



# What We Heard in the Listening Booths

Summary of findings  
from the JEIC interviews  
at PrizmahCJDS's 2019  
Conference

**"Sometimes we're working not just against people who can't dream or can't think otherwise, but we're working against generations of school having been otherwise. And to be a real innovator, you have to be a disruptor."**

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# What We Heard in the Listening Booths

## Summary of findings from the JEIC interviews at PrizmahCJDS's 2019 Conference

### Executive Summary

The Jewish Education Innovation Challenge (JEIC) catalyzes radical improvement in Jewish day schools (JDSs) and is at the forefront of innovating the field of Jewish day school (JDS) education through directed funding, impactful convenings, philanthropic partnerships, and bold initiatives and experimentation. To learn more from JDS practitioners and leaders about their needs and to guide funders, JEIC gathered input from participants at the Prizmah Center for Jewish Day Schools (PrizmahCJDS) Conference via the Listening Booths Project. Of the 52 participants, two thirds were from a variety of North American Jewish day schools, while the remaining third represented Jewish nonprofit organizations, higher education institutions, and online content providers.

A team of trained listeners asked participants about their dreams, wishes, and aspirations for JDSs, and followed up with questions to elaborate on the intended goals, tools necessary to reach those goals, obstacles they face, and desired outcomes. A team of researchers analyzed and streamlined the interview responses into eight common themes. To elevate Jewish education, the themes reflect that the JDS field ought to:

- Emphasize Child-Centered Approaches
- Instill Passion and Joy for Jewish Learning
- Increase Diversity in Learners, Families, Teachers, and Content
- Individualize Teaching and Include All Learners
- Increase the Jewish Educator Pipeline
- Professionalize the Field for Jewish Educators
- Implement Best Practices to Increase the Quality of Education
- Manage Affordability and Sustainability

The report focuses on these themes by describing them in more detail, including a summary of commonly needed tools, obstacles, and outcomes for each theme. Some of the tools needed to actualize the dreams were funding, human resources, training, community support, increased networking, and collaboration. Common obstacles included lack of funding and little support from outside sources. Outcomes varied by theme but generally included some ideal, achievable metrics that would demonstrate progress towards the given goal.

Along with the themes, individual participants noted additional dreams for JDSs to:

- Use existing resources and buildings to start adult learning institutes.
- Expand the reach of JDSs through “schools-within-schools” models that would address the needs of a variety of students within the JDS system.
- Create opportunities for educators from Jewish and Catholic private schools to travel to Israel and learn together.
- Disrupt the financial barriers to enrollment.
- Examine the financial models at Catholic and Christian schools, which require lower tuition (compared to JDSs) from all families by supplementing revenue with donations from large philanthropists.
- Create local JDS systems, where feasible, to facilitate cost-sharing for logistics such as student transportation.
- Revamp middle schools by removing the typical course schedule and implementing a junior version of a dissertation process. Students would learn about real-world problems, challenge themselves, and conduct interdisciplinary hands-on experiments to work towards solutions using integrated learning and 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills.

Finally, a pattern emerged showing that the dreams of JDS stakeholders in some schools already are becoming a reality in other JDSs, and the report highlights a few examples in dark grey text boxes entitled “Where Dreams Come True”.

# What We Heard in the Listening Booths

Summary of findings from the JEIC interviews  
at Prizmah's 2019 Conference

## Why the "Listening Booths Project"?

The Jewish Education Innovation Challenge (JEIC) catalyzes radical improvement in Jewish day schools (JDSs). JEIC is at the forefront of innovating the field of Jewish day school (JDS) education through directed funding, impactful convenings, philanthropic partnerships, and bold initiatives and experimentation.

To learn more about Jewish educators' needs and desires, and to guide funders, JEIC undertook an unprecedented effort to gather input from a wide variety of JDS stakeholders. As part of this effort, JEIC designed the Listening Booths Project in partnership with Prizmah Center for Jewish Day Schools (PrizmahCJDS). The Listening Booths Project took place at the PrizmahCJDS Conference in March 2019 in Atlanta, GA. The Listening Booths Project related to the 2019 PrizmahCJDS Conference theme, "Dare to Dream," by giving conference attendees a chance to confidentially respond to the overarching question: "What are your dreams, aspirations, and visions for the future of Jewish day school education?" This question prompted an open-ended format for participants to share their most pressing ideas.

## Who Let Us Listen?

JEIC invited the 1,103 PrizmahCJDS Conference attendees to voluntarily participate in the Listening Booths Project. Attendees could sign up prior to the conference or during the conference, for a time that did not interfere with major conference programming. The participants spoke with one of six trained Listeners in a quiet corner of the conference expo room.

Of the 52 attendees who participated, 35 (67 percent) were affiliated with a Jewish day school (JDS) or yeshiva. Of those 35, two thirds were from non-Orthodox day schools, and one third were from Orthodox schools. The remaining participants came from other sectors of Jewish education, including nonprofit organizations, higher education institutions, and online content providers.

About 40 percent held head of school or director-level roles, 34 percent were school principals or in key roles such as admissions, and the other 26 percent were department chairs, teachers, consultants, and board members.

Participants had an average of 20 years of experience in Jewish education, and an average of six years' tenure (ranging from 1 to 30 years) in their current role. Additionally, 72 percent had been JDS students themselves, and 86 percent were either current or former day school parents.

*See Appendix for more details on the study methodology and sample.*



# What Did We Hear?

After the conference, a team of two highly trained and experienced researchers analyzed and streamlined the interview responses into common themes and identified several unique ideas (defined as unique to this set of participants).

## *What Were the Themes?*

The findings illustrate that participants have big dreams for the future of day schools and realistic perspectives regarding the tools and obstacles involved in bringing their dreams to fruition. Some of the ideas may be expected or familiar to some readers of this report; however, their frequent mention by participants highlighted their importance to the field. The following eight major themes captured a majority of the ideas from the Listening Booths Project participants:

1. Emphasize Child-Centered Approaches
2. Instill Passion and Joy for Jewish Learning
3. Increase Diversity in Learners, Families, Teachers, and Content
4. Individualize Teaching and Include All Learners
5. Increase the Jewish Educator Pipeline
6. Professionalize the Field for Jewish Educators
7. Implement Best Practices to Increase the Quality of Education
8. Manage Affordability and Sustainability

In addition, several participants raised the concept of “making education relevant” to JDS students by relating Jewish content to the lives of current and future generations of children. This idea did not fit into a theme, nor did it form a separate theme (see sidebar on page 8).

