

Snapshots & Insights



Spring 2009



The Publications and Dissemination Project (PDP), an initiative of JESNA's Learnings & Consultation Center (LCC), brings JESNA's knowledge and expertise to practitioners and policymakers in the field by means of print and online media.

Snapshots & Insights is JESNA's newest publication series designed to disseminate emergent data and understandings. Each issue will briefly focus on lessons learned about a single aspect of Jewish Education based on research and evaluations (performed primarily by JESNA's Berman Center for Research and Evaluation in Jewish Education) as well as on-the-ground knowledge (primarily gleaned from JESNA's Learnings & Consultation Center staff who work directly with Jewish educators in the field).

Stay tuned for the next publication in JESNA's other PDP series *Making Jewish Education Work* which focuses on Professional Development for Educators. Planned publication date:

Summer 2009



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TOPIC:

Resource Centers for Jewish Educators

Introduction

Teacher Resource Centers were established beginning in the 1960s. They evolved from school libraries which only offered print resources to centers designed to offer additional services to teachers. Throughout the last 5 decades, Resource Centers have continued to focus on the teacher and his/her role as an agent of change and facilitator of learning for students, while using and teaching the latest technological advances and educational theories.

Teacher Resource Centers became popular within Jewish communities beginning in the 1980s. Like their counterparts in the secular world, they were initially founded to serve as clearinghouses for materials (paper, audio and video) that classroom teachers could access, but soon evolved to provide other needed resources (e.g., machines to create games and other projects), and to coordinate professional development opportunities.

At this time, more than 30 Jewish Educator Resource Centers exist in North American communities. They differ on many levels, including: staffing and services provided, usage and costs. During the last 3 years, JESNA has received many inquiries about the effectiveness and efficiencies of Jewish Educator Resource Centers. We have, therefore, chosen to focus our inaugural issue of *Snapshots & Insights* on these important facilities. >>>>



Resource Centers in the 1990s and Early 2000s

In 1992, JESNA reported results of a survey of nearly 50 Jewish community media-resource centers in North America. At that time, Resource Centers existed to improve “the quality of Jewish education by providing services, programs, and materials.”¹ Other findings from that report provide a descriptive profile of Resource Centers at that time.

- **Target audiences** included individual teachers, schools and synagogues as well as other Jewish organizations.
- Services **most valued by users** included the available resource materials and consultations with “experts.” Additionally, Resource Centers organized local conferences for educators.
- **Hours of operation** were generally five days each week for eight hours each day.
- **Staff** of the Resource Centers were described by users as skilled in areas of education and Judaica (rather than Library Sciences, for example).
- Most Resource Centers operated under the **auspices** of the local Central Agency for Jewish Education, and more than half were funded exclusively by their sponsoring institutions.



JESNA’s report also noted that increasing community outreach and expanding acquisitions (especially in areas of technological advances) were priorities for Resource Centers moving forward.

In 2003, the Jewish Education Center of Cleveland (JECC) convened with JESNA and ADCA (Association of Directors of Central Agencies for Jewish Education) a conference for Resource Center professionals. At that time “meta-goals” for Resource Centers were similar to those identified in the previous decade. It was believed that Resource Centers should:

- Serve as a resource/partner to enhance what other educators are doing; and
- Offer leadership and vision, “to help those with whom we work think outside the box.”²

1 JESNA, *Report on the survey of Jewish Community Media-Resource Centers in North America*, (New York: Spring 1992).

2 ADCA/JESNA, *Thinking Outside the Box: A Conference for Resource Center Personnel*, (Cleveland: 2003).

During that conference, participants agreed that given new realities facing the field (e.g., decentralization of resources, technological innovations, etc.), Resource Centers needed to redefine and reposition themselves. Key issues discussed included the feasibility, desirability and necessity of:

- Recruiting “clients” to Resource Centers to utilize their resources and services and/or bring resources and services to their “clients”;
- Providing professional development opportunities for teachers; and
- Creating a national Resource Center.

Resource Centers Today³

There are two primary models of Resource Centers now functioning in North American Jewish communities. Some remain basically as they were in the 1990s and early 2000s, and others have retained key features from previous years while venturing (some more deeply than others) into technological realms by building and supporting web sites.

