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## Connecting The Jewish Education Dots

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Jewish educational opportunities have grown — and grown more complex — in the last 15 years, according to a new study of the field that emphasizes the need to build links within communities between formal and informal programs, between families and schools, and between communal agencies that too often compete rather than coordinate. The 36-page report, “Linking The Silos: How To Accelerate The Momentum In Jewish Education Today,” was done by a research team headed by Jack Wertheimer, provost and professor of American Jewish history at the Jewish Theological Seminary, with funding from the Avi Chai Foundation. The attempt to assess the impact Jewish education has on the lives of youngsters and their families found much positive news. For example, parents are more involved in reinforcing Jewish education than they were in the past, more attention is being given to teen education, and supplementary education is not the lost cause some educators believed it to be. But “turf battles” between and among institutions in many communities persist, and as a result there tends to be an overall lack of coordination and planning on strategic educational issues and choices. “I visited seven communities as part of my research,” Wertheimer said in an interview, “and I was struck by how few leaders were able to talk about their community as a whole. They tended to see just their part of the elephant.” Wertheimer said he is aware of the reasons why these situations exist, but maintains “we have an opportunity to do better.” He believes there ought to be people in each community designated to thinking more broadly, with an eye toward connecting students from one program to another. “I hope this report will raise consciousness about the silos” — a term used in the information technology field to describe the one-dimensional way in which fields of knowledge operate apart from each other — “and what we lose by isolating ourselves in individual institutions,” Wertheimer said. He is hoping “there will be a greater awareness that our lack of coordination is harming children and families.” The report notes that Jewish education plays a more central role for families than it had in the past. In part as a result of the worrisome findings about assimilation in the 1990 National Jewish Population Study, communities and national organizations have created more formal and informal education programs in the last 15 years, from nondenominational day schools to summer camps.

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About 80 percent of Jewish youngsters receive some form of Jewish education, according to the NJPS study. The findings of the Wertheimer report challenge a number of long-held perceptions about Jewish education, including the notions "that a single type of institution will meet the diverse educational needs and preferences of all Jewish families; that schools are exclusively educators of children; that outside of the Orthodox world, denominational identification is a matter of little importance; that efficiency is the best way to strengthen Jewish education and duplication is a wasteful misuse of precious resources; and that only the family determines whether Jewish education will succeed." Rather, it found that education is part of, not separate from, the rest of Jewish life. Parents are more active in making decisions for their children about Jewish education, in part because as adults they have become more interested in increasing their own Jewish learning and/or hope to gain Jewish knowledge through their children's educational experience. One Reform mother quoted in the study said her children's education "has been the most important Jewish experience of my life." For some parents considering day schools, a key concern is the lack of diversity — whether their children will be too "ghettoized" by being in school only with other Jewish children. The study found that the more parents are committed to day schools, the less that issue worries them. "Most educators think parents are primarily concerned with the quality of education," Wertheimer said, "but we found that parents are deeply concerned about preparing their children to operate in a pluralistic society." Parents who seek a supplementary-school education for their children offer a range of reasons, often citing the importance of fostering a sense of Jewish identity in their offspring in the hope that they will marry a Jew and continue the traditions. In general, parents say they are seeking the best educational option for each of their children and, unlike the "carpool generation" of decades ago, parents are more engaged in thinking about Jewish education in the life of their family. While the study concluded that one-day-a-week Sunday school programs have "little positive impact over the long term," two- and three-day-a-week programs, and especially supplementary high school programs, are seen as deserving more support — "unless we are prepared to write off the majority of young Jews," since most do not attend day school. The report noted that with more converts and non-Jews involved in raising Jewish children as a result of intermarriage, the goals and language used in regard to Jewish education may differ, depending on whether the parent was born Jewish or not. Those raised outside of Judaism often speak of wanting the child to have a relationship with God and learn about moral issues, while those born Jewish emphasize learning rituals and practices. The contrast in outlook is "quite dramatic," the report stated, describing the difference as "a Judaism of family and festivals as compared to a Judaism of faith and feelings." Wertheimer said it is important for schools "to understand how things are being heard." The study calls for creating linkages among educational programs, informing parents of options, and encouraging children to move from one program to the next, whether it be a higher level of Jewish formal education or becoming involved in summer camp or youth movements. Such coordination is not taking place now in many communities where each institution addresses only its needs. "This need for linkages may be understood intuitively, but in most cases it is just not happening," said Yossi Prager, North American executive director of Avi Chai, the sponsoring foundation for the report. "We're fighting inertia, not competition," he said. According to Prager, the project was undertaken to get an updated look at parental decision-making when it comes to Jewish education, though the study did not probe financial considerations. He was particularly encouraged by the information on supplementary schools, which suggested that a significant percentage of parents "want something serious" for their children's Jewish education. "Maybe there will be room for new initiatives," he said.