The following subsections describe these eight themes according to four dimensions: (1) respondents’ **dreams**, wishes, visions, and aspirations, (2) the **tools** they need to accomplish the dreams, (3) the **obstacles** that stand in their way, and (4) **outcomes** they will see if the dreams come true. To further define these terms:

- **Dreams** (i.e., visions, aspirations, and goals) generally were the substantial structure, process, or content that participants wanted for the future of JDS education. Instead of being the object of the dream, notably, these dreams included specific ideas that went beyond a wish for more funding.
- **Tools** included various tangible and conceptual supports necessary to actualize a dream or vision. Interviewees did mention funding, but they also mentioned more or different human resources, additional training, professional development (PD), external support, and board collaboration. Notably, participants mentioned some of the same tools across the themes, so repetition across those lists in the findings subsections is intentional.
- **Obstacles** were structural or process-related parameters that prevented participants and others from reaching their dreams. These obstacles included, for example, lack of funding, lack of support, and staff- or community-wide challenges.



- **Outcomes** generally embodied the results of fulfilling the suggested dreams. They varied from concrete measurables, such as enrolling more students, to abstract ideas such as witnessing children learning with more joy and motivation.

**“Change in education is so hard; I always describe it as the gears game for kids. People think, 'Oh, if we just turn the gear the other way in the curriculum section, the other gears are going to start turning in the right direction,' but they never do.... The biggest challenge is that every part of the system is connected and sometimes you turn a gear, but it'll bust the whole thing and then you have chaos in the worst possible way. Sometimes you turn something and it's the one no one cares about, so ... everything else stays the same. What you have to do is very carefully turn a few of them in a way that everything's going to still move in the same direction.”**

*– Bryna Leider, Head of Partnerships for Jewish Education, Altitude Learning*

### *What Else Did We Learn?*

In addition to the themes described below, the JEIC research team found ideas that we considered unique (in this participant sample). See details beginning on page 20. These additional ideas included the wish to:

- Use existing resources and buildings to start adult learning institutes.
- Expand the reach of JDSs through “schools-within-schools” models that would address the needs of a variety of students within the JDS system.
- Create opportunities for educators from Jewish and Catholic private schools to travel to Israel and learn together.
- Disrupt the financial barriers to enrollment.
- Examine the financial models at Catholic and Christian schools, which require lower tuition (compared to JDSs) from all families by supplementing revenue with donations from large philanthropists.
- Create local JDS systems, where feasible, to facilitate cost-sharing for logistics such as student transportation.
- Revamp middle schools by removing the typical course schedule and implementing a junior version of a dissertation process. Students would learn about real-world problems, challenge themselves, and conduct interdisciplinary hands-on experiments to work towards solutions using integrated learning and 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills.

Finally, an interesting auxiliary finding that surfaced in the Listening Booths Project was that, despite increased school networking, the dreams of JDS stakeholders in some schools already are becoming a reality in other JDSs. Without the intention of being an exhaustive sample, the report highlights a few examples in dark grey text boxes entitled “Where Dreams Come True” throughout the report. This finding highlighted the need for increased communication across JDSs.

# Emphasize Child-Centered Approaches

The most commonly expressed theme was an emphasis on whole-child, values-based student-centered approaches, which included developing positive *middot* (Jewish values), and considering children’s social-emotional needs as a priority. This child-development-centered approach serves as a basis for students to learn in a safe and supported environment and creates a foundation for student-centered teaching. Many participants expressed a concern about student needs getting lost among other priorities, such as academic rigor, and they wanted to bring the focus back to the student as a person; meaning, no matter what else was going on with the school, staff, or community, the students and their needs as children should come first. Some mentioned that their ultimate goal was to produce *mensches* (people of high moral standards). Specific ideas suggested to serve children in the best way possible include:

- Enabling kids to practice *middot* and become *mensches*.
- Implementing curricula focused on social-emotional development.
- Keeping children in mind in everything schools do so that the students thrive.
- Prioritizing good values over competitive academics.
- Creating spaces where children feel safe, cared for, comfortable, and happy.
- Teaching empathy and *tikkun olam* (literally “repairing the world”; caring for others) in and out of school.
- Encouraging and supporting *gemilut chasadim* (acts of kindness).
- Fitting in regular, long-term community service programs focused on building relationships instead of task-based service.
- Graduating lots of children who have a positive sense of self and of their *Yahadut* (Judaism).
- Supporting a holistic sense of children’s learning: cognitive, physical, spiritual, and social-emotional growth.
- Collaborating between general and special education departments to teach social-emotional learning.
- Promoting metacognitive learning through self-awareness and self-moderation.

Suggested approaches to reaching this vision include:

- Thinking of schools not only as places to impart knowledge but also as places of personal growth.
- Encouraging curricular components that emphasize Jewish values such as *tikkun olam*.
- Exposing students to inequity in the world and projects that enable them to engage in *tikkun olam* and *chesed* (kindness).
- Utilizing curricula that foster social-emotional development, such as anti-bullying programs.
- Implementing a student-centered approach to learning.
- Using learning models, such as Universal Design for Learning, that increase accessibility for all students by varying how teachers present materials, assess student learning, and motivate students.

- Modeling the “whole person” for our students by all teachers to encourage future success in all areas of Jewish and professional life.

Obstacles to this vision that participants described include systems that emphasize academic outcomes, rather than learning for the joy and sake of learning.

Participants who mentioned outcomes of this vision becoming a reality included ideas such as witnessing students who:

- Feel safe, supported, and respected.
- Continue past schooling to be Jewishly engaged and active in their communities.
- In some circles, remain observant and attend yeshiva/seminary.
- Send their own children to JDSs.

