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**Re-Imagining Congregational  
Education: Lessons from  
The RE-IMAGINE Project**

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with commentary by the Experiment in  
Congregational Education

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## Lessons from The RE-IMAGINE Project

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The Jewish community has long relied on congregational schools to educate its youth. Recent growth in day schools notwithstanding, the great majority of children who receive Jewish education continue to do so in the synagogue. Despite the importance of the congregational schools, however, the organized community for years did little for their improvement. That situation appears to be changing.

We are beginning to see new energy and optimism in supplementary Jewish education—new ideas, curricula, initiatives, strategies, and experimentation. This activity is driven by a number of factors including a growing recognition of the importance of these schools and a willingness of communities to invest in them, interest by parents and teachers in strengthening Jewish education, and openness in synagogues to rethink Jewish education. At the same time, congregational schools face significant obstacles—little capacity for fundraising and minimal outside funding, high competition for families’ time and attention, limited hours of instruction, and reliance on part-time faculty, to name just some.<sup>1</sup>

The RE-IMAGINE Project, with its goal of producing original thinking about supplementary education, is a significant contributor to this new energy. It begins with an 18-month planning process, carried out by a Task Force representing different constituencies within the congregation. Its intended results are an articulated vision for Jewish education for the children of the congregation, pilot tests of potential innovations, and clear direction for the implementation of a full-scale educational initiative.

In many regards, The RE-IMAGINE Project is a pioneering effort. It challenges participants to move beyond the current model of schooling to arrive at a new vision that will inspire and inform action. In order to learn while doing, it has welcomed an accompanying research study of the planning process and its outcomes. In reading the results of this research, it should be remembered that planning is but a first step in change. The study makes no judgment on whether or how the participating schools, their educational program, and the children they work with will be affected. Implementation, the next phase of the change effort, will be assessed in a separate study.

### ECE Commentary

As an organization that values reflection and research, ECE looks to the evaluation of its projects for a deeper understanding of our work, and for suggestions on how to improve. Although the point at which data for this report were collected (Spring 2006) marked the “official” end of the project, nearly all of the congregations continued to refine their long-term plans and to experiment with new pilots. In talking this over with Dr. Sales, the idea arose of our offering our own commentary on the report. We appreciate the Cohen Center’s openness to dialoguing with us, and to presenting its report in this unusual format.

The goals of this commentary are to:

- provide an update on the congregations in the second cohort of The RE-IMAGINE Project of New York, whose work is ongoing;
- note parts of the report that have influenced ECE’s work with the subsequent cohorts of The RE-IMAGINE Project; and
- offer some general comments about the nature of congregational change.

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<sup>1</sup> Sales, A. (2006). *Mapping Jewish education: The national picture*.

Available at <http://jimjosephfoundation.org/PDF/Brandeis%20Report%202.pdf>.

Wertheimer, J. (2007, March). *Recent trends in supplementary Jewish education*. NY: The AVI CHAI Foundation.

The study is based on 13 of the synagogues in the second cohort of The RE-IMAGINE Project in Greater New York. It entailed a survey of all Task Force members at the beginning of the planning period in Fall 2004 and a year and a half later in Spring 2006. It also included a Spring 2006 survey of Synagogue Leadership, lay leaders who serve on the synagogue board of trustees and/or the religious school committee. (For details and survey instruments, [click here.](#)) We can assume that results are representative of the RE-IMAGINE experience as response rates to these surveys were high (86%, 77%, and 68% respectively). Eight lessons emerge from the research results.

### **1. Congregations move through the planning process at noticeably different rates.**

By the end of 18 months of work, all of the Task Forces had created a vision statement for Jewish education for the children in their congregation. In addition, four had planned, carried out, and evaluated a pilot project. Three had completed at least one of the steps of a pilot project, and the other six had completed none of them. Using what they learned from the pilot, the Task Forces were next to develop an implementation plan for the coming school year. The data are murkier on how far they got on this step. In one group there was consensus that nothing had been done. In the other groups, some Task Force members said they were working on the development of a plan while others believed that the plan was already done.

