

# Brandeis University

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## Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies

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### **THE RE-IMAGINE PROJECT: CASE STUDIES**

*By*

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The Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University is a multidisciplinary research institute dedicated to the study of modern American Jewry. Its mission is to enhance understanding of the Jewish community and the development of religious and cultural identity.

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## **The RE-IMAGINE Project**

### **Case Studies**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Synagogue change initiatives confront two realities: the unique profile presented by each congregation, and the readiness of each congregation to consider new ideas and change its approach and direction.

In large measure, synagogue change is idiosyncratic. The RE-IMAGINE Project (REI) offers an elaborated curriculum and process, but each congregation enters the project with distinctive circumstances, culture, and history. Each has a different set of needs, resources, and goals. Although all want to “re-imagine” their religious education, that term carries different meanings in different settings. Evaluation research must therefore look deep within each setting to understand the dynamics that produce or obstruct desired outcomes.

Differential inputs generally lead to differential outcomes. As a result, the course of the project should also be affected by the congregation’s readiness to undertake the work. Based on lessons learned from its pilot sites, ECE posited that the project was probably more appropriate to congregations of high readiness. The notion of readiness was based on common wisdom and experience, but it lacked an operational definition. The case studies were designed, in part, to test the concept of readiness. If readiness is indeed vital to success, then it might be possible to create a diagnostic tool for determining which congregations can begin the project and which need developmental work before engaging in such a major undertaking.

In order to chart trajectories of change in congregations with different levels of perceived readiness, the research included three in-depth case studies. The case studies explored how the uniqueness of each synagogue—its organizational structure, personalities, dynamics, culture, and context—affected the course and outcome of The RE-IMAGINE Project. They also examined how REI played out in settings deemed to be fully ready and those deemed not to be so.

### **Method**

The method was based on interviews with Leadership Team and Task Force members at three points in time over the course of the year and a half of The RE-IMAGINE Project.

## **Selection**

To select case study sites, ECE was first asked to sort the participating congregations into three groups—high, mid, and low—based on the consultants' initial assessment of the congregations' readiness to begin the project and their likelihood of engaging in a successful process. The Research Team then chose one congregation from each of these three groups. In doing so, we intentionally included Reform and Conservative synagogues, urban and suburban, large and small. As our objective was to study sites in which the project was likely to develop in different ways, diversity was an important factor in selection. All of our first-choice sites accepted the invitation to take part in the study.

The three synagogues are designated by their rankings at the inception of the project. Gold Synagogue, whose religious school was “at the top of its game,” was chosen because it was considered to have a high degree of readiness and a strong likelihood of success. Silver Synagogue also had many characteristics which suggested readiness, but because a new educator was coming on board, its success was less assured. Bronze Synagogue, a more traditional synagogue than the others with less experience in initiating change, was believed to have a relatively low likelihood of success from the project. These designations are intended to keep level of readiness in the reader's awareness. They are also intended to disguise the identities of the congregations in the hope that the reader will focus on general principles rather than on the identity of the specific congregations.

### **Baseline Interviews (Fall 2004)**

In Fall 2004, we gathered baseline data by means of interviews with rabbis, educators, Task Force chairs, and Task Force members not on the Leadership Team. We conducted interviews by telephone of approximately one hour's duration. We asked interviewees about their experiences in the synagogue and how they viewed their school and the relationship between the school and the congregation. We asked them to describe how their synagogue had changed over time and how prior initiatives to create change had been planned and implemented. Finally, we asked about their initial impressions of The RE-IMAGINE Project and their sense of where it might lead. Data from these interviews provided a picture of the congregations as they embarked on their re-imagining journeys and a view of their hopes and concerns regarding the process.

### **Mid-Project Interviews (Spring 2005)**

In Spring 2005, we conducted a second round of telephone interviews. This round picked up the narrative midstream, at a point where the Task Forces were immersing themselves in the REI process, discovering its benefits and pitfalls, and adapting it to fit their specific needs. We asked interviewees to discuss each aspect of the project—the Task Force (roles, relationships, workload, etc.), the conduct of Task Force meetings, ECE gatherings (e.g., Chug Limmudim, Yachdav), and consultation. We asked them about specific issues that had emerged from the baseline interviews (e.g., product versus

process, diversity on the Task Force, contextual concerns). To conclude, we asked them about their understanding of REI's intended outcomes and the roadmap that was to guide them there. Data from these conversations provided descriptions of emerging plans, reactions to the work, and opinions about potential impediments and contributors to a successful outcome.

### **Post-Siyyum Interviews (Summer 2006)**

In Summer 2006, we made site visits to each of the three synagogues so that interviews could be conducted in person. We customized interview protocols, zeroing in on specific issues and aspects of the story line in each congregation. We asked interviewees about the accomplishments of the Task Force—the vision statement, pilot project, and initiative implementation plans. We asked them to reflect on the hopes and concerns that had been expressed by their Task Force in earlier rounds of interviews. In the final questions, we asked them to reflect on the possibility of truly re-imagining the congregational school, the fit between the congregation and the project, and the ways in which the work they had done was likely to evolve over the next few years.

### **Outline of the Report**

The report begins with the stories of Congregation Gold, Synagogue Silver, and Synagogue Bronze. Each story includes a description of the congregation as it entered The RE-IMAGINE Project, the course of the Task Force's work over the year and a half of the project, and accomplishments. The report concludes with the lessons these case studies teach us about synagogue readiness and change.

## CONGREGATION GOLD

### Profile in Fall 2004

Setting: Suburban Denomination: Conservative Congregation Size: 950 School Size: 300 children (k-12) Estimated post bar/bat mitzvah retention rate: 85%
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Congregation Gold, a large, vibrant congregation “at the top of its game,” has an award-winning religious school that is a source of great pride. Over the 25 years of the director’s tenure, he has built a flourishing institution in which students learn *evrit b’evrit* and most stay for high school classes after their bar/t mitzvah. The synagogue, with artwork adorning the walls, is a bustling place alive with activities even on summer weekdays. The building houses a large preschool and a summer day camp. Israeli music is piped into the bright, neat school hallways. No expense has been spared in creating an inviting atmosphere for worship, study, and socializing.

#### Core Issues

Such success presents challenges to initiatives like The RE-IMAGINE Project that aim toward innovation. Some in the congregation thought it unwise to “mess with success.” Others desired to try alternative educational approaches but feared lowering current high standards. The clergy, accepting that “safe is just too easy,” were open to exploring alternative models that might be more appealing to some students than were current offerings. The education director, however, maintained that the students universally loved the existing program.

Some parents were unhappy with the six-hour weekly commitment required by the school. A few years earlier, the town had decided that any middle school student could play on a sports team. This decision was particularly problematic in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade as the sports schedule conflicted with religious school and with bar/t mitzvah activities. Another congregation in the area had cut its hours, and some of Congregation Gold’s families left to take advantage of the reduced schedule there. The school, in response, allowed each student one season during which s/he could have excused absences for sports, but families abused the policy. It then instituted a flexible schedule in which one day a week students could come in the evening instead of the afternoon. This solution led to parental goodwill and the return of some of the families who had left.

An underlying motivation for The RE-IMAGINE Project at Congregation Gold was to change the way in which professionals and lay leaders worked together. The congregation was, without a doubt, professionally driven. Staff provided ideas for innovation, and lay leadership followed through supportively. Congregants’ affluence, their hectic schedules, and the presence of high quality synagogue professionals

promoted a consumer orientation toward the synagogue, high reliance on the professional staff, and minimal parental involvement in the children's education.

Another motivation was to better integrate the large number of congregational families (~100) who sent their children to day schools. These children did not attend activities run by the synagogue's Hebrew high school and thus were not well connected with their religious school peers. The day school parents, some of whom were involved in synagogue governance, had a great deal to offer but did not contribute to the religious school.

### **Structure**

In 2004, the school had a six hour per week program and also required junior congregation attendance and bar/t mitzvah tutoring. The program of study was described as somewhat textbook and curriculum driven but also innovative. Enrollment in the school had been declining over the past few years but had shown a slight upturn the previous year. The decline was largely attributable to increasing numbers choosing day school education. The synagogue also had a nursery school with 100 enrollees. Synagogue membership was not required for nursery school or the early grades of the religious school.

