RCF leads effort to build early childhood enrollment

An effort is underway to help synagogues and JCC early childhood education (ECE) centers increase enrollment, better engage Jewish families and build stronger connections to the Jewish community. Led by Rose Community Foundation (RCF), partners, are BUILDing Jewish ECE (www.buildingjcce.org) — involves a partnership between the Union for Reform Judaism and the JCC Association, and is open to all nine Denver and Boulder synagogues and JCCs with ECE Centers.

Two URJ synagogues and two JCCs comprise the current cohort, launched in July of 2014. Five other synagogues, including two conservative synagogues, will be part of a second cohort starting this summer when the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism joins the initiative.

After years of research and planning, RCF says the time is right to focus on an area of Jewish education that is often neglected, yet presents immense opportunities to engage families and welcome them into Jewish communities. “We must bring families into Jewish communities at formative stages of their lives and their children’s development,” says Lisa Farber Miller, senior program officer at RCF.

“The JCC Association, URJ and USCJ recognize the importance of early childhood education and family engagement and that is why — for the first time ever — they are working so closely together. “National leadership and local leaders of JCCs and congregations are all playing key roles in this truly collaborative, cross-denominational, cross-organizational initiative. “Together, we can improve early childhood education and Jewish family engagement, and make these critical areas part of our national, communal agenda.”

Students demonstrate that parents, children, synagogues, JCCs and communities as a whole would benefit from stronger and more accessible Jewish ECE programs.

Parents are more likely to be involved and invested in Jewish home rituals and celebrations as a result of their child’s own involvement in these experiences at ECE centers.

The preschool years have proven to be a critical time in the development of a child’s personality and identity — including their religious identity.

Eighty-five percent of a child’s cognitive development is formed by age five, the majority by age three. Synagogues and JCCs would increase revenues with ECE centers that are integrated into the entire organization and are operating as effectively as possible.

“Our ECE centers need the best outreach strategies and tools to engage families at this critical life stage,” says Mark Horowitz, vice president of early childhood education and family engagement at the JCC Association.

“An influx of families with young children — on a scale that we know is possible — would be a game-changer for JCCs, synagogues and truly, entire communities.

“The RCE centers in BUILDing Jewish ECE each offer something unique that appeals to a wide range of Jewish families. We view it as a Jewish obligation to market those dynamic engagement opportunities and bring families into these learning experiences.”

Through the initiative, RCE centers receive matched training and guidance from the URJ, JCC Association and USCJ experts and others, along with a “Toolbox of Resources” to expedite long-term growth.

This includes website, social media branding, customer service, recruitment and retention.

The services and tools offered as part of the initiative are valued at $92,000 per institution.

BUILDing Jewish ECE is a result of eight years of research and work conducted by the Colorado Jewish early childhood education initiative steering committee.

The committee supported a new early childhood director at the Colorado Agency for Jewish Education (CAJE), intensive professional development for teachers and directors, scholarships and financial support to ECE centers (including www.MasseDet.org).

A 2012 economic study that found that if Jewish ECE centers in the Denver-Boulder area were operated at best practice standards, their congregations and JCCs’ revenues could increase $720,000 annually, an average of 11%.

The study said that synagogues and ECE centers need programs, campaigns and marketing that create inclusive relationships with members and aggressively communicate what synagogues or JCCs offer to families.

RCF designed BUILDing Jewish ECE as a response to the study and reached out to the Jay & Rose Phillips Family Foundation of Colorado, the URJ, JCC Association and USCJ to assist in this work as partners.

Says Cathy Rolland, director of engaging families with young children at the URJ: “BUILDing Jewish ECE takes the best practices from the secular business world, particularly marketing, enrollment conversion and customer service, and helps apply them to ECE and family engagement.”

“The URJ is excited to work with those great partners to break down even more community silos and to reach, engage and nudge all kinds of families.”

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“My own family became more actively involved in the community after an enriching, high quality experience in the JCC ECE center.

“There are many other young families in our community who could benefit from embarking on a similar type of Jewish journey.”

Adds Farber Miller: "Early childhood education is one of the few times when Jewish communities have a demand-side economy working in their favor. In other words, many parents need and must pay for expensive early care and education for young children.

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