



complementary strengths. Having co-teachers offered built-in opportunities for joint planning, problem solving, and support. Teachers felt less isolated and more accountable because their practice was public.

**An integrated approach to content and pedagogy.** Unlike conventional teacher education that separates the learning of content from the learning of teaching strategies, we adopted an integrated approach. We provided opportunities for teachers to work with consultants, to study their subject matter with master teachers, and to see master teachers teaching that subject matter to students. Afterwards, we analyzed the teaching and learning that teachers had experienced or observed and the conceptual and pedagogical issues that arose.

**Engagement with authentic texts.** Avocational teachers engaged in serious study, including text study. People reported spending three to four hours preparing for class and cited their own personal learning as the most powerful part of the experience. The avocational teacher

project was truly adult learning in the service of children's Jewish education.

**Experienced teachers mentor new teachers.** A major goal of the project was to create an ongoing system of teacher recruitment and support. In the third year, we recruited new teachers to join existing teams so that they could learn to teach alongside more experienced teachers. When the project ended, we had a pool of experienced teachers who could coach and co-teach new volunteers as well as a bank of lesson plans to share.

Placing teacher learning at the center of efforts to transform congregational schools represents a powerful strategy for linking recruitment, retention, and development. While this will take imagination, time, and resources, it is a necessary condition for teaching and learning to flourish in any school — religious or secular — and for teachers whether they are full-time or part-time, paid or volunteer, professionally trained or avocational.

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## Innovative Models

### Explorations: A New Model of Congregational Learning

*Sue Ringler Pet and Sandra Barsky Daniels*

In 1992, we were two parents with children in Hebrew school. As professional educators, we knew the school wasn't providing creative learning opportunities for our children. We wanted to create a school environment that immersed whole families and individuals in one major aspect of Judaism at a time, offering vibrant, multifaceted learning experiences that would create lasting understanding and continuity of Jewish practice. We called the model *EXPLORATIONS* and piloted it at our synagogue in the spring of 1995 after two years of on-site experimentation. Having had opportunities to reflect on the program and build a sense of ownership, the congregation adopted the model in

place of religious school in the fall of 1995. It continues to thrive as a working laboratory and nationally recognized Jewish education program.

In generations past, the family, the neighborhood, the rhythm of Jewish time, and the synagogue community provided the nurturing framework for continuity of Jewish values, identity, and knowledge. A religion steeped in ritual, history, and tradition, brimming with distinctive personalities, music, colors, arts, and stories, was transmitted almost magically over time. Today, while many Jews genuinely seek a link to Judaism, they live with schedules of public activity pulling hard against all things Jewish. Studies show that the congregational religious school has been charged

to provide that link. In recent decades, innovative Jewish educators have responded by modernizing texts, updating teaching strategies, adding family programs, and infusing technology into classrooms. These valiant efforts, while revitalizing some schools and curricula, have yet to strike the vibrant chord that resonates outside the synagogue walls and beyond bar/bat mitzvah.

In creating *EXPLORATIONS*, we have stopped rearranging the various parts of a tired school mechanism. We recognize that the masterful subtleties of the Jewish family — exemplary in modeling, immersion, and emotion — surpass any curricula or school we could ever hope to create. With that goal in mind, we have dramatically reconceptualized the traditional religious school model. We have designed an alternative that collapses traditional structures in staffing, student groupings, curriculum, and class design, in order to build and empower an entire community to embrace Judaism as commanded in the Torah, “*na’aseh v’nishma*” — we will do and we will understand.

In our program, participants study an aspect of Judaism between two and eight weeks. They interact with a carefully selected collection of resource materials, educational activities, books, projects, stories, discussions, games, arts, and music, crafted specifically for the unit. Blocks of study with *EXPLORATIONS* titles such as *The Living Haggadah; Torah, A Tour of Genesis; Moon Magic; Immigration; and From Shtetl to Ship to Shelter to Shore* target the traditional curricular topics of Judaism — holidays, history, *tefillah*, *tzedakah*, Torah, and time. Like the cycle of Torah, these topics reappear over time, inviting individuals to approach them with a new knowledge base, maturity level, and life experience.

As a school situated in a small community, our program operates with a completely volunteer, untrained staff. An essential aspect of preparation is training teachers for each new program. Each program begins with adult learning that grays the lines between staff development and adult education by offering workshops open to the synagogue as a whole. Guided by an original curriculum, participants are introduced to the new content, goals, and

structure. They experience innovative teaching strategies, workshop-style lessons, and projects, which they in turn share with children as members of adult teaching teams. The rabbi, other experts, and invited scholars illuminate intriguing concepts. The workshop sparks the interest of adults, many non-Jewish or married to non-Jews, and the program flourishes as a completely volunteer staff is readied to teach the new program.

Sunday mornings are rich in creativity, activity, and excitement. Populating every nook and cranny of the building, adults, teens, and children are grouped differently for each program, a feature that precipitates familiarity among participants. Multi-age groups enjoy family-style learning that meets individuals at their readiness and interest level and creates a “dinner table” type comfort not experienced in most traditional settings. The synagogue buzzes with common vocabulary, snippets of sharing, and anticipation of a memorable culminating activity, what we call “A Unique Jewish Celebration,” in performance, narrative, exhibition, production, or demonstration, delightfully different every time!

The ongoing growth process that characterizes *EXPLORATIONS* is both deliberate and spontaneous. The program is fueled by a symbiotic relationship between well-planned, intentional steps emerging from strong Jewish and educational foundations, and creative, intuitive leaps. Such a spirit of innovation paves the way for our transformation. With adults delighted by their nonthreatening entry into Judaism’s vastness, and children bubbling with enthusiasm, “Sunday School” is but a faded memory. *EXPLORATIONS* nurtures our “family of learners” on a lifelong exploration of Judaism.

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