

Research Brief | #1

Career Trajectories of Jewish Educators in the United States

# The Journeys of Jewish Educators



Prepared by  
Rosov Consulting

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casje

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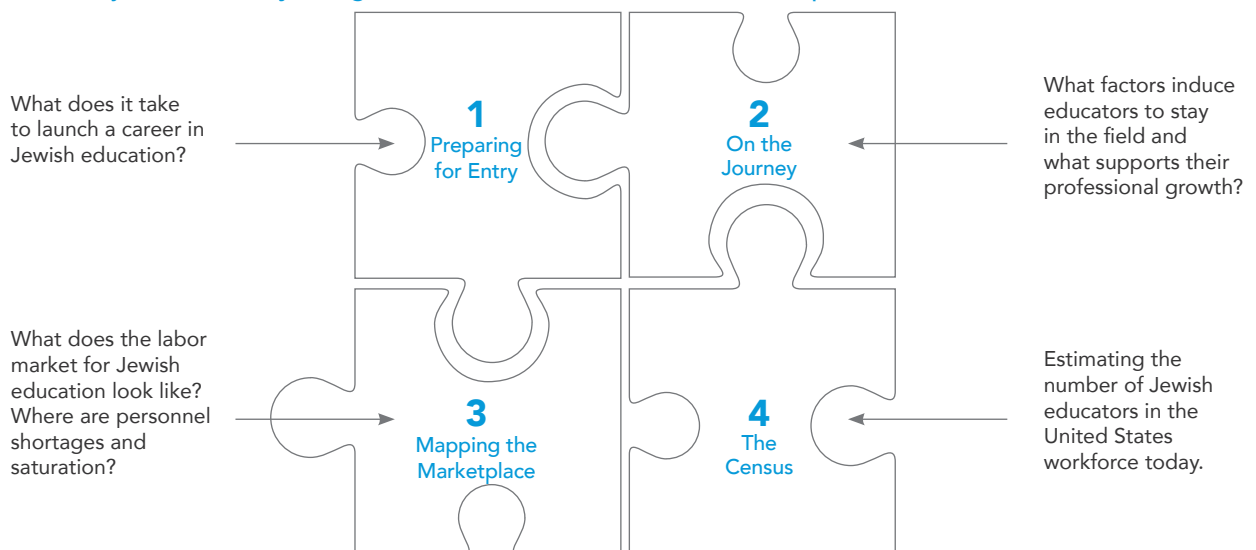
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## About this Report

The Collaborative for Applied Studies in Jewish Education (CASJE) is a community of researchers, practitioners, and policymakers dedicated to improving the quality of knowledge that can be used to guide Jewish education and learning. CASJE is committed to developing high quality research that is responsive to critical questions across diverse sectors in Jewish education. CASJE's programmatic and fiduciary home is located at the George Washington University's Graduate School of Education and Human Development (GSEHD).

This brief is first of a series of four that shares findings from *On the Journey*, one of four research strands of the CASJE Career Trajectories of Jewish Educators Study. The larger CASJE study seeks to understand the recruitment, retention and development of Jewish educators in the United States. You can read more about this study at [www.casje.org](http://www.casje.org)

The Career Trajectories Study is organized around four central research questions:



*On the Journey* is designed to elucidate the career pathways of Jewish educators, including their professional growth, compensation, workplace conditions and lived experiences. In 2019 CASJE published the white paper [\*On the Journey: Concepts That Support a Study of the Professional Trajectories of Jewish Educators\*](#), which lays out the framework and key questions that underlie this inquiry and serves as a companion to these research briefs.

# Acknowledgments

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# Summary

*On the Journey*—the first strand of a multi-year, comprehensive study of North American Jewish educators—explores the roles Jewish educators play across multiple settings, what motivates people to commit to this work, how they grow professionally, and in what ways their lived experiences shape their professional journeys and choices. Other briefs in our series delve deeply into key workplace conditions that impact Jewish educators across sectors: salary and benefits; professional development opportunities; and supports such as autonomy, collaboration, supervision, and mentoring. This first brief is a holistic exploration of Jewish educators’ professional lives, characterized by three “journeys” that many educators traverse during their careers: (1) Journeys Through Time—entering the field, becoming established, and advancing to higher roles; (2) Journeys In and Out—the “on-ramps” that bring people to the field from other professions and “off-ramps” that drive some to leave; and (3) The Inner Journey—how professional meaning and motivation develops and evolves.

In addition, this brief presents portraits of five individual educators, bringing to life how the personal and professional are woven together in their journeys. These are not meant to be “representative” portraits, as no five individuals could adequately represent the universe of Jewish educators. Rather, these portraits serve to highlight and contextualize many of the key themes explored in the *On the Journey* series.

## Key Findings

### Journeys Through Time

- Many Jewish educators enter the field in response to an opening rather than out of a purposeful choice to join the profession. When asked to identify what inspired them to become a Jewish educator, the most common response was, “I had a job opportunity and decided to take it.”
- As educators become more established in their roles, they also become more satisfied, empowered, and committed. Interviewees highlighted three factors that lead to these positive outcomes: the confidence that comes with time; learning from mentors and supervisors; and having opportunities for substantive professional development, such as fellowships, certificate programs, and graduate degrees.
- Although some interviewees shared stories of how they had moved up within their organizations, quite a few

instead emphasized their uncertainty or discouragement about their future career options. This was particularly true for those outside of formal Jewish education, or those within formal education who don’t see administration in their future.

### Journeys In and Out of the Field

- Many Jewish educators experience discontinuous journeys with “on-ramps” and “off-ramps” in and out of the field. Fully 60% of survey respondents—the “switchers”—had previously held a primary job in a non-Jewish organization.
- Overall, switchers are more professionally satisfied, motivated, and committed than non-switchers. Interview narratives suggest that two reasons for this difference may be that many switchers join the field to seek a career with more meaning and purpose, and that they benefit from the skills and expertise they bring with them.

- On the opposite end are the “leavers,” who exit the field to pursue other career paths or leave professional life altogether (not including retirees). The most common reasons expressed for leaving Jewish education are toxic work environments, inadequate compensation and/or benefits, lack of professional growth opportunities, personal issues such as work/life balance, and seeking different professional missions (such as working with diverse populations).

## The Inner Journey

- Even if many Jewish educators enter the field for largely practical or circumstantial reasons, nearly all come to see their work as a source of deeper meaning and purpose. Fewer than half of respondents said they were motivated “a lot” in their work by practical concerns such as “making a living.”

- Overall, professional motivations fall into two categories encapsulated in the very term “Jewish educator:” shaping lives and cultivating minds through education, and seeking to inspire love of Judaism and create rich Jewish identities for those with whom they work. The dedication expressed is emblematic of professionals who see their work not merely as a job or even a career, but as a “calling.”
- Some interviewees identified a darker side to the assumption that Jewish education is inherently a “calling.” The intrinsic rewards of fulfilling, values-based work can be used to justify skimping on the extrinsic rewards that are equally necessary—good pay and benefits, reasonable work hours, and even professional respect. Historically, this has been an all-too-prevalent challenge of the field.

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# Data and Methods

This brief reports data gathered as part of CASJE's investigation of "Career Trajectories of Jewish Educators." Quantitative data come specifically from the *On the Journey* survey fielded over January and February 2020 to Jewish educators, defined as professionals "involved in designing and delivering experiences for the purpose of facilitating Jewish learning, engagement, connection, and meaning." Qualitative data come from follow-up interviews and focus groups with a subsample of 52 survey respondents and an additional 20 people who had left the field.

Specifically, study participants were employed in five occupational sectors: (1) formal Jewish education (day schools, early childhood, supplemental schools); (2) informal/experiential settings including both immersive (e.g., camp) and non-immersive (e.g., youth organizations, JCCs); (3) those involved in engagement, social justice, and innovation (e.g., Jewish Studio Project, Moishe House, OneTable); (4) communal organizations that may employ someone in a related role (e.g., scholars in residence at Federations or Jewish educators at Jewish Family Services); and (5) non-organizational networks and online learning (e.g., independent B'nai Mitzvah or Hebrew tutors).

The survey was fielded in eight communities selected to represent a range of sizes of Jewish populations and include diverse geographic regions of the United States. The communities were: Austin, TX, Boston, MA, Chicago, IL, Detroit, MI, Las Vegas, NV, Miami-Dade, FL, Nassau and Westchester Counties,

NY, and San Francisco Bay Area, CA. (For more information about the communities' Jewish educational ecosystems, please see "**On the Journey: Study Methodology and Data Collection Instruments.**")

The total number of survey respondents was 1,278, of which approximately 40% are day school educators, 20% supplemental school educators, 20% early childhood educators, 10% informal/experiential educators, and the remainder in innovation/social justice organizations, federated institutions, or working as independent educators. All respondents had been in the field between 6 and 30 years.

The *On the Journey* survey was designed to explore the relationships between "background" characteristics of individual educators and their work settings, the interventions and workplace conditions that educators may experience in their careers, and the desired outcomes for educators (self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and career commitment) that are of particular interest to stakeholders of this research. Interviews and focus groups were designed to bring both additional richness and nuance to the findings from the survey data.

