

Establishing a Community of Practice (CoP) among Jewish Day School Heads: Working Together to Evaluate Educational Effectiveness

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Introduction

The past decade has seen a surge of Jewish philanthropic dollars and new initiatives for strengthening and supporting independent Jewish day schools across North America. This article articulates a process and some early conclusions about the effectiveness of local initiatives from the perspective of a group of Boston heads of school. The article is a product of discussions within this group about the costs of participating in well-intentioned initiatives that have unintended consequences. The discussions were themselves part of an initiative funded by Combined Jewish Philanthropies in Boston CJP. The document presented below is a "community artifact" (Hildreth 2004), in the sense that it emerged from the learning community of Boston heads of school. Indeed, Hildreth asserts that "the process of creating and working with a shared artifact is most important, more than the artifact itself (p. 169)."

This article describes a community development method that has been underway in Boston since the summer of 2005 and contains a sample written product developed by that community. It articulates the groups' perspectives on the characteristics of effective Jewish day school initiatives.

Background: Creation of a Community of Practice for Heads of Jewish Day Schools

Over the past decade, Combined Jewish Philanthropies in Boston (CJP), the official Jewish communal planning organization has made a growing commitment to Jewish education, both for adults and children. Community leaders believe that Jewish day schools are instrumental in building Jewish commitment and continuity. In its strategic plan, CJP called for funding nationally recognized adult education programs, providing help in starting new Jewish day schools and increasing support for existing schools. In October 2004, philanthropists in the Boston area came together to give the single largest gift on record to Jewish independent schools, establishing a fund of \$45 million dollars to strengthen the 15 independent Jewish day schools in the Boston area. Resources were

differentially allocated among schools, and funding included support for strategic planning and implementation, as well as support for serving the needs of diverse learners.

Part of this project included the sponsorship of a Community of Practice (CoP) for heads of Boston area Jewish day schools. The development of the CoP was part of a larger CJP strategy. The definition of a Community of Practice (CoP) is “a community of professionals who share a common set of problems and systematically share their knowledge, expertise and tools in order to improve their practice and the performance of their organization by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002, pg.4).

In the summer of 2005, CJP sponsored the creation of a CoP for Heads of Schools that reaches across the denominational spectrum. CJP’s Initiative for Day School Excellence provides organizational sponsorship for the CoP project, overseeing the distribution of funds, providing direction and evaluation and making available the learning that emerged from the initiative as a whole. CJP also hired and supervises community facilitators, experts in community cultivation and support. The funding stimulates and supports extended contact among heads of schools and provides high quality programming for the group. The CoP was envisioned as a professional development opportunity for heads of school, and an effective way of strengthening the initiatives taken by individual schools and the community as a whole, as well as an arena through which to build a professional learning community among the group of leaders. This document is only one of several community outcomes and products.

CJP articulated the following reasons for selecting a CoP strategy:

- Professional leaders play a central role in school improvement in the success of all the major Jewish day school initiatives.
- The CoP could stimulate collaborative efforts to further enhance educational quality.
- The CoP fills the growing need for systems for communication and strategies to match the increase in numbers of schools.
- The CoP simultaneously addresses both the lack of motivation for large independent schools to connect to each other, and the competitions and conflict that result from flat enrollment.
- Given the differential interventions and dispersed funding, the CoP enables schools to share information and knowledge in large groups and smaller sub-groups, and thus strengthen the system as a whole.

Despite heavily over-scheduled work lives, fifteen heads of school meet in large and small groups approximately every six weeks to discuss a collectively-developed agenda interspersed with phone and email conversations. This became a forum for the heads of schools to work together, brainstorm, communicate ideas and share information. Discussion topics have included fundraising, admissions, coaching, parent relations, security and crisis management, relations with the Board, and governance. The in-person sessions have featured a range of formats from presentations by experts to informal dialogue, to structured protocols for providing feedback on complex issues. Future

sessions may address time management, vision for special needs programming and synagogue/day school relations. In these and other new areas, the school leaders are sharing strategies and generating new ideas in a supportive environment.

The heads of school in Boston see the CoP model as an effective strategy that could be replicated in other parts of the country, although the make-up and focus would differ from one region to another.

After six months of meeting, the heads of school asked themselves what drives the success of this CoP. They concluded that the fact that the Heads of School own both the process and the content enables the following certain key factors in success:

- The agenda is driven by the shared learning goals of its members and there are no officially mandated agendas.
- It is a safe place for colleagues to share and process both policy and personal issues, discover what they have in common, and appreciate differences.
- There is a balance between facilitator and community members, where the facilitator performs organizational and administrative tasks – such as convening meetings, preparing research, documenting discussions and navigating conversation around difficult issues – while individuals or small groups take leadership in suggesting topics, designing sessions or presenting their perspectives.
- Discovering a common voice, they can speak out on particular topics of interest that can have an impact beyond their immediate community.

