

## Blog Post: From Practice-to-Research-to Practice: Building the Field by Building an Evidence Base in Jewish Education

By Susan Kardos  
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*Today we feature a timely and important piece from the AVI CHAI Foundation blog this past summer. Susan M. Kardos, a former Mandel Center post-doctoral fellow and now senior director for strategy and education planning at The AVI CHAI Foundation, reports on the new Consortium for Applied Studies in Jewish Education. Mandel Center Director Sharon Feiman-Nemser serves on the national advisory board and we look forward to seeing what emerges from the consortium's work.*

It's an uncontested fact that any strong field has—in addition to strong institutions, skilled and talented people, sufficient resources, and standards of practice—a knowledge base upon which policy and practice decisions are made.

Though chronically underfunded, the Jewish education field has done some serious foundational work to build an evidence base. Three specific examples come to mind. Chaired by Jeff Kress, the Network for Research in Jewish Education celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary at its annual meeting in Toronto this year. In addition to the celebratory feel, the sessions were consistently high quality and featured interesting and relevant scholarly work in Jewish education. Edited by Michael Zeldin, the peer-reviewed *Journal of Jewish Education* continues to chronicle some of the best research currently being conducted in the field. Finally, the recently released *International Handbook of Jewish Education*, edited by Helena Miller, Lisa D. Grant, and Alex Pomson, is a comprehensive collection of the most recent research in Jewish education and provides a useful picture of the current state of the field.

Motivated by AVI CHAI's desire to invest in this needed aspect of a strong Jewish education field, and inspired by the Jim Joseph Foundation's commitment to and investment in research and scholarship in Jewish education, the two foundations joined forces to imagine and fund the first phase of what we are calling the Consortium for Applied Studies in Jewish Education (CASJE).

In Phase 1 of CASJE we plan to identify 4 critical questions in Jewish education and assemble “panels” of perhaps 12-20 scholars and practitioners who have much to say on the particular panel question. Panel questions *might* fall within topic areas such as Israel education, Jewish education leadership, or adolescent spiritual development and will examine the questions from multiple disciplinary perspectives and in different educational settings. Each panel will create (1) a review of the current literature in the field related to that question: What is known? What is not known? What is contested and how?, (2) a digital monograph of the panel materials such as essays, briefs, videos and artifacts, and (3) a research agenda that will grow out of the literature review and the panel colloquium. We

have 2 serious commitments that stretch across all the work of Phase 1, from how we do the planning to all of the work of the panels. First, we are committed that all of the work fully integrates practitioners, is guided by practitioner questions from the field, and is readily applied to practice. Second, we are committed to utilizing 21<sup>st</sup> Century technologies to democratize the effort and ensure field participation in all stages.

The venerable Lee Shulman is the intellectual leader of this initiative and serves as Chair of the National Advisory Board, an august assemblage (still in formation) of Jewish education scholars and practitioners with a key role in planning the project. The project is being ably directed by Rosov Consulting, which brings extraordinary experience, talent, and skill to the effort. While we do not yet know what Phase 2 will look like—or even how Phase 1 will evolve—we are delighted by this opportunity to invest in Jewish education research and bringing that research to bear on solving real problems of practice. We look forward to being able to report on what is accomplished.

A few may wonder why a foundation dedicated to the intensive and immersive educational experiences that Jewish day schools and overnight summer camps offer would spend precious resources on applied research rather than on camp or school financial assistance for families or budget relief for the institutions themselves. While that approach has never been AVI CHAI's philanthropic strategy, even more compelling reasons exist. First, these times call for educational innovation. Bill Gates, who has contributed \$5 billion to the field of general education and has learned a lot from his successes and failures, recently told the *Wall Street Journal*: "I believe in innovation and...the way you get innovation is you fund research and you learn the basic facts." We agree that this is one very important way. Second, the future of the Jewish People depends on its future leaders. These future leaders are now in Jewish day schools, overnight camps, Israel trips, supplemental schools, and youth groups. They deserve nothing less than an education which is grounded in a base of evidence and a set of working theories. They will write the story of the Jewish future; we can only do our part to ensure that they leave their educational experiences Jewishly literate, engaged, and committed to their People. The rest is up to them.