More information about the sample, methods, and instrumentation can be found in "**On the Journey: Study Methodology and Data Collection Instruments.**"

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► *Qualitative data come from follow-up interviews and focus groups with a subsample of 52 survey respondents and an additional 20 people who had left the field.*

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# Background

## Why Jewish Educators' Journeys Matter

If, as Rawidowicz famously put it, the Jewish people is widely conceived as “the ever-dying people,” then Jewish education must surely be the ever-expiring profession. More than 10 years ago, following a large-scale study of Jewish educators in North America, its authors concluded that the community faced “a critical shortage...of fully qualified educators,” a situation that called for a comprehensive strategy of recruitment, retention, and professional development.<sup>1</sup> Their alert echoed one made more than a decade earlier by the authors of *A Time to Act*, who called attention to a “severe shortage of talented, trained and committed personnel for the field of Jewish education.” As many have done before and since, these authors traced the challenges of recruitment and retention to “the salaries, training, working conditions and status of Jewish educators.”<sup>2</sup>

CASJE’s investigation of “Career Trajectories of Jewish Educators” is a fresh attempt to explore these challenges. At its core is an appreciation that if talented educators are to be attracted to this work and inspired to stick with it, we must better understand the journeys taken by those already working in the field today, as well as those who have chosen to leave. Educators’ journeys—or what have also been called their career trajectories, career cycles, or professional pathways—have been the subject of extensive scholarship over the last 70 years, at least since Howard Becker’s 1952 study “The Career of the Chicago Public Schoolteacher.”<sup>3</sup> This body of scholarship has important practical implications. Introducing another seminal study—Michael Huberman’s *The Lives of*

*Teachers*—Andy Hargreaves explains how, as we gain a fuller understanding of educators’ lives (their development, their careers, their relationships with colleagues, their working conditions, their status and rewards), we come to discern those things that make a difference to the quality of their practice. The more we know about these circumstances, the more wisely we might intervene in constructive ways.<sup>4</sup>

We know from inquiries into a wide variety of professions that how and when people come into a field of work informs how they approach that work over subsequent years.<sup>5</sup> We know, too, that the workplace conditions and cultures they experience as well as the professional opportunities with which they’re provided substantially influence their efficacy and commitment.<sup>6</sup> The extent to which the rhythm of their work aligns with the trajectory of their personal and social-psychological development also shapes their appetite and capacity to be productive.<sup>7</sup> In addition, beginning with the work of Bellah and his colleagues, in their landmark study *Habits of the Heart*, sociologists have distinguished people’s relationships to their work as jobs, careers, and callings,<sup>8</sup> a distinction that is particularly relevant for educators who very often feel a vocational calling regarding their professions. These phenomena all contribute to the contours of the educator’s journey. Until now, scholars of Jewish education have tended to view these elements of the educator’s journey discretely. This brief constitutes an attempt to connect these pieces with new data in a meaningful and policy-useful manner.<sup>9</sup>

1 Kress & Ben Avi, 2007.

2 Commission on Jewish Education in North America, 1991.

3 Becker, 1952, 470–477.

4 Hargreaves, 1993.

5 Troesch & Bauer, 2017, 389–398; Gubler et al., 2017, 1–14; Kindt, 2018, 958–976.

6 Johnson et al., 2012, 1–39; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017.

7 Huberman, 1993.

8 Bellah et al., 1985; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997, 22.

9 The *On the Journey* briefs share data from Jewish educators already established in the field. *Preparing for Entry* will report on launching a career, and *Mapping the Market* will analyze the career paths through the perspective of those who hire and prepare Jewish educators.





# The Many Roles of Jewish Educators

Before delving into what our data reveal about the paths that Jewish educators follow during their careers, we offer a brief overview of the roles and characteristics of the educators in our study sample. (See the *Data and Methods* section above for a snapshot of the sample's general composition.) All respondents had been in the field between 6 and 30 years. Overall, the large majority of respondents (83%) consider themselves to be "Jewish educators;" only 3% do not (and 11% do "sometimes").<sup>10</sup> Nine in 10 respondents identify as Jewish; of those who do not, the largest percentage work in Early Childhood Education (20%), and the lowest (0%) in Supplementary Schools. Finally, using a composite score measuring the extent of experience of Jewish education from a young age and work in the Jewish community, 18% of the sample can be characterized as "born and bred" to become Jewish educators, with numerous experiences as both learners and educators; 5% are "joiners" with very limited Jewish background and work experiences; and the rest fall in the middle.

The survey gathered additional data about the specific, and often multiple, professional roles that Jewish educators hold within their institutions:

- **Day School:** Just over half (55%) of the day school educators in our sample teach Judaic studies or Hebrew, while 47% teach general studies—two categories that are not mutually exclusive. (General studies teachers were included in the analysis if they self-defined as Jewish educators.) One in 10 of these day school educators provide special needs support, either as a teacher or paraeducator, while one in 12 define themselves as an "experiential educator." Although the study excluded those who are not frontline educators, it did include those who serve in both teaching and leadership roles. Thus, 8% are Division Heads and 4% Principals or Heads of School. Finally, 6% serve as teaching assistants and 2% as administrative assistants.
- **Early Childhood:** The large majority of early childhood educators in our sample—7 in 10—have positions as teachers, while 16% are teaching assistants. Nearly 20% are Directors or Assistant Directors, while also being frontline educators. Small numbers—2%–3%—fill specialist roles such as music or fitness teachers, Hebrew teachers, or (self-defined) experiential educators. While the survey didn't gather data on these educators' institutional settings, we know that most Jewish early childhood centers are housed within JCCs and congregations; far fewer operate as independent organizations.
- **Supplemental School:** Three-quarters of supplemental school educator respondents are teachers and about one-third are Directors or Assistant Directors. They are based in congregations and in other independent, afterschool frameworks. Small percentages fill a number of other educational roles, generally within congregations: 16% Hebrew language tutor, 14% B'nai Mitzvah tutor, 10% experiential educator, 8% specialist (music, arts, etc.), 5% Junior congregation leader, and 4% special needs support.

<sup>10</sup> Questions about how and why people come to define themselves as Jewish educators (or not) are explored in the "Preparing for Entry" study about pathways into the field.

- **Informal/Experiential Educators:** Although there were those in each of the above settings who labeled themselves an “experiential educator,” the survey also reached informal educators—working in camps, youth-serving organizations in congregations, and on campus, for example—who serve in a wide range of other roles, the most varied of any of the four primary sectors. Six in 10 in this group serve as a “program manager,” while just over half define themselves as an “engagement professional.” Adding a bit more specificity, one-quarter have a role as a “trip leader;” 21% are “youth group advisors;” 9% are “counselors;” and one respondent each said they are a “fellow,” “song leader,” and “shaliach.” Over 60% of respondents in this sector said they are a Director, Assistant Director, or Division Head. This is by far the largest percentage in any sector who hold leadership roles, likely reflecting the fact that “frontline” and “leadership” positions may not be as sharply defined within these kinds of experiential organizations.

- **Innovation/Social Justice/Communal Organizations:** Over the last 15 years, alternative sites for Jewish education and engagement have proliferated, especially for those age 18 and older. These include service-learning frameworks, millennial engagement platforms, media and technology businesses, Israel experience

providers, alternative minyanim and prayer groups, and programs that make available intensive Jewish learning for niche communities. While our survey did not collect data about the roles of those within these organizations who consider themselves Jewish educators (who make up much smaller populations than those in the above groups), our qualitative findings offer some insight. A number of professionals in the “Innovation and Social Justice” sector work for community-based or national Jewish organizations and might define their work as “engagement” or “social entrepreneurship” rather than “education.” Yet the core goals of their work—such as building Jewish community and meaning through creative means such as Shabbat dinners, volunteering, arts, trips to Israel, or environmental action—often overlap with those of self-defined “educational” organizations.

Communal professionals in our sample work in Federation “Engagement” departments, Jewish Family Services agencies, or Jewish Community Relations Councils. While many, if not most, professionals in these organizations would not define themselves as educators, there are a growing number who seek to ground their work in Jewish texts, ideas, and values, and in so doing are blurring the traditional lines between Jewish “educators” and “communal professionals.”

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# Journeys Through Time

## Entry, Becoming “Established,” and Professional Advancement

### Entry to the Field - Often More Accidental than Purposeful

Although the pathways by which Jewish educators enter the field will be explored in more detail in the *Preparing for Entry* strand of our study,<sup>11</sup> *On the Journey* participants also provided illuminating data about how they came to their current or previous positions. Survey respondents were asked to identify what had inspired them to become a Jewish educator (with the ability to select multiple options). As seen in Exhibit 1, while many pinpointed family influence, past Jewish experiences, or inspiring role models as key to their professional paths, the most frequently chosen option was “I had a job opportunity and decided to take it.”

