

JEWISH EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

because educators think before they teach

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EMPOWERING STUDENTS

the potential and the pitfall



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Areyvut's service projects have student empowerment built in.

For the last 10 years Areyvut has worked with schools and educators to incorporate more *hesed*, *tzedakah* and *tikkun olam* programming in their settings. From the outset the goal of Areyvut has been to ignite a lifelong passion for these core Jewish values by actively engaging students at a young age; however, our success has hinged on a belief that empowering students leads to increased engagement. In this article, I highlight three programs that use student empowerment to meaningfully engage students of all ages in acts of *tzedakah* to demonstrate the benefit of this approach to Jewish education.

Penny Harvest at SAR

The Common Cents Penny Harvest is a program that was started in 1991 in New York from one child's desire to feed the homeless. Since 1991, children throughout the United States between the ages of four and 14 have been converting their natural compassion for others into action by collecting pennies and turning those pennies into grants for community organizations. Through Penny Harvest children have distributed more than \$8 million in grants.

Here's how it works. To participate, schools must appoint a teacher, specialist, or parent to serve as a Penny Harvest coach and program coordinator. The coach participates in a training session and receives all program related materials.

After collecting pennies in the fall, students form Philanthropy Roundtables to study community problems, identify agencies that address these issues, and invite agency representatives to discuss their work with the class. In the spring, students distribute grants from the money they collected to support the organizations that most appealed to them. Last year students made thousands of cash grants to a wide array of community organizations, including homeless shelters, animal rescue organizations, community gardens and senior centers. Students are often inspired by the program to supplement their cash donations through service projects. Last year, Penny Harvest participants engaged in hundreds of service projects including teaching English to immigrants, creating murals for social service agencies, collecting supplies for the troops overseas, visiting senior citizens and planting community gardens.

SAR Academy in Riverdale is one of only a few Jewish day schools that participate in Penny Harvest. This year, SAR second graders collected \$2,000 in pennies with the help of their teacher and coach, Mrs. Lynn Zadoff, and have begun meeting with representatives from non-profit organizations to decide how to distribute the money. For the second graders at SAR it is about more than collecting and distributing funds; rather, students are interested in connecting with their "grantees" in a deeper way by volunteering or creating crafts for agency affiliates.

By introducing philanthropy and service during students' formative years, Penny Harvest helps students develop their generosity and moral character while fostering a sense of responsibility that motivates students to become actively involved in their communities. Principals and parents find that the Penny Harvest encourages a caring culture and sense of belonging; teachers see it as an opportunity to enhance curriculum through a blend of service-learning, character education, and child philanthropy; community leaders value the millions of dollars and hours that children donate back to better our communities; and students like the program because it's fun.

However, Penny Harvest's uniqueness rests in its readiness to put immense influence in the hands of its young participants. Penny Harvest affords elementary school students opportunities to determine which agencies should receive funding, where they should volunteer, and how they can best better their communities. In doing so, it shows its participants that young people have the ability to make the world a better place and provides a transformative experience that students are likely to carry with them throughout their lives. Through the empowerment model, Penny Harvest helps students develop long-lasting connections to philanthropy and service.

Mitzvah projects

Many Bar or Bat Mitzvah celebrants incorporate a *Mitzvah* project into their celebration. While some schools offer guidance and support to help facilitate these projects, students and their families often take the lead in putting projects in motion. The most successful *mitzvah* projects motivate students to continue participation beyond their celebrations by engaging celebrants in activities that are personally meaningful to them. To develop and implement this type of *mitzvah* project, students must believe that they can contribute to making the world a better place and must feel empowered to make decisions based on their personal interests and passions.

Daniel Rothner is the founder and director of Areyvut.

Mitzvah projects require students to take initiative and accept substantial responsibilities but rewards students with valuable lessons. For many students coordinating their *mitzvah* project is the first time that they took the lead in interacting with an adult outside their school or synagogue. They must be self-reflective about their areas of interest, thoughtful in researching potential agencies that focus on that area, and assertive in reaching out to those agencies to determine what opportunities are available to them. Once a celebrant has selected an agency, he or she must acquire the skills to succeed in their project, develop a schedule for themselves, and continuously evaluate whether the experience is a good fit for them. All of these experiences provide lessons that students can draw upon the rest of their lives.

Many agencies or projects that met a real community need were started as *mitzvah* projects that celebrants sustained well beyond their celebration:

Dennis Fries, a current college student from Chandler, AZ, started Operation Noah to donate stuffed animals to children

For the second graders at SAR it is about more than collecting and distributing funds; rather, students are interested in connecting with their “grantees” in a deeper way ...

in hospitals. To date he has collected more than 50,000 stuffed animals and has delivered them to hospitals in more than twenty states.

Sarita Rosenstock, a current college student from Princeton, NJ, started a project called Raising Awareness Destination Darfur to inform others about Darfur and other genocides. Today Sarita is still actively involved in raising a voice for those who cannot raise their own voices.

Eric Greenberg Goldy, a high school student from New York, hosted a bowl-a-thon to benefit children with cancer as his *mitzvah* project and has made the bowl-a-thon an annual event and has raised more than \$100,000 to support the Pediatric Cancer Foundation.

