

Summary of Findings from Sustainability Interviews

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OVERVIEW

In January and February 2021, Informing Change conducted twelve key informant interviews for the Denver & Boulder Jewish Teen Initiative (DBJTI) to gain a better understanding of how community leaders and program leaders in the Jewish teen ecosystem perceive its strengths and gaps. The interview protocol followed a Sustainability Diagnostic Tool (SDT) developed by the national Jewish Teen Education and Engagement Funder Collaborative, which has supported DBJTI since 2014.

The SDT is designed to prompt reflections on the development and sustainability of Jewish teen education and engagement ecosystems across the country. The tool uses the term “ecosystem” to mean the full network of local Jewish organizations involved directly or peripherally with Jewish teen programming and engagement.

According to the stakeholders of Jewish teen programming in Denver and Boulder interviewed with the SDT, local teens and families have access to a variety of good, steady Jewish teen programming led by knowledgeable teen program leaders whose skillsets are good to excellent. Interviewees expressed some concerns about the ability of these programs to rebound quickly from the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly in regard to staffing. In general, however, stakeholders have a positive outlook for the short-term future of Jewish teen programming post-pandemic. There is less certainty about the longer-term future of quality programming for Jewish teens, and a lack of shared vision and shared commitment for ensuring quality teen programming for all of the Jewish teens of Denver and Boulder.

METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

Stakeholders for the interviews were selected by the evaluation team in consultation with Foundation staff. The twelve stakeholders represent a range of perspectives – they are teen program leaders, senior nonprofit vice-presidents and program supervisors, lay leaders of synagogues and nonprofits, synagogue education directors, and parents of teens. The majority have been active in the Denver and Boulder Jewish community for many years and were able to speak about changes over time. Of the 12 interviewees, five are in organizations that are part of the DBJTI, four had limited interaction with DBJTI through J-Hub between 2015-17, and three have had no formal interactions with DBJTI or J-Hub. Two of the twelve are involved exclusively in Boulder Jewish programs and organizations.

The interview protocol followed the SDT framework and guidance from the national Funder Collaborative’s evaluation team. A copy of the SDT framework is attached (see Appendix A). Our analysis of the interview data focused on whether or not there was evidence of the sustainability indicators laid out in the SDT. We aimed to answer the question: How, and how well, is the Jewish teen ecosystem in Denver and Boulder positioned for future sustainability?

FINDINGS

Steady Programming

The strength of the local Jewish teen ecosystem is within the programs themselves. Stakeholders describe the programs they know as high quality, attractive to teens and parents, and responsive to teen interests and needs. They describe and praise a wide range of programs and organizations, including synagogue education programs, camp programs, and youth engagement programs both within the DBJTI and non-Initiative programs. While not all programs are described as filled “to capacity,” there is a general sense that Jewish teen programming elicits enough interest from parents and teens to fill programs to a healthy level.

Relatedly, programs are thoughtful in the way they market to teens and parents. They make adjustments and aim to stay up to date on trends and platforms that catch teens’ attention. They also pay attention to the need to differentiate marketing strategies for parents and their teens.

Many teen engagement programs are using successful models for teen leadership and teen-designed programming. There is a strong pattern of collecting teen input, training, and supporting teens for leadership roles, and using teen networking for peer recruitment. Some programs that use established curricula with fewer options for teen-designed programs invest in their group leader training, to ensure opportunities for teen voice where possible and teen-led conversations about the curriculum.

Support & Training for Teen Professionals

The quality of a teen program and the likelihood of repeat participation by teens and families are heavily dependent on the skillset and personality of the Jewish educator or teen professional running the program. Stakeholders see both strengths and weaknesses in this aspect of Jewish teen programs and the larger ecosystem as a whole.

Stakeholders say—usually in reference to the programs they know best—that there are excellent, well-trained teen professionals and group leaders running teen programs. They are less confident that other programs have such high-quality staff, sometimes citing specific situations and examples. Stakeholders do not see any community-wide effort to ensure teen professionals possess or develop the kinds of skillsets and knowledge necessary to work well with teens. Organizations with national affiliations direct their teen professionals to national and regional trainings for skill building.