The prevalence of what one might call “accidental” entry—responding to an opportunity rather than making a purposeful choice—has lingering consequences for overall levels of commitment among Jewish educators.<sup>12</sup> Those who selected this option were more likely to agree with the statements “If I could get a similarly paying job outside of a Jewish setting, I would likely take it” and “If I could do it all over again, I would choose to work in a different profession” and less likely to agree that “I definitely want a career for myself in a Jewish setting,” “If I had all the money I needed without working, I would probably still continue to work in a Jewish setting,” and “I like this profession too much to give it up.”



#### Exhibit 1 Inspiration to Become a Jewish Educator

I had a job opportunity and decided to take it	49%
My family	45%
An inspirational educator	33%
Participating in Jewish camps	31%
Going to religious services	26%
Participating in Jewish youth groups	26%
Attending Jewish day school	24%
Participating in an Israel experience program	21%
Attending supplementary Jewish school	13%
Participating in a campus Jewish experience	13%

<sup>11</sup> See “[Preparing for Entry: Concepts That Support a Study of What It Takes to Launch a Career in Jewish Education](#).”

<sup>12</sup> Overall, the 18% of the survey respondents who had very intensive Jewish backgrounds and early Jewish work experiences—a group we termed “Born and Bred” to be Jewish educators—have higher scores for the key outcomes of satisfaction, self-efficacy, and commitment as compared to “Joiners” (those with very limited Jewish backgrounds and work experiences), who made up 5% of respondents. Further comparisons between these groups are explored in the *Preparing for Entry* report.

## “Falling Into” One’s First Job

Many interviewees’ descriptions of how they came to their first jobs as Jewish educators echoed the sense of an unintended or accidental path rather than a deliberate choice. One informal educator related that she *“kind of fell into Jewish education, when I got really involved in the school my kids were attending, as a volunteer.”* A day school educator used similar language of “falling” to describe how she ended up teaching in a Jewish setting: *“When I went back to school for teaching, I wasn’t planning to teach in Jewish education, though I was observant. But I sort of fell into the Jewish part and I enjoyed it and was comfortable in it, and it was great to have holidays off.”* Some day school educators first looked for work in public schools, but shifted after finding no available jobs in that sector: *“I went all over and tried to get a job and couldn’t get one anywhere in public schools. And at that time [an Orthodox day school] said we want you; we’ll pay you a nice salary, and I had the feeling it could be an interesting experience.”*

## “Recruited” Entry

Others who did not originally intend to become a Jewish educator were guided in by a peer or acquaintance, rather than randomly “falling” into the role. An early childhood and a day school educator each shared stories of this kind of “recruited” entry. In each case, the recruiter’s motivation seems to have been a mix of genuinely seeing the person’s potential as an educator and an eagerness (even desperation) to fill an empty position. However, as the second quote below demonstrates, even a less-than-inspiring entry can lead to a career of purpose and passion.

*It happened by accident. I was subbing in the school district and a friend of mine who worked at the JCC called me and said, “We need a teacher, one just quit, and school starts in three weeks.” I said,*

*“I haven’t been with preschoolers in all these years. I love them, but I don’t know how the curriculum has changed or what they’re doing now.” I didn’t feel prepared. She’s like, “No, you don’t understand. You have to just come. It’ll be fine.” So I took the job and that’s what got my foot back in the door.*

*I was a substitute teacher, and the teacher I was subbing for quit before Thanksgiving, and they didn’t have anyone and asked me to stay. They encouraged me even though I didn’t have a credential, so I stayed. As soon as I had my own class in fourth grade, that was it. For me it was a joy, not a job. I got my certification, went on to my master’s degree. I’m the greatest advocate for someone who says, “I don’t know if I could do this.”*

We also heard from some educators who experienced more “deliberate entries” to the field. One day school educator had a high school internship in a Jewish elementary school *“that really opened my eyes to, ‘this is a lot of fun, I could do this as a career.’”* An informal educator sought out work in the Jewish community to feel more connected to her own Jewish identity. After finding her first job in a Federation unsatisfying, she *“reached out to the regional youth director of the youth group I was in as a kid. I was still close with this woman, and I called her and asked her if I should look for a chapter to be an advisor for. I wanted something to fulfill me more.”* Eventually these proactive steps led her to a position as a regional youth group director. Nevertheless, the number of both survey respondents and interviewees who described “taking a job” (sometimes with questionable qualifications) rather than seeking out and planning a career was striking. This trend suggests a challenge and gap that merits further exploration.

## Becoming “Established” - Gaining Confidence, Skills, and Satisfaction

While our data come only from individuals who have worked in Jewish education for more than five years, survey data reveal meaningful differences in educators’ lived experience in their roles related to how far along they are in their careers. Two-thirds of respondents self-defined as being “well established in my field,” about one-quarter are “getting settled and no longer a beginner,” and the rest are “getting started” or “still exploring.” Compared to those in earlier stages, established educators:

- View their workplaces more positively.
- Are more satisfied with the level of teamwork they experience, their compensation, and their workload.
- Are more aware of the availability of professional development opportunities and networks.
- Have higher self-efficacy, autonomy, and empowerment.
- Are more committed to their organization and the field.

In the absence of longitudinal data, we don’t know if these findings indicate that educators develop greater satisfaction and stronger outcomes over time, or if they result from the early exit of less satisfied, efficacious, and committed educators. Our interview data suggest the answer is “both”—established interviewees described some of the elements that helped them grow over the course of their careers, and many of the “leavers” we spoke with related how frustrations pushed them out before they could fully settle and develop as educators (as will be explored in a later section).

Numerous factors and conditions help educators develop in their careers (many of which are explored in depth in our other *On the Journey* briefs). When interviewees reflected on how they had grown into their roles, they highlighted three factors in particular: the confidence that comes with time; learning from mentors and supervisors; and having opportunities for substantive professional development such as fellowships, certificate programs, and graduate degrees.

### Gaining Confidence

A number of interviewees described self-confidence as something that comes with time and experience. An early childhood educator shared, *“I think the experience and having done this for so many years makes me the teacher that I am today. The older you get, you’re just not afraid. That’s how I am in my role today. I’m not afraid if we have to talk to the parents or whatever. I’m much more confident.”* A day school educator noted that the confidence she has gained with experience has in turn led to positive benefits for her students:

*I think all of my exposures have given me confidence to push myself in order to make the school atmosphere what my students need...I started a program to help contribute to the school beyond my specific work. I don’t think earlier I would have had the confidence to make changes in a bigger way beyond my classroom.*

An informal educator offers an example from the other end of the spectrum, illustrating how difficult it can be for some early career educators to overcome their fear of being seen as inadequate and unqualified:

*When I first started this job doing youth programming, I had so much self-doubt and was so scared I’d be seen as someone not Jewish enough, without enough authority. I’m starting to realize that we’re*

*all doing this together. I'm interested and passionate about the core aspects of the work and try to remember that when I feel scared. I have a long way to go.*

## Learning from Mentors

While time and experience can be valuable in and of themselves, an extensive body of research shows that educators' skills and confidence are significantly enhanced through opportunities for mentoring and formal professional development.<sup>13</sup> Several interviewees, when asked to identify factors that helped them feel particularly engaged and thriving in their professions, cited either mentoring or professional development as stand-out experiences. A well-established day school educator reflected on an influential early mentor in her career, *"I had only been teaching for four years, and I had this wonderful Assistant Principal who helped to build me as a teacher, as a professional, and offered me guidance in developing my career in a certain path. I would come home saying, she's the most amazing person I'd ever met."* An informal educator explained that even as an experienced educator she continues to *"seek mentors and support, and it's hard to ask, but once you have the experience of having a mentor...[it's] one of the most important opportunities."* Mentoring also has reverberating benefits as many who experience excellent mentoring are inspired to serve as mentors themselves. As this educator shared, *"How do I pay that forward and who am I mentoring in this process? That's something that's been incredibly important to me."*

## Professional Development

As to the impact of professional development, an educator in the Innovation sector described taking part in an 18-month Fellowship with her community's Jewish education central agency as *"literally the best thing that's ever happened to me. It was an amazing way to get connected to other Jewish educators who were doing the same kind of work, but also to have these connections to faculty members who taught me to take professionalism to the next level."* An informal educator who works with teens received a certificate in adolescent development from Hebrew Union College, which she described as *"an incredible, rigorous, academic program."* She draws a direct connection between this development opportunity, her ability to innovate in her work, and her longevity in the field: *"I did that my second year as a youth director, and attribute that program and opportunity with what I was able to create with the teens in [this community]. That was probably the reason I stayed so long."* However, the reality is that such intensive Jewish professional development opportunities are as rare as they are impactful. Although just over half of survey respondents have a graduate degree or certificate, less than a quarter of these degrees are specifically in Jewish education or communal service. While the 42% with a graduate degree in general education undoubtedly obtained skills and knowledge that have been valuable in their careers, there are unique benefits to being connected with other Jewish educators and immersed in content that is specific and relevant to Jewish education settings.

