



## A Landmark Moment for the Field: Unveiling Standards of Excellence in Jewish ECE

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*By Michael Ben-Avie and Lisa Farber Miller*

As anyone who has done it knows, building a professional field is a long haul. The time and resources needed are immense. Initiatives and programs launched often are a mixture of successes and failures. Sometimes the greatest of efforts lead to mere incremental advancements. Jewish early childhood education (ECE) is no exception, as we both have experienced over decades of work.

Three years ago, Jewish ECE took a major step forward with the launch of [BUILdING Jewish ECE](#) – the first of its kind national marketing and family engagement initiative for synagogues and Jewish community centers with ECE centers. Rose Community Foundation brought together the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ), Jewish Community Center Association (JCCA) and United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (USCJ) to provide coaching and tools for increased marketing capacity and higher enrollment at nine Denver/Boulder ECE centers, and to help them expedite long-term growth, better engage Jewish families and build stronger connections Jewish communities. This was the first time these three national organizations worked together.

Now, as that initiative concludes, and we absorb the marked improvements in the participating ECE centers, we are excited to release the [Standards of Excellence for Jewish Community Centers and Synagogues with Early Childhood Education Centers](#): Guidelines for Exemplary Educational Practice and for Exemplary Marketing, Enrollment Conversion, Family Satisfaction and Retention, Integration of Center Families into JCCS and

Synagogues. Thankfully, we call them SOE for short.

There are 15 overarching standards within the entire SOE, addressing such areas as ECE center brand identity and marketing strategie – areas that most educators and directors have not received training in – as well as dynamic and developmentally appropriate curriculum and seamless Judaism. The Standards are comprehensive, multidimensional, and include guidelines related to preparation, action, and outcome. **They are a tool, literally a workbook to help Jewish ECE centers understand and document their accomplishments in both educational and marketing strategies, and to develop action plans for change.** We have learned that for ECE centers and the broader institutions in which they exist to be successful, to be financial viable, and to fully welcome families into Jewish life, both excellence in marketing and educational quality must be addressed.

Critically, all of the standards within the SOE build on previous ECE efforts. The standards addressing marketing were developed as part of BUILDing Jewish ECE. Other standards were developed through professional development initiatives with ECE centers that focused on education practices. **Essentially, now, after ten years of work and millions of dollars invested, the SOE is a compilation, a refinement, and streamlined publication of ECE standards developed by expert evaluators and consultants who worked directly with ECE centers.**

The SOE fills a deep void that existed in Jewish ECE: a common language – or shared data definitions – which is the hallmark of any field. Without this common language, practitioners and evaluators ostensibly doing the same work are unable to converse with each other, share best practices, discuss challenges, hold themselves to the same standards, and learn together *as a field*. Researchers may find the SOE useful when conducting independent evaluations of Jewish ECE initiatives.

For the synagogue or JCC, the SOE is a self-assessment tool to help organize, visualize, and track quality improvement progress. It is intended to be used by executive directors, clergy, ECE center directors, staff, supervisors, and leadership teams who recognize and work toward levels of competency related to educational practice and professional development, family engagement, increasing enrollment, and fostering connections to Jewish communities. It can be helpful to review the guidelines and determine actions with an individual who has prior experience working in ECE.

The advancement of ECE – continuing to elevate its place in our community – is key to welcoming in and engaging more people in Jewish life. **For children, preschool years are a critical time in the development of cognition, personality and identity – including religious identity.** And we know that when children enjoy Jewish learning and rituals at school, they bring them home, often introducing them to the entire family.

**For parents, a preschool is their first educational choice for their child and family, one that can spur a lifelong Jewish journey.** Parents who perceive an ECE program to be of high quality are more likely to listen and absorb when an educator engages them in Jewish activities and teaching. Moreover, young parents often choose Jewish preschools primarily to meet other Jewish parents and to form community. Parents who have Jewish peer groups through their child's school are more likely to be actively engaged in Jewish life in the future.

Slowly, more Jewish community leaders have grown to understand the value of ECE. It's no longer uncommon for people to talk about the need for excellent ECE experiences. Yet, many people still do not know what exemplary ECE looks like, feels like, where and how it occurs. Equally as important, they may not know what practices to implement to achieve that excellence. The SOE is designed to give a clear step-by-step picture of all facets of this work. Along with other experts in the field, we wrote the SOE in a way that is not overly prescriptive, but that also offers specifics on exemplary Jewish ECE. The SOE will help translate goals into practice – to operationalize what ECE centers do into individual items.

We hope ECE centers and the broader institutions in which they exist – generally synagogues and JCCs – have three main takeaways from digesting this publication:

1. **Understand what to look for and what to do to create excellent Jewish ECE experience** . Whether it's the marketing, family engagement, or educational component, ECE leaders and educators need a robust knowledge-base that addresses the biggest and smallest elements of this work. As just one small example, an ECE classroom may have a book shelf that is nice and organized, but is it in reach of the children? There are countless questions like this prompted in the SOE.
2. **Be as specific as you want about which areas of ECE to focus on** . There are 15 total standards within the entire SOE. Within these primary sections there are numerous sub-sections. Standard 3, for example, is *Dynamic and Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum*. Standard 3.3 is *Artistic expression and creative opportunities*. If desired, select a few key areas to work on and focus intently on those related standards. In Denver/Boulder, the centers were encouraged to focus on three main areas so that the endeavor didn't feel so daunting.
3. **Celebrate**. We hope ECE leaders and educators gather each year to review their progress, to measure themselves against goals they identified, and to celebrate as they say "look what we've accomplished." Stop and take stock. The celebration of effort, the acknowledgement of talented and devoted professionals, is an important part of building a field too—and building morale.

We hope the release of the [Standards of Excellence](#) continues a conversation about the place of ECE in Jewish life. Having shared data definitions is significant in its own right, but this development, and this publication, must be coupled with a continued, highly warranted, focus on and support of ECE by other funders, practitioners, and leaders in Jewish education. That in mind, we look forward to feedback and can be reached at [michael.ben-avie@yale.edu](mailto:michael.ben-avie@yale.edu) and [standardssofexcellence@rcfdenver.org](mailto:standardssofexcellence@rcfdenver.org).

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