The question of whether the community has an adequate number of teen professionals received mixed responses. Some interviewees believe the roster of Jewish teen professionals depends on too many part-time, low-paid positions. In addition, some cited evidence that the pandemic has resulted in increased workloads for teen professionals in several organizations as they cover staff vacancies and reassignments, further reducing the hours available for teen programming within their paid weekly hours. Relatedly, there are concerns about teen-facing staff turnover—even organizations with an adequate number of quality teen professionals may be burning out these staff with high workloads, difficult schedules, and enrollment expectations.

Based on their observations at individual organizations, interviewees believe that supervisors encourage teen professionals' development. Though there does not appear to be an aligned, community-wide strategy for supporting teen professionals' development, most stakeholders observe that supervisors of teen professionals encouraged participation in professional development opportunities—that is, when teen professionals could find those opportunities.

Identified Gaps in the Ecosystem

In contrast to the pattern of many positive comments about individual programs, stakeholders had little to offer as evidence of cross-program, community-level ecosystem development. Three key elements of long-term sustainability emerged as gaps: partnerships, leadership, and shared vision and goals.

- **Partnerships & Collaborations.** Some partnerships between teen programs exist, but on a small scale or as a vendor relationship (e.g., a specialty program like a camp and a more general program sharing resources or co-marketing). Stakeholders believe that not enough is being done to form and sustain strategic cross-program partnerships that could be mutually beneficial for the teen programs and for individual educators, and that could strengthen, expand, or innovate existing programming.

Most stakeholders expressed a desire for an organizing group to bring teen professionals together occasionally to share information and learn about one another's programs. A secondary interest is to have this group identify the types of learning or professional development of immediate interest to teen professionals and help organize activities to match these short-term interests. Several stakeholders referred to the learning group of early childcare professionals as an example of how regular peer

gatherings can strengthen relationships, provide learning opportunities, and give professionals a sense of being seen and supported by the larger Jewish community.

- **Leadership.** No stakeholders believe the Jewish teen ecosystem has intentional leadership, although a few whose organizations participate in the DBJTI can name some individuals they consider leaders with a vision beyond their own program. Almost all can identify a couple strong leaders of individual program and some refer to supportive lay leaders and executive leaders, but there is a perception of little to no ecosystem leadership. This is not surprising, given that stakeholders also described the connections across teen programs as light, loose, and occasional.

One stakeholder points out that the logical pool from which to draw and build leadership for the teen ecosystem is the roster of teen professionals themselves. However, as we have learned in evaluations of other Jewish teen initiatives, this group is known for burnout and rapid turnover and typically comprises entry-level positions in larger organizations. Younger teen professionals frequently describe a lack of support to advance on a career pathway within the Jewish community. It is unrealistic to expect sustainable leadership to appear in this group without convening opportunities (as noted earlier in this memo) to help identify, recognize, and nurture future leadership for the field.

- **Shared Vision & Goals.** Accompanying the perceived gap in ecosystem level leadership, stakeholders are not aware of a shared vision or set of common goals across teen programs, neither in Denver nor Boulder. Some community leaders assume various teen programs must have goals in common, despite the differences in their program, and believe teen professionals can infer a shared purpose around teen and education engagement in Jewish life. However, it is clear that in the eyes of the larger community the Jewish teen ecosystem has not agreed on or articulated a shared mission or shared goals. Organizations work hard to stand out and offer unique programming but focusing on these differences between programs can also undermine the sense that all organizations are working together to support Denver and Boulder teens.
- Stakeholders do not believe there is a clear and coherent roadmap for the community's future as an ecosystem. Several interviewees identified the lack of an infrastructure to keep teen professionals connected—even something informal like monthly roundtables—as contributing to this gap.

Stakeholders associated with JEWISHcolorado (JCo) programs have a more positive view of shared goals, possibly because their teen program design depends on partnerships with a wide range of Jewish communal organizations.

Funding Uncertainty

When discussing sustainability of a nonprofit program, most people think first of funding. The SDT framework usefully points out other aspects of structure and planning that contribute to sustainability. However, addressing the question of future funding is central to securing sustainability, whether for an individual program or for a group of programs that make up a community's Jewish teen ecosystem.