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- ▶ *When interviewees reflected on how they had grown into their roles, they highlighted three factors: confidence that comes with time; learning from mentors and supervisors; and having opportunities for substantive professional development such as fellowships, certificate programs, and graduate degrees.*
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<sup>13</sup> See Background sections of the "Professional Development" and "Workplace Conditions" briefs.

## Career Advancement – Paths are Often Limited and/or Unclear

By design, our study focused on educators in frontline positions rather than administrators, though about 30% of survey respondents said they had “both frontline and supervision/management” positions.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, rather than learning about how their careers have already advanced, our survey and interview data focused more on the roles and paths respondents could envision for themselves. The large majority of educators seem to feel that their options to move up within their settings are limited, as only 25% agreed with the statement, “I have opportunities for advancement at my organization.”<sup>15</sup>

Some interviewees did share stories of moving up within a school or organization from one frontline role to another; often this involved starting as a substitute teacher and gaining a staff position, or expanding a part-time role to full-time. In some cases, employees were in the “right place at the right time” when a position opened up or a clear staffing need arose. An early childhood educator who started as a “floater” described such an upward journey in her school:

*An administrator came to me and said, “I think you should be an Assistant instead of a floater,” so then I was an Assistant for three years. Then, I was told by my new supervisor to come to her if I was thinking of quitting because there was a new teacher who was a real mess. So that’s how I became a teacher in the pre-K room.*

Other educators deploy more initiative in their advancement, essentially “creating their own luck” as they envision opportunities and gain buy-in from their organizations. One congregational educator described how she

successfully turned a mélange of roles into a higher-level, more stable position:

*I was teaching Sunday school and religious school and ran the Madrichim program, so it was kind of a shiluv, as they say, a mixture of different roles, which was the only way they could justify a full-time salary and benefits. Eventually I said, “It seems like you might need an Assistant Director,” so after a number of conversations that position was made for me.*

Another congregational educator also described expanding roles and responsibilities over the years, though without the details to reveal whether these jumps were instigated by her own initiative or that of the administration:

*I started out as assistant teacher in a class and tutoring, and that has evolved to teaching two classes and coordinating the whole B’nai Mitzvah program. So my role has grown as I’ve gained more experience and become more senior.*

While we did hear positive advancement stories such as these, quite a few interviewees instead emphasized their uncertainty or discouragement about their future career options. This was particularly true for those outside of formal Jewish education, or those within formal education who don’t see administration in their future. One informal educator bluntly stated, “There are really only two opportunities for advancement for me. Either I go to HUC and become clergy, or I go to HUC and become a religious school director. That’s the path for an experiential Jewish educator. So even if I want to run a camp or something, I have to go to HUC.” Another informal educator noted that unclear professional paths can also be a deterrent to entering the field in the first place:

*It’s so convoluted for any of us to get where we are now; it’s hard to find a*

<sup>14</sup> This number is lowest for day school educators (15%) and highest for those in the innovation/social justice sector (73%), likely because the latter are mostly in small organizations with limited staff who fill multiple roles.

<sup>15</sup> By sector: 25% of day school educators, 19% of supplementary school educators; 24% of early childhood educators, and 30% of informal/experiential educators.

*clear path. And I don't know I meet anyone younger who says, "one day I want to work for the JCC Youth and Teen department." Or, "I want to work for the JCC in some capacity; how do I get there?" People say, "I like Judaism and Jewish studies. What can I do after that?" But I don't think that's anyone's clear career goal.*

Finally, a day school educator articulated the frequently heard lament that for classroom teachers to advance, they generally need to leave the classroom, even if that is where their talents and passion lie. Mentoring, coaching, and knowledge sharing—a collection of roles sometimes defined as “master teaching”—could be an alternate pathway for educators’ professional growth:

*There needs to be a better career pathway. I have worked with teachers who have been in class for 35 years. They only love the children. But for those that want more, there has to be more of a pathway into mentorship or knowledge sharing and coaching, a system where experienced teachers work with novice*

*teachers. There are teachers who are always going to be happy in the classroom, but there needs to be ways to advance and grow as a professional. Growth as a professional and treatment as a professional— that is going to be one of the things that would ensure that people stay in Jewish education and that Jewish education continues to grow and uplift itself.*

Given the challenges of identifying opportunities for advancement, it is notable that the majority of respondents still expressed commitment to their career path. Nearly half of respondents said they planned to continue working in the Jewish educational or professional sector “until retirement,” and another 18% that they planned to continue “more than five years.” However, commitment to one’s specific organization was not quite as strong. Only 29% said they planned to stay at their organization until retirement, and 21% for more than five years. These numbers may reflect the recognition by some that moving up in the field could require moving on from their current workplaces.

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- ▶ *Quite a few interviewees instead emphasized their uncertainty or discouragement about their future career options. This was particularly true for those outside of formal Jewish education, or those within formal education who don't see administration in their future.*
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# Journeys In and Out

## “Switchers” and “Leavers”

### “Switchers” Have Higher Satisfaction and Outcomes, Potentially Due to Their Motivations and the Skills They Bring

While the journeys described in the above section—from entry to early career to becoming established to senior positions (for some)—might be envisioned as a smooth journey from embarkation to destination, many Jewish educators experience discontinuous journeys with “on-ramps” and “off-ramps” in and out of the field. Fully 60% of survey respondents had previously held a primary job in a non-Jewish organization—a group we have labeled “switchers.” Of this group, just over half had worked in a secular educational institution, half in a different field altogether, and about 5% in an educational organization of a religion other than Judaism (respondents could select multiple options).

Switchers responded more positively on a variety of metrics than did those who had only worked in Jewish settings. Specifically, they:

- Are more positive about multiple workplace conditions, including benefits, teamwork/relatedness, empowerment, and professional support;
- Are more motivated and express greater self-efficacy; and
- Are more satisfied with and committed to their careers.

### Finding a Career with Purpose

Our data point to some potential explanations for these intriguing findings. Switchers may

assess their careers more positively in part because of their motives for joining the field. While more than half of those who have only worked for Jewish organizations said their entry to the field was inspired in part because “I had a job opportunity and took it,” only 40% of switchers say the same. There’s an even greater difference in those who cite “an inspirational educator”—42% for switchers compared to 27% for non-switchers. Although they enter the field after having tried something else first, this population may be more committed to and more inspired by the purposes of Jewish education upon entry. This seems to help bolster their levels of satisfaction, commitment, self-efficacy, and ongoing motivation.

This theme is reflected in the interviews as well. Some who had entered the field after a foray in other jobs or careers cited as a primary motivation their desire to find more meaning and purpose in their work. One supplementary school educator who previously worked in public education shared that her need to switch careers grew from “seeds” of Jewish meaning that had been planted early in life: *“I think I first became involved in Jewish education because something was missing, and I wasn’t feeling completely fulfilled just working in public schools. There was this piece, seeds that had been planted as a child, as a teen, that there was something important about Judaism that hadn’t been fulfilled.”* An interviewee who had made an even larger professional jump from audio engineering to early childhood education reflected that even though he had enjoyed his former job, teaching offered an opportunity to “bring something to the world” of unique value: *“I realized, I think*

*there's a quote—you shouldn't just do what makes you happy, but do something that you can bring to the world that others can't. I love audio stuff, it's super fun, but I don't have talent in that that others don't. I do think I have talent here that others don't.*" While these kinds of purpose-driven motivations are shared widely among Jewish educators (as will be explored in a later section), it may be that those whose "north star" diverts them from a previous path into education find even greater satisfaction in their work because they can compare it to what they left behind.

## Entering with Expertise

Another factor that may account for higher satisfaction and outcomes among switchers is the level of skills, knowledge, and confidence they bring with them as more experienced professionals. Interviewees cited jobs in secular private education, journalism, nonprofit organizations, and business consulting as all providing relevant and valuable skills for careers in Jewish education. A day school educator noted that her previous, private school experience was critical for her professional growth, allowing her to cope with the fact that her day school doesn't provide the same level of resources and development opportunities: *"In that prep school, I grew a lot, I learned a lot, I picked the brains of people there...I'm in a much better place career-wise, so now I can be in a place where they don't have much and still be okay."* An informal educator explained that working in journalism helped her develop and express her "curiosity," a stance that now informs her current work: *"I am a questioner—why are we doing that, what's the purpose of that? It's a naturally Jewish thing to do, so this is actually a good place to be, where I can wrestle with those I work with and not accept everything at face value."* Another informal educator reflected on how working as a marketing consultant provided valuable language and models with

which to enhance the Jewish education field's approach to innovation and goal setting:

*I gained a lot from experiencing the business world. It was an important milestone because I could bring a lot of what I learned into the world of Jewish education....I learned we should adapt some of the models from the business world when it comes to innovation, decision making, being more goal oriented, and measuring our goals.... Sometimes I use some of the language of the business world today in my work, which makes it more defined, more clear for people.*

## Leavers are Pushed Out by Toxic Workplaces, Low Pay, and Lack of Growth Opportunities

Traveling in the opposite direction are those who choose to leave Jewish education, either for other professional pursuits or to step away from working life altogether (not including those retiring at the end of their careers). While our survey was fielded only to current Jewish educators, we did explore the motivations of those who said they were considering leaving the field, as seen in Exhibit 2.

