as “more than a synagogue – it’s a Jewish Neighborhood!” It prioritizes lifelong Jewish learning which it sees as a central part of Jewish life. It supports the general goals of the Union of Reform Judaism and strives to create a program of Jewish education that enables children, teens and adults to become Jews who are proud of their Jewish identity, esteem themselves and others, and express their kinship with K’lal Yisrael. They value and engage in tefila (prayer), cherish and use Hebrew, and celebrate Shabbat, the festivals and Jewish life cycle events. They further the causes of justice, freedom, and peace by pursuing tzedek (justice) and chesed (loving deeds), and embrace the Torah through the study and observance of mitzvot (commandments) as interpreted in contemporary liberal thought. They believe these goals are best accomplished through educational experiences for the whole person: body, heart, mind, and soul.

How Does the Model Align with the Vision for Learning?

Temple Isaiah believes that Jewish learning is a lifelong endeavor, and that education is at the core of what it means to be a Jew. Therefore, they offer opportunities, such as JQuest, for Jewish learning to people of all ages. Through these opportunities, they hope that each member of their community – child and adult alike – will find a spiritual home at Temple Isaiah.

JQuest is designed to help students engage with a rich and varied experience of Jewish tradition and community. Through expeditionary project-based learning, JQuest supports children’s exploration of big questions. JQuest Yad b’Yad fosters family learning, cultivates lifelong learning, and demands that parents demonstrate their ongoing commitment to Jewish living and lifelong learning.

Who are the Learners?

The learners are children in pre-K through 2nd Grade and their parents. There is no special language used to describe the learners who are called children, kids or students. Any child who attends a pre-school, Jewish or secular, may enroll in JQuest during pre-K, regardless of whether their families are members of Temple Isaiah. Once a child enters Kindergarten, only children whose families are members of Temple Isaiah can enroll in JQuest. When they choose the Yad b’Yad JQuest track, the parents will also be active learners, joining their children every other week.

Who are the Educators/Learning Facilitators?

The current teacher of the JQuest parent-child pre-K class is a former kindergarten teacher and a social worker by training. She knows the culture of the community as well as what is age-appropriate for young children and adults. Other educators and learning facilitators for the pre-K class and Yad b’Yad include: Clergy, K-2 teachers, music specialist, Yad b’Yad facilitator, Israel educator, and a Hebrew specialist.

Where Does the Learning Experience Happen?

The learning generally takes place inside the building, in the classrooms, social hall, and sanctuary.

What is the Nature of the Learning Experience?

JQuest offers a program for pre-Kindergarten children and parents that is an introduction to the opportunities it offers for children in Kindergarten and beyond. This six-week class for pre-K children and their parents meets from February through May. The curriculum focuses on Jewish holidays and Jewish values, and the classroom environment is designed to be one of discovery and creativity. Arts, storytelling, hands-on activities, song and dance are all part of the sessions. Discussions allow parents to appreciate the deep level of spiritual craving and search for higher meaning that such young children can demonstrate. Topics for the spring of 2016 included: blessings, Torah, Purim, Passover, Mitzvot, and Israel. Clergy rotate leading a 30-minute adult learning session with the parents. This class serves as an introduction to JQuest and provides a taste of the Yad b'Yad family learning track.

Learners in K-2 can choose to participate in the Yad b'Yad Family Education Program as an alternative to the JQuest Grade-Based Programs. Both tracks meet every Sunday morning. Parents in Yad b'Yad attend every other session, while parents whose children are in grade-based programs attend two family education programs annually.

Children in the JQuest Yad b'Yad Family Education Program attend JQuest every Sunday morning and engage in Jewish learning through music, art, dance, stories, Hebrew prayer, and discussion. Parents in Yad b'Yad join their children every other Sunday in a family-oriented program that includes separate child and adult learning as well as time for families to learn and grow together. Yad b'Yad gives parents the opportunity to study with Temple Isaiah's Rabbis and Cantor, thereby deepening their own Jewish knowledge.

