

What Are the ECE's Goals and Guiding Principles?

Dual Goals

The Experiment in Congregational Education (ECE) focuses its efforts on two goals—to create **Congregations of Learners** and **Self-Renewing Congregations**.

- In **Congregations of Learners**, learning permeates all aspects of congregational life and more people engage in deeper Jewish learning more regularly and with a variety of learning styles.
- **Self-Renewing Congregations** gain increased capacity to envision their future and to anticipate and respond to changing conditions and ongoing challenges by:
 - Being both reflective and proactive;
 - Practicing collaborative leadership;
 - Building community while welcoming diversity; and
 - Balancing tradition and innovation.

Guiding Principles

Jewish learning as a pathway: The ECE believes that Jewish learning is a primary pathway to synagogue revitalization. Thorough congregational revitalization requires re-thinking all the three aspects of a synagogue's purpose (prayer, community, and learning). The ECE believes that—for many congregations—Jewish learning is the most accessible and empowering place to start. And The RE-IMAGINE Project focuses on the religious school because it is where Jewish learning starts for many children and families.

Adaptation versus replication: The ECE advocates thoughtful adaptation of innovative educational models, not wholesale replication of someone else's program. Rather than simply copying so-called best practices, The RE-IMAGINE Project helps congregations adapt and develop programs that fit their unique circumstances and needs based on understanding not only what other congregations have done but, more importantly, how they *think* about innovation.

Inquiry and reflection: Re-imagining aspects of congregational education requires inquiry and reflection. The RE-IMAGINE Project is more than a program design project. It involves a process of vision-based planning. The changes that result may not happen all at once; they are likely to continue to evolve over time. This type of change requires self-reflection, on the part of the congregation as a whole and the individuals who comprise that congregation. Inquiry and reflection are woven into the RE-IMAGINE process at every step.

Text study is integral: In addition to more common forms of data gathering and analysis, Torah study is integral to the process—serving as a catalyst for a thoughtful, probing analysis of



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congregational life. In Torah study we encounter an alternative culture, a set of concepts and practices that challenge the preconceived notions of modern life. Jewish texts are models of reflective thinking—a sustained effort to examine beliefs and practices from many angles; a willingness to question all assumptions; a respect for differing perspectives. We believe there can be no better way to stimulate creative thinking about the Jewish future than exposure to provocative texts from the Jewish past and present.

By Torah we mean Torah in the broadest sense, which includes the Bible, Talmud, Midrash, and modern commentaries and response. As such, Torah is the repository of Jewish values and Jewish thinking; it is a record of the Jewish response to the world. In the Jewish tradition the study of Torah is seen as both an end in itself (*Torah lishma*) and as a vehicle for a number of inter-related goals—enriching the Jewish lives of individuals; creating and sustaining a sense of community; linking local communities to one another and to the Jewish people as a whole. We have found that studying Jewish texts together creates community by establishing connections and relationships that are purposeful and substantive.

Experimentation: We use the term “experiment” (as in the *Experiment* in Congregational Education) for several reasons. First, it invites participants to embark on a journey into uncharted territory. Based on our experiences of the past 12 years, we feel confident of the process through which REIMAGINE Project congregations will be led. Still, each congregation is different, and the outcomes of the process cannot be fully predicted ahead of time.

Secondly, we encourage congregations to experiment with innovative programmatic solutions as well as new cultural assumptions—new ways of thinking and working together. By thinking of them as experiments, we give ourselves permission to let go of things that aren’t working without embarrassment or loss of face. Cultivating a culture of experimentation can be critical to long-term success in bringing about meaningful educational change

A third reason we use the term *experiment* relates to the critical role of research in this project. Too often in Jewish life, changes are initiated without any provisions being made for documentation. Thus, whatever the project’s outcomes, outside observers (and even the key actors themselves) are no closer to an understanding of the change process or the determinants of success than they were before. The RE-IMAGINE Project has been designed to assure that what transpires in the participating congregations (both process and outcomes) will be studied, and the insights gained from these experiences will be available to congregations that attempt similar reforms in the future.

Balancing product and process: As our dual goals suggest, we value—and constantly seek to maintain—a dynamic balance between product and process. We find that some participants in our projects focus largely on working toward a programmatic outcome, such as a new model of religious school. They look for the hidden answers they expect us to provide. Others value the deliberative and reflective processes that lead them to question assumptions, to look through new lenses, to debate and redefine goals, to imagine and envision, and to experiment. We believe the two are inextricably intertwined. When we study a passage of Talmud, we do it not only to learn the outcome of a



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particular rabbinic legal debate, but to enter into that debate, to wrestle with the values underlying it; and to inform our timely decisions with our timeless tradition. Each would suffer without the other. Each congregation must do its own wrestling and reach its own outcomes.



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