Five years earlier, the congregation had pulled out of a consortium Hebrew high school and started its own program with the aim of better meeting the needs of its teens. The high school program, through Grade 12, integrated formal and informal educational approaches. The program grew quickly and thrived.

The school had a strong Israel program, and, through the generosity of a donor, had \$10,000 a year to support scholarships for high school Israel trips. An Israel savings program was available although only six students were enrolled in it. Many students from the congregation attended Jewish summer camp. Jewish education and bar/t mitzvah preparation were also provided for approximately 15 children with special needs.

The school had difficulty finding qualified teachers, but those hired came into a setting strong on professional development. At the time it entered The RE-IMAGINE Project, the supplementary school at Congregation Gold had 18 faculty members as well as a number of aids (graduates of the school) and other support staff.

In terms of governance, the synagogue had an umbrella education committee, a religious school committee, and a highly active PTA. Even before the project, the school had crafted a mission statement and produced a long-range plan.

### **The RE-IMAGINE Project at Congregation Gold**

At the time of its application to ECE, Congregation Gold had just completed a strategic assessment. The assessment, which revealed increased diversity within the membership, led to the conclusion that the synagogue needed to offer multiple models in all areas,

including education. The synagogue was in the process of setting up task forces on various areas of synagogue life. Education was primary among these.

With these forces aligned, the congregation felt poised and ready to re-imagine its religious education. Moreover, the various task forces suggested possible synergies. For example, the strategic assessment led to changes in Shabbat programming. More food on the Kiddush table, more opportunity for conversation, and various educational programs encouraged attendees to stay at the synagogue and prolong their family’s Shabbat experience. The success of that program seemed to presage success for The RE-IMAGINE Project.

**Readiness**

Professionals introduced The RE-IMAGINE Project into Congregation Gold, and the congregation supported it enthusiastically from the beginning. The time seemed ripe for this project. Reflecting back at the end of the project, almost everyone involved believed that the synagogue had been ready to begin and that REI had been a good match for the congregation.

	<i>% Very much</i>
Synagogue was truly ready to begin The RE-IMAGINE Project.	96
The RE-IMAGINE Project was a good match for the congregation.	96
Task Force Survey--Spring 2006 (n=26)	

**Fall 2004**

The project began with signs of strong commitment. Six of the seven members of the Leadership Team attended two or more of the orientation sessions. A large, diverse Task Force was appointed and attendance at initial meetings was high. Different age groups were well represented on the Task Force, including high school students, religious school parents, pre-school parents, day school parents, and empty-nesters. Three members of the congregation’s large Persian sub-community were recruited for the Task Force (although they all dropped out in the first year). Absent from the Task Force were the uninvolved and the drop-and-leave parents. The assumption was that these people, most likely to be grouching about the religious school and advocating for “Hebrew School Lite,” would not be willing to serve.

From the beginning, participants were extremely pleased with the RE-IMAGINE process (in particular, the Guidebook and the conduct of meetings), and they were convinced that it would lead to the desired outcomes. On the Fall 2004 Task Force Survey, 82% said that the project was “very” or “extremely likely” to succeed.

Along with this optimism, there were a few concerns. The Task Force members understood that they needed to surmount two congregational attitudes: “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” and “it’s always been done this way.” They also realized that

they needed to bring along the “naysayers” and develop ways of keeping the congregation in the loop. They needed to clarify roles and relationships between the existing education committee and the Task Force. Moreover, the leaders saw the need to manage the “overwhelming sense of process” on the Task Force and the resultant perception of a slow pace. There was concern that some participants, lacking patience for the process, might leave the Task Force. At the end of the project, half of the Leadership Team agreed that the project had achieved the right balance of task and process; half judged the emphasis to be excessively on process.

The Task Force believed that the excellence of the school (its intensive program and its well-regarded principal) and the enthusiasm of professional and lay leadership would help the project succeed. At the same time, the Leadership Team was aware of potential obstacles: defensiveness on the part of the principal, school administrators’ inhibiting lay leaders from giving critical input, and resistance from older members.

### **Summer 2005**

By the end of the first year, a number of participants had dropped off the Task Force. Estimates vary, but as many as 10-15 people had resigned, leaving the group with 25-30 active members. Those that remained continued to hold high enthusiasm for and optimism about the work. As one interviewee said at the time, the “real stakeholders have held on.”

The RE-IMAGINE process was helping to form relationships and build a sense of community among Task Force members. Meetings were variously described as “free-flowing, open, caring and communicative,” “optimistic,” “friendly,” and “wonderful.” Some suspected these meetings were not fully “open” and that things often were not said for fear of upsetting the principal. Even when the Leadership Team gave Task Force members the opportunity to submit comments anonymously, no one responded.

During the first year, the Task Force responded positively to the REI materials. They generally thought the Guidebook was well organized, “indispensable,” “wonderful,” and the text study and on-line learning were accessible and useful. There was particular enthusiasm for the text study, which was led by the rabbis and other professionals. The president of the congregation introduced text study into executive board meetings, and the vice-president of education decided to use it at school board meetings. There were exceptions to be sure. Some people did not complete assignments; a few others “lost steam” over material they found to be repetitive and confusing.

Conversation in the first year did not center on the religious school schedule which had been a core issue coming in. Nonetheless, the long-term success of any change was going to require buy-in from the principal and it seemed clear that he would not compromise on the minimum number of required hours in the school program. There was also little movement on lay-professional relations, even as seen in the Task Force leadership. The

full responsibility for meetings remained with the coordinator, a synagogue professional who was overwhelmed by the work.

During this time, Congregation Gold had two professional transitions, a new executive director and a new assistant rabbi. The former assistant rabbi had been a vital force in The RE-IMAGINE Project, and his replacement soon took over this active role. As well, the synagogue undertook a capital campaign for an early childhood center. The new building would likely have an impact on the religious school, if only because the kindergarten was using space in the nursery school.

Although they started with the idea that they would be able to re-imagine their religious school in its entirety, Gold’s Task Force came to more limited, shorter-term goals by the end of the first year. Through the *Yachdav*, they accepted that starting small was a valid strategy. The Task Force focused on creating a venue for parents to become involved in their children’s education and on building a larger Shabbat community. Success, they understood, depended on their ability to compete successfully with sports and other activities in the community, build consensus, and work openly. They worried about whether a project developed by the 20% who attended services regularly could appeal to the 80% who did not. They understood that a Shabbat program of family services, learning, and activities might be less controversial and more feasible than changing the school per se, but they were concerned that it might attract only those already involved in and positive about their children’s Jewish education.

**Summer 2006**

The Gold Task Force started with 40 members. After the drop-off in the first year, the remaining 25-30 stayed to the end and maintained a positive view of the project and its process. Almost everyone who stayed was satisfied with his/her experience on the Task Force.

<b>Overall Satisfaction with Experience on The RE-IMAGINE Project</b>		
Dissatisfied 15%	Neutral 4%	Satisfied 81%
Task Force Survey--Spring 2006 (n=26)		

Task Force members uniformly gave high marks to the group’s leadership, creativity, diversity, and open and honest conversations.

	<i>% Very much</i>
Task Force had the leadership it needed.	92
Own input was valued.	92
Task Force was creative in its thinking.	92
Task Force had <i>little</i> difficulty reaching agreement, making decisions.	92
Task Force had the right mix of people.	85
Conversations were open and honest.	85
Task Force was willing to “think big” and take risks.	77
There were diverse perspectives on the Task Force.	73
Task Force Survey--Spring 2006 (n=26)	

The Leadership Team had hoped that REI would help change the congregation’s culture of professionals by empowering lay leaders to take initiative, put forward their own ideas, and seize the creative role. In some respects, little progress was made. The coordinator, a synagogue professional, carried the full burden of Task Force meetings and was largely responsible for the vision. He doubts that the project made the school or the congregation any less professionally driven although it did underscore the importance of getting input from different constituencies.

At the same time, the REI process taught the rabbi the value of “bottom up” planning. “It can be a messy and time-intensive way to work,” he said, “but there is no doubt in my mind that it got us somewhere we couldn’t have gotten to in the old way... Our job at the top is not just to lead, but to light the fire under the bottom... If the old model is ‘follow me,’ the new model is finding the kindling and lighting the fire.” Other professionals felt the project built some grassroots activity in the congregation, created new lay leadership and empowered it to design and implement something meaningful for the religious school.