#### *ECE Commentary*

While the “official” timeline for the RE-IMAGINE process was 18 months, we knew from the outset that actual timetables would vary according to the situation of each congregation. The Cohen Center’s report is based on questionnaires filled out in the Spring of 2006. By January, 2007 six congregations had completed and evaluated at least one pilot, and the remaining seven had pilots in process.

Planning a more ambitious initiative is often delegated to a smaller team, so it is not surprising that some Task Force members might be unclear as to how far this team had progressed. According to the consultants<sup>2</sup>, by January 2007 eight congregations had mounted initiatives and three were planning the expansion of their pilots into initiatives. These initiatives ranged in scope and ambition. Most ambitious was a congregation that required parent engagement ten times for all families in two grades of the religious school; less ambitious, but nonetheless significant, was an initiative in which a self-selected group of families participated in a five-session “Jewish Family Adventure,” visiting various Jewish sites of interest.

Also worth noting is the fact that four congregations in this cohort of RE-IMAGINE have received Legacy Heritage Foundation grants to fund their initiatives, two in 2006 and two in 2007. The two congregations were among a subset of the first year grantees that also received continuation grants from the foundation. Three other congregations have received grants from other sources to fund the innovations that were planned through RE-IMAGINE.

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<sup>2</sup> Each RE-IMAGINE congregation is assigned a consultant who works with them for approximately 18 months guiding them through the process and provides periodic follow up consultation for up to 24 months after the project formally ends.

## 2. Task Force members are generally positive about the product of their work while Synagogue Leadership is often unaware of it.

As seen in Table 1, the majority of Task Force members understand, appreciate, and agree with the vision. A majority also express positive views about implementation plans, often saying that they are an exciting step in the right direction. There is, however, less conviction that the vision will be achieved or used to guide decisions related to Jewish learning or that the implementation plans are as ambitious as they could be.

One-third of the Synagogue Leadership surveyed do not know if the Task Force created a vision

statement and 45% do not know if the Task Force created an implementation plan. Leaders who are aware of these products are significantly less likely than members of the Task Force to understand or agree with them, but they share the Task Force’s overall assessment of them.

### ECE Commentary

These findings are quite helpful, giving RE-IMAGINE staff insight into an area that is not normally visible to consultants. As a result, consultants are placing a greater emphasis in the third New York cohort of the project on encouraging and supporting congregational teams in engaging both synagogue leaders and teachers in the process.

**Table 1: Implementation Plan (Task Force and Synagogue Leadership)**

	% Very Much-Great Extent		
	Task Force	Synagogue Leadership <sup>a</sup>	
<b>Vision</b>			
Personally agree with the vision	79	65	***
Understand vision well enough to explain to others	75	27	***
Vision is compelling	71	60	*
Vision is ambitious	65	52	ns
Had input into the vision statement	56	6	***
<i>Over the next five years, the vision will--</i>			
... make a difference in the educational experience	53	55	ns
... guide decisions related to Jewish learning	49	58	ns
... be achieved	49	40	ns
<b>Initiative Implementation Plan</b>			
Initiative is a step in the right direction	84	71	ns
Implementation plan is realistic and doable	80	54	*
Understand initiative well enough to explain to others	76	26	***
Initiative is in alignment with the vision	76	60	*
Initiative is exciting	76	60	ns
Initiative will make a difference in the educational experience	64	61	ns
Initiative is ambitious	53	44	ns
<sup>a</sup> Vision results are based on the responses of 189 synagogue leaders who said that their Task Force had created a vision statement. Initiative results are based on the responses of 122 synagogue leaders who said that their Task Force had created an implementation plan. *** p<.001 * p<.05 ns non-significant			

Although most Task Force leaders were not very concerned about having sufficient budget, staff, or leadership for implementation, in only two congregations does Synagogue Leadership believe that increased financial support for education is very likely. Moreover, one-fourth of the Task Force members do not know if the initiative has the support of staff or the board; over one-third do not know if it has the support of parents or teachers; and half do not know if it has the support of the members-at-large. The only sure thing appears to be the support of the clergy: 82% say that clergy very much support the initiative.