Alexandra Kukoff, a middle school student from Thousand Oaks, CA, felt that finding a suitable *mitzvah* project was more difficult than she thought it should be. So she wrote a book for girls on selecting *mitzvah* project and developed a blog

where she highlights a different girl and innovative project every month.

What do all of these projects have in common? Why did the students who started them continue well after they finished writing their thank you notes? These students selected causes that were personally meaningful to them and were further empowered by the experiences of working on a project that they were passionate about. These examples show the import and impact these projects can have and model ways that we, as educational leaders, can use *mitzvah* projects to increase volunteerism, service and overall communal involvement.

Jewish teen philanthropy

Currently there are more than 85 Jewish teen philanthropy programs in day schools, synagogues, JCC's, summer camps, federations and other agencies across the United States. These programs teach participants about philanthropy



and the non-profit world by transforming participants into a board or teen foundation with the authority to distribute money that has been – at least partially – contributed or raised by participants. They meet regularly to learn about communal needs, create a mission statement, develop an RFP, go on site visits, select grant recipients, and host a banquet where gifts are presented and celebrated. To extend the program beyond funding many programs incorporate a chesed or service component as well. More than 1,500 middle school and high school students were involved in Jewish teen philanthropy programs last year and granted more than \$750,000 to non-profits throughout the world.

Yeshivat Noam in Paramus, NJ is one of the few day schools in the country to offer a Jewish teen philanthropy program. The program, called H.O.P.E. (Helping Organizations Provide Essentials), is an optional program that is open to all 7th grade students and is facilitated by Areyvut. The program has been well received by the school leadership and program participants. As demonstrated by the following quotes, students are inspired by the sense of empowerment that they develop through H.O.P.E. and are motivated to make a difference in the long term.

Rachel S. I now realize the massive amount of help that people need, and how important it is to help them. I loved the feeling of making a difference and can't wait to continue doing it throughout my life. H.O.P.E. has truly inspired me to make a change, and I can't wait to inspire others.

Ariella R. I know that in a couple of years because of this program we will all make a big difference even if we do not give so much money.

Zachary O. What really impacted me is that organizations need money and that I and the group can make a difference. I wanted to help and this program helped me really help organization and make a difference.

Sophie D. I feel that this is a good program for kids our age because children can learn about giving to charity. This program inspired me to help organizations.

These students selected causes that were personally meaningful to them and were further empowered by the experiences of working on a project that they were passionate about.

Aliza O. Being in the H.O.P.E. Program has really changed me. I will try to use the skills that I gained here for the rest of my life. I hope that our contribution will help make a difference in the world.

Rabbi Tavi Koslowe, Assistant Principal, Middle School Judaic Studies at Yeshivat Noam, believes that students become engaged in programs like H.O.P.E. because they know that their ideas and efforts shape the program. In the case of teen philanthropy programs, “student empowerment involves giving students a voice.” However, Rabbi Kaslowe describes the hard work required on the part of students and facilitators in order to make the most of students’ voices. Facilitators must work with students to set expectations, establish goals, and shape guidelines from the outset. Students require sufficient time and resources to plan, assess, reflect, and learn to disagree in respectful ways before empowerment can take hold in an effective way.

Programs like H.O.P.E. bring Judaism to life, teach participants valuable lessons and facilitate their ongoing involvement in the community. The impact these programs have illustrates the importance of empowering and engaging students at all ages. Teaching students about communal involvement and engagement is so critical that there are a variety of agencies, programs, initiatives, resources and conferences solely focused on these areas.

Conclusion

Taking part in acts of *tzedakah* such as those described above profoundly impacts program participants by enabling them to learn new concepts, understand community needs, and work with agencies addressing those needs. Participants learn valuable skills including critical thinking, consensus building, public speaking, active

listening and teamwork. For many, these programs are first opportunities to work with students who are different from them and offer opinions that have real impact on a program. When participants are given this ability to play an active role in the design and implementation of the program they generally view “authorities” in a positive light, often as colleagues or equal partners in the initiative. Though many of these programs are not designed as leadership programs, they all teach leadership skills directly or indirectly. Often program alumni emerge from these programs engaged, inspired and motivated to continue to address these areas and they are the ones that lead, develop and implement other related initiatives and programs in the community and beyond.

Participating in these sorts of programs can also help educators address their educational goals and reach students they may ordinarily have difficulty reaching. The students who often struggle academically excel when planting a garden, visiting seniors, volunteering at the food pantry or participating in other similar programs. Engaging and empowering these students will help them grow, learn and achieve while positively impacting their peers and serving the community.

These initiatives meaningfully engage students at a young age and teach critical life skills that will impact students for the rest of their lives. Students get to see how Judaism relates to real world issues and emerge empowered to become active in their communities. Since these *hesed* and *tzedakah* programs enhance the educational, emotional and social experience of students and impact their families, schools, communities and the agencies they work with, we should do whatever we can to incorporate more of these types of programs in our schools and communities. Doing so will benefit us now and well into the future.