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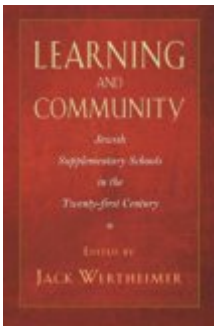

Jack Wertheimer, ed.. *Learning and Community: Jewish Supplementary Schools in the Twenty-First Century.* Brandeis Series in American Jewish History, Culture, and Life. Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2009. 400 pp. $35.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-58465-770-5.

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Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

What to call the enterprise of educating the children of a Jewish congregation is in and of itself a challenge. For so long "Sunday School," brought to the American Jewish community by Rebecca Gratz in the nineteenth century, was the term used. Today, most practitioners use "Religious School," where schooling is part-time and the curriculum is primarily Judaica. "Hebrew School" is the preferred terminology where part-time language education and Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation is central. Academics and scholars use "Supplemental School" as their favored term.

But it is just this seemingly small point of acceptable terminology that begins to reveal the challenges with this type of educational enterprise. Is it a school and only on Sunday? Is it for religious instruction only or Hebrew language? Is it only congregationally based? What exactly does “supplemental” mean (p. xviin1)? Putting aside what to call this institution, much more important is the question of the possibility of having successful part-time Jewish learning programs for children. In fact, what are the elements of successful supplementary schools?

That and many other important questions are what Jack Wertheimer attempts to answer in this book. Working with an excellent team of ten--five who are academics-researchers and five who are educational administrators-leaders--Wertheimer sets out to “explain how some Supplementary Schools deliver a reasonably effective Jewish education, whether in conventional ways or by taking their programs in unexpected directions” (p. xvi).

The research for this volume was sponsored by the Avi Chai Foundation, which was interested in the various models of supplementary schools that have emerged over the past several years. Wertheimer and his colleagues decided to look for schools in various settings and regions, and of different sizes and denominational approaches. They also decided to visit only schools that were reported as “schools that work.” The study was not meant to be a representative sample of supplementary schooling. They were looking for

places that seem to be “reasonable successes, not failures.” They chose to visit four schools connected to the Reform movement, two Conservative, one Reconstructionist, one Chabad, and two community high schools. The research was done during the calendar year 2007 by sending two people to each chosen site, an academic and an educational administrator. The research team used the qualitative methodology of Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, called “portraiture,” from her work ***The Good High School: Portraits of Character and Culture*** (1983), and the insights of Elliot W. Eisner, who believed that a person with much prior educational administrative experience in schooling is able to assess the school as a “connoisseur” (***Re-Imagining Schools: Selected Works of Elliot Eisner*** [2005]).

From the very start, I am struck positive by several choices Wertheimer makes. First, he is very creative in forming teams of academics and practitioners doing the research. This choice alone is unique in the field. It allows for a richer more nuanced view of each site. I would have loved to have been part of the discussions between the team members as they processed their observations of a school. What did each see that the other did not? Second, Wertheimer’s decision to only study schools reported as “reasonably successful” is spot on. We have enough materials about what does not work. A thick portrait of an effective school is what is needed so others may work to achieve successes in their own sites. Wertheimer is emphatic when he states in the book that the volume is not a report of the field of supplementary schooling, nor is the book meant to invent a better system of schooling.

The book is well organized into three sections: "Innovative Small Schools," "Re-Thinking Large Suburban Congregational Schools," and "High School Models." Within each section are chapters devoted to every school site visited. The chapters are authored by each of the academic and practitioner two-person teams. I enjoyed the very descriptive language in each chapter, painting pictures and capturing conversations. I found it easy to put myself in the school with the researchers-observers. The reader really gets the flavor of the school, a taste of the curriculum, setting, teachers, and students. The reader also gains insight into critical aspects of the school from the perspectives of the rabbis involved, lay leaders, and parents. Most of all, the writers are able to analyze and interpret seemingly every facet of the school being observed, from tests, examinations and other assessment tools, governance, schedules of classes and events, demographic trends, burn out, curriculum, and physical facilities, to mission and vision.

The final chapter contains the conclusions gleaned from these in-depth observations of ten reasonably successful supplemental schools. Wertheimer gives us ten lessons learned from the sites. One, we learn that the best schools develop community among their stakeholders and this is intentionally a school goal. Community building comes before any Jewish content. Two, for a school to be good it must emphasize Jewish study and content at a high level. Students learn more than the facts of the subject. They learn to analyze, evaluate, conceptualize, and value what they study. Three, the curriculum and teaching staff are aligned with the goals of the school. Teachers are trained and supported to ensure that what they are teaching in the classroom is consistent with the objectives of the program. Four, the school is valued and so are the students. Students feel valued because there is individual attention. When students feel good about their time in the school, the school gets valued. Five, families are engaged in the educational process. When the students are positive about their time in the school, parents serve as allies with the school. The more the parents engage, the more Jewish living enters their homes. Six, there is a clear vision for the school and its students. The school articulates how it sees its ideal graduate and has plans for how to get a student to reach that achievement.

Seven, there is a culture of self-reflection. The leaders and stakeholders of the school are determined to constantly look inward and examine the current state of the school toward improvement. Eight, the school makes the most of resources available. Good schools look to every and all sources for potential financial support; the recruiting, training, and retention of faculty; and any other internal or external resource that will help the school. Nine, the school develops a common purpose with lay leaders and parents. Members of the Board of Trustees of the congregation and other lay leaders are as committed to the success of the school as is any parent. Finally, ten, there is a staff imbued with a strong Jewish mission. As Wertheimer writes, "Inspired teachers matter" (p. 358). I think that says it all.

The final few pages of the book include some larger conclusions that Wertheimer and the researchers-observers feel are especially important for policymakers and funders to consider. In my opinion, the most striking of these is the lack of champions for the field of supplemental Jewish education. If only leaders and donors put their collective minds and resources together so that the overwhelming majority of supplemental schools could be reasonably good.

Wertheimer and his colleagues have made a significant contribution to the field of Jewish education. This is an important book to both study and use with practitioners, professionals, and lay leaders.