### **3. During the planning phase, only a few congregations successfully re-imagined their religious schools.**

Everyone involved believes that the planning phase made a difference although views are split on whether or not it led to fundamental change: 46% of the Task Force members say that the project took religious education in a new direction; 41% say it helped move things along a familiar path; 13% say that it held the congregation back or led it astray. These opinions are not uniformly distributed. Four of the Task Forces agree that they were very successful in re-imagining their religious school. The other Task Forces report lesser degrees of success or simply lack agreement on what was accomplished.

There are several explanations for the low number. A few felt that “re-imagining” was the wrong term and that their efforts represented incremental change rather than a fundamental rethinking of the school. Others argued that the work was in process and it was too soon to gauge success. Some of the Task Forces shifted their attention away from the school onto broader issues in the congregation and thus did not expect to see an impact on the quality of learning in the school. As well, re-imagining was hindered by relatively low levels of Task Force creativity and risk taking, the enormity of the task, and the intractability of environmental factors and religious school structures. A number of the groups came to the realization that they had to focus their efforts, start small, and regard the work as first steps in a longer process of change.

#### *ECE Commentary*

This finding has been taken to heart by the RE-IMAGINE staff, which has made some important changes in the third New York cohort of RE-IMAGINE. The final section of the Guidebook has been rewritten to encourage Task Force members to design initiatives that are ambitious and bold. In addition, at Yachdav, the gathering for Task Force members of all the congregations, ECE Director Rob Weinberg urged the group to “think big and act boldly” and to consider changing the structures of their educational programs to create a greater sense of community and allow for a more natural connection between Jewish living and learning.

**4. Asked to comment on the factors that facilitated or hindered success in re-imagining, respondents most often wrote about people as the greatest contributor to success, process as the greatest obstacle to success, and contextual factors as both facilitators and impediments to success.**

Respondents at every site except one wrote about the dedication, commitment, determination, openness, creativity, enthusiasm, and diversity of their Task Force and its leadership. In a few instances, respondents cited, as well, a successful lay-professional partnership. A few respondents cited the Task Force’s process as a factor

*“An excellent Task Force was very important. The structure given to us by RE-IMAGINE kept us going and on track. We now have new strong leaders and new ways of looking at education and our entire temple.”*

in their success. They mentioned the positive value of the group’s diversity, respect for each other’s opinions, readiness to work through frustration, the “give-and-take” and honest discussions, and the exercise of “thinking out of the box.” At least three times as many comments, however, referred to the obstructionist nature of the process, which was experienced as “slow,” “cumbersome,” “rigid,” and “drawn out.” The process was sometimes hindered by

congregational dynamics: internal politics, egos, untested assumptions, and dysfunctional group process. Moreover, it was not always a good fit with the particular congregation. Some adapted the materials and approach to good effect. Some adapted them but at the expense of much time and effort. In at least two sites, the adaptation that needed to take place did not. Other comments refer to contextual factors, including the congregation’s readiness to undertake The RE-IMAGINE Project. About half of these comments essentially say that “the time was ripe” and that RE-IMAGINE was “the right program at the right time.” The other half describe schools that needed so much effort to get into operational shape that they were not ready to devote attention to re-imagining. Some of these blocks were linked to new personnel, restructuring, and declines in student enrollment.

*“The process was too slow—almost every step had to be re-thought in light of our particular community. This took an enormous amount of time for the Leadership Team.”*

*ECE Commentary*

This raises one of the perennial educational dilemmas: when preparing “lesson plans” for leadership teams with a range of abilities, how detailed should those plans be? The design of the Guidebook is based on the assumption that experienced group leaders will welcome detailed lesson plans, and feel free to adapt them to suit their particular group. Because less experienced group leaders may feel overwhelmed by the detail in the Guidebook, all leadership team members are encouraged to plan each meeting together with their consultant. Unfortunately, not all leadership teams responded to the consultants’ offers of assistance.

