

NESS (Nurturing Excellence in Synagogue Schools): A Synagogue School Transformation Initiative

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Philadelphia's Auerbach Central Agency for Jewish Education's pilot program works to create and examine strategies to foster excellence in synagogue schools.

Retention of students in synagogue schools and the students' connection to the Jewish community post-*B'nai Mitzvah* have become increasingly challenging to communities throughout the country. In the Greater Philadelphia Jewish community, as in many other Jewish communities, the vast majority (fully 85% in Philadelphia) of children who receive a Jewish education do so in synagogue schools. Therefore, the future of Jewish life in our community—and in our country—depends on how successful children's experiences are in these schools.

To that end, the Auerbach Central Agency for Jewish Education (ACAJE) developed a groundbreaking pilot program that would create and examine strategies to foster excellence in synagogue schools. Now in its third and final year, the program, NESS: Nurturing Excellence in Synagogue Schools, has been extremely successful on many levels and is seen as a model for synagogue school education throughout the country.

Background and Goals

Research¹ done by Dr. Sharon Ravitch for ACAJE shows that escalating dropout rates are a direct result of students' synagogue school experiences prior to becoming *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah*. To address this challenge, ACAJE convened a panel of 23 experts from secular and Jewish education to envision a program that would foster excellence in such schools.

Previously, ACAJE had devised a number of programs to achieve this goal, including the "Designated School Program," an organizational development program based on systems theory; preparation of mentor teachers through its mentor teacher program; training for educational directors in a variety of seminars and workshops; and a variety of models of short-term (two to twelve hours) training for teachers. Agency professionals had consulted with school directors and teachers about the schools' curricula and had also informally helped schools assess their progress.

The problem was that each of these programs, although successful in its own right, was not aligned with the others and was not integrated into a coherent, systemic whole. Without that coordination, we did not create the synergy that was necessary to promote transformational change in the school's culture. Thus, it was decided to create a totally new and uniquely conceptualized program, which was based on Ravitch's research that had identified the areas of weakness in synagogue school education.

The result was the NESS (Nurturing Excellence in Synagogue Schools) Initiative: a multi-year, on-site, whole-school program, custom-designed to the needs of each school. The goals of the NESS Initiative are to

1. Provide our youth with an engaging, meaningful, and enjoyable Jewish education.
2. Help our youth develop strong Jewish identities and increase their commitment to active involvement in the Jewish community.
3. Encourage our youth to continue their Jewish learning and involvement beyond their *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah*.

NESS achieves this goal by strengthening synagogue schools through intensive, ongoing, professional development for teachers, including training in how to make parents co-educators; leadership development for educational directors; regular assessment of the school's progress in nine basic areas using a unique instrument created for the NESS program; as well as an organizational development program that enhances the leadership skills of the school's/synagogue's lay and professional leaders and facilitates a process to develop a mission statement, goals, action plan, and approaches to a lay-professional partnership for conducting school business. Additionally, schools are assisted in developing comprehensive school-wide curricula.

The most important and unique aspects of the Initiative are its comprehensive, holistic, and systemic nature. In this program, it is critical that each aspect is aligned and coordinated with all of the other aspects. In this way, the whole truly is more than the sum of the parts. Overseeing all of these aspects of the program and coordinating the professional

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consultants who are involved in it is the role of the Program Director.

Eighteen Philosophical Underpinnings of NESS

NESS is rooted in specific philosophical underpinnings, which serve as a touchstone for all strategic and programmatic decisions. In order to understand the NESS Initiative, it is important to understand the following assumptions upon which it is based:

- ♦ Synagogue schools can be successful.
- ♦ Schools and synagogues are systems.
- ♦ The school must be integrated into its synagogue.
- ♦ Jewish organizations and change initiatives must be based on Jewish values.
- ♦ Transformative change is about holistic, systemic change.
- ♦ Collaboration leads to synergy; the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.
- ♦ There is power in lay-professional partnerships.
- ♦ Team-work should shape decision-making, because more wisdom and rationality result from effective group work than from the work of a single individual.
- ♦ An effective change process proceeds through a democratic, not hierarchical, model.
- ♦ Policy, structure, mission, and all interventions on a system must be aligned.
- ♦ Organizations have personalities and cultures, in much the same way that people and families do.
- ♦ Organizational processes are non-linear, and often messy.
- ♦ Genuine stakeholder buy-in must precede change.
- ♦ Successful products and processes must be celebrated regularly.
- ♦ All aspects of process and products must be directly connected to the mission.
- ♦ Lay and professional leadership must be nurtured and trained.
- ♦ Change must be institutionalized in order to maintain it.
- ♦ "Trust the process!"

The Program's Components

The NESS Initiative consists of six components that are seamlessly interwoven into a well-aligned and unified program. These components include:

Professional Development for Teachers

Teacher training is based on a model of on-going (three years), intensive, professional development for the entire faculty of a school, including the school director. In an intensive (twenty to thirty hours per year), on-site seminar (conducted at the synagogue during the first two years), which is modeled on the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education's Penn Literacy Network, educators are trained to teach content through meaning-centered, active learning strategies that encourage students to be fully engaged in their learning. Participants integrate Judaic information with the best of secular education practices, reflect on learned strategies, create lessons and units built on research-based approaches, and practice their skills within a sup-

portive community of peers. They also focus on extending learning outside the classroom into the home, encouraging family learning.