### Where Dreams Come True

Some schools have adapted child-centered approaches: LabSchool division of Kohelet Yeshiva in Lower Merion, PA; Jewish Community Day School in Boston, MA; Shalhevet High School, Los Angeles, CA; and Montessori schools such as Netivot in East Brunswick, NJ, and Luria Academy in Brooklyn, NY, among others.

## Instill Passion and Joy for Jewish Learning

Another common theme was a dream to reignite the *simcha* (joy) in all learning, particularly in Judaic learning, as a way to perpetuate an intrinsic love of Judaism for future generations. Responses include:

- Instilling positive memories so that later experiences with Jewish life bring feelings of joy and connection to Judaism, holidays, and *tefillah* (prayer).
- Bringing the fun and energy back to education in places where that energy has waned.
- Giving every Jewish child a chance for an extraordinary and inspired Jewish education.
- Making Jewish day schools the epicenter of joyful learning.
- Creating excitement that will lead students to want to be knowledgeable Jewish leaders.
- Growing lifelong learners who are proud of being Jewish and are engaged in the Jewish community.

Participants indicated various mechanisms necessary to achieve these goals, including programs that emphasize joy and Jewish identity in prayer and Judaic studies. Participants talked about the need to help teachers integrate Judaic learning into other areas of students’ lives to help spark *simcha*. They suggested:

- Researching and discovering the best practices for creating engaging and exciting learning environments.
- Promoting environments that make students excited and passionate about Judaic studies.

- Ensuring that educators model the behaviors and learning that they want students to exhibit.
- Providing experiences with practical *halacha* (law) through hands-on learning.
- Inspiring a love of Judaism and *Yiddishkeit* (a Jewish way of life) through Jewish texts.
- Giving students ownership of their education, aspirations, and goals.
- Unifying the Jewish people through universal Hebrew knowledge.

When describing obstacles to achieving this dream, participants mentioned some schools turning kids “off” instead of “on” to Judaic studies. The challenge is in finding ways to make the material engaging and accessible to all students. For example, when the Hebrew language barrier makes it difficult to learn from primary Jewish text sources in Hebrew, it can affect the joy of learning. Other obstacles they mentioned include:

- Teachers lack the flexibility to present ancient Jewish texts in new ways.
- Teachers need to implement too many initiatives at once, so that teaching and learning become about mastery and achievement instead of the inherent joy of learning.
- Families leave small schools, further reducing peer learning opportunities that foster enjoyment in learning.
- Schools prioritize time and resources for other subject areas rather than for Judaic studies.
- Donors or board members focus on measuring the immediate return on investment instead of longer-term goals of instilling the love of Jewish learning.

If these obstacles were overcome, respondents would expect to see more students in JDSs. One respondent anticipates that students would pursue additional learning, both for their own benefit and in preparation for becoming the next generation of Jewish educators and parents. They gave other indicators of successfully infusing joy of learning including:

- Seeing students collaborating with peers and happily engaging in their Jewish learning.
- Observing students thriving in their environments and connecting to their Jewish purpose, values, and traditions.
- Maintaining students’ connectedness to Jewish life and learning in the future.
- Enrolling children of alumni or hiring alumni as teachers in their schools.

## Making Education Relevant

One vision that participants mentioned, usually in the context of describing another main dream, was the need to make Jewish education meaningful to every student. This can mean that schools are flexible and adaptive enough to continue to be relevant as educational institutions. Participants suggested JDSs achieve this goal by:

- Matching Judaic studies curricula to each student or class, and not vice versa.
- Implementing innovative Jewish learning to better meet students’ needs.
- Balancing tradition and modernity.
- Emphasizing text learning approaches that maintain the tradition while making it meaningful to students
- Supporting school cultures that educate within the framework of Jewish living.
- Personalizing Jewish education with a constructivist approach not only to provide information, but also to ensure that students absorb, process and reflect on information.

# Increase Diversity in Learners, Families, Teachers, and Content

Another theme among the respondents was a dream to diversify Jewish day schools. Such diversity would encompass several dimensions, including students' learning needs, families' and teachers' backgrounds, and the breadth of content taught. Their visions entailed:

- Serving more students and a larger percentage of Jewish families.
- Recruiting a student population that is diverse in many factors such as race, culture, language, religious observance, and socioeconomic background.
- Building a sense of community across diverse student populations.
- Supporting a wide range of learning needs.
- Implementing curricula that promote leadership, use a variety of pedagogies to teach content knowledge, develop social and emotional competence, and facilitate personal meaning.
- Enabling teachers to pursue further specialization(s), particularly in Judaic studies, and in accommodating special needs.
- Showing students that women can be both Jewish role models and professionals.

Actualizing this vision requires that schools consider how diversity fits within their overall goals and values and that JDS leaders restructure their policies, processes, pedagogies, curricula, and teacher training accordingly. Participants suggested specific mechanisms for change that include:

- Convening school leaders, thought leaders, and funders to discuss core goals and values within and across schools.
- Phasing out content and programs that do not align with a school's goals and values.
- Clarifying learning targets for teachers based on the school's goals and values.
- Introducing holistic, pluralistic pedagogies that emphasize developing human beings.
- Reflecting the evolution of Jewish identity and content in Judaic studies programs.
- Giving students the ability to love Israel, and educators not questioning their loyalty if they express any criticism.
- Looking at Israel education through a wider lens (with more perspectives).
- Developing training programs that bring together teachers from different cultural backgrounds to broaden their understanding of pluralism and the Jewish community.
- Improving marketing, messaging, branding, and training for admissions professionals to attract families in underserved populations.
- Raising funds to support families who otherwise could not enroll their children for economic reasons.
- Serving students of diverse races, religiosities, learning needs, and so on.
- Centralizing concerns about discrimination and pay gaps with a neutral entity.