What we know about contemporary Resource Centers in the communities studied:

- Almost all local educators working within Jewish educational settings **know about their local Resource Center**.⁴ Services of the Resource Centers are promoted largely through their web sites, by users of the Resource Centers, and by principals of local Jewish schools.
- **On-site services** most commonly offered by Resource Centers include: a lending library, teacher consultations, responses to email queries, providing creative resources and games, and curriculum consultation with schools and/or synagogues.
- Most Resource Centers report between 6-15 **teacher visits per week**, and the next most common frequency reported is 5 or fewer per week. No Resource Center (on its own) reported more than 25 teacher visits.⁵ Significantly, most report that these figures remained constant from last year, some report fewer visits than last year, and no Resource Centers report increased in-person usage.
- Some Resource Centers note that “clients” contact them by **email** or **telephone** as well, usually to request materials.⁶ >>>>

3 To offer a snapshot of what Resource Centers are in 2008, JESNA used three sets of data: three reports which JESNA authored in 2007 that assessed Resource Centers in Hartford, CT, Rhode Island and Western Massachusetts; a report commissioned to explore the feasibility of creating a Virtual Resource Center; and a brief survey conducted by the Resource Center in Chicago, IL, which gathered information from 14 Resource Centers.

4 JESNA, *Achieving Excellence in Professional Development and Resources for Jewish Educators — Reports*, (New York: 2007-8).

5 BJE of Metropolitan Chicago, *Survey of the Marshall Jewish Learning Center*, (Chicago: 2008).

6 JESNA, *Achieving Excellence in Professional Development and Resources for Jewish Educators — Reports*, (New York: 2007-8) and Talance, Inc., *Virtual Resource Center Feasibility Study*, (Massachusetts: 2007).



- JESNA also learned that at least 20% of local educators **do not utilize their Resource Centers** at all. Stakeholders perceive there is little (if anything) that Resource Centers could do to bring those educators to the Resource Centers.⁷
- In terms of **web-based services**, where they exist, most include searchable databases which provide links to on-line resources (e.g., curricula, books).⁸ Some include other features, such as:
 - Information/registration for professional development opportunities
 - On-line catalogues of resources available at the Resource Centers
 - New and archived e-newsletters (which include announcements, trivia challenges, “master-teacher tip of the week,” etc.)
 - Job banks enabling users to find or post jobs
 - Access to roundtable forums and peer networks

There are significant challenges associated with keeping such web sites up-to-date and designing them so that they are user-friendly.

- Though most Resource Centers have large **collections of resources** (curricula, books, audio and video materials, etc.), some are accessed less for such resources and more for **arts and crafts project ideas** and supplies, and the free or inexpensive use of **production machines** (e.g., laminating or die cut machines).⁹
- Educators (teachers and principals alike) recognize the importance of **professional development** opportunities, the provision of which has long been associated with Resource Centers. However, surveyed teachers and principals prefer to have such opportunities provided on-site at their schools, rather than participating in larger community-wide programs. They found that professional development was more effective when contextualized and customized to meet the unique needs of individual schools and their teachers, and when offered within their own school environment.¹⁰
- The majority of surveyed Resource Centers are **open** for at least 7 hours per day, Mondays through Thursdays, and for at least 6 hours on Friday. Some are open 4 or more hours per day, 5 days a week, and others offer “by appointment hours” on Fridays and/or other days.¹¹
- **Staffing** of Resource Centers varies greatly, largely according to the number of hours and days the Resource Center is open. Some employ full-time and others employ part-time Resource Center directors. Most also employ part-time associates, librarians and/or administrative assistants.¹² Staff have varied backgrounds, some with expertise in Jewish education or educational pedagogy. Very few report strong backgrounds or familiarity with technology.

7 JESNA, *Achieving Excellence in Professional Development and Resources for Jewish Educators — Reports*, (New York: 2007-8).

8 For a complete listing of web sites reviewed, please refer to the Bibliography.

9 JESNA, *Achieving Excellence in Professional Development and Resources for Jewish Educators — Reports*, (New York: 2007-8).

