

Did you survey young people to find out what they want and need?

Yes. We learned that an overwhelming number of teens—including those who dropped out—went to religious school in search of “spirituality.” Nowhere else in their lives—not in their homes, schools, baseball teams, etc.—could they think about what it means to be a spiritual being.

Interestingly, though, the parents, rabbis, and educators we interviewed thought that young people came to religious school not to learn about spiritu-

ality, but to socialize. We’ve learned that if you talk only to adults about what young people want, you will sometimes get inaccurate perceptions. Now our primary focus is to continuously engage with children and teens.

How difficult would it be for congregations with many dropouts to raise their retention rates to 80%?

I believe every congregation can achieve an 80% plus level of retention at the highest grade level they teach, whether that’s grade 10, 11, or 12. The chal-

lenge for those congregations that have yet to reach the 80% level has to do with what I call “creating a culture of expectation”—clearly indicating from the outset that “Jewish learning lies at the heart of our identity; it is our very essence.” When ongoing Jewish education is an articulated, shared vision of the congregational leadership and when the temple’s educational budget reflects this priority, retention rates climb.

What innovative approaches are congregations taking to keep students involved through high school?

One approach that shows much promise is called JIEEP—Jewish Individual Experience Education Plan. Understanding that every person learns differently, and it is advantageous to educate each person in the way he or she learns best, it’s long been the practice in special education to provide students with an IEP (Individual Education Plan). This model can be applied to every one of the 17,000 b’nai and b’not mitzvah in the Reform Movement.

Temple Beth Elohim in Wellesley, Massachusetts is applying one aspect of JIEEP by promising that a full-time congregational professional will develop a personal relationship with every religious school student starting in the fifth grade. Rather than being considered part of a grade or a class, each student will have her or his unique attributes, interests, and learning needs addressed by the congregation in its educational planning and programming. The trusting relationships that develop through this Jewish Journey program, slated for full implementation in the 2010-2011/5771 academic year, should also increase the likelihood that students will want to be connected with the temple on a long-term basis.

Also in line with JIEEP, in Memphis, Temple Israel (TI) b’nai mitzvah students are being paired with a “writing coach,” a caring adult in the congregation who works with them in person, by phone, and by email to develop their ideas and thoughts into a unique *d’var torah* (text-based bar mitzvah speech)—and, in the process, a meaningful relationship develops. Since they started the program, about two years ago, TI Education Director Barb Gelb says “it’s

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