This dream requires schools to accommodate diverse needs and populations with limited resources and the unavoidable prioritization of time, funding, and personnel. Schools must also contend with the inherent struggle between wanting to expose students to diversity and

operating within a niche educational setting outside the public school system. Potential challenges participants described include:

- Training teachers and school leaders to work with curricula, pedagogies, and populations they have not previously encountered.
- Creating JDS communities that feel welcoming to underrepresented populations.
- Embracing the task of providing a Jewish education to those who cannot afford it.
- Making a case for JDS education that will appeal to underrepresented populations.
- Finding opportunities for students to engage with people outside their core circles.

**“[Success is] being part of a thriving ecosystem where lots of Jewish children are enrolled, in which you’re actually serving a diverse set of students, and that diversity is measured in any number of ways.”**

*– Susie Tanchel, Head of School, Jewish Community Day School of Boston*

If these dreams come true, respondents expect to see a system where a large and diverse segment of Jewish children enroll in JDSs, and schools that measure diversity in a variety of ways. They said signs that schools are fulfilling this dream include:

- Changing mindsets around affordability and outreach to diversify student composition.
- Investing in systems to set priorities and align pedagogies and curricula with priorities.
- Developing a proactive admissions cycle to identify prospective families that do not necessarily fit the mold.
- Helping prospective families overcome obstacles that might keep them from enrolling.
- Implementing more contemporary pedagogies to meet students’ needs.

## Individualize Teaching and Include All Learners

A fourth theme focused around a dream to create school environments that support individualized learning and enable educators to attend to every student. Responses describe a vision of JDS education that prioritizes student-centered pedagogies to meet the needs of all students. In this vision, JDS education personalizes learning and encourages educational decisions that align with constructivist education (learners construct their own views of the world and modify their knowledge through experiences). Examples given within this vision include:

- Considering student interests and needs when making curricular decisions.
- Differentiating instruction to address the needs of various learners.
- Making intentional space for students with special needs.
- Seeking to maximize students’ individual strengths.



- Acknowledging that students can access meaning in Judaism using more than one path.
- Helping students find personal meaning by processing, reflecting on, and applying new knowledge.

To achieve this vision, schools require freedom to explore student-centered models of education; guidance in identifying changes that best align with their goals, values, and student needs; and resources to bring those models into their schools. Participants provided specific mechanisms that support this dream including:

- Developing measures for constructivist education and identifying a third party to evaluate schools against those measures.
- Training teachers—particularly veteran teachers—in constructivist pedagogy, differentiation, and relationship building.
- Developing diversified, constructivist curricula that include opportunities for practical, hands-on learning and application.
- Embracing a student-centered pedagogy to facilitate differentiation.
- Increasing visibility and transparency around system changes so that parents and teachers are informed before changes occur.
- Digitizing curricula to enable adaptation and differentiation.
- Creating a platform of crowd-sourced, customizable digital content.

An obstacle to achieving this dream described by participants is the entrenchment of current approaches that limit accessibility, individualization, and emphasis on personalized meaning-making. Changing these approaches requires school leaders to address both the challenge of transforming communal and parental expectations and the hard work of change within the school itself. Participants said this change is further hindered by the challenges of:

- Acknowledging that change involves strategically prioritizing certain goals and values.
- Facing emotional hesitations to change, including attachment to old approaches and fear of the unknown.
- Moving school leaders and funders beyond their current preoccupation with the next new trend under the premise of a constant need to innovate.
- Supporting busy, overwhelmed leaders so they can objectively evaluate their schools.

**"I'd like schools to be more comfortable thinking about the best way to teach, and to reach students beyond how the teachers learned or how the teachers were taught. I want to see them be able to grow and develop thoughtful, passionate, connected future Jews, future leaders. I wish that we would think more carefully about what we really care about and be willing to sacrifice doing everything for the sake of something."**

*– Rabbi Yehuda Chanales,  
Director of Educational  
Advancement, Fuchs  
Mizrachi School*



- Finding the time and energy for school leaders and educators to focus on change.
- Identifying funding sources for training, curricula, and other resources on inclusion.

If these dreams come true, respondents expect to see JDS leaders, administrators, educators, parents, and funders identifying individualized learning as an important approach, thinking about student needs and interests, and demonstrating the willingness and ability to adapt their materials, approaches, and priorities to maximize students' strengths. Respondents indicated this actualization might include:

- Implementing curricula and pedagogies that individualize and differentiate.
- Inspiring students to continue their Jewish learning because they find the learning personally meaningful.
- Developing models that balance student strengths and working on areas of improvement.
- Having more model constructivist schools.
- Increasing the number of schools that can successfully address special needs.
- Balancing the long hours and expectations of a dual curriculum.
- Investing in teachers to continuously grow and experiment around progressive practices and share their learning with others.

### Where Dreams Come True

The Moriah School in Englewood, NJ, Yeshivat He'atid in Teaneck, NJ, and Westchester Torah Academy in New Rochelle, NY, conducted professional development on blended learning to individualize and include more types of learners. The B'yadenu Project via Gateways has been piloting inclusion initiatives for students with diverse learning needs at five Boston area schools.

## Increase the Jewish Educator Pipeline

Another theme was a dream to increase the number of qualified candidates for teaching and leadership positions, particularly in Judaic studies, and to improve the processes through which JDS professionals develop and advance throughout their careers. This dream acknowledges the importance of getting the right people on board as the first step toward excellence in day schools. One respondent said almost everyone they spoke with at the PrizmahCJDS Conference identified with this dream, and the respondent named the challenge of finding talent “the elephant in the room.” Their visions entail:

- Identifying characteristics that make a candidate ideal for day school positions.
- Finding and supporting aspiring Jewish educators to enlarge the pool of job candidates.
- Raising standards for JDS professionals, particularly in the area of Judaic studies.
- Developing strong professional and lay leadership at the top.