The Denver and Boulder communities are at a disadvantage right now in envisioning shared funding strategies for the ecosystem, for three reasons. First, several Jewish teen programs in both communities are struggling to generate funding or allocate organizational funds to ensure their own minimal operations for the next couple years. Second, information about one another's future plans and funding are rarely shared across organizations and programs. Half of the informants were unable to make any comment on the future financial viability of the overall teen ecosystem. Third, the staff cuts and other organizational disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic are further clouding the picture of what resources might be available for teen programs in the near future.

Still, it is worth looking at two of the SDT indicators for funding security to understand the funding challenges facing the current set of programs now serving Denver and Boulder Jewish teens:

- **Diverse and numerous funding sources.** Stakeholders do not describe a funding landscape of many small and large funders in the Denver and Boulder area. Most say there are few local foundations or donors interested in funding teen programs. One stakeholder, for example, says they do not know any funders in the area besides Rose Community Foundation and JCo. Several say they must draw on national funding sources through their national organization to sustain their program.
- **Diversified revenue strategies at the program level.** Most of the programs known to the stakeholders we interviewed depend on budget allocations from a parent organization. A few receive teen-restricted program grants from foundations; those receiving DBJTI grants acknowledge this funding is unusual and extraordinary in size, scope, flexibility, and long-term investment, compared to other foundation grants. A few programs have earned income from program fees, and most conduct donor solicitation to some degree. No stakeholder knew of any long-term financial plan at the program level aimed at teen program sustainability.

IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings from this sustainability diagnostic, the Denver and Boulder communities can feel moderately comfortable about the quality, responsiveness, and likely sustainability of programs for Jewish teens. Across the two communities, program by program, there will continue to be ups and downs in program quality, outreach and enrollment, and sustainability. Without a centralized group promoting and advocating for Jewish teen engagement and education, however, the overall diversity and reach of program offerings is unlikely to change. And despite stakeholders' comfort with the status quo, generating support for future teen programming will be more difficult if communal leaders, let alone the broader Jewish community, cannot articulate shared goals and a common vision for Jewish teen engagement and education.

In our evaluations of other community-wide Jewish teen initiatives, we have seen that the Jewish teen professionals and teen leaders form the underpinning of successful teen engagement. Fortunately for the Denver and Boulder Jewish ecosystem, there is much enthusiasm among those we interviewed for building a community of Jewish youth professionals for mutual support, greater learning, and finding ways to work cooperatively toward shared goals. Whether a teen group leader or a lay leader just observing the work, across the different perspectives, stakeholders acknowledge the benefits of connecting teen professionals to one another and supporting their learning and shared work.

Recommendations for future:

- Consider ways to support networking and shared learning for Jewish teen professionals. Whether regular roundtables, casual convenings, or a formal learning community, these types of routine gatherings have been shown to facilitate the development of a cohesive Jewish teen ecosystem and help youth professionals feel supported by the larger Jewish community. Gatherings that facilitate networking, sharing information, and short-term learning (e.g., speakers, panels, workshops) seem to match the current needs of the ecosystem rather than formal professional development courses and training series.
- Engage Jewish community leaders (e.g., CEOs, synagogue leaders, lay leaders) in a conversation about shared goals for educating and engaging Jewish teens. Find a way to connect, even if only once every one or two years, how different organizations' missions and visions include Jewish teens and teen activities. This kind of intentional conversation focused on teens, even if only occasional, can motivate and guide program leaders to identify and work on shared goals.

- Consider leveraging organizations' success with teen leadership for a community-wide planning assignment that could support shared goals and elevate the community's awareness of and interest in Jewish teen engagement and education. Stakeholders in these interviews see the value of having teens act as leaders and planners, and their comments confirm that the teen programs are developing some teens' skills for such roles.
- As the Covid-19 pandemic recedes, step forward to ask questions and build understanding about whether and how the pandemic has disrupted and changed the Jewish teen ecosystem. In addition to the numerous staff layoffs and program restructuring, there have been bursts of teen leadership, program creativity, and greater connectivity through online and video tools. An intentional inventory and reflection about what was lost and gained holds potential for strengthening and perhaps reimagining the Jewish teen ecosystem.

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