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More than 200 Jewish educators, program developers, and volunteer leaders participated on Tuesday (January 29) in a convening in New York organized by JESNA and a group of co-sponsoring organizations to examine new models of complementary education. The convening, the first of three that will be held across the continent over the coming months on the theme, "Creating the Future of Complementary Education," drew a capacity crowd of 100 in-person attendees and a larger contingent who joined the proceedings on line. The program featured panelists who have been involved in a variety of innovative programs that have emerged in recent years and who shared lessons learned from their experiences. Participants also engaged in interactive small group exercises, generating new ideas for how to address some of complementary education's current challenges.

Complementary education - also called supplementary, part-time education or "Hebrew school" - enrolls more than 200,000 Jewish young people and has been the subject of both intense criticism and a growing number of initiatives both to improve offerings in synagogues - the largest providers of this type of Jewish education - and to create alternative programs outside congregational settings. JESNA initiated the series of convenings in order to bring together individuals who are spearheading these initiatives as well as those seeking to introduce or accelerate change in their institutions. "Our ultimate goal is to build a broad-based movement for innovation in complementary education," stated Dr. Leora Isaacs, who heads up JESNA's Berman Center for Applied Innovation, which organized the convening. "To make this happen we need to do more sharing of what is being learned and more collaborative thinking to devise the next steps for the field," she noted. "While new models and approaches are being tried today, keeping track of these is arduous, and there is little opportunity to reflect on and analyze what is happening."

Dr. Jonathan Woocher, JESNA's chief ideas officer, who helped to plan the New York convening, added, "We need to have a better understanding of what problems these innovations are trying to solve, which changes are making a difference in outcomes, and what more we need to know in order to enable more children and families to have a satisfying and impactful complementary education experience."

Panelists for the January 29th convening included: Harlene Appelman, Executive Director of the Covenant Foundation; Cyd Weissman, Director of Innovation in Congregational Learning at the Jewish Education Project; Pomegranate Award winner Rabbi Shira Koch Epstein, Associate Rabbi of Brooklyn's Congregation Beth Elohim; Ana Fuchs, founder of Jewish Kids Groups in Atlanta; and David Waksberg, CEO of Jewish LearningWorks in San Francisco, among others. The program also featured the unveiling of JESNA's new InnovationXChangeTM (innovationxchange.jesna.org), an online resource for accessing information about and discussing new program models and resources. Co-sponsors of the convenings series include: The Association of Directors of Central Agencies (ADCA), NewCAJE, The Jewish Educators Assembly (JEA), The National Association of Temple Educators (NATE) and the Reconstructionist Educators of North America (RENA).

The second convening in the series will be held in Los Angeles on March 19, 2013, focusing on community change initiatives, and the third convening is planned for Montreal on May 22, and is entitled, “Putting the Pieces Together - Building a Network for Change.”

About JESNA: JESNA promotes innovation and systemic change in Jewish education in order to broaden and deepen educational participation and to enhance the impact of Jewish learning on the lives of its participants. The Berman Center for Applied Innovation is JESNA’s action arm, working with communities and institutions, and current and future educators to catalyze and support the development of new, more effective educational practices and models and to disseminate these broadly through conferences, community engagements, and online.
