

Making the Invisible Visible: Reflections on the Infrastructure of NESS

by Helene Tigay

It is just as important to plan for the invisible infrastructure of an initiative as it is for the more obvious educational aspects of the program. The author uses Philadelphia's NESS (Nurturing Excellence in Synagogue Schools) initiative as an example.

The NESS (Nurturing Excellence in Synagogue Schools) initiative is a systemic, holistic approach to transformational change in synagogue schools, created and administered by the Auerbach Central Agency for Jewish Education in Philadelphia. The first cohort of six schools has completed its intensive, three-year program and these schools are now engaged in a follow-up Extended Learning and Practice program. At the same time, the second cohort of six schools has begun the program. There is a full description of the NESS program on the ACAJE website at www.ajce.org (in the "articles" section of the Teen Education portion of the website), as well as an evaluation of the program by JESNA's Berman Center.

In this article, I will share learnings connected to the invisible infrastructure of the program, which I offer to those embarking on and implementing any broad-based initiative.

Research

The NESS initiative was born after serious reflection on research that ACAJE conducted on the problem of retaining youngsters in the Jewish educational system beyond *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*. It was clear from that research that the students' lack of interest in continuing beyond *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* was connected to dissatisfaction with their synagogue elementary school experience.¹ They found, *inter alia*, classes to be repetitive and teachers boring. This finding certainly could have led people to think that our work at the Auerbach Central Agency with synagogue schools wasn't successful and it could have made us squeamish about sharing these results with our Board and publishing the results nationally. It actually worked in the opposite way; it strengthened our Board's resolve to address the issue, and, as a result, it attracted donors who were interested in solving the problem.

We recommend that research should be the bedrock of significant initiatives. We must ask the right questions of the right people and not assume from the get-go that our hypotheses and assumptions are correct. We should, of course, first check to see if the research has already been done and, if not, find a way to do it or encourage others to undertake it.

Evaluation

New and on-going initiatives should undergo objective evaluations, both formative and summative, and a flexible attitude should direct the project leaders to change course when the evaluation indicates the need to do so.

All new initiatives should publicize their evaluations, whether they are positive or negative, so that learning can be shared with colleagues and lay leaders world-wide. We learn from successes and failures and we are all in the world of Jewish education together. Addressing difficult questions is a risky endeavor, and we shouldn't demand success at every turn, from ourselves or from others. Federations and donors should demand the broad publication of program evaluation results, enabling initiatives to have a broad impact, and be open to the possibility that the project will not be "successful".

Donors should be regularly updated on the initiative's formative and summative evaluations.

Trust the Process

We must have patience. We must educate participants, staff, and funders to understand that significant, systemic change does not occur overnight. And, since change initiatives do not follow a linear course, and the tipping point for change is often reached after a year or two, we must trust the process and have patience. Often, in group work, for example, groups "storm" before they "form" and "perform."

*Helene Z. Tigay has worked in day school, synagogue school, camping and youth group settings. She is now the Executive Director of the Auerbach Central Agency for Jewish Education in Melrose Park, PA.
htigay@ajce.org*

Partnerships

We should acknowledge that we don't always have all the expertise necessary to carry out a comprehensive, intensive initiative. We should look for partners beyond our own agencies and beyond the Jewish community, when appropriate, for needed skills, experience and know-how. In NESS, for example, we invited the University of Pennsylvania's School of Education Penn Literary Network (PLN) to partner with us in the area of teacher training. We enlisted another educational provider, Foundations Inc., to partner with us in creating a comprehensive assessment tool for synagogue schools (JSASIP — Jewish School Assessment, School Improvement Process). Creating such high-level partnerships not only provides expertise, it also raises the status of the entire program in the eyes of the participants, donors, and broader community.

It is often very expensive to partner with high-status institutions, so it is important for the primary agency, when possible, to acquire the skills and knowledge-base of the partner institution so that it can provide the service more affordably in the future.

Funders

Seek and select funders from the outset whom you respect, with whom you can work, and who are willing to be involved in the planning and oversight of the project. Today's funders are often experienced, highly competent, creative, and entrepreneurial individuals whose informed involvement can significantly enhance a project's success.

Advisory Committee

Create an Advisory Committee that is comprised of national and local lay and professional leaders and experts, as well as donors and representatives of the client population, for insight, oversight, and for determining policy.

Systems

Think big! Systemic problems have systemic solutions. Improving a single component in the school (for example, the curriculum, or lay leader and professional leadership development, or teacher training) will rarely result, by itself, in a transformational change in the school. Determine what significant components impact on the problem and find ways to address as many as possible in a systemic way. It is very difficult to balance and align multiple components, but that is the only way to create the synergy that is necessary for transformational change.

Budget

Budget carefully and appropriately so that you don't find yourself with insufficient funds at the end of the day. And budget for appropriate and, when possible, generous stipends for educators who are participating in the initiative.

Staff Meetings

Schedule frequent and regular times for the integration of all of the project's staff (agency and out-of-agency) who are working on the project. NESS schedules weekly, two-hour meetings for sharing, problem solving, and collaborative learning. These meetings are the engine that keep the program on track and creative.

Communication

Plan for regular communication to all components of the initiative, including:

- ♦ The initiative's staff, including out-of-agency partners.
- ♦ Participating schools and all of the lay leaders and professionals who are involved.
- ♦ The Federation, agency Board, donors, and the general community.
- ♦ Work-alike groups (e.g., presidents, school chairs, education directors) across the participating schools (through list-servs and face-to-face meetings).

P. R.

Get out the word about the initiative and its innovative work in the Jewish and general press, and in synagogue newsletters. Such publicity garners interest and enthusiasm from the outside and it helps build and maintain momentum.

Extended Learning and Practice As a Follow-up

Plan from the beginning for maintaining and further developing the accomplishments that have been achieved by the program's end. To this end, it is important to secure ample funding for these necessary services and resources that spur further growth and development.

To sum up, planning for the invisible infrastructure of an initiative is just as important as planning for its more obvious educational aspects. Doing so thoughtfully and with careful planning will enhance the outcome of the initiative. ✿

Endnotes:

1. Ravitch, Sharon M. *Engaging & Retaining Jewish Youth Beyond Bar/Bat Mitzvah*. Philadelphia, PA: ACAJE, 2002. This article can also be found and read on the ACAJE website at www.ajaj.org/content/teeneducation/articles/articles/shtml.