Rabbi Samuel T. Lachs Mentoring Program for Teachers

Experienced mentor consultants teach a variety of coaching strategies to the faculty of each school, helping teachers support each other as they reflect on implementing newly learned skills. If

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needed, they also provide additional mentoring to individual teachers, in consultation with the school's educational director and the teacher.

Leadership Development Seminar (LDS)

This seminar is designed to provide educational directors with the opportunity to re-envision their practice as leaders of synagogue schools. In a supportive, learning community, they think together about the significant issues they face, including supervision, conflict management, data-based decision-making, effective communication and team-building strategies, and best practices for involving families in the synagogue school experience. The group reflects on effective teaching strategies that actively engage children in the learning process, and participants learn how to design professional development plans that help them assist their teachers in using these strategies in their classrooms. They also work on the practical aspects of directing schools, such as fundraising and marketing. Finally, since the work of leadership is always infused with moral considerations, the educational directors explore a variety of frameworks for moral decision-making and their application to real situations that they encounter as directors.

Program for Organizational Development (POD)

The POD focuses on building the leadership capabilities of synagogue professional and lay leaders and facilitating their collaborative efforts to transform the synagogue school. At the start of the Initiative, each synagogue/school assembles a team that represents its major educational constituencies. Using a focused process, the team clarifies a shared vision of excellence for the school, sets goals, and embarks on an implementation plan that will realize its vision. Throughout this process, team members gain expertise in creating sustainable change that can be transferred to future projects. The POD helps to create a more effective and efficient school committee that increases the positive involvement of its lay leadership in the school.

Curriculum Development Project

This component of NESS assists schools in developing a meaningful, sequential curriculum for all subject areas in all grades of the school. The POD committee's formulation of the

school's overall mission statement and broad-based school goals informs later decisions related to specific content areas within the curriculum. Thoughtful lay leaders and professional educators within the synagogue form a task force that, guided by an ACAJE consultant, develops the curricula that make the school's goals operational. An annotated compendium of the best curricular materials and textbooks has been created by ACAJE to help schools select materials that will be incorporated into their school's curricula.

The Jewish School Assessment & School Improvement Process (J-SASIP)

In cooperation with ACAJE, Foundations, Inc., a national non-profit organization that specializes in extended-day enrichment programs, has coordinated the development of an assessment tool specifically designed to help synagogue schools make decisions that will result in school improvement. A team of assessors gathers critical data on the strengths and weakness of the school in nine areas: curriculum, instruction, co-curricular programs, leadership, professional development, school culture, facilities, human resources, and practices and procedures. By determining the current status of the school's functioning, lay and professional leaders are able to create an action plan that helps them meet their goals.

NESS's Uniquenesses

Much is unique about the NESS Initiative, including:

- ♦ The deliberate integration of six educationally-sound components that together can create school change.
- ♦ An innovative collaboration of secular and Jewish educational institutions that have designed and implemented the program.
- ♦ The intentional creation of a community of learners among the NESS professionals and lay leaders who are involved in the pursuit of excellence.
- ♦ Generous stipends, college credits, Pennsylvania State ACT 48 credits, and credits toward CBL (Community Board of License) licensure for the educational director and teachers, compensating them for their professional time.
- ♦ Training of lay leaders of the congregation in the acquisition of skills, knowledge, and experience needed to assess the school on an ongoing basis and plan thoughtfully for school improvement.
- ♦ The ongoing, active involvement of a lay and professional Advisory Committee that creates and advises on the program's structure and process.
- ♦ Ongoing, intensive, external evaluation of the entire NESS program, as well as of each of its components, throughout the duration of the program, affording the opportunity to make adjustments as the program proceeds, as well as providing information that will permit replication of the program in Philadelphia and in other Jewish communities throughout the United States.

Successes

As participants begin the third and final year of the program,

Moreover, the anecdotal evidence is compelling a NESS-school student said, "I only wish this program existed years ago, and perhaps I could have enjoyed more of my time in Hebrew school."

they are extremely pleased with the progress they have made. They have reported:

- ♦ Heightened interest and attention to Jewish education in their congregations.
- ♦ Improved Education Committee structures.
- ♦ Models of leadership development that are applicable and being generalized to other arenas of congregational life.
- ♦ Application of a consensus model for congregational decision-making.
- ♦ Enhanced skills, roles, and status of Educational Directors.
- ♦ Effective professional development for teachers.
- ♦ Greater accountability on the part of teachers for what they are teaching.
- ♦ Overall professionalization of congregational Jewish education.

Moreover, the anecdotal evidence is compelling. From a NESS-school rabbi we hear, "NESS has succeeded in creating a culture in our community that puts education at the top of our priority list." A NESS-school educational director comments that, "NESS has opened up many opportunities to engage students, parents, and other lay people in our school. It has enabled my teachers to work collaboratively and creatively. It has transformed the infrastructure of our education committee to support these new initiatives. Our synagogue has changed; it really has become a new place with new energy for education because of NESS. The atmosphere in our school is humming!" A NESS-school teacher said, "I, who have been teaching for many years, personally feel more empowered to stimulate my students, allowing them to be creative and not passive learners. NESS has exceeded my expectations..." And, finally, and perhaps most significantly, a NESS-school student said, "I only wish this program existed years ago, and perhaps I could have enjoyed more of my time in Hebrew school." After his experience in a NESS school, he decided to continue his Jewish education in a community Hebrew high school. ❖

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ENDNOTES:

1. Ravitch, Sharon. *Engaging and Retaining Jewish Youth Beyond Bar/Bat Mitzvah: An Action Research Study*. Melrose Park, PA: ACAJE, 2002.