<b>Task Force Process</b>	<i>% Very much</i>
a good collaboration between professionals and lay people	89
community building	85
personally meaningful	85
<i>not</i> frustrating	77
productive	73
<i>not</i> too slow	46
fun	23
Task Force Survey--Spring 2006 (n=26)	

### **Accomplishments**

In many regards, Congregation Gold was a model ECE site. Over the course of the year and a half, the Task Force created a vision statement; planned, carried out, and evaluated a pilot project; and developed an initiative implementation plan. The Task Force, which will work on implementation in the coming year, has become a sub-committee of the

religious school committee. It continues to be led by a professional. Views about the significance of this work are split: Some say it set religious education in the congregation in a new direction; others say it helped them along a path that they were already on.

<b>Impact of The RE-IMAGINE Project on Direction of Religious Education in the Congregation</b>	<b>% <i>Very much</i></b>
It set us in a new direction.	56
It moved us along a path we were already on.	40
It did not make much difference one way or the other.	4
It held us back or led us astray.	0
Task Force Survey--Spring 2006 (n=26)	

During the course of The RE-IMAGINE Project, important structural changes took place in the religious school. The beloved director of the religious school retired after 25 years. Because congregants considered him “irreplaceable,” the executive board decided not to hire another school director but rather to reconfigure the education staff and create a new umbrella position, Director of Lifelong Learning, to oversee the nursery school, the religious school, the high school, and adult education. The board appointed the congregation’s Hebrew high school principal to serve in that position. An experienced teacher from the religious school assumed the position of principal, and an assistant principal was hired to help lead the high school. The role of the assistant rabbi, who teaches adult education classes and views congregational education as an important part of his portfolio, was unchanged. Professional and lay leaders are enthusiastic about the reorganization and look forward to continuing the work of the previous director while re-imagining the school for the future.

**Vision Statement**

In the process of developing its vision statement, the Task Force drafted a set of bullet points and then got stuck. The consultant suggested that it shorten the list to a single statement. Doing so broke the logjam and achieved a statement that everyone could support. As one interviewee explained,

There’s really nothing we couldn’t do that wouldn’t somehow fall under the rubric of our vision statement, which is good and bad...It doesn’t allow for us to weed out what isn’t in our vision. At the same time, it is very reflective of our community. It’s very diverse. It’s big. We do everything big here.

Nonetheless, the creation of the vision statement, which gave a feeling of accomplishment and direction, was an important turning point for the group.

The vision statement was designed in the form of a *daf* of Torah. Take-home copies sit next to a prominent poster-sized display at the main entrance to the building. Framed copies are being posted in every classroom.

<i>I...</i>	<b>% Very much</b>
had input into the vision statement.	65
personally agree with the vision.	92
understand the vision well enough to explain it to others.	85
<i>The vision is...</i>	
compelling.	89
ambitious.	92
<i>Over the next five years, the vision will ...</i>	
guide decisions related to Jewish learning in the congregation.	89
make a difference in the children's educational experience.	85
be achieved.	72
Task Force Survey--Spring 2006 (n=26)	

### **Pilot Project and Initiative Implementation Plan**

Congregation Gold's pilot had two foci: creating a Shabbat community and expanding parents' involvement in their children's education. In April 2006, the congregation held the first Shabbat program for Grade 4 children and families. The Friday night program consisted of worship services under the stars in a spacious outdoor courtyard. A dinner of Chinese food, something organizers hoped would make the program feel different, followed. Peter Pitzele, biblio-dramatist, led a program for the children while the senior rabbi led text study for the parents. Separate programming was also available for siblings. This design enabled parents to study together on an adult level without distraction and to let the fourth graders know that the program was designed especially for them. At the end, everyone assembled for a wrap-up, *oneg*, and party favors and *bracha* cards in Chinese food containers. Half of the fourth grade families (~20) attended the program. Importantly, some of these were day school families. The Task Force, which had decided that it needed at least ten families at the program, deemed the evening a huge success. One goal of the pilot was to reach the uninvolved. Although it is not clear how many of these families attended the pilot, it is believed that some did and that others will participate in the initiative once the pilot's success is known.

The Task Force will introduce three such programs for Grade 5 this year. First will be a Shabbat afternoon and evening event in November while the days are short enough to plan an activity such as bowling after *Havdalah*. In February, the congregation will have a Shabbat morning program. In April there will be another Kabbalat Shabbat service under the stars, with a dinner and program afterwards. The synagogue will charge a fee for these programs, a move that might give them more caché and help attract more participants.

The program design has three ingredients: *t'filot*, eating, and learning. A rabbinic intern will serve as the staff person. By Summer 2006, the Task Force was already recruiting parents and beginning to plan.

	<b>% Very much</b>
I understand the initiative well enough to explain it to others.	84
<i>The initiative is...</i>	
ambitious.	53
a step in the right direction.	100
in alignment with the vision.	100
Exciting.	100
The initiative will make a difference in children’s educational experience.	79
The implementation plan is realistic and doable.	90
The implementation team is well-informed about The RE-IMAGINE Project.	95
Task Force Survey--Spring 2006 (n=26)	

The Task Force hopes that the program will help this year’s fifth grade families form close ties and begin to learn and worship together in preparation for becoming a bar/t mitzvah *havurah* during the following year. The religious school already has programs for sixth grade families, but Task Force members hope to develop something more extensive, such as a bar/t mitzvah university for parents and students seeking a richer experience.

The Task Force understands its effort as incremental change, a series of small steps that will move gradually toward greater parental involvement. Each year, it will replicate each grade’s program while also developing new programs for the lead grade. Only the rabbi has a radical vision for change, expanding education beyond the walls of the school into an individualized, family-based consultation. He envisions consultants or mentors who will lead each family along its own path of Jewish learning, drawing from both formal and informal educational approaches.

There are tremendous feelings of satisfaction and accomplishment on the Congregation Gold Task Force. For some, the vision and the initiative they produced were worth the 18 months of meetings and process. They successfully piloted their initiative and now look forward to following an evolutionary process to create serious family education and family involvement in the religious school.

## SILVER SYNAGOGUE

### Profile in Fall 2004

Setting: Urban Denomination: Reform Congregation Size: ~300 families School Size: ~150 children (k-12) Estimated post bar/bat mitzvah retention rate: 30%
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Silver Synagogue strikes a visitor as a warm, *hamesh* place, but its members—almost half of whom are lawyers—work long hours and have little time for the synagogue. To escape the stress of their careers, some retreat to country homes on the weekend. Partly in response to this lifestyle, the religious school holds classes only on weekdays. Given its urban setting, the synagogue has no parking lot, and students walk to religious school. The few parents who accompany their children do not enter the building. The school offers nothing for parents during religious school hours.

#### Core Issues

Silver Synagogue faces both external and internal challenges. In recent years, the congregation's strength has been threatened by environmental factors. Housing in the area has become increasingly pricey. Seeking a better educational system for their children, many young families have moved to the suburbs, leaving behind their urban congregation. In 2004, the synagogue was trying to grow its membership by attracting young families. The rabbi ran a Kabbalat Shabbat program for young families in the neighborhood, and the synagogue's well-regarded preschool brought in these families as well. Only some, however, ended up joining the synagogue.

Internally, Silver Synagogue grapples with a diverse membership characterized by differences in household composition, religious practice, and synagogue involvement. Many of the active members of the congregation are converts to Judaism. Religious school students come from a variety of schools, both public and private.

Most of Silver Synagogue's parents have minimal involvement in their children's Jewish lives. The parents are described as workaholics who want quality time with their children on weekends. Quality time might include ski trips or time at the country house. It does not include the synagogue. Parents also value secular enrichment—intellectual, athletic and artistic—which generally wins whenever it competes with religious education for time.

There is a troublesome discontinuity between what is learned in religious school and what goes on at home. The greatest fear for some synagogue leaders is that students will leave the religious school with the idea that Judaism is something that happens only in the synagogue.