10 JESNA, *Achieving Excellence in Professional Development and Resources for Jewish Educators — Reports*, (New York: 2007-8), and BJE of Metropolitan Chicago, *Survey of the Marshall Jewish Learning Center*, (Chicago: 2008).

11 BJE of Metropolitan Chicago, *Survey of the Marshall Jewish Learning Center*, (Chicago: 2008).

12 Ibid.

- Most Resource Centers are primarily (and in many cases exclusively) **funded** by local Jewish Federations, and operate under the **auspices** of the local Central Agency for Jewish Education. Others receive funding from private donors, fees/dues, and/or grants (which in most cases account for less than 5% of the Resource Centers' total budgets).

Surveyed educators and principals expressed great interest in having access to a **National Virtual Resource Center**,¹³ which would function much in the same way that many local Resource Center web sites already do, complementing local consultation and support services for teachers. Such a site would be customizable on the local level to include specific announcements, materials (particularly related to professional development) and/or services, but would be staffed on a national level. This would promote financial efficiencies, provide access to (and ideally feedback about) more resources, and facilitate discussions and networking between and among teachers across the continent.

Alternative Models for Resource Centers

There are models (some functioning within the Jewish education field, and many outside of it) from which Resource Centers can learn. A brief scan of more than 40 web sites was conducted to complement this report (many of which are referenced in the attached Bibliography). It should be noted that almost all of the innovative features of these web sites already exist in one or more of the Jewish educational Resource Centers web sites, albeit to a lesser extent, and in less user-friendly formats. It must be noted that some Jewish educational Resource Centers have developed their web sites extensively, whereas others have limited or no web presence.

Features of these web sites that could easily be adapted to either a national Virtual Resource Center, or to the local web sites of Resource Centers, include:

- Rich, searchable banks of curricula, lesson plans and one-time activities for classroom use organized by subject area and grade level, with feedback provided by users about what did and did not work well;
- Interactive resources for teachers and students;
- Collections of useful Jewish web sites, including those that enable users to sign up and participate in Communities of Practice; and
- Information and other materials related to in-person, online and virtual professional development opportunities. >>>>

13 Talance, Inc. *Virtual Resource Center Feasibility Study*, (Massachusetts: 2007).



Lessons Learned: What Works and Under What Conditions

But I have to teach this class tomorrow!

For the most part, teachers are interested in materials that can assist them *immediately*. When teachers visit Jewish educational Resource Centers, they generally seek to obtain pre-packaged resources, such as curricula or projects, or come to prepare materials that they need for their classes by using machines on-site. They seek access more than consultations.



Resource Center staff should view each interaction as an opportunity to offer concrete suggestions to respond to teachers' immediate needs while building on existing plans, thus "raising the bar." While many or most teachers may be unlikely to seek this extra insight on their own, they are likely to accept and appreciate it, thereby enriching the experience for the teacher, and in-turn for his/her students.

Accessing resources from the comfort of my home — it's 2009!

Though there is no substitute for human interaction, most teachers do not, and will not, visit Resource Centers in person due to time constraints, the location of the Resource Center, and their perception that they do not need what the Resource Centers have to offer. Most educators, however, are extremely likely to access resources on-line, at their leisure. Therefore, all Resource Centers should develop and maintain user-friendly and highly functional web sites to showcase and provide links to available resources. Resource Centers should also train local educators (particularly those not familiar or comfortable with commonly used technology) to utilize these tools efficiently.

In order to realize financial efficiencies, Resource Centers should revisit and, where needed, adjust staffing patterns to ensure that when teachers reach out to a Resource Center (either in person, via email or by telephone), the person representing the Resource Center is able to address their presenting needs and queries while also helping them to "raise the bar." Individual Resource Centers should adjust their hours of operation so that they are open during the days and times when most teachers seek services, not necessarily during regular workdays. To realize further efficiencies vis-à-vis financial and human resources, a continent-wide Virtual Resource Center could be launched, partnering with, and creating an effective system of, existing Resource Centers. (It should be noted that with the ongoing development of technology, any strategies pursued would need to be reviewed on a regular basis to insure that they are kept current.)

Bring professional development to the teachers, not the teachers to professional development!