We also spoke with 20 professionals who either had left the field or were contemplating doing so in order to further delve into the reasons underlying their decisions and deliberations. The interviews surfaced similar—though not identical—themes as the survey data, as explored below.

## Toxic Workplace Environments

The issue most frequently cited by the leavers we interviewed was navigating an unsupportive or otherwise toxic workplace environment. Interviewees described

**Exhibit 2**  
**Motivations of Educators Considering Leaving the Field**

Better financial opportunities elsewhere	50%
Unable to satisfactorily balance work and personal life	35%
Better benefits elsewhere	29%
More interesting work in a different sector	21%
Insufficient opportunities for career development in this sector	18%

workloads that left them feeling overwhelmed or exploited. They depicted overly politicized or hierarchical environments, and organizational leadership that played favorites and failed to listen to or support teachers. In these settings, parents' needs and desires were prioritized over educators' well-being. As one former day school educator bluntly stated, *"The reason I left wasn't because I wanted to leave Jewish education, but because I had two Heads of School who thought tuition was more important than my integrity as an educator."* Another day school educator who is considering leaving described how some colleagues were driven out by a lack of support that she too experiences: *"I know people my age who weren't ready to retire but left because of the behavior of kids. There are lovely families, but there is enough of a percentage of kids who are just fresh, rude, and there is not support from administration in dealing with that."* An early childhood educator also complained of the lack of support from school leadership: *"They have expectations but not support to get us there. They have people designated for support, but it just doesn't happen."* A former informal educator in a synagogue described a hierarchal system in which clergy used their position to exploit others: *"I was in a place where there was clergy and everyone else."*

*Clergy stole my ideas, took credit for it in public and media, and I was frustrated. [I felt] I'm not staying here and taking this. If my ideas are better than yours and you're treating me badly, do it yourself."* Finally, an innovation sector professional sees the lack of respect for Jewish educators as an issue that pervades the entire Jewish community, a reality that she believes should discourage others from entering the field:

*There are ways to honor and respect people that I don't know if there's thought being put into. It's not even being talked about or thought about, how we support Jewish community educators, what would make them feel honored and valued and respected. Everybody's just like, yeah, yeah, of course. But it doesn't feel like there's a lot of traction on that, or that the community had a concrete and unified message around that. I would never encourage anyone in my life to work in this field, unless they're incredibly passionate and feel it's their calling.*

### **Inadequate Compensation and/or Benefits**

The survey data show that one of the strongest motivations for leaving Jewish education is the lack of adequate pay and

benefits. While not emphasized quite as much in the interviews, financial needs were cited as a factor by just under half of leavers. Most who did reference poor pay also said that they otherwise enjoyed their positions and careers; they just couldn't make ends meet or live the (not-so-lavish) lifestyle they desired. One former innovation sector professional detailed the middle-class life she could not achieve on an educator's salary:

*I wasn't going to get enough compensation to do the basics, put a roof over my head, give my daughter a Jewish education and save for her college education, and to save for my retirement to not be a burden to her. I have modest goals, except that I would like two bedrooms. But I'm not going to get that stuff from Jewish education. This is a very nice field, if you don't need to rely on it for financial sustenance. It's a nice thing to do, but as a single mom I need more than a nice thing to do.*

Educators across other sectors similarly reflected that while they enjoyed—even “loved”—their work, the financial realities made a long-term career in the field seem untenable. An informal educator said that were it not for the low pay, *“I would stay in Jewish education for the rest of my life. Jewish education can be a full-time career for sure, but I don't think the industry is ready for that full-time career. It's not competitive enough in pay...the pay hasn't caught up with the demand it takes from a person.”* A former early childhood educator reflected, *“I love the kids, I love the hours. I feel if the pay was better, and we had gotten more paid time off, then I would have been perfectly happy with where I was.”* And a former day school educator in a high-cost-of-living city described how she found herself living further and further from her school in order to afford housing on her low salary: *“We wanted to buy a house, but what I was making was nowhere*

*near what I needed. We were already strapped trying to rent an apartment that was okay and relatively close, so my commute was getting longer. So it started with practical pieces, money and distance. Those were the driving forces.”*

## Lack of Professional Growth and Advancement Opportunities

Earlier, we described the frustrations many Jewish educators feel regarding unclear or limited paths for professional growth and advancement. For some, this frustration is severe enough to push them out of the field. An educator in an innovation sector organization bemoaned the lack of a leadership pipeline for younger professionals. Instead, the reshuffling of executives among organizations leads to a “game of musical chairs” in which all but a few are shut out, to the detriment of the whole field:

*The professional pipeline is really small, [and] in these Jewish nonprofits there's this effect of musical chairs. For instance, our current ED has been the ED of five other nonprofits in the past 10 years—that's how often people are moving around. Before that, we had the same ED for a long time, but there's no way to get all the way up there because there are so few positions, and people are just exchanging them. There's no true mentoring for young folks to be on top... It has frozen Jewish education in time.*

Although there may be more leadership positions in formal education sectors, some who had left day schools noted that (as mentioned before) these paths generally involve becoming administrators, something that doesn't appeal to everyone. Additionally, a former day school educator felt that professional development opportunities were only available for Jewish studies teachers, but not those like her who wished to expand their general education knowledge and skills:

*One of the reasons I left was wanting more professional development and growth. I wasn't getting that. There was a lot of emphasis on the Jewish stuff, which makes sense, but what if I want to be a more responsive and sensitive teacher in social studies? There was nothing for me there. I think there was a lot more emphasis and PD for Judaics than for general studies, so I had to seek it out on my own time, and usually with my own money.*

## Additional Factors – Work/Life Balance and Seeking Other Purpose

Finally, two factors cited by a fair number of survey respondents—lack of work/life balance and more interesting opportunities in other sectors—were less prevalent in interviews, but still mentioned by a few. Both of the educators who cited difficulty balancing work and life had jobs that required working evenings and weekends—one in a supplemental school, another as youth group advisor—a schedule that eventually took a toll. The first shared that *“Working Sundays, especially when coupled with Friday night obligations, was challenging. I worked so much and never had a full weekend with family except summers and vacation.”* The second recounted how the demanding hours overcame her love of the job: *“I was very tired of the hours demanded of a youth professional. I found a lot of meaning and joy in being with students, but it took away from my personal life, and I was expected to make my job my whole life, and that was still a tension for me.”*

Finally, we heard from three “leavers” who realized that they were seeking a different mission and focus for their careers that led them beyond the Jewish community. All still wanted to “do good” in the world, but felt that they could make a larger contribution

working with more underserved populations. For each, this was a difficult decision, as they felt torn between the community of their roots and others who they felt needed them more. A former day school educator reflected on the “guilt” she felt leaving Jewish education, though ultimately other priorities won out:

*I felt guilty leaving the Jewish community because it had done so much for me, and because this community had supported me. But there was another part of me, spiritually and professionally, that was not doing enough. I felt I wanted to give more to the community not that I grew up in, but to all communities. I was teaching students that almost all looked the same, with a tiny bit of economic difference, but not stark economic difference.*

An informal educator considering leaving also spoke of feeling professional “guilt,” although for her this guilt came from continuing to work with youth on the higher end of the economic spectrum: *“My other friends are working in communities that really need them and are really underserved, and the Jewish community here is overserved. We're overprogramming those kids and giving them so many options, so I'm seeing other communities with only one option, and I feel guilt about that.”* Finally, a former Jewish professional from the innovation sector described the “heartbreaking” decision to move into a different social service area when she couldn't ignore the intense need she saw there:

*The other job I was looking at was pulling at me hard. It was reproductive health, post-abortion support, working on a national level to like do culture change, and destigmatize people's abortion experiences, and give them a platform for storytelling. It was very important for me, and having the two [options] side by side helped me with the realization*

*that it really was time for me to leave the community. It was really heartbreaking for me, I won't lie.*

Now in a role that involves consulting to Jewish organizations on social issues, this professional feels that she's reached a satisfying middle ground of contributing to the Jewish community, but not being

*"entrenched" in it, "Now I work with Jewish organizations again, and get to support them but not work in them, and my funding isn't reliant on the Jewish community. I like to be able to support the community but not be entrenched in it anymore."*

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- ▶ *Financial needs were cited as a factor by just under half of leavers. Most who did reference poor pay also said that they otherwise enjoyed their positions and careers; they just couldn't make ends meet or live the (not-so-lavish) lifestyle they desired.*
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# The Inner Journey

## Motivation, Meaning, and Purpose

### Jewish Educators Seek to Impact, Inspire, and Contribute

While, as we've seen, many Jewish educators enter the field for largely practical or circumstantial reasons, our data suggest that whatever their initial motivations may be, nearly all come to see their work as a source of deeper meaning and purpose. Our survey asked respondents to rate the extent to which various factors motivate their work as a Jewish educator (from "not at all" to "a lot"). The top three overall, based on the percentage who said they were motivated "a lot" by the factor, were "impacting people's life paths" (82%), "expressing my commitment to educating others" (78%), and "contributing to the Jewish community" (72%). By comparison, the motivations that received lower scores were more self-focused and practical. Fewer than half of the respondents said that they were motivated "a lot" by "giving myself an opportunity to strengthen my own religious identity;" "having work that is compatible with living a Jewish life (e.g., having Jewish holidays off);" and "making a living." Exhibit 3 presents the top five motivations among educators in the largest sectors (with motivations across settings shaded in the same color):