## Structure

In 2004, k-2 met one day a week; Grades 4-6 met two days a week; Grade 7 met one day a week, and tutoring was available. The school was adamantly *not* a Sunday school.

The congregation was small enough for the rabbi to stay involved with religious school families but large enough for the school to have a fulltime educator. The school was troubled by high faculty turnover—the educator himself was new in 2004 and had very little transition time before taking over from his predecessor. Some of the putative best teachers were synagogue members with no formal background in Jewish education. The rabbi and educator agreed on the need to bring in more professional teachers.

The school was particularly proud of its ability to educate and celebrate the bar/t mitzvah of students with special needs, including students with severe dyslexia, mild autism, downs syndrome, and various emotional and developmental challenges.

The school was very much curriculum and text-book driven, but its program was strengthened by variety. Students who met two days a week had a half hour of *t'filot* on one day and *chugim* on the other. Students could sign up for any *chug* they chose. Topics varied weekly depending on the interests and expertise of the teachers—Jewish cooking, acting, singing, art history, and so on. In addition, the synagogue ran a homeless shelter and, in a new program, students prepared the shelter for its guests each week.

Other aspects of the curriculum presented a mixed picture. The Hebrew curriculum had undergone a revision several years earlier, but some believed further improvement was needed. Parents were involved in a number of ways, but opportunities for parent education or parallel learning were limited, and the programs that were offered were not well attended.

Students seemed to enjoy the school and to learn there. Nonetheless, they tended not to continue after their bar/t mitzvah celebrations and families often disaffiliated at that time. There was a noticeable divide between the religious school families and the older congregants, caused perhaps by the older members' reluctance to invest in those they assumed would be leaving.

### The RE-IMAGINE Project at Silver Synagogue

The original push to apply for The RE-IMAGINE Project came from the educator at the time and a somewhat combative group on the religious school committee. Despite the Task Force chair's concern about their "bull in a china shop" approach, two of these lay leaders were named to the Task Force. The rabbi also thought that some congregants might be too "goal oriented" to be able to appreciate the RE-IMAGINE process.

The rabbi also feared the "nothing's broken so why fix it" mentality he saw in his congregation. Other synagogue leaders were nervous that expectations might be too high for REI and for the religious school, hampered as it was by its limited schedule and by

the lack of home support. Indeed, expectations were high: The Leadership Team wanted to see the religious school fully re-imagined. And they hoped the project would develop new, younger leaders and strengthen community among religious school families and other congregants.

### **Readiness**

Silver Synagogue’s religious school came into the project with several strengths—devoted teachers, an inviting physical environment, and an appealing neighborhood feel. The congregation had had two recent experiences that added to its level of preparedness: the establishment of its own full-fledged preschool two years previously and a lay-professional project that created and piloted new High Holiday youth services and *machzorim*.

At the same time, the religious school faced several challenges. Parents had a history of “running roughshod” over the school’s professional staff. The education director who brought REI to the congregation left before the end of a school year feeling badly mistreated. The new education director arrived only to be confronted by high demands and expectations.

It was “overwhelming” for the new educator to have to think about the project while acculturating to a new school and attempting to put his stamp on it. REI consultants expressed reservations about Silver Synagogue undertaking the project at this time, but congregants, particularly parents who were critical of the school, were adamant that they proceed.

Reflecting at the end of the process, few Task Force members felt that Silver Synagogue had been ready to begin The RE-IMAGINE Project or that the project had been a good match for the congregation.

	<i>% Very much</i>
Synagogue was truly ready to begin The RE-IMAGINE Project.	17
The RE-IMAGINE Project was a good match for the congregation.	17
Task Force Survey--Spring 2006 (n=18)	

### **Fall 2004**

As the project began, the Leadership Team’s attendance at orientation sessions was uneven. Only three of the seven members attended two or more of the orientation sessions. Nonetheless, in the first few months, there was a great deal of positive energy on the Task Force and participants put in vast amounts of time. The group’s energy, diversity, openness, and intellectualism gave Silver Synagogue reason to believe that REI could be successful there. Indeed, 81% of the respondents to the Fall 2004 Task Force Survey said that the project was “very” or “extremely likely” to succeed. Respondents recognized that success depended on three things: understanding the congregation’s

financial constraints, involving the rest of the congregation in the project, and maintaining their own commitment through to implementation.

### **Summer 2005**

By Summer 2005, enthusiasm for The RE-IMAGINE Project was less evident at Silver Synagogue than it was at the other two case study sites. Five members of the Task Force formally left and only some of the remaining 22 members attended meetings. The downsizing enabled the Task Force to dispense with the breakout discussion groups, which were found to be a waste of valuable time. It also left a smaller number of people to share the work and an overwhelmed coordinator.

Task Force conversations were open and polite, but meetings were felt to be too long and inefficient. Participants found the project overly heavy on process and they were impatient to get to real change products. They were getting to know each other only slowly and even the chair felt it was more important to spend time on substantive issues rather than on relationship building. It was suggested that REI might be more appropriate for suburban communities where people presumably had more time for such matters and were slower to grasp concepts. One professional criticized the Guidebook as “obvious and belabored.” “Some congregations might need this,” he said, “but we’re not that slow.” Text study was similarly critiqued as too obvious, unclear, or tangential to the subject at hand.

Task Force members were focused on task but developed little momentum in their work. Some failed to do the homework. Others did it at the last minute, leaving no chance for it to be disseminated before the meetings.

The new educator attended all of the Leadership Team and Task Force meetings. He appreciated the opportunity to get to know members of the community and learn more about the history of the school. But the project added a challenging component to an already huge job of developing curriculum, running the day-to-day operations of the school, and handling relationships with students and parents. The disgruntled school parents, whose lack of diplomacy was credited with the departure of the previous education director, remained a potential threat to the new director’s success.

At the end of this first year, several issues were on the table. Families whose children had already graduated from the religious school no longer enjoyed the bar/t mitzvah focus of Shabbat morning services and were advocating for adults-only programs and services. The rabbi and others opposed this move. There was little optimism about the possibility of changing the school schedule to include weekend programming or of finding programs that would expand parents’ involvement in the religious education of their children. And there was little consensus about strategy: One member wanted to focus on family education, another on adult learning, and still others on the children’s education. One wanted to change the design of the school, perhaps by combining grades.

## Summer 2006

By Summer 2006, the Task Force was down to 10 to 18 people, depending on whose estimate is believed. It made no sense to keep the Task Force going with its diminished membership, and a farewell dinner was held to mark its ending. The education director, a teacher from the school, and one or two members of the Task Force were tasked with pilot implementation. They now operate as a subcommittee of the religious school committee.

Overall Satisfaction with Experience on The RE-IMAGINE Project		
Dissatisfied 39%	Neutral 33%	Satisfied 28%
Task Force Survey--Spring 2006 (n=18)		

Throughout the Project, many at Silver Synagogue were critical of the process. One of the lay leaders said the religious school had needed reshaping but, “the process has been expensive, time consuming, nerve wracking.” Another characterized REI as

a lot, a lot, a lot of time for a very incremental result. I don’t know if that’s the process or the way we did it or what, but it seemed like far too much process and effort for what we ended up with.

A third found the process “boring,” some of the exercises “tedious and...contrived,” the on-line work “dull,” and the meeting format occasionally disruptive of the overall flow. Yet another, a member of the Leadership Team, said that REI put too much power in the hands of lay people who lack the knowledge needed for the kinds of decisions they were being called upon to make. And still another, a synagogue professional, had no doubt that The RE-IMAGINE Project aims at creative work, “but it’s aimed in the wrong way.” He found the Task Force too big for the creativity and depth it needed, and wondered if the resultant initiative would work. He suspected that ECE “withheld information” in order to force the group through “this long process.”

A few were more tolerant of the process. One understood that REI wanted people to be “as concerned about *how* they got to where they were going as they were about *where* they were going.” He felt that this lesson was much needed at Silver Synagogue and that learning it had been both the best and the most frustrating part of the work. Prior to Silver Synagogue’s involvement, he felt “displaced energy from people pushing for change in the religious school program.” Now, he says, “everyone feels respected and feels they have a hand in the outcome...Is it what everyone wants? Probably not, but it’s a communal commitment.”