**“Getting the right people ‘on the bus’ is always important. And the people who are willing to really commit their full selves to the kind of mission, the mission of the school, the mission of Jewish education.”**

*- Oren Kaunfer, Spiritual Educator, Jewish Community Day School of Boston*

Actualizing this vision requires collaboration across the JDS field to modify all phases of the Jewish educator pipeline, including pre-service training, recruitment services, onboarding, and professional support and development. The specific mechanisms participants suggested include:

- Streamlining teacher recruitment processes and retaining top talent.
- Collaborating across the field to identify, train, onboard, and incentivize professionals, particularly Judaic studies teachers.
- Creating a national program to recruit and train high school and college students to become Judaic studies educators.
- Launching undergraduate programs to train Judaic studies content specialists who are familiar with child development and pedagogy, particularly for Orthodox day schools.
- Improving pre-service training so that teachers are prepared, confident, and ready when they start work.
- Creating a job hub, recruitment firm, and/or network to connect candidates with potential employers, assist with resumes, teach interview skills, and support new professionals.
- Investing resources in higher salaries, relationship-building initiatives, and professional development and growth opportunities to help school leaders increase staff retention.

Participants shared obstacles that stand in the way of these dreams. Many mentioned the small number of candidates who enter the Jewish education field and a tendency for professionals to leave the field because of overwhelming job expectations and relatively low salaries compared to other jobs in the community. Confronting these realities is particularly challenging because it requires JDS leaders to pool resources and work together across schools. Other potential challenges mentioned include:

- Finding individuals to lead and fund field-wide training and recruitment efforts.
- Improving morale among teachers, who can feel overloaded with work.
- Raising funds to sustain professional development and pay competitive salaries, particularly in small schools with limited means.
- Competing with public school compensation in salary, benefits, and pension funds.
- Maintaining high professional standards when the field has a shortage of qualified candidates.

Bringing these dreams to fruition would enable JDSs to attract strong Judaic and general studies teachers who motivate students by modeling desired behavior. Additionally, JDSs would attract school leaders who transform the community, engage parents as partners

instead of as consumers, and enable sound educational decisions. When this dream comes true, respondents suggested we might see evidence of:

- Unifying efforts to address pre-service training and recruitment shortfalls.
- Developing a cadre of potential educators who are passionate about Jewish education.
- Filling teacher and leadership positions with candidates who embody high standards.
- Providing continuous learning and growth within schools and across the field.
- Supporting school professionals at all stages of their careers.
- Seeing more students inspired by their educators to live Jewish lives.
- Noting fewer sessions on the challenges of teacher retention in future educator conferences.

## Professionalize the Field for Jewish Educators

Another theme surfaced that related to teaching practices. More specifically, interviewees envisioned professionalizing Jewish education and educational leadership through higher standards and in-service professional development. Through this professionalization, JDSs would have better trained and more experienced teachers. To professionalize the field, many suggested increasing Jewish educator qualifications and standards, thereby creating environments where highly qualified and respected teachers are available, and schools do not need to settle on less-than-stellar teachers. A common vision was to provide time and resources for continuous, high-quality professional development (PD), specifically in the areas of:

- Developing training specializations in Judaic subtopics other than Talmud and Hebrew language.
- Guiding Judaic studies teachers on how to “kick it up a notch,” or greatly improve their teaching methods.
- Reallocating resources to provide effective PD on fewer curricular initiatives, rather than underfunding multiple PD initiatives at one time.
- Recognizing the critical importance of PD as a norm rather than a bonus.
- Making sure every school grows its staff through career development, including leadership development.
- Professionalizing the image of the entire school staff—school administrators, classroom teachers, maintenance staff, and others.

Most of the tools necessary for professionalizing the field center around funding, time, and support to train educators to meet the higher expectations and provide higher quality education for students. For example, participants suggested:

- Funding collaborative planning time in the summer so that teachers can prepare high-quality lessons before each school year.

## Where Dreams Come True

The academic incubator style of material development is happening at schools such as Shalhevet High School in Los Angeles, CA, where they created a Judaic studies curriculum (LahaV), which they have shared across the nation and with schools in Israel and Australia.

- Obtaining significant funding from foundations and local Jewish Federations for PD programs *and* the paid time to attend them, as in other professions.
- Funding PD developers to include training materials to help teachers appropriately use curricular materials to meet the needs of students.
- Creating teachers' institutes within schools to support academia-style personal and team advancement, such as developing curricular materials to market to other schools.
- Expanding existing PD programs across schools, rather than each school or educational organization creating its own new programs.
- Providing support for teachers to use curricular resources that can be individualized and are flexible.
- Implementing innovation in ways that make teachers feel supported instead of overburdened.
- Sending Jewish educators to visit exemplary schools, both within and outside the Jewish community, that exemplify professionalism in teaching.
- Paying educators well, but, more importantly, affording them the respect and status they deserve as professionals.
- Incorporating effective HR practices and improving educator recruitment and retention by school leaders and hiring managers.
- Competing with public school salaries and pension funds to retain in-demand teachers.
- Recognizing with distinction teachers whose students grow and learn each day.
- Acknowledging teachers' growth in a way that keeps good teachers in the classroom.

Given the participants' input on tools to increase professionalization, understandably, the most common obstacles to professionalization are limited time, funding, and support. Some of their examples of obstacles to meeting teachers' needs were:

- The need to convince principals to prioritize PD, offer paid time for learning or planning, give flexibility to teachers, and give release time (substitutes cover classes while teachers attend PD), whether for off-site workshops or on-site coaching sessions.
- Fewer professional standards and training opportunities for Judaic studies educators than general studies educators.
- More specifically, few opportunities for training educators on how to effectively teach complex

[Like Cal Ripken who won an award, not for hitting home runs, but rather for consistently showing up and doing his job,] **“the teacher who comes in every day and her children in her classroom leave feeling empowered, invigorated, and inspired, and [have] grown, they're better at the end of the day than they were at the beginning—that teacher deserves the Cal Ripken award.”**

- Dr. Rona Milch Novick, Dean, Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education at Yeshiva University

Jewish text courses such as *Tanakh* (Jewish Bible) and *Gemara* (Rabbinic analysis and commentary about the *Mishnah*, which is Jewish oral law).

- PD offerings that do not work for all schools and all teachers due to requirements or logistics.
- Classroom teachers, often strong ones, either leaving the field because of low pay or moving to an administration role for increased pay and prestige.