In JQuest Yad b'Yad, the learning is done in multi-age cohorts of Kindergarten through 2nd Grade. The curriculum rotates each year through the three topics which comprise the JQuest K-2 Grade-Based curriculum as follows:

- Kindergarten: The Cycles of Jewish Time (Shabbat, holidays, life-cycle events)
- 1st Grade: Jewish Home (What does it mean to be Jewish at home?) and Torah Stories
- 2nd Grade: Jewish Community, Middot and Mitzvot (What does it mean to be Jewish outside our homes? Learning about Israel, synagogues, Jewish values and Jewish actions)

At the end of the three-year cycle, the children and families in the JQuest Yad b'Yad Family Education Program will have studied each of the three topics. In addition, the Jewish holidays are studied each year. In either track, Hebrew is taught through various modalities. Temple Isaiah has moved decoding later in their Hebrew curriculum and placed it into one-on-one study opportunities.

In addition to JQuest, there are two types of Shabbat services which provide meaningful Jewish life experiences and build the connection between young JQuest families and the Temple Isaiah community: Tot Shabbat and Shabbatarama. While participation in these prayer services is not required, families are encouraged to participate in these experiences which support the bonds between families as well as the growing connection to the congregation.

Tot Shabbat is an interactive and friendly 90-minute Shabbat experience geared toward families with children 0-5 years old. Tot Shabbat meets twice monthly, once on Friday night and once on Shabbat morning. These services provide an opportunity to enjoy food, activities, music, and prayer, and build connections with other young families.

Shabbatarama is a monthly interactive and intergenerational Friday night service geared especially for JQuest families in Kindergarten through 6th Grade. It is held in the sanctuary with lively singing and visual tefillah. It is followed by dessert, Gaga (Israeli dodge ball), arts & crafts and more! Shabbatarama is an intergenerational service as it is *the* Friday night service at Temple Isaiah that week.

When does the Learning Experience Happen?

JQuest pre-K meets 6 Sundays, from February through May, from 9-11 am. The JQuest K-2 Yad b'Yad Family Education Program meets Sunday mornings, 9-11 am. Yad b'Yad parents attend 12-13 sessions during the year. Most parents also participate with their children in weekly Tefillah during the last 30 minutes of the session 10:30-11 am. Tot Shabbat is held the second Saturday of each month at 9:30 a.m. and the fourth Friday of each month at 5:30 p.m. Shabbatarama occurs the first Friday evening of the month, October to May.

Relationship of Model to Congregational Learning System:

JQuest Yad b'Yad is one of two tracks available for children in Kindergarten to 2nd Grade. It features bi-weekly family learning and is an alternative to the JQuest Grade-Based track which includes two family learning experiences each year.

How Do You Describe Your Congregation?

Temple Isaiah is a Reform congregation with about 900 member families. It is served by five clergy (four rabbis and one cantor). Two of the rabbis also function as lead educators, one as the Director of Education overseeing the youth education program for pre-K through 7th Grade and the other overseeing the youth and teen programs. There are two other senior education staff members – the Director of Early Childhood Education and the Youth Director.

Budget:

The cost for the JQuest pre-Kindergarten class (six weeks) is \$100 for Temple Isaiah members and \$125 for non-members. The cost for JQuest for children in Kindergarten

through 2nd Grade is \$410. JQuest families also need to be members of Temple Isaiah once their children enter Kindergarten.

What Makes This Model a Compelling Bridge Model?

The JQuest Yad b'Yad model:

- Brings families together on a regular basis to experience Jewish living and learning
- Places culture of continuous Jewish journeys into family conversations and decision making
- Fosters relationships between participants and clergy
- Develops strong connections between participants and the congregation
- Exemplifies and cultivates lifelong learning
- Calls on parents to demonstrate their ongoing commitment to Jewish living and learning
- Links learning to living in an authentic way
- Provides learning and living activities that are age-appropriate, relevant and meaningful to participants
- Supports whole person learning through experiences that speak to the body, mind, heart and soul

Sample Materials to Support Model Documentation

The synagogue's website at www.temple-isaiah.org contains a full description of JQuest, the pre-K parent-child class and the Yad b'Yad Family Education Program. It includes an overview, schedule, curriculum, Frequently Asked Questions and links to the blogs for each group that are updated weekly. In addition, much information about Yad b'Yad is available directly at <http://yadbyaders.blogspot.com/>, a blog for participants in Yad b'Yad.

There is an article by Rabbi Nicole Greninger, the Director of Education at Temple Isaiah, entitled "Believing, Behaving, Belonging: Tefillah Education in the 21st Century" in the Journal of Jewish Education at <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15244113.2010.521882>.