	<i>% Very much</i>
There were diverse perspectives on the Task Force.	78
Task Force had the right mix of people.	61
Task Force had the leadership it needed.	61
Conversations were open and honest.	59
Task Force was willing to “think big” and take risks.	56
Own input was valued.	56
Task Force was creative in its thinking.	44
Task Force had <i>little</i> difficulty reaching agreement, making decisions.	39
Task Force Survey--Spring 2006 (n=18)	

<b>Task Force Process</b>	<i>% Very much</i>
a good collaboration between professionals and lay people	50
community building	33
productive	28
fun	28
<i>not</i> too slow	28
personally meaningful	22
<i>not</i> frustrating	12
Task Force Survey--Spring 2006 (n=18)	

### Accomplishments

After a year and a half in the project, the Silver Synagogue Task Force had created a vision statement and was in the process of planning its pilot project. It had not, as yet, carried out and evaluated a pilot project nor had it developed an initiative implementation plan. Still, half of the Task Force members responding to the survey said that the project had “very much” or “to a great extent” set religious education in the congregation in a new direction.

<b>Impact of The RE-IMAGINE Project on Direction of Religious Education in the Congregation</b>	<i>% Very much</i>
It set us in a new direction.	50
It moved us along a path we were already on.	36
It did not make much difference one way or the other.	14
It held us back or led us astray.	0
Task Force Survey--Spring 2006 (n=18)	

## Vision Statement

Task Force leaders describe the creation of the vision statement as a “sticking point” in The RE-IMAGINE Project. The education director crafted it, but some members of the Task Force considered it “too wordy,” “flowery,” and not adequately precise. They sought advice from the ECE consultant, who suggested that they accept it as is and go on to develop their pilot. The Task Force did move on, but some members regard the vision statement as an unfinished product. The vision statement is posted at the entrance to the synagogue, but this is not a space where one would linger to read, and the display is easily missed. No one spoke of sharing the vision statement in a systematic way with the congregation.

<i>I...</i>	<b>% Very much</b>
had input into the vision statement.	56
personally agree with the vision.	56
understand the vision well enough to explain it to others.	56
<i>The vision is...</i>	
compelling.	44
ambitious.	47
<i>Over the next five years, the vision will ...</i>	
guide decisions related to Jewish learning in the congregation.	11
make a difference in the children’s educational experience.	22
be achieved.	12
Task Force Survey--Spring 2006 (n=18)	

## Pilot Project and Initiative Implementation Plan

Silver Synagogue did not finish according to plan. The synagogue is the one case study site that did not pilot a program during 2005-06. Informants, with the exception of the rabbi, said that they spent too much time on process the first year and then found themselves with insufficient time to prepare their pilot.

In the end, the Task Force chose an initiative, and a small group started to discuss the contours of a pilot. Hoping to break the taboo on weekend activities, the group decided to have four programs for fourth grade families on different weekends during the 2006-07 school year—three on Shabbat and one on Sunday morning. By Summer 2006, no dates had been set and no decisions had been made about content. The focus will be on Jewish values and parental involvement. The intent is to encourage Silver Synagogue’s families to “live their Judaism a little bit more...to get more to happen in the home.”

These ideas are not without controversy. Members of the Task Force differ over whether the program should be mandatory or voluntary. Some want to establish a second track for those students whose parents will commit to participating in weekend activities. Others

believe that a two-track system will destroy the sense of community among families that the program is designed to create.

From the beginning, Task Force members feared that congregants' expectations for changing the school could not be met. One professional continues to worry about congregants who want immediate change and "lots of different programs." He acknowledges that parents who want change want it to happen now while their children can enjoy the results. Another Task Force leader says that he still wonders what is "realistically achievable," but he thinks that the REI process "has helped those individuals who have such high expectations to understand why they can't have everything that they want."

## BRONZE SYNAGOGUE

### Profile in Fall 2004

Setting: Suburban  
Denomination: Conservative  
Congregation Size: ~ 350 families  
School Size: ~75 children, k-7  
Estimated post bar/bat mitzvah retention rate: ~30%

Bronze Synagogue is evocative of New York suburban Jewish life in the 1950s. Its three-storey building rises over a small, potholed parking lot where a rusting basketball hoop bears witness to youth once at play. A generation ago, large numbers of people walked to this synagogue, nestled in a residential neighborhood of modest homes. Today, the composition of the area has changed. Many of the Jews who formerly lived here have moved to Florida; some are in nursing homes; and some have died. Their children have moved to more outlying suburbs where they can get larger homes for less money. Many young Jews who settle in the area join the larger congregations that flourish nearby or remain unaffiliated.

A congregation whose religious school once boasted 700 students, Bronze Synagogue now has to combine grades to create a viable class. It recently closed its Hebrew high school because of dwindling enrollment. It now sends fewer than 10 students a year to the community supplementary high school. If teens come to the synagogue at all, it is for youth group. A nursery school in the congregation has a strong reputation and brings in some young families but, similar to the situation in Silver Synagogue, not all of them affiliate. Moreover, there is no transition from the nursery school into the religious school.

### Core Issues

As it entered The RE-IMAGINE Project, Bronze Synagogue was faced with issues common to synagogues that have not adapted to changing times. Demographic shifts in the neighborhood had led to a decline in membership and there was little chance for its renewed growth. Fewer members meant reduced income from dues and a resultant increase in financial difficulties.

The congregation adhered to a traditional, predominantly Hebrew worship service, unchanged in 25 years. The atmosphere created by these services was not particularly welcoming to those who were less conversant in Judaism.

The religious school had a weak reputation. As one informant said, "Nothing distinguishes it. It's not remarkable in any way... If someone were to walk in they would think they were in a time warp from the 1950s." The school committee was relatively uninvolved. Complaints abounded: The school had no curriculum and the parents had no idea what their children were learning. The school had not kept up with technological

innovations in education. There was staff turnover and a lack of parental involvement. The school committee met, listened to reports, and made suggestions, but was reluctant to tackle policy issues. The education director, who came to the congregation in 2001, felt that the school needed family education and acknowledged that he was hired to do that but believed that he could be most helpful by being a principal, creating change, and bringing in someone else to implement family education.

Task Force members felt that the teachers were behind the times and unable to engage the children. The education director claimed that the teachers were “very good,” but he acknowledged that they had received no salary increase in several years.

The rabbi, who had been in this pulpit for 25 years, enjoyed the love and respect of most congregants but had no optimism for the future of his synagogue. He did little to hide his preference for day school education and avoided going into the religious school. Although Leadership Team members noted that he could be effective in the classroom, parents on the Task Force felt that he was “not a rabbi for kids.”

At the beginning of their REI involvement, the congregation’s lay leaders fully appreciated the demographic constraints they faced. Along with the education director, they were already considering the concept of cooperative arrangements with neighboring synagogues. Still, they did not think of REI as a way to build such a community school, but as a way to infuse the existing school with family education and to create a vibrancy that would attract young families and keep children actively engaged in Judaism.

### **Structure**

In 2004, Bronze Synagogue had a traditional Conservative religious school structure. K-2 had a relatively limited schedule, but starting in Grade 3, classes met three days a week for a total of six hours. Grade 7 met twice a week with a third session for bar/t mitzvah tutoring. The education director took pride in the school’s fulltime tutor for students with special needs.

Despite the fact that the religious school required Shabbat attendance and participation in junior congregation, many students did not attend. The fourth Saturday of the month was a special family service that, for that Shabbat alone, would raise attendance by half. As in other suburban congregations, Shabbat services and religious school competed unsuccessfully with sports programs.

The religious school had no written curriculum, and the school committee had not addressed curricular issues. Task Force members hoped that the project could help the school move toward innovation and change, but they were not considering changing the school committee or the structure of the religious school.

### The RE-IMAGINE Project at Bronze Synagogue

The RE-IMAGINE Project was introduced to the congregation by the education director. An experienced lay leader with a professional background in educational leadership assumed the chairmanship of the Task Force and helped the education director gain the congregation's buy-in. Along with two students and one teacher, the Task Force included some strong lay leaders and others with no experience in synagogue governance. As predicted, the rabbi and cantor distanced themselves from the project. The lay leaders, however, committed themselves wholeheartedly.