**Exhibit 3**  
Educators' Top Five Motivations

	Day School	Supplementary School	ECE	Informal/Experiential
1	Impacting people's life paths	Contributing to the Jewish community	Expressing my commitment to educating others	Impacting people's life paths
2	Expressing my commitment to educating others	Impacting people's life paths	Impacting people's life paths	Contributing to the Jewish community
3	Expressing my love for the particular subject matter	Expressing my commitment to educating others	Contributing to the Jewish community	Expressing my commitment to educating others
4	Contributing to the Jewish community	Expressing my love for the particular subject matter	Working in a place in which I have much in common with many of the staff members	Expressing my love for the particular subject matter
5	Working in a place in which I have much in common with many of the staff members	Expressing my commitment to the Jewish people	Expressing my love for the particular subject matter	Expressing my commitment to the Jewish people

*Motivations across settings are shaded in the same color*

As noted in the previous section, those who previously worked in non-Jewish settings have higher motivation scores overall than those who have not (except for “making a living,” which had the same score in both groups). Switchers are more likely to say they are motivated “a lot” in their work by the above factors than non-switchers, with the widest gaps for specifically Jewish motivations: 16% higher for “having work that is compatible with a Jewish life,” 13% higher for “expressing my commitment to the Jewish people,” and 9% higher for “contributing to the Jewish community.” This supports the supposition that switchers’ higher satisfaction and outcome scores may reflect a newfound sense of passion and purpose in their work as compared to previous careers in non-Jewish sectors.

Overall, the motivations revealed through both survey and interview data fall into two categories encapsulated in the very term “Jewish educator.” These professionals are both dedicated to the broad mission of shaping lives and cultivating minds through education, and they specifically seek to inspire love of Judaism and create rich Jewish identities for those with whom they work.

## Shaping Lives and Minds

The two strongest motivations cited by survey respondents—impacting life paths and commitment to educating others—are at the core of the mission of education. Interviewees shared moving descriptions of how “rewarding” and “inspiring” it is to see children learn and grow and the “gratification” and “joy” of being part of that process. One early childhood educator reflected on the meaning that comes from being able to work with young children at one of the most transformative times in their lives: *“I see the impact that I can and do have on the kids, shaping them through this time. It’s the most vital time in their life*

*and shapes them for the future. Things that people can say to them now can stay with them for their whole life, so I want to have a positive impact.”* An informal educator similarly focused on the joy of helping children’s *“maturation and development and growth. You see them down the road, and it’s an exciting thing to have been part of their growth.”* A day school educator succinctly summed up a core inspiration and motivation for many educators—the desire to share her knowledge and experience with others: *“I felt I have things to share, things I want to teach, things in my life that can connect...not just teaching from a textbook but also from experience. In this field in particular, when you’re the one who makes a difference to someone else, you got to do it because you love it, not for any other reason.”* Finally, another day school educator who has experienced significant challenges in her school (difficult parents and unsupportive leadership) reflected that when her job was at its best, it was because of her students’ engagement with learning which in turn inspired her to grow as a teacher:

*I loved being with the kids. They love their teachers, they’re enthusiastic and emotional. I also loved the intellectual part—trying to figure out a problem and how to fix it. That’s how I kept engaged as a teacher. You can go on autopilot. I would do research and try different things. I found that extremely engaging. It was fun and creative. I liked when the kids would just figure something out, and you could share in that moment when they realized something. It’s amazing, and it’s wonderful to be a part of it.*

## Putting the “Jewish” in Jewish Educator

Although survey respondents placed a bit more focus on the “educator” aspect of



being a Jewish educator, most interviewees emphasized Jewish inspirations and motivations when discussing their career paths. Many said that their own positive Jewish experiences and connections led them to want to create these for others, as one supplementary school educator reflected:

*I was very lucky to have always felt my Judaism strongly and felt at home in Judaism, and that's informed my teaching because that's my goal for my students more than academic achievement. I want them to feel Jewish and when they walk in a synagogue to feel comfortable and at home. My father's parents were Holocaust survivors, so Jewish continuity was important to us. So I find a lot of meaning in bringing up the next generation of Jews.*

A day school educator similarly explained that helping her kindergarten students create Jewish meaning and connections was more inspiring for her than teaching “academic” subject matter:

*When I decided to be a teacher, the thing that brought me most joy and made me most excited was not teaching phonics or math, but sharing stories about Torah and Jewish holidays, having fun speaking Hebrew, and stories that connected me to my heritage but could also help other children feel that love and connection as well. That's what gave me passion and fire, and why I ended up teaching in day school.*

Another day school educator noted that while she could have been a special education teacher in a public school, she felt compelled to work in a Jewish setting in order to fully express her values and identity:

*I grew up with the Jewish tradition and really thinking about it...I had to find*

*answers and meaning that connected to me. When I went into special education I could have gone into public schools, but I felt like I wanted to give over the pride that I have in being Jewish and the values.*

Finally, an informal educator vividly described the unique connections and emotions she experienced in Jewish overnight camps, and how meaningful she finds it to be able to create these for others:

*When you go to sleepaway camp, and everyone is singing the songs, and everyone comes together, and you feel camaraderie, and you know it's because everyone is relating to Judaism, that's always been such a draw. I crave those moments. Now that I get to create and be a leader of those moments, to pass on what I feel in my heart about why it's so special to be Jewish, that is really special.*

## The Power and Pitfalls of Jewish Education as a “Calling”

The passion that comes through in all of the quotes above—the love of shaping minds and lives and passing on Jewish connections and traditions—is emblematic of professionals who see their work not merely as a job or even a career, but as a calling. In this typology, “people with Callings find that their work is inseparable from their life. A person with a Calling works not for financial gain or career advancement, but instead for the fulfillment that doing the work brings to the individual.”<sup>16</sup> Although most interviewees did not use the term “calling,” the way they defined their work strongly echoes this notion. A number said explicitly that they were not doing their jobs for financial benefit, as an informal educator explained: *“It's so important. What I keep telling people is that the dollars might*

16 Wrzesniewski et al., 1997, 22.

*not be there, but what we do is so much more than money. When you're in your early twenties it's hard to see the value of that, but as you get older, money becomes less important and fulfilling your soul becomes much more important."* A day school educator described how being connected to a values-based mission through her work is what "propels [her] professionally," more so than if she were an educator in another setting:

*Being part of something special helps propel you professionally, and people should understand that. That the work is rooted in basic values, that's really different than being part of a large educational system. And when people see that, that's when they tell their friends to come work at the school. When the mission works and is fulfilled and the education is connected to the values, that's a whole different ballgame.*

While these thoughts—and the many others above regarding the meaning and purpose of Jewish education—are genuinely inspiring, a few interviewees identified a darker side to the assumption that Jewish education is inherently a "calling." The intrinsic rewards of fulfilling, values-based work can be used to justify skimping on the extrinsic rewards that are equally necessary: good pay and benefits, reasonable work hours, and even professional respect. As one early childhood educator noted, Jewish institutions have come to expect that their staff will go "above and beyond" because they are so dedicated to their work and the Jewish community: *"I think, as is probably true for most Jewish*

*professionals, that my role and investment and sense of belonging and identity being wrapped up in this community mean that I am constantly going above and beyond my employment role and that Jewish institutions depend on that."* It is notable that the few interviewees who did use the term "calling" regarding Jewish education did so to highlight challenges they have faced, as in these observations from an Innovation sector educator and an informal educator:

*Salary has long been an issue in day school education tiers, in nonprofit work, and in some Jewish innovation startups. We do this work because it is our calling, our life's work, and we are committed to it—not because we think it can pay the bills.*

*At various points in my career, I have felt disenchanting and defeated. Usually these feelings come from a frustration with Temple leadership. A feeling as though they do not know what we are trying to do, or why we are trying to do it. My job is my calling, and I put 110% of myself into this work.*

The passion, dedication, and joy with which many of the Jewish educators spoke about their work is a hopeful sign for the strength and future of the field, given that its survival relies on those for whom being a Jewish educator is a "labor of love." However, Jewish institutions and communal leaders should keep in mind that the "labor" is just as real as the "love," and without adequate material, emotional, and professional support, the latter can be all-too-easily extinguished.

