

Educational Choice is a Blessing

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by Adena Raub



As Jews, we are living in an era of unprecedented freedom and choice.

Jewish families now have the opportunity to choose how to educate their children in both secular and Jewish studies. Our children are no longer assigned to specific schools based on religious background. Rather than

treat the decision as a burden, we should be grateful for the ability to make such a choice. Educational choice is a blessing.

All of the choices of Jewish education: day school, complementary school, homeshuling, camps, etc... are simply that- choices- the “media” through which we choose to extend a similar message: thousands of years of Jewish culture, religious beliefs, history and language. Regardless of which medium is chosen, if the message is transmitted engagingly enough, with family support our children will be Jewishly knowledgeable, proud of their Jewish heritage and ready to fulfill meaningful Jewish lives as they transition into adulthood.

When referring to the traditional use of the word “media”, the medium itself has often been touted or blamed as the cause of the positive or negative influence of programming. However, such consequence cannot be attributed to the medium itself. A well researched, well produced documentary can be equally engaging whether broadcast through radio or television. The content and production decisions are far more important than the choice of medium.

The choice of medium in Jewish education is not as critical as the content and methodology being used to educate. Each medium has its merits and deficits, which is exactly why many families find these decisions to be so difficult.

Rather than spend our time determining “the better medium”, the Jewish education community should consider all venues to be of equal value, since our diverse community comprises various family priorities, learner differences, and Movement philosophies. There is no better medium, but perhaps a better fit. Jewish professionals, institutions and foundations need to make a resounding effort to enhance the clarity of our message by improving the quality of all education across the board. All Jewish education systems face challenges, and all systems have successes. We should be working together and learning from one another to alleviate frustrations and disseminate best practices.

Within a society that allows for Jewish freedom, an unbroken Jewish future relies on a solid education system. The paths to surmount our obstacles do not exist within one four-walled institution, and they will only emerge when we open our doors to one another. Our inclination has been to hold our ideas close. We must evolve in order to assure that we, as a Jewish people, are able to continue to thrive during this era when ownership is no longer valued over openness.

Transparency will allow for us to transform all Jewish education choices into better choices. The current economic climate has forced some level of discussion, but discussion by necessity alone is not enough. As a community, we need to build a network for cooperation and partnership across the spectrum of Jewish education, to develop a common language, capitalize on the minds of our professionals and maximize our investments. Only then can we assure that we are in fact *growing* Jewish education.

Adena Raub, is Information Manager, [PELIE, The Partnership for Effective Learning and Innovative Education](#).

Selected Comments:

-Respectfully. To say that “the Jewish education community should consider all venues to be of equal value,” is to deny the fundamental fact that afternoon Hebrew school is an utter failure at instilling Jewish identity. To the contrary, the majority of Hebrew school graduates, myself included, will tell you that the Hebrew school experience did more to turn us off from Judaism than anything else!

It is now 2010. The evidence of the past 50 years is in. The debate is over, and afternoon Hebrew school is a failure. Jewish day schools - orthodox, conservative, and reform, remain the only hope to keep our children Jewish.

-I have to respectfully disagree with your assessment of both supplementary education and the field of Jewish education. The look and feel of supplementary education has grown by leaps and bounds over the past 50 years and is ever evolving. New initiatives are springing up from family programs to more integration of experiential education. We don't yet know what the effect of these initiatives will ultimately have but research is causing a change in the field and educators are working to meet that change.

Your view of the Jewish educational scene is limited to supplementary schools and day schools. However that fails to recognize the place and impact of camps, youth movements, Israel trips and plenty of other opportunities where Jewish education lives and thrives.

When you look to limit the field to only 1 possible entry point you fail to take into account the reality of limitations. Whether or not day school education is the height of Jewish education is irrelevant. For many families it is not an option either because of cost, quality or availability. As a Jewish educator and professional I wonder if I'll even be able to afford to send my children to day school.

I myself am a graduate of both supplementary school and a youth movement. I have come to believe that not 1 aspect of the field alone is “the only hope to keep our children Jewish.” Rather it is the layering of experiences that will allow our learners to grow into active Jewish adults: socially and intellectually.

There are so many amazing new opportunities available to act as educational tools and entry points into the Jewish community. It is our job as a community to nurture and constantly evolve those options while striving to create new opportunities and entry points.