#### Readiness

At the beginning of the project, there was some cause for optimism. The Task Force included a diverse group of individuals, some of whom had not previously been active in the synagogue. Given the small size of the congregation, the Task Force members' spheres of influence included almost everyone in the community. Participants recognized the need for change and appeared ready to take risks and dedicate resources to re-imagining the religious school. The education director, described as open to suggestions and successful in accomplishing goals, was also committed to change.

Opposing forces, however, were formidable: the lack of interest from the clergy, resource constraints, and the intractable contextual factors described above.

By the end of the process, the majority of the Task Force members felt that REI had been a good match for their congregation, but few believed that the synagogue had truly been ready to begin the work.

	<i>% Very much</i>
Synagogue was truly ready to begin The RE-IMAGINE Project.	44
The RE-IMAGINE Project was a good match for the congregation.	72
Task Force Survey--Spring 2006 (n=18)	

#### Fall 2004

The Leadership Team had a strong start, with five of its six members attending at least two orientation sessions. The Leadership Team found the Guidebook confusing and was concerned that Task Force members would be "scared off" by the length of the process. Nonetheless, they eagerly looked forward to working together and following the REI roadmap.

Task Force members at Bronze Synagogue were less likely than their counterparts elsewhere to believe that their congregation would successfully re-imagine its religious school. On the Fall 2004 Task Force Survey, only 57% said that the project was "very" or "extremely" likely to succeed (versus over 80% at Silver Synagogue and Congregation Gold). Necessary conditions for success, they said, were support from the rabbi, support from the board of trustees, and general consensus on the need for change. Many already

recognized that the first condition would not be met. Moreover, Task Force members understood the demographic challenges they faced, and some worried about whether the congregation's financial resources could support real change.

### **Summer 2005**

By Summer 2005, the Task Force had become a tight-knit group, with 19 of the 35 original members participating on a regular basis. Those who attended meetings were organized, committed, and involved. The meetings of the Task Force were characterized by positive energy, enthusiasm, respect, good listening, and hard work. This attitude was emblemized by an event that occurred in Spring 2005 when a Task Force member who had spent three months in Florida returned to the group. He started to complain about the problems of the school, but someone stopped him saying, "We're not about what's wrong. We're about what's right."

Information about the project was regularly disseminated through a monthly column in the newsletter written by the education director and by a special page on the congregation's website. The president was invited to Task Force meetings and was kept informed about the group's work. Nonetheless, congregation-wide consensus had not been achieved. The older generation saw no need for change, and the clergy maintained their distance from the project. The rabbi attended neither Task Force nor Leadership Team meetings. The cantor came to only one meeting. There were concerns that, when the time came, the clergy might not support the program developed by the Task Force.

Other professionals—the education director, director of youth services, and a teacher in the religious school—came to all of the meetings. Lay people on the Task Force were becoming more involved in the synagogue and new leadership was being identified. Unlike the situation at Gold and Silver, members of the Bronze Task Force shared in the workload, making the coordinator's job more doable. Responsibility for leading text study rotated among lay and professional participants. Most of the Task Force members did the homework although somewhat fewer did the on-line work. Task Force members perceived the Guidebook to be "very, very user unfriendly;" the coordinator reported having to spend at least four hours reading through the material and putting it into an agenda format in preparation for each Leadership Team and Task Force meeting,

There were some positive notes during 2005: Almost half of the Task Force attended the *Yachdav* in Manhattan and returned energized. The chair came back with a new understanding about the direction of the process. The education director began using text study with the religious school committee. There was a general sense of comfort with the REI process.

At the end of the first year, despite the project's emphasis on starting small, the Bronze Synagogue Task Force was contemplating major redesign, whether that would be offering experiences that create Jewish memories or pilot testing a community school, a move the rabbi would oppose. It was realistic about financial difficulties and about the continuing lack of rabbinic support for the school and its change agenda. Through all this,

Task Force members remained optimistic, believing in the potential of their cohesive, diverse, enthusiastic, and hard-working group. Change, they suggested, requires less financial than personal commitment—something they had in abundance.

**Summer 2006**

Throughout the 2005-06 school year, the synagogue’s issues continued unabated. Over the two years of The RE-IMAGINE Project, the school lost more students, shrinking from 77 students to only 40. The congregation continued to face ongoing financial problems. The religious school remained underfunded and the teachers underpaid.

In 2006, the synagogue entered into negotiations to combine religious schools with a neighboring congregation. The education director, who maintains his positive attitude, is looking forward to working on the merger to create a more viable entity. The mood among lay leaders on the Task Force, however, is mixed. Although they view their accomplishments positively, they have made little progress in engaging the rabbi who remains aloof from the Task Force proceedings and its pilot programs. Task Force members deeply desire his participation and continue to discuss how to reach him.

Despite these issues, Task Force members made progress over the past year and a half, and their answers to the 2006 survey reflect satisfaction with their REI experience.

Overall Satisfaction with Experience on The RE-IMAGINE Project		
Dissatisfied 11%	Neutral 6%	Satisfied 83%
Task Force Survey--Spring 2006 (n=18)		

Ratings of the group’s composition and process were also very high. All said that discussions had been open and honest, and the great majority felt that their own input was valued. They credit the REI process with helping them select the right people for the Task Force. The result was a diverse group that bonded strongly: “a terrific cross-section of people—more involved, less involved, older, younger, religious and not religious.”

	<i>% Very much</i>
Conversations were open and honest.	100
Task Force had the right mix of people.	94
Task Force had the leadership it needed.	94
Own input was valued.	82
Task Force had <i>little</i> difficulty reaching agreement, making decisions.	77
Task Force was willing to “think big” and take risks.	72
There were diverse perspectives on the Task Force.	71
Task Force was creative in its thinking.	67
Task Force Survey--Spring 2006 (n=18)	

Most remarkable, from their perspective, was the unending commitment of the group, as seen in high attendance (even in a blizzard) and completed assignments. Lowest marks go to lay-professional collaboration (influenced undoubtedly by relations with the clergy) and to pace (an issue in all of the case study sites).

<b>Task Force Process</b>	<b>% <i>Very much</i></b>
productive	72
personally meaningful	72
community building	61
<i>not</i> frustrating	61
fun	44
good collaboration between professionals and lay people	39
<i>not</i> too slow	33
Task Force Survey--Spring 2006 (n=18)	

Overall, the project worked for them. They followed the Guidebook path, stayed on schedule, and took pride in their accomplishments.

### **Accomplishments**

After a year and a half in the project, Bronze's Task Force had created a vision statement and had planned, implemented, and evaluated a three-part pilot Shabbat program. They decided to continue the Task Force. They recruited new members, created a new Leadership Team, and planned for a "mini-implementation team" to prepare a calendar for the coming year. Three-fourths of the Task Force members believed that the project had, indeed, set religious education in the congregation in a new direction.

<b>Impact of The RE-IMAGINE Project on Direction of Religious Education in the Congregation</b>	<b>% <i>Very much</i></b>
It set us in a new direction.	74
It moved us along a path we were already on.	12
It did not make much difference one way or the other.	12
It held us back or led us astray.	0
Task Force Survey--Spring 2006 (n=18)	

### **Vision Statement**

Bronze Synagogue had a relatively easy time creating its vision statement. Discussion time was used to share ideology, philosophy, and beliefs. Final "word-smithing" was done via email exchanges. The vision statement is not visibly displayed in the building but it does appear on the letterhead.

<i>I...</i>	<b>% Very much</b>
had input into the vision statement.	50
personally agree with the vision.	77
understand the vision well enough to explain it to others.	77
<i>The vision is...</i>	
compelling.	63
ambitious.	64
<i>Over the next five years, the vision will ...</i>	
guide decisions related to Jewish learning in the congregation.	33
make a difference in the children's educational experience.	39
be achieved.	28
Task Force Survey--Spring 2006 (n=18)	

### **Pilot Project and Initiative Implementation Plan**

The Task Force defined the Shabbat program series as a pilot, with the idea that there would be other, more extensive initiatives during 2006-07. The first program in the pilot series was held on a Shabbat morning in February; the second was held on a Friday night in March; and the third, in April, returned to a Shabbat morning time slot. A fourth program scheduled for a Shabbat morning in June had to be canceled for personal reasons affecting the organizer and not because of a lack of community support.