Following some of the more progressive educational trends in the country and world, others described the obstacles as a need for a shift in focus: educators need to de-emphasize grades and emphasize high-quality teaching and learning itself. Some said that professionalism was being hindered by a culture of acceptance of teacher mediocrity with little demand for change and a fear of taking risks or getting on board with new visions. They suggested the following:

- Eliminating the unrealistic communal expectation that all teachers should be good at everything related to teaching in a JDS.
- Allowing for more teacher specialization within Judaic studies.
- Creating more effective staff evaluations so school leaders can help staff members advance their teaching practices.

If these dreams come true, participants said we would see more schools investing time and funding in their educators, setting PD as a priority, and developing a new mindset of:

- Inspiring students via their well-trained and transformational educators.
- Increasing teacher retention so that teachers remain for a long-term career.

### Where Dreams Come True

Schools working toward professionalizing Jewish educators include the Allegra Franco School of Educational Leadership program, which provides teachers with pedagogical training, content-area knowledge, and self-reflection; and about 20 schools implementing Ayeka or Pedagogy of Partnership training for teachers.

## Implement Best Practices to Increase the Quality of Education

Participating educators aspired to know and use “what really works” regarding innovation and implementation. They want to focus on best practices rather than being overburdened by multiple (experimental) initiatives at once. They called for assessing and reassessing their innovation and educational plans to find the strongest, most meaningful and impactful pedagogical practices. They said schools could achieve this in the following ways:

- Catching up with the best progressive education approaches, such as inquiry-based learning.
- Implementing cutting-edge and student-developed lesson plans.

- Incorporating intensive units where students focus on a single initiative (instead of regular classes).
- Expanding self-reflection and content knowledge through progressive pedagogies that are based on projects rather than textbooks.
- Integrating and balancing the dual curriculum more creatively and effectively.
- Making JDSs a popular option for their general education, as well as for their Judaic education.
- Setting high standards in JDSs for general education that other schools want to emulate, rather than JDSs trying to meet the standards of the general education world.
- Calling for measures of excellence and identifying schools that meet those measures.
- Collaborating across movements so that the walls between schools of various affiliations (such as Orthodox and non-Orthodox) fall.
- Adopting innovation as common practice and not an extravagance.
- Holding broader conversations around best practices, including values, use of time, knowledge-sharing practices, and teacher self-assessments.

The discussions around tools to enable this dream encompassed developing core values, creating time for trial and error, catalyzing new ideas, and balancing standards and assessments with student-centered approaches. Some suggested tools focused on first identifying core goals and values, then restructuring the curricula around those priorities:

- Investing in training for both professional and lay leadership (board and volunteers).
- Understanding that teachers' relationships and passions are the foundation of quality practice.
- Focusing teachers on pedagogy and empathy rather than on content alone.
- Enacting a "less is more" approach to focus on a few goals and the best way to meet them.
- Structuring schedules for the most efficient use of the day, week, and year.
- Making time for trial and error to identify what works.
- Scheduling preparation time and space for administrators and teachers to understand the needs of students and how to help them learn based on those needs.
- Allowing schools to learn from each other, including arranging for educators to visit schools identified as centers of excellence.
- Attracting funders to further invest in schools enacting best practices.
- Disseminating resources via Prizmah's Knowledge Center.
- Centralizing curriculum and professional development in a single website.
- Creating professional learning communities of educators (PLCs): extensive networks of educators *within* and *between* schools.
- Maintaining PLCs for people who do similar work to come together for ongoing conversations to share "what works" for all subjects and social-emotional skills.
- Asking PLCs to review practices that do not work and to revise or eliminate them.
- Balancing high academic standards and assessments with identifying student strengths and areas for improvement without overemphasizing testing.
- Determining metrics for non-academic outcomes, such as whether a school is developing *mensches*.
- Assessing schools neutrally with third-party quantitative and qualitative methods.



- Using assessment outcomes to determine weaknesses and fill those gaps.
- Implementing digital portfolios for students to reflect and self-assess instead of using teacher-provided grades.

**“Innovation doesn't necessarily have to do with the next fad. It has to do with the way we are approaching the world, the kids, the content, and the curriculum. Innovation is something that can happen every day when a teacher is revising a lesson plan from last year and doing it better. [That teacher is] innovating.”**

*– Naomi Reem, Head of School, Milton Gottesman Jewish Day School of the Nation's Capital*

Other than not having the tools described above, some obstacles mentioned included lack of serious conversations around pedagogy and insufficient messaging from Prizmah about who they are, what they can do to support JDSs, and the resources they can offer schools.

The major outcomes of implementing best practices mentioned by participants would be:

- Producing a shared language and outlook on progressive education.
- Emphasizing learning rather than grades, teaching students to try new things, being vulnerable and open to risk, and recognizing that learning through failure is acceptable.
- Seeing more examples of highly excellent schools in our JDS system.

## Manage Affordability and Sustainability

For JDSs, affordability has long been a big dream, as is sustainability. While we would expect that most participants would mention “more funding” as a primary dream, most indicated funding as a tool for their dreams. Those who did emphasize the desire to decrease costs and increase enrollment were typically involved in recruitment, development, and leadership, and were more involved with affordability and sustainability than with instructional practices. Some of their visions were predictable: more donors, more philanthropists making large donations, and enabling more (or even all) families to attain a JDS education for their children. Others had a longer-term vision to help schools survive no matter what, envisioning that in 10, or even 100 years and beyond, we will still have strong, growing JDSs, with new ones opening. Participants envisioned:

- Disrupting current enrollment and financial models.
- Looking at the financial stability of their schools and figuring out how to bring in people that are not as affiliated with Judaism by helping them to realize the importance of JDSs.
- Helping donors see tuition assistance as a value for future generations rather than a financial burden.
- Helping families see the “Jewish” elements of their children’s education as an added value, not as a detractor from a good education.



