

Expanding the Definition of Service and Amplifying Youth Voice

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Boston's Jewish Community Relations Council's TELEM program is a Jewish service-learning program that has engaged over three thousand teens since its launch in 2005. This case study focuses on what we have learned about crafting powerful experiences, ones that maximize the potential not only for developing critical thinking but also foster a sense of agency and efficacy in young people. It suggests an expanded definition of service and an approach in which the expression of "youth voice" is a central component. A methodology that emphasizes youth voice presents both opportunities and obstacles to achieving Jewish service-learning goals.

In 2005, the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Boston launched TELEM: Jewish Youth Making a Difference, with support from Combined Jewish Philanthropies. This Jewish service-learning (JSL) program had a sweeping and ambitious mission. Through participation in meaningful, sustained community service, paired with compelling Jewish learning, young people would embrace social justice as an essential expression of Jewish values, think critically about pressing societal issues, and develop into engaged citizens and advocates for a more just society.

Six years later, TELEM has engaged more than three thousand teens. This case study focuses on what has been learned about crafting powerful experiences, ones that not only maximize the potential for developing critical thinking but also foster a sense of agency and efficacy in young people. Focusing primarily on TELEM's experience with community organizing, I suggest an expanded definition of "service" and an approach in which the expression of "youth voice" is a central component. Finally, I reflect on the benefits of a methodology that emphasizes youth voice in achieving Jewish service-learning goals, as well as the very real obstacles it presents in reaching other objectives.

TELEM was developed to build the capacity of synagogues and supplementary schools to provide quality experiential education in social justice. We created JSL curricula, trained educators in their implementation, identified appropriate service sites, brokered partnerships, and assured the quality of the ongoing program. One year after TELEM's launch, a community organizing track was added, building on our expertise gained in organizing synagogues.

Integrating a grassroots organizing approach into TELEM required us to expand our model and adopt a radically different approach. Rather than providing set curricula and linking teens to established volunteer service sites, we deployed

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professional organizers to work with teens in select synagogues, enabling them to build the skills, leadership, and power necessary to effect change on issues of most concern *to them*.

In this approach, TELEM organizers assemble teams of teen leaders and provide them with mentoring and intensive leadership development. The teens select issues on which to act, based on their deeply held values and interests. Next, they plan and implement action campaigns, working with allies and leveraging resources to have positive impact in the community. The cycle of organizing is completed by participants following up their action by evaluating their work, learning from it, and planning their next steps.

TELEM's first teen organizing campaign focused on a local issue. Motivated by their passion for the environment, Newton's Temple Emanuel teens launched a successful campaign to expand the city's recycling program to include religious institutions.

But this was just the first step. When teens discover what can be accomplished by exercising leadership and methodically building power to effect change, their imagination is stirred and their ambition ignited. The leaders were now eager to act on a larger stage. And they understood that they could not do so on their own; they had to find allies to grow their collective power and influence.

A Martin Luther King Day program provided the perfect opportunity. Several groups of young people, including urban black teens and teens organizing in the suburbs, had gathered together to learn about the legacy of the civil rights movement. At that program the TELEM teens met urban teens, who had embarked on a campaign to restore state funding for youth jobs, which had been drastically slashed with the downturn in the economy. The urban teens were savvy and experienced leaders who had won other victories, but this time they were at a standstill. They had recently met with their legislators, who told them that they were sympathetic, but were powerless to act without the involvement of their suburban colleagues. The TELEM teens recognized the need for immediate action and for real leadership. They quickly absorbed critical lessons about political strategy not only from their adult organizers, but more significantly, from their more experienced peers. And they sprang into action, meeting with suburban legislators who had assumed that funding for urban youth jobs was not a priority for their constituents. The Jewish teens convinced them otherwise, and several of these legislators went so far as to cosponsor the bill to restore funding. The collective of youth leaders made their case at a large political gathering featuring gubernatorial candidates and convened assemblies attended by hundreds of people in which they held their public officials accountable to act on their agenda. In the end, despite the economic challenges, funding for youth jobs was fully restored at \$3 million. The young leaders were repeatedly credited for their strategic action on the floor of the Massachusetts State Senate and in countless meetings with legislators, who lauded the group's tenacity, political sophistication, and diversity.

Though action in the political arena is not typically thought of as a "service" activity, TELEM teens have gleaned critical service-learning lessons through their involvement. By forming peer relationships with and, in many cases, being trained by their peers from urban low-income communities, stereotypes were shattered and real connections forged. At the same time, the TELEM youth

learned firsthand about the impact of disparate resources and the foundations of inequality. On a practical level, they acquired invaluable leadership skills that resulted in the funding of jobs to countless young people sorely in need of employment. Perhaps most significantly, these youth exercised and developed their “voice” through every aspect of their engagement—from identifying issues, developing strategic alliances, researching critical issues, conducting political negotiation, and evaluating their process.

TELEM’s experience with dual approaches—traditional service and organizing— have yielded insights into the benefits and drawbacks of each methodology. The service model is effective in delivering a predetermined curriculum and ensuring a focus on Jewish content. It also meets the needs of teens who are drawn to providing traditional service and alleviating immediate hardship. Yet this traditional model provides only limited opportunities for teens to express youth voice other than acting as ambassadors for the program and recruiting participants. The benefits of organizing are quite clear, particularly in developing a sense of power and agency, so essential during adolescence. Yet it also has its drawbacks. Because the youth determine the content, the integrity of a Jewish framework can be sacrificed, as was the case here. Additionally, teen organizing programs can be challenging to replicate because they require not only experienced and trained staff but also youth with the imagination and patience to embark on a complex political path. In addition, unlike service projects, which involve a regular time commitment, organizing campaigns can be unpredictable and time intensive, which can be challenging for frequently overscheduled Jewish teens.

As TELEM progresses, we hope to learn more about optimizing the benefits of each of these approaches and, in particular, leveraging the lessons of organizing to enhance youth voice through service. Given the centrality of that concept, it is appropriate to close with a TELEM leader’s reflection on his experience:

I’ve discovered a new passion of mine- something that I think I will carry with me for the rest of my life: being politically active, and being around “power.”...

The most important thing about making an impact that I learned... was about getting people behind you. Organizing is all about connecting to other people, and the impact of a group is greater than that of an individual.... I definitely think I have developed into the person that I want to be.

Jesse Weiss, Temple Beth El Temple Center, Belmont

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Young Jews Learning to Serve and Lead: Organizing Jewish Teens in Boston

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Jewish Organizing Initiative, Boston

In Greater Boston, 50 teens—Jewish and non-Jewish, white and African American—worked with organizers trained by the Jewish Organizing Initiative and organized hundreds of their peers and adult allies to advocate for the restoration of more than \$3 million in state funds for urban youth jobs. In the process, young Jews built long-term relationships, as partners, with young people very different from themselves. They did not just learn how to act alone but also learned how to *lead*—to engage their peers in working collectively and powerfully toward a common goal. They trusted in their leadership and their allies and developed a strong sense of self-efficacy and possibility. As they grow up, they will become the leaders that our communities need.

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