

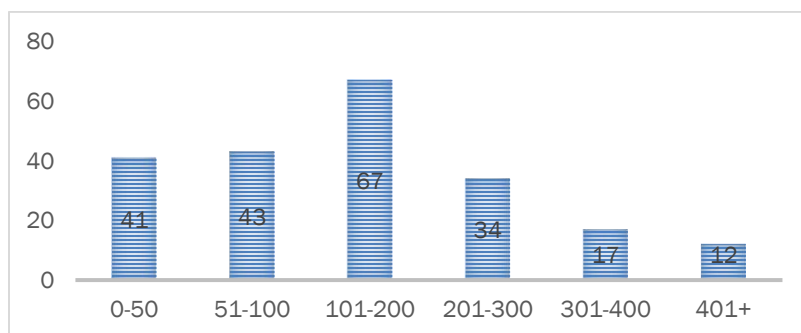
New Approaches to Supplementary Education in the Reform Movement

Preliminary Report of the Union for Reform Judaism Census on
Supplementary Education Learning Models
Rabbi Laura Novak Winer, Ilana Horwitz and Dr. Isa Aron

In recent years a growing number of Reform congregations have experimented with new formats for their religious schools. In order to gauge the prevalence of both alternative structures and curricular innovations, the authors designed a survey that was posted on the URJ Tent, sent out to all members of the Association of Reform Jewish Educators, and shared in appropriate social media venues. Additionally, follow-up emails were sent to congregations known to have alternative models.

We received 218 responses out of an estimated 630 congregations with religious schools. As shown below, survey responses came from schools of varying size (Table 1), in congregations of varying size (Table 2), with the highest number of responses coming from schools with 101-200 students and congregations with 251-500 member units.¹ Larger congregations were over-represented, and small congregations (with 250 or under member units) were under-represented, possibly because the leaders of small congregations may not be sufficiently integrated into the networks of Reform educators to have received a link to the survey or because a large percentage (approximately 75%) of the smallest congregations (with 75 or under member units) may not have religious schools. Through a process of verifying the existence of stated models in the congregations we identified 184 examples of alternative models. (Table 3)

Table 1: Number of Respondent Congregations by Student Population
N = 218



¹ Data on the congregations in the Reform Movement by student population are not available for comparison.



Table 2: Number of Respondent Congregations in Comparison to URJ Member Congregations by Congregation Household Size

N = 218

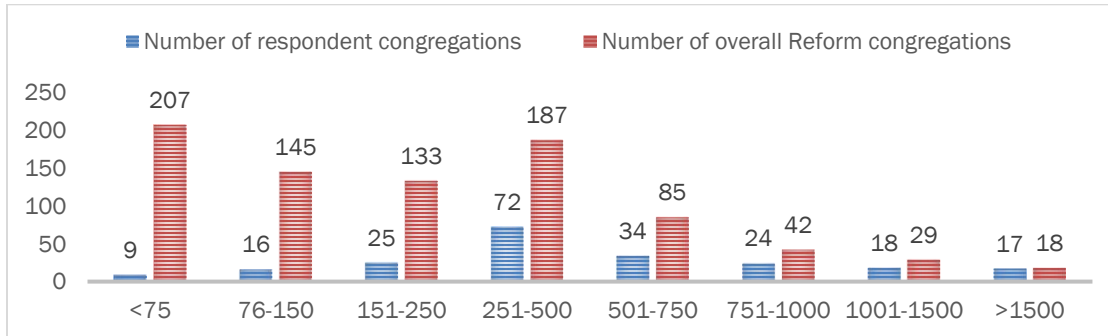
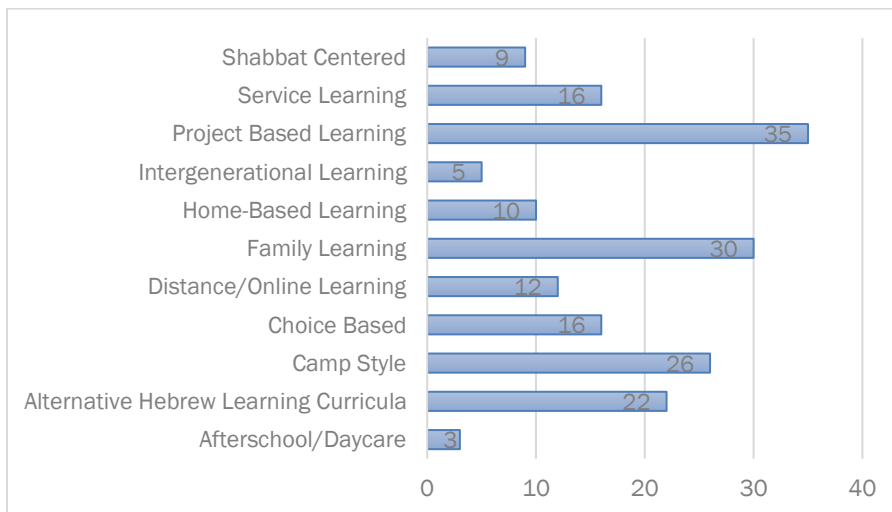


Table 3: Number and Types of Alternative Models²:

N = 184



In defining the models and verifying their existence in the respondent congregations we faced many challenges:

- There is no standard definition for any of the alternative models. By perusing synagogue websites and conducting follow-up interviews we learned that many respondents over-reported their use of models. For example, we learned that most of the self-identified “Camp-Style” models met in the synagogue building at the typical Sunday morning time slot; they were identified as “camp models” because they used elements of experiential learning and “camp-like” terminology, such as *madrich* (counselor) instead of teacher, or *edah* (group), instead of class. Believing that experiential learning and terminology were

² This list of models was adapted from categories suggested by Aron (2014) and by the Jewish Education Project’s Coalition of Innovating Congregations. For a definition of each of the models, please refer to the complete report on the Census of Supplementary Education Learning Models (available in the URJ Tent, August 2017).



not sufficient to distinguish the camp model, we limited this category to day camps held all day for at least a week at a time or to models that demonstrated a significantly transformed structure and goals that are reflective of “camp-like” learning. Similarly, programs purporting to fit into the “Family Learning” model ranged from those in which parents participated in 2-3 stand-alone family education days to those in which parents attended with their children every week. Wanting to preserve the distinction between family days and family education, we excluded sites in which parents attended fewer than 6 times a year.

