What are your priorities? JTS provost: Community doesn't ask the question enough

by Eric Fingerhut
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It's time for provocative questions, says a leading Jewish educator.

Speaking last week to the executive committee of the Partnership of Jewish Life and Learning in Rockville, Jewish Theological Seminary provost and professor Jack Wertheimer said that the Jewish community shies away from asking strong questions.

Among those questions, he said, is asking parents "What does it mean to send your kids ... to a Quaker school as opposed to a private school under Jewish auspices? ... What message do you think those kids are going to walk away with?"

"If you really care about the Jewishness of your children Š then what are your priorities going to be?" Wertheimer asked.

"There ought to be a conversation about how provocative you need to be," he said.

While the Washington-area Jewish community may need to work on that, Wertheimer acknowledged that the D.C. area's PJLL exemplifies the title of the recent Avi Chai-sponsored study he authored, Linking the Silos: How to Accelerate the Momentum in Jewish Education Today.

Wertheimer's study, among other findings and recommendations, stresses that "Jewish education should be an organic system, not merely a network of loosely connected institutions," or silos.

Attention must be paid "not only to the parts, but also to the connections" from preschool to day school or supplementary school, and then on to summer camp, teen programs and Israel trips.

"Serious resources should be directed at creating the linkages between educational programs," he writes.

The partnership is designed to do just that, joining together the local organizations dealing with both informal and formal Jewish education ‹ the Board of Jewish Education, Hillel of Greater Washington and Jewish Experience for Teens ‹ into one entity now housed in one building.
Wertheimer was one of a team of Jewish social scientists conducting the research for the Avi Chai study, a group that included Hebrew Union College research professor Steven M. Cohen and Sylvia Barack Fishman, professor of contemporary Jewish life at Brandeis University.

Among his findings, Wertheimer emphasized, is that there is nothing wrong with giving families a variety of Jewish educational options in a particular community.

"It is important to many parents to find the right niche for their kids," he said. "Multiplicity is very much in sync with where we are in America today. We have to be aware choice is important to parents."

In the study, he provides an example of a mother who sent her three children to three different schools - public, Jewish and private non-Jewish - based on what she felt was the best environment for each child.

The Avi Chai report also stresses the need to strengthen the field of supplementary Jewish education. Many parents who utilize such schools, states the report, are serious about passing Judaism onto their children, but choose not to enroll them in day schools because of cost, quality or a desire for their children to go to school with a diverse student body.

At PJLL, Wertheimer mused about what he called a heresy: "Who says supplementary education is best served by being based in synagogue?"

He noted that from the 1920s until after World War II, Jewish education for children in the U.S. was provided in the "communal setting" of a talmud torah.

Conceding that it would be virtually impossible to convince synagogues to relinquish this role now - a prime reason being that religious schools are a crucial element in driving synagogue membership - he also pointed out that a number of communities are developing communal education programs for post-bar and bat mitzvah-age students.

Wertheimer also urged the group to "work much more self-consciously to create Jewish experiences for our kids."

But despite the difficulties, a story Wertheimer told might indicate that the Jewish community is doing a little better than it thinks. The professor recalled a speaking tour of college campuses to talk about a book he had written about Judaism in America. Noticing that a number of those who came to listen to his talks were not Jewish, he asked them why they were so interested.

They told him that while they may have been from Korea or the Caribbean, "our communities are struggling with the exact same issues and ... you Jews have figured out the answer to these questions."

That line brought streams of laughter from his audience.