Providing ongoing opportunities for the professional development of educators is critical, and the coordination/facilitation of these sessions is often the responsibility of the Resource Center staff. Such sessions are most effective when they are planned with the leadership of, customized to meet identified needs of and provided within each educational setting.

This is confirmed by additional research conducted during 1997-98 by a research team from the University of Leeds that “investigated the effectiveness of Teacher Resource Centers (TRCs) as a strategy for teacher development in developing nations... The study examined the extent to which TRCs helped improve the environment for learning in schools and the quality of teaching and learning in classrooms... Results indicated that it was very difficult for TRCs to achieve their goal of improving teachers’ classroom performance and thus positively impacting teaching and learning, because they were detached from work at schools.”¹⁴

Conclusion

What often brings a teacher to a Resource Center is the quest for a particular DVD or curriculum. That same teacher should leave the Resource Center having been guided to think beyond the implementation of that specific resource. What teachers need that Jewish educational Resource Centers are structured to provide is the juxtaposition of high caliber and current resources (curricula, program ideas, etc.) and staff with expertise to guide the effective implementation and contextualization of those resources within a particular class. To contribute maximally to the field of Jewish education, and to enable teachers to improve their teaching, Resource Centers must ensure that the rich resources they make available and accessible are complemented and supported by staff with expertise in Jewish education and educational pedagogy. These steps will enable Jewish educational Resource Centers to realize their potential as doorways to genuine, ongoing professional development of Jewish educators.

14 Genevieve Fairhurst et al, *The Effectiveness of Teacher Resource Centre Strategy. Education Research Paper. Full Report*, (London: Department for International Development, 1999).



Bibliography

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- *Achieving Excellence in Professional Development and Resources for Jewish Educators — Report Re: Rhode Island*. New York: JESNA's Learnings and Consultation Center, 2007.
- *Achieving Excellence in Professional Development and Resources for Jewish Educators — Report Re: Western Massachusetts*. New York: JESNA's Learnings and Consultation Center, 2007.
- *Achieving Excellence in Professional Development and Resources for Jewish Educators — Report on Community Scan and Needs Assessment Study, Greater Hartford, CT*. New York: JESNA's Learnings and Consultation Center, 2008.
- Survey of the Marshall Jewish Learning Center of the Board of Jewish Education of Metropolitan Chicago, 2008.
- Talance, Inc. *Virtual Resource Center Feasibility Study*. Massachusetts, 2007.



Web Site Resources

- 2002 Useful Web sites Compiled by Diane Berg — <http://www.nate.rj.org/oldnate/websites.html>
- Auerbach Central Agency for Jewish Education in Philadelphia — <http://www.ajaje.org/>
- The Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York — <http://www.bjeny.org/bjeny.asp>
- Bridge Ocean Sciences Education Teacher Resource Center — <http://web.vims.edu/bridge/?svr=www>
- Bureau of Jewish Education of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties — <http://www.bjesf.org/>
- Center for the Advancement of Jewish Education in Miami — <http://www.caje-miami.org/>
- The Center for Jewish Education in Baltimore — <http://www.cjebaltimore.org/>
- Chinuch.org — <http://www.chinuch.org/>
- Education Resources Information Center — <http://www.eric.ed.gov/>
- The Educator's Reference Desk — <http://www.eduref.org/>
- The Frank G. Marshall Jewish Learning Center (Chicago) — http://www.bjechicago.org/teacher_resources.asp
- Israel Education Resource Center — <http://www.ujc.org/page.aspx?id=77859>
- Jacob & Frances Seidman Educational Resource Center — <http://www.ajaje.org/content/educationalResources/intro/introtoSERC.shtml>
- Jewish Education Center of Cleveland — <http://www.jecc.org/>
- Jewish History Resource Center — <http://www.dinur.org/1.html?rsID=219>
- Lookstein Center for Jewish Education — <http://www.lookstein.org/>
- New England Aquarium — <http://www.neaq.org/index.php>
- Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago Museum Education Kids Corner — <http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/MUS/ED/kids.html>
- Sparktop — <http://www.sparktop.org/>
- Teacher Link at Utah State University — <http://teacherlink.ed.usu.edu/>
- Teaching Resource Center — <http://www.trcabc.com/contact/>