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- ▶ *Jewish institutions and communal leaders should keep in mind that the "labor" is just as real as the "love," and without adequate material, emotional, and professional support, the latter can be all-too-easily extinguished.*
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# Implications for the Field

Unpacking the three types of journeys that Jewish educators traverse during their careers reveals areas of both encouragement and concern for the field. On the positive side, the large majority of Jewish educators view their work as a “calling” that provides a sense of meaning and purpose—centered on their identities as both “Jewish” and “educator”—that few other careers can match. As a result, even those who “fall into” their first roles often develop strong connections to the profession, while those who make a deliberate choice to enter—particularly those who find on-ramps from other fields—may have an even deeper commitment to and positive assessment of their careers. Our data also suggest that as educators grow into their roles, they become more confident, satisfied, committed, and efficacious—all the more so if their journey is supported through mentoring and meaningful professional development opportunities.

However, the journey for Jewish educators can also be quite bumpy, and the destination not as enticing as they had hoped. Many who leave the profession—or who consider leaving—have encountered serious roadblocks to their personal and professional well-being: toxic workplaces, lack of support, overwhelming workloads, inadequate pay and benefits, and the assumption by leaders that one’s passion for the job will make all of these irrelevant. Even educators who face none of these challenges and feel mostly joy in their jobs can find themselves hitting a wall when they seek paths to advance their careers, either because those paths are unclear (as many informal educators feel) or are severely limited (as in day schools where a talented teacher can only advance to administration). These challenges are not new or unknown to educational leaders, but

their prevalence in the field—after decades of research and documentation—is nonetheless disheartening. We hope our series of *On the Journey* briefs, which showcase the voices and perspectives of Jewish educators across sectors, organizations, and communities, can provide a roadmap for communal reflection and action to support Jewish educators as they seek to most effectively transmit their knowledge, passion, and inspiration to the next generation.

## Questions for Educational Leaders and Policymakers

The findings in this brief—some of which echo challenges the field has been navigating for decades—raise a number of important questions for educational leaders and policymakers to consider as the community seeks to create rewarding and purposeful professional journeys for Jewish educators:

1. Given the findings about the “accidental entry” of many Jewish educators to the field, how can pathways into the field be made more purposeful and intentional? What additional supports might be needed for those who “fall into” their first jobs in Jewish education?
2. The lack of clear career paths is a perennial challenge for the field, one that has been observed and discussed for decades. What ideas for addressing the challenge have been overlooked or resisted until now, and what is needed to finally bring about change?
3. Switchers appear to be a promising pool of potential educators, given their higher satisfaction, commitment, and motivation.

What opportunities are there to bring more “switchers” into the field of Jewish education? Are there promising practices already in existence in Jewish education or in general education?

4. The data show that even talented and committed educators can find themselves feeling that they need to leave the field for the reasons detailed in this brief. Do institutional leaders see any ways to resist the forces that push people and, instead, keep quality educators from exiting their institutions or the field overall?

5. As we’ve noted, feeling one is fulfilling a professional “calling” has great benefits, but also potential risks for individuals. How can Jewish educational institutions avoid exploiting people’s deep commitment to this work? What broader communal supports might be necessary to change this culture, which extends beyond any individual institution or sector?

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► *The findings in this brief—some of which echo challenges the field has been navigating for decades—raise a number of important questions for educational leaders and policymakers to consider as the community seeks to create rewarding and purposeful professional journeys for Jewish educators*

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# Educator Portraits

## Balancing Meaningful Work and Financial Realities in Early Childhood Education – Josh’s Journey

Josh, who calls himself a *“cultural but not religious Jew,”* grew up with a strong connection to Jewish life and institutions, particularly his local JCC, where he immersed himself in gymnastics. *“I was in Hebrew school all the time, was at the JCC constantly because the gym was there, and I did other JCC programs. All my strongest memories growing up are Jewish related. My favorite place growing up as a kid was camp.”* Now a co-lead pre-K teacher in a JCC early childhood program, Josh first started working at a JCC in his 20s as a gymnastics coach. The job came through a personal connection, a path that he calls *“a very Jewish community story, I got my foot in because of that.”* He soon realized how much he loved working with young children, and doing so specifically in a Jewish context: *“Everything, every major thing I did as a kid and every job I’ve had since has been Jewish children related...[I love] being able to teach kids about the world, doing it in the vocabulary of Tikkun Olam, instead of just global warming is bad. My Judaism is the lens I look through for everything.”*

After a few years, Josh became a “floater” in the preschool in addition to continuing as a physical education coach in order to get full-time pay. He was then tapped to advance when *“the administration came to me and said, I think you should be an assistant instead of a floater, you have ideas”* and soon after encouraged to become a teacher. He also pursued and achieved the position of Assistant Camp Director during the summers. After about five years of increasing responsibility in the preschool, he took a temporary break from Jewish education to work as an audio engineer, a decision driven as much by financial needs as vocational interests: *“What prompted me leaving education, I’d been doing audio stuff part-time since high school. I was engaged at the time and wanted to be able to support us better, bring in more to the partnership.”* Eventually, however, he realized that work outside of education didn’t bring the same fulfillment, and after a move to another city he found a new position in a Jewish preschool: *“It took me several years to realize that preschool teaching was something I was good at, something I liked, and something that was okay to do...I do think I have talent here that others don’t, and especially because I’m a male, I feel like I should come back.”*

Today, Josh loves his work in the classroom, appreciates his supportive Director and colleagues, and can see himself moving into an administrative leadership role in the future. At the same time, the financial challenges of working in early childhood education—and the sense of therefore being undervalued by the community—weigh on him. As a result, his ultimate long-term future in the field is still uncertain:

*I don’t ever want preschool teaching to be a career that people choose for pay, because it’s so obvious when people don’t love it. But it would be easier to justify...I don’t care about money a ton, I don’t need to drive a Mercedes, but if me and my potential wife make the same amount of money, we couldn’t afford to send our kid to the school I work at. I’d love to get paid closer to the amount of a typical Jewish nonprofit worker. I think I should make the same as someone sitting at a desk at a Federation. The only reservation I have about the career I chose is money.*

## Finding One's Passion and Seizing Opportunities in Experiential Education – Tamar's Journey

Tamar holds the position of “Teen Director” at the central communal Jewish institution (a merged Federation, JCC, and Board of Jewish Education) in her community. She grew up in a “*very, very, very Jewish*” home with strong Jewish institutional connections: “*I did Hebrew school, I helped lead kids' services, we went to shul [synagogue] every Saturday. I obviously went to Jewish summer camp. So I was always around Judaism.*” After training to be a high school math teacher post-college, she realized that her heart was neither in classroom teaching nor mathematics: “*By the time I graduated [from my master's program], I knew that teaching in a classroom was not going to be my profession. It was a means to get me to be able to work with kids and teens.*” Having just moved to a new community, she took a job as a camp counselor in the institution where she still works: “*As soon as I started working there, I thought, this is where I need to be and this is where my career needs to be, in the Jewish world. I was severely overqualified, but I wanted to work there so bad that I knew I could work my way up and grab the opportunities that come.*” Her career in experiential Jewish education progressed from there. The next summer she became the camp's Assistant Director, then was hired in a year-round position as Youth Coordinator. Three years ago, she was promoted to her current position in which she directs the summer camp and oversees the afterschool program, school break camps, and the teen program.

The promotion to Teen Director turned out to be a defining moment in Tamar's career. Upon learning that the current Director was leaving, Tamar successfully advocated for herself to be given the position, overcoming the initial hesitancy of the organization's leadership. In Tamar's mind, at that moment it was up or out: “*I wasn't going to stay in my position; if I didn't get that promotion I wouldn't have stayed at [the organization].*” However, it wasn't clear that it would be possible to find another Jewish education position she wanted in the community, meaning that leaving the organization would likely mean leaving the field entirely:

*If I didn't get that job, I didn't know what I was going to do next. I knew I wanted to work in the Jewish sector, and in [my community] there's only one place, because I didn't want to work in a synagogue. So if it's not here, there's no other Jewish institution I could go. I was looking at nonprofit work, because I do like serving the community, but nothing really stood out to me. Maybe if I had found something, my life would have taken a different direction. But instead, I worked really hard to get this job.*

Tamar's experience leads her to reflect on the general challenge of creating satisfying career paths in Jewish education, particularly outside of synagogues and schools: “*It's so convoluted for any of us to get where we are now; it's hard to find a clear path. I don't know that I've met anyone who's young who says, 'One day I want to work for the JCC Youth and Teen department,' or 'I want to work for the JCC in some capacity, how do I get there?'*” Despite this, Tamar is delighted with her own career journey and passionate about the Jewish education sector that she's chosen: “*Judaism now is more than going to synagogue and praying. And to show teens that it's more than just that, that really is sacred work.*”

## A Disappointing End to a Rewarding Career in Day School Education – Deborah’s Journey

Deborah has had a decades-long career as a day school educator, mostly teaching first through third grade. She grew up with a strong interest in Judaism—nurtured by immersing herself in books on Jewish subjects— but disappointing experiences with formal Jewish learning: *“I went to a terrible Hebrew school and hated it. I tried again in high school, but the teacher was so terrible that I dropped out.”* As an adult, she became observant and identified as Orthodox, though she eventually became disconnected from Orthodox institutions and now feels that *“I’m not observant, but I pray a lot. It’s much more internal.”*