**5. The project did much to increase participants’ understanding of the religious school but did little to create new leadership for the school.**

Coming into the project, most Task Force members did not understand the school’s goals and many could not articulate the school’s uniqueness (Table 2). Nonetheless, the great majority were excited and optimistic about the future of the school. Although only half thought their schools were successful at the time, three-fourths believed that the school would see future success. Several of these positions changed significantly over the course of the project. Participants became much better informed about the school and gained greater understanding of its goals. At the same time, their excitement and optimism diminished.

**Table 2: Views of School (Task Force)**

	% Agree		
	Fall 2004	Spring 2006	
Feel well-informed about what is going on in the religious school.	66	81	***
Excited about the future of the school.	81	74	***
Good understanding of the school’s goals for the future.	43	72	***
Easy to summarize for potential members how the school is unique.	50	62	*
Believe the school is very successful today.	52	63	ns
Believe the school will be very successful five years from today.	76	70	***
T-test results: *** p<.001 * p<.05 ns non-significant			

For 52% of the Task Force members, participation increased their sense of belonging in the congregation and their knowledge of educational innovations. As well, between 25% and 33% variously reported that their involvement on the project increased their interest in the religious school, their leadership skills, their participation in educational activities, and their interest in Jewish text.

At the end of the 18 months of planning, many participants decided to remain involved in the project and/or in the religious school. Of the 240 Task Force respondents, 100 planned to serve on the implementation team, 44 of them in leadership positions. The pattern appears to offer both continuity of membership and opportunity for others in the congregation to join the effort. The project, however, did little to motivate Task Force members to join the religious school committee or assume board responsibilities.

## 6. The Task Force design is highly valued, but the RE-IMAGINE process is not.

Most of the Task Force members believe that their group had the right mix of people (78%) and the leadership that it needed (78%). Most said that conversations were open and honest (82%) and that their input was valued (79%). Fewer thought the Task Force was very creative in its thinking (58%) and willing to “think big” and take risks (62%).

Of the Leadership Team members, 26% thought that the project had the right balance of process and task. Almost all of the others, 73%, thought that there was excessive emphasis on process. The emphasis on process has advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, many people credit RE-IMAGINE with teaching them the importance and value of strong group process. They understand that their accomplishments in incorporating diverse views, reaching consensus, and building community among themselves is owed to the project’s intentional focus on process. The majority thought it was a good collaboration between professionals and lay people (65%). Over half also experienced it as productive (57%), community building (55%), and personally meaningful (54%). Few experienced it as frustrating (11%), but few also experienced it as fun (27%).

*“If we put together a group of 25 diverse people from our shul with a purpose every year, it would strengthen our congregation. Everyone met people they never saw or knew before and tolerance, understanding and friendships and a sense of community emerged.”*

On the other hand, the process contributed to frustration on the Task Force and, to some extent, to the low retention rate of members (50% of the original participants became inactive or formally dropped out). It is also linked to difficulties keeping to the project time frame, a situation reported by half of those serving on Leadership Teams.

Components of the RE-IMAGINE process “somewhat” or “very much” found their way into four of the congregations. The other nine congregations applied the RE-IMAGINE meeting format in a minimal or sporadic way. In a couple of instances, RE-IMAGINE principles were not applied because the Task Force itself had stopped using them or had not used them well enough to spread them outwards.

All in all, two-thirds of participants in the planning phase of The RE-IMAGINE Project are satisfied with their experience. Correlation analyses find that the better the Task Force composition and process (e.g., open and honest conversations, creative thinking, willingness to take risks) and the more successful the outcome, the more satisfied the individual participant.

