

TOWARD A LIFETIME OF JEWISH ENGAGEMENT

Colorado Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative PROGRESS REPORT

Summer 2012

THE MOST IMPORTANT
YEARS OF A CHILD'S LIFE—
for building cognition,
character, and identity—
ARE THE FIRST FIVE.

Since up to 85 percent of
these key developmental
abilities are formed by
age five, early childhood
education offers incredible
potential that we are just
beginning to tap.

The region's Jewish early
childhood education centers
play an influential, yet
often unrecognized, role in
introducing children and
their families to Jewish life.
With 230 educators
teaching 1,100 children in
80 classrooms, they are
among our best hopes for
developing healthy,
successful learners and
for providing gateways
to current and future
Jewish engagement.



“The seamless integration
of Jewish curriculum has
been extraordinary to
watch and experience.
We now celebrate family
Shabbat every week,
and our daughter leads
the blessings. She has
blossomed with self-
confidence and charm.”

*Parent of a child attending
a Denver/Boulder Jewish
ECE Center*



Timeline

2005

Allied Jewish Federation, Colorado Agency for Jewish Education, Rose Community Foundation, and the Jewish Early Childhood Education Director's Council begin meeting to assess the state of Jewish early childhood education.

2006

Jewish Early Childhood Education in Denver and Boulder: Mapping the Field study published.

2007

Jewish ECE Summit engages 125 stakeholders to create a strategic plan to enhance quality and access

Colorado Jewish ECE Initiative Steering Committee created to oversee strategic plan

Funders invest \$1.1 million over four years to implement an approach developed by a national Jewish ECE Initiative at nine Denver/Boulder ECE centers and to hire a new Jewish ECE Specialist at CAJE

2009

Five Jewish ECE centers become Qualistar-rated and qualify for Denver Preschool Program

Steering Committee commissions new study of scholarship needs at centers

MazelTot launched

2010

Rose Community Foundation grants the Allied Jewish Federation \$484,000 to create a scholarship fund to augment tuition assistance provided by ECE centers

2011

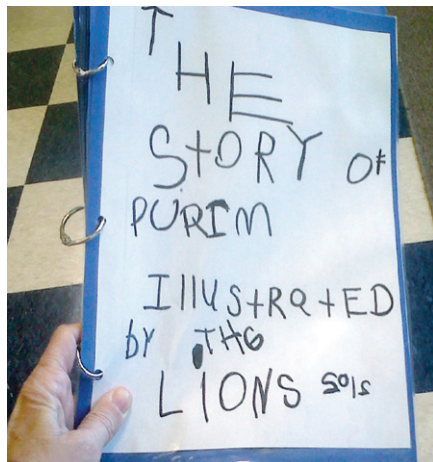
National JECEI folds, but Colorado Jewish ECE Initiative work continues

Economic study of Jewish ECE centers in Denver/Boulder commences

2012

Additional funding enables three more years of Colorado Jewish ECE Initiative implementation

Toward a Lifetime of Jewish Engagement study is published and introduced at an August 13 event



High-Quality Jewish Early Childhood Education Matters

In 2008, under the auspices of the Colorado Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative, nine early childhood education (ECE) centers embarked upon a series of shifts in approach to the teaching, learning environment, and integration of Jewish values into classrooms.

The Initiative sought to:

- **Improve the quality of ECE centers**
- **Promote Jewish identity**
- **Expand access to Jewish ECE for families**

The Initiative's specific goals underscored a larger hope of regional Jewish stakeholders: to make ECE a gateway to a lifetime of Jewish engagement for children and families alike.

To achieve these goals, ECE centers took transformative steps. Educators experienced new ways of teaching and learning, and undertook intensive professional development from national experts and from one another. They employed innovative approaches to communicating Jewish content in the classroom, and forged new connections with families and host institutions.

To gauge the Initiative's progress to date, a comprehensive research study was conducted by Michael Ben-Avie, Ph.D. earlier this year, and from its findings a broad range of positive outcomes can be seen:

- **Better teaching at ECE centers**
- **Better learning environments**
- **Better integration of Judaism into ECE curricula**
- **Better connections between families and Jewish life**

While the journey has not been without challenges (including the dissolution of the national entity that developed the educational model), families, educators, and host institutions alike report that the Jewish ECE landscape is changing for the better. The impacts can be felt in households and classrooms, and they reverberate in Jewish community centers and synagogues.

To continue to grow the number of families who choose Jewish ECE, it is critical that the centers' teaching, classroom environments, and family engagement be of the highest caliber. By keeping quality teaching and educator training at the forefront, we can increase the impact of the Jewish ECE experience, and make our institutions and Jewish community more sustainable for the long term.

This brochure highlights the research study's findings and recommendations that can guide the Initiative's next three years and beyond.

For the full report and executive summary, visit rcfdenver.org/jewishECEstudy

Colorado Jewish ECE Initiative Results

1) BETTER TEACHING AT ECE CENTERS

90% of educators agreed that "our intentionality and purposefulness when planning learning experiences" has increased.