Deborah also made a significant career switch, getting a master’s degree in education while winding down a 17-year law practice. Her desire to teach came from seeking a career that was *“more enjoyable, more intuitive, and more human connection focused.”* She first sought to teach in public schools, primarily because of better pay and benefits, but found herself on a different path: *“When I went back to school for teaching, I wasn’t planning to teach in Jewish education. But I sort of fell into the Jewish part. I got the job at [the day school] though a friend. After six weeks, I loved it and ended up staying there.”* Working in a day school allows her to express her Jewish identity and connection, even while teaching general studies: *“What I liked about Jewish school was the Torah stories and rabbinic stories, weaving them into teaching, even if I’m not a Judaic Studies teacher.”*

For quite a long time, Deborah thrived due to the school’s supportive and inspiring leadership: *“When I started, I had an incredibly supportive principal, and it made a huge difference to me. She was so positive about my teaching, so supportive of what I wanted to try. I was new, and creative, and enthusiastic.”* Although she was aware that she was forgoing the higher salary and better benefits of public schools, she felt that the positives of the school made up for it: *“It was very informal, not bureaucratic. The administration made an effort to protect teachers from situations with parents that were potentially destructive. Their attitude was, we know we don’t pay you as well or give you the same benefits as public schools, but we want this to be a positive place to work.”* Unfortunately, the 2008 recession led to cascading challenges that significantly changed the environment. Enrollment fell as parents chose public schools due to financial need. Budget shortfalls led the school to both accept students who required more learning and emotional support, and cut staff who could provide it. Teachers were expected to do even more, with diminished support: *“Marketing is such a huge issue for non-Orthodox schools. It’s shifted the balance of power very much against teachers, and much more to parents. That doesn’t make it an easy place to work.”*

Though still at the school, Deborah has decreased both her hours and her internal attachment to her work: *“I emotionally stepped back and just see it as just work and not my life. At the beginning it was always a career, and I hoped it would be that way, and then as it got harder it’s shifted to a job.”* While she still appreciates the best parts of being a teacher, her most positive feelings are now expressed in the past tense: *“Overall, when I think about my career in education, I’m feeling sad because of the change in how much I loved it. That contrast makes me sad. I loved being with the kids. I loved the intellectual part. It was fun and creative. I liked when the kids would figure something out, and you could share in that moment. It was amazing and wonderful to be a part of that.”*



## Seeking to Expand and Diversify Jewish Education in the Innovation Sector – Abby’s Journey

For close to a decade, Abby has been an educator in a Jewish environmental organization that is part of the growing “Jewish innovation sector.” After growing up in a “very secular” home, Abby sought out Jewish experiences for herself as a young adult: *“I always valued Jewish education for myself, but never found a way to enjoy it until college, when I went to Hillel. I worked at Camp Ramah, went to Israel for a year. Really took it upon myself to get a Jewish education.”* Through these experiences, Abby came to realize that her desire to effect positive change in the world could be achieved by directing her professional energies to her own community:

*I always have been really sensitive to issues around culture, community, and power. I always saw myself working to advocate for indigenous culture, and in my 20s, I was like, wait, “What about my tribe? What am I doing to shape and further what my culture looks like?” And I did a 180 and started on focusing on what it means to be a Jew and to be an educational leader as a Jew. I wanted to have a stake in what the next generation of Jewish youth learn.*

After launching a successful, Jewish, environmental, children’s program, Abby left the institution *“because I had five part time jobs and no insurance, and I couldn’t afford it.”* She then joined her current organization, advancing over time into positions of greater responsibility and leadership: *“I started out as an educator, working with groups and leading programs. Then I became Director of Youth and Family Programs, designed all kinds of new programs, camps, weekend programs, etc. Then I became Director of Education, which involves more high-level thinking, program evaluation, documentation, staff training, etc.”* Abby has thrived at the organization, but after recently returning from maternity leave, she learned that the new leadership wanted to reorganize, putting her position at risk. This has been particularly upsetting, because up until now, she benefited from meaningful mentoring and support: *“I’ve generally had a good experience feeling appreciated and trusted and relied on to create good programming. This stuff about my job being gutted is really recent, and has been a big shock to me. I was being mentored to take on more leadership, and that’s why it was a shock.”*

Abby sees her own situation reflecting broader challenges within the Jewish community. Many Jewish organizations don’t value the role of Jewish learning, in part because few in leadership roles have backgrounds or training in education: *“There’s a lack of investment in educators, and the leadership isn’t really trained in education, they’re trained in nonprofit management. So there’s not the kind of professional development necessary to develop the field, and not enough investment in mentoring leaders who are teachers so that those who are informed by best practices are making the educational decisions.”* Additionally, as a Jew of Color, Abby is keenly aware of the “white normativity” of most Jewish settings. Beyond causing her personal distress, this lack of diversity imperils the Jewish community’s future in an increasingly multicultural world: *“The Jewish community is a multiracial community, and our institutions do not reflect that. Jewish institutions have not faced how very difficult it is for a person who is not a white Jewish American to work there.”* Ultimately, both these issues require finding and investing in more diverse and representative leadership: *“We need new voices and voices that are mirroring broader sources of inequity, and that needs to be addressed from the top down. Women, queer Jewish folks, people who aren’t being invested in. We can’t really push Jewish education forward if we don’t have leadership that integrates all of our needs, whether nature-based learning, inclusive environments, or multicultural learning.”*

## Finding a Professional Home in Synagogue Family Education – Miriam’s Journey

Miriam is a synagogue-based family and early childhood educator, a second career launched after four decades as a professional singer. Miriam grew up with a strong Jewish identity, but little formal Jewish education or institutional connections: *“My parents were very assimilated. I didn’t have a Bat Mitzvah. I did go to a JCC day camp, mostly because it was close to my house, but we didn’t go to synagogue on High Holidays; we didn’t celebrate Shabbat.”* Marriage and parenthood led her to become more Jewishly involved: *“We joined a synagogue. We celebrated Shabbat. We sent our son to a Jewish middle school, and that really helped fuel my Jewish connection.”* Professionally, Miriam had steady work as a musician specializing in children’s music, though she also usually had *“a day job that supported me pursuing this music career of touring and gigging and all that.”*

As the life of a performer began to feel more draining than satisfying, Miriam’s musical talents opened up an alternate path: *“I had been doing drop-in music time at the library, people would dance and sing, it was fun. And a rabbi asked me to do it at the synagogue. I said, I’m not Jewish enough to do that, but she said, ‘Oh, just do what you do.’”* Soon the first synagogue program “snowballed” to additional engagements at local JCCs and preschools, and Miriam discovered her passion for using music to create Jewish meaning and connections: *“I realized that doing music in service of something bigger felt really good to me, and connecting directly with people, and being able to incorporate traditional songs and traditions and the calendar, all those things felt right to me...I talked to the rabbi and told her I didn’t want to push at being a famous musician anymore, I just want to do this.”* After a few years, the synagogue approached Miriam about creating a new position in family engagement. She was both intimidated and excited to stretch herself in this new role:

*When I first started, I had so much self-doubt and was scared I’d be seen as someone not Jewish enough, without enough authority. But I’m interested and passionate about the core aspects of the work, and try to remember that when I feel scared...I’ve learned so much about educating families, helping young families find their path. My ideal is creating an immersive environment for families to experience Jewish traditions in a way that’s fun and easy. Because growing up, we went to shul [synagogue], everything was in Hebrew, I had no idea what was going on. So when I do a Tot Shabbat on Saturday, it is FUN.*

Miriam’s self-confidence as a Jewish educator took a leap forward when she was recommended for, and then received, a fellowship for a Jewish education graduate program. *“I was looking for professional development for Jewish early childhood programs, and that’s when I was recommended to this Master’s program. At first, it was really intimidating and seemed way out of my league. But I did an interview for the fellowship, and they offered it to me. It’s opened up my world completely.”* Although Miriam occasionally still wrestles with her “road not taken” in music, she feels fortunate to be able to use her talents for a “greater good” and hopes her winding and unpredictable personal and professional journey can be an inspiration for others:

*It’s been an incredible journey for me. I love talking about it because I want people to know that it’s never too late to change your path, and especially with Judaism. It’s never too late to come back to it and find it for yourself, and in a way that’s comfortable and workable for you. And if you find it and want to share it, Jewish education is the perfect place to do that. That’s my mission, that’s where the work in Jewish education is really needed, helping families move forward in their own way.*

The Collaborative for Applied Studies in Jewish Education (CASJE) is an evolving community of researchers, practitioners, and philanthropic leaders dedicated to improving the quality of knowledge that can be used to guide the work of Jewish education. The Collaborative supports research shaped by the wisdom of practice, practice guided by research, and philanthropy informed by a sound base of evidence.

George Washington University's Graduate School of Education and Human Development (GSEHD) advances knowledge through meaningful research that improves the policy and practice of education. Together, more than 1,600 faculty, researchers and graduate students make up the GSEHD community of scholars. Founded in 1909, GSEHD continues to take on the challenges of the 21st century, guided by the belief that education is the single greatest contributor to economic success and social progress.

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