It was hoped that the pilot would help familiarize families with the Shabbat service. The Task Force insisted that it was not competing with the main service in the sanctuary, but rather was trying to provide opportunities for families to learn together, create memories, and build community. The first program attracted about 130 people, the second about 85, and the third at least 100. These were some of the best attended events in the synagogue that year.

The Task Force developed two other ideas, as well. A Mitzvah project would catalogue various opportunities to perform mitzvot (e.g., attendance at minyan, charitable contributions) and each family would be required to meet a certain number of "mitzvah credits" as part of membership. A Learning project would introduce a common theme in all grades (e.g., "who is G-d"), involve parents in classroom activities related to the theme, and culminate in a community program. Both ideas are based on REI principles of parental involvement, community building, integration of Jewish living and learning, and the creation of Jewish memories.

<b>Initiative</b>	<b>% Very much</b>
I understand the initiative well enough to explain it to others.	53
<i>The initiative is...</i>	
ambitious.	47
a step in the right direction.	73
in alignment with the vision.	60
exciting.	60
The initiative will make a difference in children's educational experience.	47
The implementation plan is realistic and doable.	67
The implementation team is well-informed about The RE-IMAGINE Project.	67
Task Force Survey--Spring 2006 (n=18)	

Bronze's Task Force worked hard and against the odds, and they are tired. They helped create a vision and ideas for three projects, but they now believe that others should assume the responsibility for implementation. The Guidebook does not provide a roadmap for next steps even though the *siyyum* created an expectation that the Task Force would continue. It is not clear if the new Task Force will only implement the initiatives, or whether it should also try to do more for the religious school and the congregation.

As Task Force participants look forward to next year, they worry that it may be too late to change the religious school. They readily admit that the proposed merger will have a greater impact than their programs, but they are attached to the three program ideas they generated over the 18 months and believe both the programs and the REI experience can make a difference in their community.

## SYNAGOGUE READINESS AND CHANGE

Congregations Gold, Silver, and Bronze each came into The RE-IMAGINE Project with different strengths, issues, and levels of readiness.

- Congregation **Gold**, a vibrant and growing congregation, had a highly successful religious school. It was not without issues—empowering lay leaders within a professionally-driven system and integrating the large number of day school families—but these were hardly central to its educational mission.
- Like Congregation Gold, **Silver** Synagogue was not struggling for members. It did, however, have issues with low levels of parental involvement in synagogue life and in the education of their children and the virtual ban on weekend programming. It also had a new education director who inherited REI along with an overwhelming job and a contentious school committee.
- In contrast to both Gold and Silver, **Bronze** Synagogue was suffering declining population, membership, and school enrollment to the point where it had closed its Hebrew high school and was combining lower grades to create viable classes. Demographic shifts were linked to budgetary problems, negative reputation, and little experience with change. Given all of these factors, it was deemed to be the least ready for REI and the least likely to benefit from the project.

Our hypothesis was that readiness would correlate with outcomes. We expected that Gold, with its track record, resources, and few obstacles would have the best process and outcomes; Silver, with its stable membership but notable personnel challenges, would have a moderately successful process and outcomes; and that Bronze, with its intractable contextual and cultural difficulties would fare the least well in the project. Results proved not to be so simple. The three sites fared differently depending on what metric we use:

- how much the Task Force accomplished (how far along the journey it was able to travel and how productive it was);
- how well the Task Force functioned (how strong its leadership and how smooth its process);
- how profoundly the religious school was re-imagined (how core or marginal the envisioned changes);
- how much REI infiltrated the congregation and began to make a difference beyond the religious school.

This section first considers each of these metrics and then concludes with an examination of some of the dynamics that determined the success of each of the three case study sites.

### Task Force Accomplishments

All three of the Task Forces created a vision statement for Jewish education for the children in their congregation. Beyond that, Gold and Bronze—presumably the most and

least ready of the three—completed all steps in the process. Silver, in contrast, was still planning its pilot project in Summer 2006 and had not as yet taken any further steps.

<b>Accomplishments</b>	Vision statement	Pilot plan	Pilot carried out	Pilot evaluation	Initiative implementation plan
Gold					
Silver					
Bronze					

In terms of the quality of the work, Gold’s Task Force had the most positive reactions to its vision statement and pilot project. Bronze had lower ratings than Gold but clearly surpassed Silver. As regards the vision, members of the Bronze Task Force were more likely than their counterparts on the Silver Task Force to agree with it, understand it, and judge it to be compelling, ambitious, useful, and achievable.

The same rank ordering is seen in reactions to the REI process. Every aspect of the project (text study, exercises, connection, reflection, sub-teams, vision folder) was rated most favorably by Gold, then Bronze, and then Silver. For example, three-fourths of Gold’s Task Force found text study to be highly valuable; one-fourth of the Bronze Task Force found it to be highly valuable; almost no one on the Silver Task Force found it to be so.

The same pattern holds for reports of personal impact from the experience. Overall, ratings of personal impact are moderate to low on most items. Nonetheless, Gold generally has the highest ratings, then Bronze. Silver is consistently the lowest. For example, about one-third of the Task Force members at Gold and Bronze say that their participation in REI very much increased their own participation in educational activities. No one at Silver says so. Bronze even surpasses Gold in terms of Task Force members’ increased sense of belonging in the congregation and increased leadership skills resulting from their participation in REI.

**Task Force Process**

In terms of the quality of the Task Force experience, Bronze generally has ratings comparable to those of Gold. Silver lags far behind. For example, over 90% of the Task force members at Gold and Bronze say they had the leadership they needed; about 60% of the members at Silver say so. Over 70% of the members at Gold and Bronze say their Task Force was willing to think big and take risks. Only 56% at Silver say so. Over 80% at Gold and Bronze say their input was valued. Only 56% at Silver say so. Importantly, Bronze, the least ready of the three, gives the highest ratings to the mix of people on the Task Force, the Task Force’s leadership, and the open and honest quality of Task Force conversations.

The same pattern holds for the Task Force process. None of the members of the Gold or Bronze Task Force found the process very frustrating but over one-third of those on the

Silver Task Force did. Three-fourths of the Gold and Bronze Task Forces found the process to be highly productive; only one-fourth at Silver did. The pattern is seen, as well, in the degree to which the process was personally meaningful and helped build community. Interestingly, members of the Bronze Task Force were twice as likely as those on the Gold or Silver Task Forces to say that the process was fun. Indeed, of the three synagogues, Bronze seems most comfortable with the REI process.

**Impact on the Religious School**

In many regards, Bronze Synagogue was like The Little Engine that Could. It came into the project facing formidable odds and little success was expected. Yet, through the strength of their lay leadership and a belief in themselves, they managed to have a productive and positive Task Force experience. Although they accomplished a great deal—certainly more than would have been predicted—they report the least impact on their school.

Three-fourths of the participants at Gold Congregation believe that, through REI, they were highly successful in re-imagining their religious school. In Silver and Bronze Synagogues, only about one-fourth of the Task Force members believe so. Nonetheless, most Task Force members in Silver Synagogue are excited about the future of the religious school and, despite recognition of its current state, are optimistic about its future. The same cannot be said for Bronze Synagogue. Here few Task Force members evince any excitement or optimism about the future of the school. Events external to REI are leading toward a merger of their religious school with another synagogue’s, creating an entirely new entity.

	%		
	<i>Gold</i>	<i>Silver</i>	<i>Bronze</i>
Successfully re-imagined the religious school.	76	23	28
Excited about the future of the Religious School.	96	77	28 <sup>(a)</sup>
Believe the Religious School is very successful <i>today</i> .	89	53	28
Believe the Religious School will be very successful <i>five years from now</i> .	96	65 <sup>(a)</sup>	22 <sup>(a)</sup>
<sup>(a)</sup> Notable decline from Fall 2004.			

The concept of “re-imagining” suggests a radical departure from the old ways of educating as opposed to a modification of the current approach. Results look very different when the desired outcome is framed in this way. Three-fourths of the participants at Bronze Synagogue say that REI set religious education in a new direction while only half of Gold or Silver’s participants say so.