- Additional professional development improved teaching quality and intention, as observed by parents and educators alike.
- Teachers collaborated more and learned from one another's strategies and best practices.
- An Early Childhood Education Specialist provided consistent educator support, as well as continuity between coaching sessions with national consultants.
- Demand exists for benchmarks of quality that combine Qualistar Colorado criteria with Jewish ECE criteria.

2) BETTER LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Educators will continue or implement elements such as a play-based approach (84%), a project-based emergent curriculum (66%), emotionally responsive practice (73%), and a nature-based environment (66%).

- Intensive efforts to abandon a cookie-cutter ECE approach and adopt progressive teaching strategies were effective.
- Parents and educators appreciated child-centered elements such as sustained long-term projects, a process-over-product focus, and more documentation of learning.
- Structural classroom changes—including softer lighting and natural materials—were well received and made classrooms "venues of peace and calm."
- Child-centered, inquiry-based approaches such as Reggio Emilia will likely be sustained by ECE centers.

3) BETTER INTEGRATION OF JUDAISM INTO CURRICULA

92% of parents said their child's teachers "effectively teach children about Jewish life."

- By communicating Judaism through a framework of seven "lenses," educators could represent complexities of Jewish practices, culture, and values in ways children could grasp.
- Educators now integrate Jewish experiences into curricula year-round, rather than segregating them into "holiday boxes."
- Staff walkthroughs and other professional development helped educators see how to embed Jewish values within their classrooms.

4) BETTER CONNECTIONS BETWEEN FAMILIES AND JEWISH LIFE

94% of parents said their ECE center helps their family provide Jewish experiences for their children. 71% of families report a strengthened connection with the Jewish community.

- A direct relationship was found between the duration of ECE center attendance and increased family engagement in Jewish life.
- Educators formed program and personal connections with families, inviting them into the ECE community to discuss topics on parenting and Judaism.
- Parents felt greater openness at ECE centers and new opportunities to become involved in leadership.
- Interfaith and families of other faith traditions formed positive affinities for the Jewish community, independent of the religious framework.



Elements of the Colorado Jewish ECE Initiative

Directors, teachers, and families worked together with national consultants to implement these ECE strategies to improve teaching and learning:

- **Principles of excellence** to help educators reach high standards
- **On-site coaching and mentoring** from national consultants
- **Peer-to-peer sharing** of best practices and a **shared governance model**
- An **Early Childhood Education Specialist** to provide continual professional development
- **New educational strategies** employing a constructivist, child-centered approach
- **Changes in classrooms** to include natural materials and promote peace and calm
- **A framework of seven "lenses"** to integrate Jewish concepts seamlessly into ECE curricula
- Benchmarking (of some centers) by the **Qualistar Colorado rating system**
- A **scholarship fund** to help more families afford Jewish ECE

“Our classroom is calmer and more enjoyable. Children are respected and recognized as individuals. Our style of teaching has changed, and the children guide our classroom activities.”



Educator at Denver/ Boulder Jewish ECE Center

“The ECE experience has tightly integrated Jewish education with education in general—and with the local community—for our children, so that rather than thinking of Judaism as a separate lens, they consider them one and the same.”

Parent of a child attending a Denver/Boulder Jewish ECE Center



RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Maintain and support the ECE specialist position** to reinforce a consistent approach across ECE centers.
- **Scrutinize the original ECE change model** to determine which elements—Reggio Emilia, Emotionally Responsive Practice, natural classroom environments, shared governance, the “Jewish lenses”—to maintain or refine going forward.
- **Focus on professional development** to help educators improve skills, serve special needs children, and learn from experts as well as one another.
- **Establish quality benchmarks** that merge traditional ECE standards with Jewish ones.
- **Improve Jewish ECE access** via means such as scholarship funds, MazelTot, or other innovations that mitigate financial and logistic barriers.

For the full report and executive summary, visit rcfdenver.org/jewishECEstudy



“It takes a community to get things done.”
Educator at a Denver/Boulder Jewish ECE Center

Denver/Boulder Jewish Early Childhood Education Centers:

- Aish Denver Preschool
- Boulder Jewish Community Center Preschool
- BMH-BJ Preschool
- Congregation Hebrew Educational Alliance Preschool
- Congregation Rodef Shalom Preschool
- Garden Preschool and Early Learning Center at Chabad Jewish Center of South Metro Denver
- Robert E. Loup Jewish Community Center Early Childhood Center
- Temple Emanuel Early Childhood Center
- Temple Sinai Preschool

Colorado Partners:

- Allied Jewish Federation of Colorado
- Colorado Agency for Jewish Education
- Colorado Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative Steering Committee
- Jewish Early Childhood Center Directors Council
- Rose Community Foundation

Funders:

- Paul Gillis
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- Jay and Rose Phillips Family Foundation
- Rose Community Foundation
- Two anonymous donors

For more information about these centers, visit mazelatot.org

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