### *ECE Commentary*

There is bound to be a tension between those who value deliberative processes and those who are eager to “get going” and make decisions. The 18-month-long RE-IMAGINE process represents an attempt at compromise between the two. As mentioned above, the RE-IMAGINE staff fully expected that the time-frame might be attenuated in some cases. Given that the structure of RE-IMAGINE meetings includes time for “connection” and text study, the more “product” oriented Task Force members are likely to be frustrated and even to drop out. We believe that these elements, particularly text study, are critical. Connection builds community. When congregational leaders persist in incorporating text study into all of their meetings, the culture of the congregation begins to change; ultimately text study becomes part of “the way we do things here,” thereby enriching everyone’s Jewish literacy.

## **7. Synagogue leadership has little connection to The RE-IMAGINE Project during the first 18 months.**

One-fourth of the members of the synagogue board and the school committee do not know if the congregation was ready for the project or if the project was a good match for the congregation. Over one-third do not know if the Task Force successfully re-imagined its religious school. Over half do not know if further resources will be made available for religious education as a result of the project. Many do not feel well informed about the religious school, they do not understand its goals for the future, and they cannot say how the school is unique. The vast majority do not understand the RE-IMAGINE initiative well enough to explain it to others.

### *ECE Commentary*

Communication with the board and the congregation at large is a continual challenge for RE-IMAGINE Project participants because the bulk of the meeting time is spent laying the groundwork for the pilots and initiatives that emerge towards the end of the planning process. For the first year, at least, it feels to participants as though “there is nothing to tell.” In the third round of RE-IMAGINE, we redoubled our efforts to encourage early and frequent communication so that the congregation and the board are aware of the vision and the new educational initiatives that are being planned.

## **8. A tremendous amount is learned during the RE-IMAGINE planning phase.**

The final question on the survey asked Task Force members to recount the three most valuable things they learned from their participation on The RE-IMAGINE Project. Overall, 187 participants recounted over 430 lessons learned. They learned about the religious school, models of education, and the relevance of Jewish text. They learned about others in the congregation, about themselves, and about their own leadership capabilities. For members of the Leadership Team in particular, the project helped develop skills in meeting management, community building, planning, and the like. Others learned how to ask the right questions, write meaningful agendas, facilitate meetings, involve new people, work on a team, and plan for the future. They learned patience and commitment. Many gained a new appreciation for their congregation—its leadership, membership, and school.

The largest category of comments refer to process lessons. These include lessons learned about group dynamics, collaboration, vision, and meeting models. Participants learned, for example, that “process works” and that it is “a pain, but useful.” They learned that participation and group process bring people closer, yield a sense of community, increase investment in a project, and generate enthusiasm and goodwill. Most commonly they learned how to listen to diverse views and work toward consensual decisions.

Most stunningly perhaps, they acquired wisdom about the process of synagogue change. They say that they learned to take risks without fear of making mistakes. They learned that congregational leadership has to be open to change and that members of the congregation have to be brought into the change effort. They learned to take one step at a time and to trust the process.

*“It’s important to view this as a process. That is, even if our pilot were to fail (which I very much doubt!), we would still learn from it and be farther along than where we were when we started.”*

They learned that change proceeds at a slow pace, that the development and implementation of new programming takes great amounts of time and effort, and that these realities have a cost. Importantly, they learned that one need not accept the status quo and that there is always room for change.

Of all of the lessons learned, those about change are likely to have the greatest impact on the synagogues. Over 200 congregants have had the opportunity to learn how to dream and not to fear mistakes, to trust the process, and to appreciate the commitment entailed in serious change. They have learned that change is difficult but possible and that there is always room for growth and improvement. The wisdom that emerges from The RE-IMAGINE Project is a foundation for the future.

#### *ECE Commentary*

These results are gratifying given the emphasis that ECE places on building capacity for change in synagogues, which are typically slow to change. They also provide an interesting counterpoint to the concerns about process raised in point 4 above.