	%		
	<i>Gold</i>	<i>Silver</i>	<i>Bronze</i>
REI set religious education in a new direction	56	50	74
Task Force Survey (Spring 2006)			

- Gold Congregation** wanted to re-imagine its religious school in its entirety but, within the first year of REI, came to more limited, short-term goals and accepted that starting small was a valid strategy. The goals are to create a Shabbat community and to expand parents’ involvement in their children’s education. Its initiative will be three optional Shabbat programs for Grade 5 families over the course of the year. The Task Force sees the initiative as a series of small steps that will, over time, move gradually toward the goal. There is a model of evolutionary change, or, as one interviewee said, “solid growth in baby steps.”
- Silver Synagogue** had an inefficient and unsatisfactory REI process. Like Congregation Gold, it gave up its notion of fundamentally changing the school and focused, instead, on testing the possibility of weekend programming. The ultimate goal is to increase parental involvement and to bring more Judaism into the home. Their initiative will be four mandatory Shabbat programs for Grade 4 families over the course of the year. Impact is difficult to find here. Some view the vision statement as a work in progress; no pilot was carried out to evaluate; and the ideas on the table seem to represent small additions to the religious school rather than change to its core structure. Indeed, some of the participants worry that the program will seem too small for the time, effort, and hype of The RE-IMAGINE Project.

Nonetheless, some leaders continue to dream of a religious school that will bring people into the building on weekends even if that means separate tracks for the more and less involved. One lay leader hopes the program will expand beyond the four weekends, that children will start to celebrate holidays and Shabbat together, and that families will get “a Jewish rhythm to their lives.” The rabbi envisions a synagogue that will be a “busy, humming place on weekends.” He hopes that REI will help the congregation respond to the needs of a diverse and inclusive congregation while also adhering to a set of Jewish educational goals and principles.

- Bronze Synagogue** came into the project with a declining population, a troubled school that was clearly behind the times, and hopes that REI would help move the school toward innovation and change. Their pilot focused on Shabbat experiences designed to help families learn about the worship service together and build community. The plan is to continue the program into the coming year and also, perhaps, add a synagogue-wide Mitzvah program. Their third idea, based on a common thematic unit across grades, is on hold for now.

Task Force members remain committed to re-imagining their religious school and the synagogue itself. Most are staying on for the implementation year. However, if the school goes ahead with the proposed merger, the place of the REI initiative will be in question. More critically, if the demographic trend is irreversible, as most believe, there may, in the end, be no school to re-imagine.

### Impact on the Congregation

Our simple measure of impact on the congregation was whether or not elements from the REI process had been used in other areas of the congregation. As of the time of the research, none of the three sites had achieved much dissemination.

Extent to which elements used in other areas of the congregation	%		
	Gold	Silver	Bronze
Very much-great extent	27	0	0
Somewhat	50	27	25
Not at all-a little	23	73	75

Task Force Survey (Spring 2006)

- Gold** Task Force members dreamt of incorporating parts of the REI process into other synagogue meetings. The president of the congregation tried to use REI text study at meetings of the board of trustees, but the board had no patience for the process. Text study was used at the board of education and at religious affairs committee meetings. The artifacts exercise was used with the school’s PTA. According to one informant, “various committees have started on time and are ending when they’re supposed to based on the experiences of The RE-IMAGINE Project. It definitely has spread.”
- In the first year, there was an attempt to replace the *d’var Torah* with text study at **Silver** Synagogue board meetings, but similar to the story at Congregation Gold, this practice was regarded as too time-consuming. As one interviewee explained, a *d’var Torah* takes five minutes; a discussion takes at least fifteen. Beyond that, there were no further attempts to bring REI elements into other venues in the synagogue. As a respondent to the Task Force survey explained, the Task Force failed to use REI ingredients well and was therefore in no position to spread them into the congregation:

The principles of consensus decision making were used in the Board discussion about renewal of the rabbi’s contract. However, overall we have been resistant to applying tools like brainstorming and gathering feedback to the way that business is conducted at the synagogue. We missed this opportunity to practice lessons of listening, feedback, fluidity, growth. In general, at meetings, the discourse was pulled back to a superficial and polite level both in the Task Force and Leadership Team. We did not illuminate honestly the issues and conflicts that arose in our religious school’s past, we did not communicate and update and involve the

whole congregation as we proceeded through each next step, and our meetings lacked heartfelt, engaged, deep thinking.

- **Bronze** Synagogue Task Force members realize that The RE-IMAGINE Project cannot stand alone but rather has to be integrated into the culture of the congregation. This integration has proven difficult for them, and no examples of success came out either in interviews or on the Task Force survey. Nonetheless, with their customary optimism and can-do attitude, the Task Force members remain devoted to the process and still hope to “infiltrate” it into the culture of their congregation. They witnessed Task Force members become more active participants in synagogue life and believe they can build on this success to get more people involved. They believe that the lessons they learned in the Task Force can benefit other committees although they do not know how to disseminate these lessons without the rabbi’s support.

Bronze participants speak glowingly of the REI process and, at the very least, intend to incorporate it into the new Task Force in 2006-07. Each meeting will start with Jewish connections, include text study, and close with summary reflections. Task Force members liked that their meetings started and ended on time—something very unusual for their congregation—and that decisions were made by consensus rather than majority vote. “One of the best things about The RE-IMAGINE Project was the planning meetings,” said one interviewee: “You sit down and the creativity just flows!”

### **Forces at Play**

The case studies demonstrate the possibilities that emerge when committed members come together and, through a strong group process, set a vision and plan for the future. Where the process was well managed, the Task Force devoted to the work (sometimes through the attrition of less committed members), and leadership equal to the task, Task Forces were positive and productive.

The case studies also demonstrate the critical role played by leadership. Silver Synagogue suffered a lack of leadership from the rabbi who deferred to the educator, and a lack of leadership from the new educator who was overwhelmed with the demands of his job. Bronze Synagogue could not get the support of the rabbi who seemed uninterested in novel approaches to education and more committed to day school education than to the congregational school. Lay leadership did rise to the challenge in Bronze Synagogue but, in the end, recognized that major change in education would not occur without the active support of the clergy.

Finally, the case studies demonstrate the powerful influence of serendipitous events and contextual factors.

- During the course of REI, Congregation **Gold**’s longtime, beloved religious school director retired. The executive board decided to reconfigure the education staff and, as part of this effort, created a new position of Director of Lifelong Learning.

Handled well, such structural changes can have a significant impact on the culture of learning in a congregation. In this instance, one might expect greater integration of various forms of learning with better connections between nursery, elementary, high school, and adult and family learning. The restructuring decision and the retirement that spurred it were unrelated to REI. If anything, the restructuring adds further to the professional side of the equation at Congregation Gold. These changes might bode well for REI outcomes even though, from the perspective of the project, they were neither predictable nor controllable.

- **Silver** Synagogue is characterized by its affluent, workaholic families. The congregation has little patience for process and there was a sense that the project was not suited to their urban lifestyle and sophistication. Bugged down in the process and critical of it, the Task Force lost members and failed to proceed productively. The culture clash between the initiative and the congregation created an obstacle that leadership was unable to overcome. The end result was that little was accomplished.
- **Bronze** Synagogue faced contextual obstacles that ultimately determined outcomes. With a declining population and dwindling school enrollment, it seems unlikely that the school will remain in business. The school needed updating and transformation, something the Task Force might have been able to orchestrate. But the demographic reality pushing this situation was out of the Task Force's control. Moreover, the Task Force did not have the support of the clergy and, of the three case studies, expressed the greatest concerns about having adequate budget, staffing, and lay input for its implementation phase. The aggregate of these factors, all outside the control of the Task Force, meant that no matter how good their process or how great their optimism, they could not have a major impact on the religious school.

In the final analysis, The RE-IMAGINE Project experience appears to be influenced by the congregation's unique profile (including contextual factors and current events), its readiness, and its leadership. The experience is multifaceted and outcomes are multidimensional. As a result, there is not a simple correlation between inputs and outcome. In one place, the process may generate enthusiasm for the school but not set religious education in a new direction. In another, the Task Force might be productive and accomplish a great deal but not fully re-imagine its school. Each of the congregations benefits from its participation, but the type and quality of that benefit varies from site to site. The challenge for the project is how to maximize outcomes in the greatest variety of congregational settings.