CAJE-Miami: A Decade of Lessons Learned

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By Valerie Mitrani and Julie Lambert

Affordability and sustainability. These are the two words we hear most often when talking about challenges facing Jewish day schools. Foundations have invested millions of dollars in multiple initiatives and programs on cost analysis, student recruitment, fundraising and leadership development to address these challenges.

In Miami, we have participated in many of these national programs, but there is one other area in which we have invested significant resources and which remains at the forefront of our community’s priorities – the quality of teaching and learning in our schools. What is the point of sustainability and affordability if Jewish day schools aren’t at the forefront of education, providing learning environments that offer leading pedagogies and opportunities that meet the needs of our students and families?

Ten years ago, Center for the Advancement of Jewish Education (CAJE-Miami) professionals followed their hunch that the linchpin for high quality education isn’t the curriculum, the technology tools or the gorgeous campuses – it’s the teacher. Educational data and research supports this hypothesis: The single most important school-based factor impacting student learning is the teacher. The second most important factor is the principal.
Peter Senge writes in his work *The Fifth Discipline* “Small, well-focused actions can sometimes produce significant, enduring improvements, if they’re in the right place. System thinkers refer to this principle as ‘leverage.’ Tackling a difficult problem is often a matter of seeing where the high leverage lies, a place which – with a minimum of effort – would lead to lasting, significant improvement.”

CAJE is the leveraging agent for high quality Jewish education in Miami. With a $500,000 grant from the Greater Miami Jewish Federation, ten years ago CAJE embarked on a journey to create and nurture a system where professional learning became the primary vehicle for instigating and sustaining school change focused on the quality of teaching and learning. We have gleaned a lot from this decade of work.

1. **Go Slow at the Beginning**

Author and educator Parker Palmer tells a story about a veteran heart surgeon teaching new surgeons a challenging procedure that they have only one minute to complete and during which time a patient’s life hangs in the balance. The surgeon’s advice: “Go slow at the beginning.”

When designing and implementing an educational initiative that will impact school culture, teacher practice, and the lives of countless students, it is important to slow down and intentionally design the process that will achieve the intended outcomes. Immediate impact and return on investment (ROI) often drives a rushed process and a “quick-to-implementation state” that does not yield long-term impact, nor address the challenge of changing the culture of institutions that is at the heart of this work. Just like a surgeon holds his patient’s life in his hands, educators hold tremendous responsibility for their students’ future in theirs.

2. **Community Cannot Be Assumed**

It takes intention and effort to build community – within each school, across a network of schools, and between the schools and CAJE. One of the first things we heard from teachers in the schools is that in some cases they did not even know the names of their colleagues across the hall. How would schools be expected to have open and honest conversations about student learning when professionals did not even have relationships amongst themselves?

All of the quality education initiatives we have designed and launched are a cohort model where schools designate leadership teams who come together for workshops and seminars facilitated by CAJE and expert consultants from the top organizations in the field. These leadership teams then replicate the cohort learning experience with their faculties in their respective schools.

3. **Data, Data, Data**

The purpose of education is to build the learner’s knowledge and capacity. Therefore, any decisions in an educational environment MUST have the student at the center. What we now know about data-driven instruction and the role data plays in our lives and in our decisions should not stop at the school door.
If education is student-centered, teachers and school leaders must continuously collect and analyze student data and, taking it a step further – share this information with students to increase transparency in their learning process. The world our students live in is data-rich, so too, should their education be designed to maximize their talents and support their learning.

4. A Community of Jewish Educators Should Not Discuss Religious Practice

Yes, you read that correctly. One of our earliest “Aha! Moments” was when we realized the boys’ Yeshiva and the Reform day school were having powerful discussions centered on teacher practice and student learning. As Jewish educators, we often assume that what connects us is Jewish learning and practice. In fact, that can be a barrier to deeper conversations. By shifting the conversation from content to process, we are better able to leverage each other’s expertise and deepen collaborative relationships.

5. Outside Expertise is Critical, but Building Internal Capacity is Essential

There is a critical role only an outside expert can play when it comes to moving systems. They introduce knowledge and skills and facilitate learning that builds capacity within schools to sustain change. However, once the expert leaves, the focus shifts to the role of those at the school level.

Critical to the success of any new initiative is taking the time to build capacity of all involved. Over the past 10 years, we have invested in all levels of the system by designing cohort learning models that include teachers, coaches and administrators who are responsible for setting the vision and the outcomes. Shared language and knowledge allows each school team to design and plan for experimental initiatives, starting small in singular classrooms and building out to the bigger system.

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In a world full of options, we have a moral obligation as a Jewish community to ensure that Jewish day school students experience a high quality education. It takes a multi-pronged approach to achieve this goal, and we are proud of the model we have built in Miami. It is one that harnesses the collective knowledge of our community, leverages resources, and builds capacity to ensure success for all schools, educators and children within our network of schools.

The benefit of the CAJE-Miami model is that the work of learning is never complete and with this networked approach, we can continue to bring our schools together to learn and apply the latest research-based knowledge in education to benefit all schools in our network. Most recently, CAJE-Miami in partnership with the Avi Chai Foundation and with support from the Greater Miami Jewish Federation and local funders, has been designing and implementing #JBlendMiami which introduces and builds school capacity around blended and personalized learning. This initiative is an outgrowth of the previous decade of work in which we built a system that takes into account the above 5 lessons.
As we read in *Pirkei Avot*, “Lo alecha hamlacha ligmor, v’lo atah ben chorin l’hivatel mimena” it is not our obligation to complete the work but we are not permitted to desist from it. CAJE, in partnership with the network of Jewish day schools in Miami, will continue to strive for the best in teaching and learning – collaboratively as a collective commitment to excellence in Jewish Education.

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