The goals around these visions include sustaining stable student populations and engaging other organizations and families outside the school in supporting Jewish education communally. Their specific goals included:

- Addressing the sustainability of small and medium-sized schools before they become too small and need to close.
- Sustaining multiple schools (with various pedagogies and religious perspectives or practices) in all communities, so that all Jewish families have choices of JDSs.
- Making budget planning more effective, so that meeting payroll and other payment deadlines is not a challenge.
- Providing good teachers job stability; reducing the fear of losing their job.
- Making instructional decisions based on educational evidence rather than budgetary reasons.
- Seeing more JDSs open and more JDSs on a growth trajectory.

Several participants suggested tools for enabling this vision of financial stability, such as new tuition models and maintaining or increasing enrollment. Respondents called for school administrators to prioritize this effort and think outside the box. Their visions included:

- Creating a funders' circle around building a communal fund for tuition assistance.
- Giving financial support to those who are active in other parts of the Jewish community (such as rabbis, cantors, and Jewish nonprofit professionals).
- Finding additional sources for tuition assistance aside from revenue generated from full-paying families' tuition.
- Encouraging wealthy Jewish families to support Jewish education in addition to, or instead of, other causes.
- Considering tuition caps by a percentage of salary.
- Supporting a budget for digital marketing.
- Engaging school ambassadors to recruit and retain other families.
- Training admissions professionals through conferences and PD opportunities.
- Investing in professional leadership that will keep schools in business.

Participants mentioned the following obstacles to affordability and sustainability:

- The current financial model does not make education accessible to all.
- The system does not have sufficient funds funneled into it.
- Small schools have the added challenge of smaller budgets, even when certain fixed costs are the same as for large schools with large budgets.
- The financial aid process is embarrassing, intrusive, judgmental, and likely turns away potential families.
- Support for academic excellence and innovative programming is a significant expense.
- A lack of transportation for students from faraway neighborhoods results in families leaving schools.
- Administrators have the challenge of making a full budget with the best-practice goal of 80 percent hard income (such as tuition, building rentals) and 20 percent soft income (such as fundraising, grants).

**“We want to solve the tuition assistance crisis, the affordability crisis. The bottom line is that it's hard to afford the tuition, it's hard to afford that type of education, but as a community we can come together and help people do it ... if there's a general commitment to Jewish education in the community, regardless of if it's for my school or the other schools, we all win. As the community gets more supportive of Jewish education and more kids go, and it just becomes a de facto thing—‘You move to the community, your kids are going to go to Jewish day school, because that's what this Jewish community does’—then the schools can be stronger.”**

*– Josh Suchoff, Director of Development, Milton Gottesman Jewish Day School of the Nation’s Capital*

The outcomes of surmounting these obstacles would be that all JDSs could say they are financially sound and not just sustaining their status quo, but also thriving. Other outcomes mentioned by participants included:

- Seeing lower-tuition models so that tuition assistance does not need to be in the budget.
- Creating tuition models that support both affiliated and unaffiliated families.
- Raising funds becomes less of a challenge.
- Closing schools due to low enrollment rarely becomes a necessary step; thus, fewer conference sessions on student recruitment and retention.
- Seeing JDSs survive as strong educational institutions.

#### Where Dreams Come True

The Jewish Federations of Toronto, Greater Miami, and Greater Metro West, as well as the Board of Jewish Education in LA, are examples of using community-wide approaches to funding day schools and helping them to manage affordability and sustainability.

## Consider Other Ideas

While the above themes emerged as responses from multiple participants, some out-of-the-box ideas surfaced from individual interviewees. We define these ideas as unique, at least within the framework of the content that emerged from this project. This section describes these ideas. *Note: Participants permitted JEIC to share their contributions below in a non-aggregated format.*

### *Use existing resources and buildings to expand the reach of JDSs*

One participant suggested expanding on PreK-12 education at JDSs to include adult learning institutes that serve the community. The institutes would bring people into the building and

the school community who might not otherwise get involved. Schools could leverage these new relationships to increase buy-in, revenue, and support for the day schools themselves.

Another participant suggested creating additional “schools-within-schools” models that would address the needs of a variety of students within the JDS system. Expanding this concept to more JDSs would allow students to both remain in the immersive JDS environment and address academic goals or other learning needs.

### *Educate about diversity outside of Judaism*

Another participant suggested an initiative to create opportunities for educators from Jewish and Catholic private schools to travel to Israel and learn together. The goal is to meet the needs of Jewish educators who have not yet been to Israel and Catholic counterparts who have been requesting a collaborative trip. The respondent proposed structuring an educational trip, then finding those willing to pilot the idea, and then sharing the benefits; the respondent also acknowledged the obstacle that buy-in for this idea may be hard to achieve from everyone in the field.

### *Disrupt the financial and logistical barriers to enrollment*

A participant suggested JDSs examine the financial models at Catholic and Christian schools, which require lower tuition (compared to JDSs) from all families by supplementing revenue with donations from large philanthropists. The respondent felt that school leaders need to learn from other independent schools’ models about how JDSs can better engage with available resources to make formal Jewish education more affordable and accessible to all who wish to attend.

Another participant added an idea to create local school systems of Jewish schools within geographic regions to lower barriers to engagement by sharing resources such as transportation systems. Rather than each school owning and operating buses, a local system would enable schools to share the cost and, at the same time, alleviate the challenge for those who want their children to attend a JDS and need busing to get them there.

### *Reimagine middle schools*

For decades, middle school educators have been struggling to address the academic and social needs of middle school grades. One of the more detailed innovations a respondent proposed was completely revamping the middle school experience. Instead of classes and a typical schedule, middle schools in this vision would implement a junior version of a dissertation process. Students would learn about real-world problems, challenge

## Where Dreams Come True

The schools-within-schools model exists in some schools for inclusion and special needs such as Sulam in MD, and Sinai Schools in NY and NJ, and for specialty tracks such as the Arts and STEM programs at The Frisch School.

themselves, and conduct interdisciplinary hands-on experiments to work towards solutions. Instead of typical class periods, students would have longer time blocks to focus on their projects and problem-solving. Integrated learning would mix general studies, Judaic studies, 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills, and soft skills, which would address the need to prepare the next generation of day school graduates for life beyond schooling.