After a year and half of meeting, heads of school asked the question: what are the challenges to this process? The main issues that emerged were lack of time, diversity of needs, and geographical dispersion.

Creating a Community Artifact

Given the numerous new initiatives in the Boston community and their impact on the leaders and their schools, a core group of the CoP decided to focus its efforts on reviewing the city-wide initiatives serving Jewish day schools and identifying critical factors for its success. Beginning in the summer of 2005, members undertook the following process:

1. The CoP agreed to develop and implement a self survey that analyzes current perceptions of the various day school initiatives that have recently begun.
2. Facilitators discussed this plan with the CoP sponsor, analyzing its benefits, risks and implications. While benefits included providing useful information, giving the heads of school a sense of agency, encouraging dialogue and perspective sharing among peers, and modeling the open dialogue for the future CoP, the process could expose a critique of various initiatives that might not be welcomed by all.

3. Facilitators pledged to mitigate the risks by carefully managing confidentiality and by framing the conversation in order to achieve the most productive and valuable goals.
4. Together with the sponsor, facilitators identified a CoP member and community leader with excellent political sense and a deep commitment to the potential of this group, and utilized this member as an advisor in making decisions about how to proceed.
5. The survey was co-designed by heads and facilitators and completed by nine CoP members.
6. Results were shared with members at the following session. The survey results were analyzed and discussed by the group. A document entitled “**Characteristics of Effective Jewish Day School Initiatives**” was created to summarize the discussion.
7. The draft was refined and ratified by community members.
8. The draft was approved by the sponsor.
9. The document was disseminated at a national conference held by the Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education (PEJE) in March of 2006.
10. The CoP reviewed and revised the article.
11. The document was updated in January of 2007 and is shared below.

Characteristics of Effective Jewish Day School Initiatives

Impact

An effective initiative has a strong impact on education by:

- Directing benefits to students
- Providing significant human or financial resources
- Bringing in new ideas and energy
- Generating new insights and ways of doing things
- Allowing for collaborative thinking and sharing
- Meeting the current needs of day schools, which shift over time.

Expertise

Many of the best initiatives provide schools with a level of expertise that they could not afford on their own. They involve nationally respected, high caliber experts, providing schools with talented trainers and resources (e.g. staff, consultants) that the schools can access and engage with. By using excellent local resources, such as an expert on teacher induction from DeLeT (Day School Leadership Through Teaching) as well as other resources at Brandeis’ Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education, these types of initiatives deliver value through achieving economies of scale by sharing the cost of expertise among numerous schools.

Flexibility and Customization

The initiatives allow for flexible design and customization to individual situations. They enable schools to get the best resources and/or consultants that fit the schools’ needs and culture at a specific time. The Combined Jewish Philanthropies (CJP) strategic planning

initiative allowed schools to select their own consultant, which resulted in better matches between professionals and schools.

Budget Structure

The initiatives provide funding for administrative costs and time. They also make hidden administrative time (e.g. staff time processing applications or evaluations or liaising with initiative) and long-term operational costs (e.g., personnel, materials) clear so that schools are aware of all the costs before deciding if and how they want to participate. Initiatives also enable schools to plan for how they will sustain the program when the funding is no longer available. As a result, schools are able to focus on achieving program benefits within an accurate and global budget.

Management

The initiatives are professionally managed in a style effective for the day schools served. Program personnel are respectful of the position of heads of school and believe in Jewish day school education. The program enters into a partnership that allows schools to contribute to program design and implementation, provide feedback and engage in ongoing learning and improvement. Tools for input include program evaluation as well as representation of heads on key decision making committees.

Sensitivity to the Heads of Schools' Scarcity of Time

The Initiative's staff communicates effectively and efficiently providing an appropriate level of detail, and responds quickly to schools' questions and needs. An understanding of the rhythms of day schools (that is they don't book demands during key busy periods e.g. holidays, start of school) is especially helpful. It is useful if the projects are designed to effectively use people other than the heads of school, thereby lowering the time pressures on the day school leaders.

Dialogue and Partnership

Program staff search for and hear feedback in a positive manner that is not defensive. They share with the participating schools the acquired knowledge, experience, and perspectives that are learned in the project.

Conclusion:

This article illustrates a creative process and a very practical product: together they show the power of a community of practice to generate new possibilities for Jewish education. The positive experience of community members, sponsor and facilitators working together to initiate changes within the Jewish day school system led to the growth of a culture of ongoing conversation between heads and other local initiatives. This story is told in order to share with other communities a vision of initiatives that can engage in community wide dialogue to maximize their mission of supporting the growth and strengthening of Jewish day schools.

We hope this article will stimulate other communities to think about effective day school initiatives as well as explore new possibilities of dialogue and speaking with a common voice in order to strengthen the Jewish future.

The Boston Heads Community of Practice is grateful to CJP for its ongoing support. For more information about CJP's Initiative for Day School Excellence please contact Susan Kardos (susank@cjp.org).

Bibliography

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