- The difference between what Aron (2014, p.202) has called “full strength” and “diluted” models might be ideological or pragmatic; If the latter, the difference might be explained by whether the congregation takes incremental or transformational approach to change. Unfortunately, in the absence of in-depth, qualitative research, we have no way of knowing how synagogues think about these changes, and what their aspirations are for the future.
- A survey cannot adequately assess the depth and quality of innovative curricula such as project-based learning or service learning. We know a great deal about some of the programs through articles, videos and explanations on their websites, but little about many of the others.
- While we tried to define the models according to their structure and their primary goals, we found that these goals pointed to more than one model. For example, we initially set out to define a “Community Building” model, but realized that the creation of communities of learners is a goal for many of the models. Thus, it proved challenging to categorize individual congregational programs as fitting within one model or another because a congregation’s program could meet the criteria of multiple models at the same time. Though we have identified 184 examples of alternative models (Table 3), those are representative of 123 unique congregations.

Lessons Learned

- **There is a great deal of experimentation underway:** More congregations than we thought are attempting to change the conventional religious school.
- **Incremental Change:** While a significant number of congregations are transforming their educational offerings in radical ways, utilizing one or more of the above models, many more congregations are making incremental changes, using Hebrew Through Movement, elements of project based learning, and/or adding family days, to take just a few examples. Several congregations stated explicitly that they see themselves innovating within the structure of the conventional model. One educator wrote:

“People think that because it is conventional model [meaning that it meets weekly on Sunday mornings], that what happens inside is ‘conventional’ or old school, but what we are doing within the time and within the classrooms has exciting projects, material and experiences.”

- **Vision and Goals of Jewish learning.** Many congregations have articulated visions for Jewish learning and goals or are working on creating those. Asked to “describe your overall educational goals for your K-6 learners and families,” over 50% of the respondents included all or part of their formal vision statements and goals. For example:
 - *“...we are striving to (re)imagine and create a fun, nurturing and dynamic center of living Judaism, with multiple opportunities for authentic Jewish study, practice and observance.”*
 - *“...it is not our goal to complete your child’s Jewish education, but rather to awaken the fire that already exists inside your child. We want to give them a taste of a vibrant and complex Jewish experience that transforms them into life-long learners and lovers of Judaism.”*
 - *“Religious School is a spiritual community where... families explore becoming moral, confident individuals in relationship with one another and the world...”*



In addition, many congregations articulated social-emotional goals such as

- “...creating a sense of belonging to a Jewish community”
- “...building a strong Jewish connection and community with their peers”
- “...discover joy and excitement in their learning.”

There is still a predominant focus on building Jewish identity, and on the knowledge of holidays, Torah, and mitzvot. The goals of Hebrew prayer literacy for the purposes of becoming bar/bat mitzvah are still quite prominent.

- **Home-based Learning:** The census uncovered a model not included in our initial list. At least 10 congregations currently offer options for individualized or small group learning in students’ homes, with a teacher hired and supervised by the congregation who travels to various homes to teach a set curriculum. The goals of this model include creating community among small groups of students and offering flexibility for families according to mutually convenient schedules. (Note: Home-based learning is distinguished from homeschooling, in which the parent(s) set and teach the curriculum.)
- **Hebrew:** While many congregations are employing sound-to-print methodologies such as Hebrew Through Movement in their programs, they have not yet fully transformed the way they approach Hebrew education. With very few exceptions, sound-to-print methodologies appear to be additive rather than a replacement of decoding. Of the approximately 50 respondents who indicated they employed a sound-to-print curriculum, more than half of them still introduce decoding in grades 3 or 4.
- **Growing Awareness of Special Needs:** Congregations are hiring inclusion specialists to address the needs of learners with special needs. Four congregations made note that they were in the process of creating this new position in their communities. We don’t know how many congregations already have designated inclusion specialists, but believe that this is a trend to watch.
- **Hebrew and Judaica Integration or Separation:** There remains an ongoing debate about whether Hebrew and Judaica learning should be integrated or separated. On the one hand, the desire to offer a holistic education and create stronger relationships between teachers and students has led to integrated curricula. On the other, the use of new models creates a need for segmenting the curriculum and hiring the right teachers to teach specific subjects.

V. Areas for further research

Limited as we were to a survey that could be filled out rather quickly, we were unable to ask certain more in-depth questions about the changing landscape. We hope that future studies will be able to inform us about: how these alternative models were developed; who the teachers are; who creates the curricula; and how both the students in and graduates of these programs differ from their counterparts in conventional settings.

Next Steps

The URJ has already begun to use the information in this survey to create Active Learning Networks, small groups of congregations that already employ or are interested in introducing alternative models. These networks will help congregations share curricular resources and do joint problem solving. It is our hope that their conversations will add to our knowledge base in this critical area.

REFERENCES

Aron, I. (2014). Upending the Grammar of the Conventional Religious School. *Journal of Jewish Education*, 80(3), 193-228. doi:10.1080/15244113.2014.937193