## What Did We Learn?

The Listening Booths Project at the PrizmahCJDS 2019 Conference produced extensive information about school stakeholders' dreams, wishes, and aspirations. Overall, the responses from participants fit into eight themes:

- Focus on child-centered approaches that recognize the whole child
- Spark a joy for Jewish learning and lifelong Jewish living
- Create a more diverse student, teacher, and family population
- Individualize instruction to meet all students' learning needs
- Increase the pipeline of Jewish educators through recruitment efforts
- Professionalize Jewish educators with better training and ongoing support
- Identify and implement the best practices in education
- Address concerns for funding, accessibility, affordability, and sustainability

Other conversations raised ideas that stood out as unique from the eight themes and encouraged JDSs' efforts to:

- Make education relevant to today's students by recognizing and solving the challenge of teaching centuries-old material using approaches that resonate with contemporary students.
- Expand on PreK-12 education at JDSs to include adult learning institutes that serve the community.
- Create "schools-within-schools" models for a variety of student subpopulations, allowing students to remain in the immersive JDS environment while addressing academic or other needs.
- Offering opportunities for educators from Jewish and Catholic private schools to travel to Israel and learn together.
- Examine the financial models at Catholic and Christian schools, which keep tuition lower (compared to JDSs) for all families through large philanthropic donations.
- Create local JDS systems, where feasible, to facilitate cost-sharing for logistics such as transportation.
- Reimagine the middle school experience so that instead of classes and a typical schedule, students build 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills through completing a junior version of a dissertation process. Students would learn about real-world problems and conduct interdisciplinary hands-on experiments to work towards solutions.

Participants identified the key tools for achieving these goals. These tools included funding, human resources, training, community support, increased networking, and collaboration to ascertain and establish best practices for JDS education. They also acknowledged

obstacles, which included the lack of funding or quality personnel for implementing their dreams, and little support from outside sources.

Nationwide organizations are helping schools to network, share ideas, and collaborate around innovative practices. However, even more communication is needed. As mentioned, sometimes leaders were not aware that other schools were already embarking on making certain dreams a reality. To facilitate more idea-sharing, Listening Booths participants suggested creating a single virtual space (such as an online platform) for Jewish educational organizations to share all things JDS —ideas, materials, available PD, resources, and so on. In addition to materials, the virtual space could allow for two-way communication such as a social media platform for JDS educators and leaders that would help increase cross-school collaborations. By improving communication, schools with a particular aspiration to connect with other schools already working towards those dreams will be able to learn from their experiences, as seen by the examples in the callout boxes throughout the report.

Innovations of today and tomorrow may eventually be the outdated habits of yesterday, and the field must keep evolving, self-reflecting, and innovating. The JEIC Listening Booths Project at PrizmahCJDS garnered feedback and ideas from 52 JDS stakeholders in 2019. While the sample was relatively diverse and findings are wide-ranging and included many suggestions, they cannot possibly be comprehensive, as stakeholders in the field are constantly generating new ideas to meet new challenges. Further, many in the field who were not at the conference did not have the opportunity to share their dreams or the programs they are implementing in their schools. As education, technology, society, and the Jewish community evolve, the field would benefit from continuing to solicit ongoing feedback and ideas from JDS leaders, teachers, parents, and other Jewish educators. To tackle an array of constantly changing challenges, collaborative communication is key. ■

# Appendix. Methodology and Sample

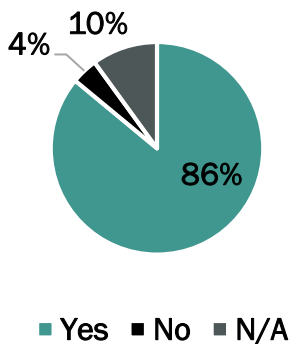
JEIC invited all 1,103 attendees of the PrizmahCJDS Conference via email and social media to participate in the Listening Booths Project interviews during convenient times in the conference schedule. Participants could sign up in advance or at the conference. With up to 60 spaces originally on the Listening Booths Project schedule, 52 conference attendees voluntarily participated. Each participant had 20 minutes to speak his or her mind, and interviewers (“Listeners”) recorded the sessions for note-taking purposes only. Incentives to participate included a carrying case for AirPods®, and a chance to win a set of AirPods®.

## What did we ask, and how?

Six trained Listeners comprised the research team. The Listeners asked the interviewees, “What are your dreams, wishes, aspirations, and visions for Jewish day schools across North America?” and, where applicable, “What are your dreams, wishes, aspirations, and visions for your Jewish day school/organization?”

After the conference, JEIC sent the audio recordings to a transcription service. Next, three research staff verified the language, particularly the Hebrew and Yiddish words that were not transcribed correctly or at all. A team of two highly trained and experienced researchers then coded and analyzed all the interview responses. They streamlined the approximately 1,020 minutes of response into a set of cohesive and common themes and unique (to this participant sample) ideas.

### Are or were you a day school parent?

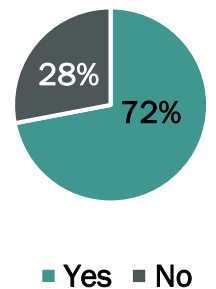


admissions. Attendees in roles such as department chairs, teachers, consultants, board members, content developers, and graduate students comprised a smaller portion of the participants. Participants had an average of 20 years of experience in Jewish education and six years of tenure (range of 1 to 30 years) in their current school/role. Additionally, 72 percent had been day school students themselves, and 86 percent were day school parents either at the time of the interview or in the past.

### Who let us listen?

Of the 52 Listening Booths Project participants, 35 (67 percent) worked or volunteered at a Jewish day school or yeshiva. Of those 35 participants affiliated with a school, one third (11) were from Orthodox day schools and two thirds (24) were from community or non-Orthodox day schools. The remaining 17 participants were from other sectors such as nonprofit, higher-education, content provider, and an inclusion school. About 40 percent were heads of schools or in director-level roles, and 34 percent were principals or in other key roles such as development or

### Were you a day school student?









Catalyzing radical improvement in Jewish day schools

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