

# The URJ & Youth: Learnings to Inform the Future

## *Executive Summary*

PREPARED FOR:

The Union for Reform Judaism

PREPARED BY:

Yonatan Gordis  
Beth Glick

Ellen Irie  
Naomi Orensten  
Regina Sheridan  
Evan A. Gattozzi

## INTRODUCTION

### Context

As the core organization of the Reform Movement, the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) supports the various institutions of the Movement as well as its members. One of the key visions currently guiding the URJ involves prioritizing its efforts with youth. While more young people experience their *b'nai mitzvah* in the Reform Movement than in any other denomination, the challenges of the day—decreasing family affiliation rates, post *b'nai mitzvah* drop-off from Jewish life and disconnection from formal membership in general—limit the reach of the URJ and other Reform institutions with youth.

In late 2012, with the generous support of the Jim Joseph Foundation, the URJ launched a consultancy to “evaluate potential approaches to youth engagement and to develop a concrete plan to begin to realize the vision of the Campaign for Youth Engagement (CYE).” The CYE, an initiative launched by the URJ at the 2011 Biennial, attracted significant attention in its early months and since then has launched several initiatives including the B'nai Mitzvah Revolution (BMR). The URJ engaged the combined consulting team of BTW *informing change* and the Center for Leadership Initiatives for this strategic process. The scope of the youth consultancy focused on the following areas:

- Strategies that could measurably increase the number of youth engaged in the Reform Movement;
- The potential role(s) of the URJ in these efforts;
- Fiscal implications of these strategic approaches; and
- The commitments the URJ would need to make to roll out these strategies.

### Learning Process

Beginning in early 2013, the consulting team embarked on an intensive learning process, resulting in a comprehensive learning report, summarized in this executive summary. The learning process included:<sup>1</sup>

- A review of dozens of URJ documents from the past decade (strategy, programming, budget, surveys and more);
- A secondary materials review of scholarly and organizational writing on youth engagement;
- Interviews with approximately 30 key stakeholders regarding the URJ and youth, including internal stakeholders at Reform institutions and other informants with expertise in fields connected to youth (in the Jewish world and beyond);
- Five focus groups with youth professionals and educators, NFTY (North American Federation of Temple Youth) youth, and young adults;
- A survey of youth professionals and educators in the Reform Movement; and
- Zip code analysis of NFTY youth and URJ campers.

Additionally, a cadre of over 40 advisors who work or volunteer in key units of the Reform Movement or connected agencies was engaged for analysis and reflection. The consultancy took these advisors through a five-week process of testing and critiquing ideas of potential changes that could shift the URJ's impact on youth.

---

<sup>1</sup> This report is an executive summary of a larger learning report submitted to the URJ in May 2013. Please contact Rabbi Bradley Solmsen at the URJ for further information about the research methods, citations, and full learning report.



It should be noted that the learning effort was constrained by several realities, including a limited institutional memory (e.g., documentation, tracking data and evaluations) at the URJ. The lack of these types of data limits the ability to learn about past trends, their potential extrapolation to today, and possible strategies for intervention.

## This Report

The analysis of the URJ’s efforts around youth within this document is structured around a stakeholder lens and specifically reflects on the following question: **What value does the URJ provide to each of its stakeholders around youth?** Only by answering this question in an ongoing fashion can URJ demonstrate the return each stakeholder receives on investing in the URJ and its efforts. Whereas the most frequent way of regarding the URJ’s work is to examine the organizational components within its universe (e.g., NFTY, camp, congregations, etc.), analysis of data gathered in this research indicated that multiple stakeholders are part of the value proposition offered by the URJ regarding youth. It is not just about the young people and what programs they are offered; it is also about the professionals who serve them, the organizational bodies that prioritize them and the Movement in which they live. Thus, this research frames its findings around the URJ’s engagement with four types of stakeholders.

- **Youth** – those who participate in programs directly operated by the URJ.
- **Professionals** – the youth professionals and educators who work at congregations, camps, NFTY and other URJ youth programs.
- **Institutions** – the organizational bodies that themselves interact directly with youth and which have varying degrees of fiduciary relationships with the URJ (camps=high; congregations=low).
- **The Reform Movement** – the diverse set of organizations and individuals who formally or informally identify with Reform Judaism.



This report looks at the value added by the URJ to each of these stakeholders in its youth-oriented work from several angles. The first—mechanisms—addresses the brass tacks of service delivery from the side of the URJ; in other words, what it *does*. In each section this is followed by lessons learned, perspectives developed through this research that reflect on *how* the URJ is doing in its efforts with this stakeholder.

Exhibit 1  
**The URJ’s Stakeholders & Mechanisms for Delivering Value to Youth**

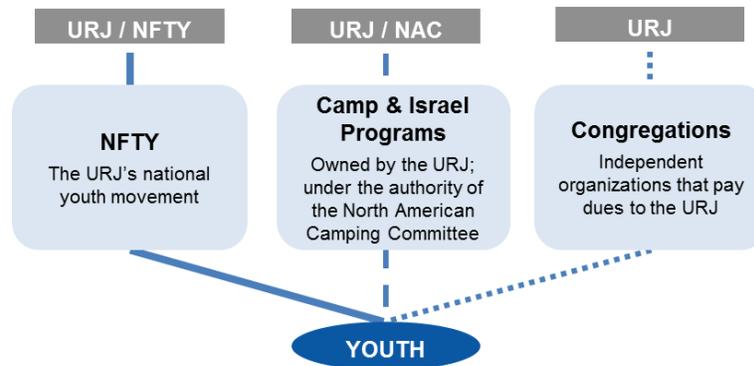
Stakeholder	URJ ‘Mechanism’	Definition
Youth	Convener	Face-to-face and virtual gatherings
	Leadership Developer	Leadership development for Reform youth
Professionals	Professional Development Provider	Skill development for youth professionals
	Convener	Face-to-face and virtual gatherings
Institutions	Innovation Seeder	Igniting new ideas and their implementation, primarily through campaigns, funding and specialty camps
	Convener	Face-to-face and virtual gatherings
	Organizational Support Provider	Capacity building and backend infrastructural support
The Reform Movement	Innovation Seeder	Igniting new ideas and their implementation, primarily through thought leadership
	Youth Knowledge House	Data and best practice collector, analyzer and disseminator
	Convener	Face-to-face and virtual gatherings



## Looking Ahead: Strategic Recommendations

The next stage of the consultancy is to test a set of scenarios with the Advisory group and ultimately develop a series of strategic recommendations about where and how the URJ should invest its resources around youth. Having varying degrees of influence with each stakeholder, the URJ must take into account its capacity to create and measure a return on its investment with each stakeholder group. Exhibit 2 illustrates the complex organizational and fiscal relationships between the URJ and NFTY, camps and congregations; the “less solid” the line between the URJ and youth, the less power the URJ has to affect change.

Exhibit 2  
**The URJ’s Relationship with NFTY, Camp, Israel Program & Congregations<sup>2</sup>**



Beyond evaluating these lines of power, other elements must also be taken into account, including potential reach, the URJ’s core competencies and capacity, and fiscal opportunities. The strategic recommendations will be offered taking all of these frames into consideration.

This report seeks to shine light on the URJ’s various stakeholders in hopes of building a platform of knowledge from which to assess options for the future. This report does not strive to answer all questions raised by these findings, but rather seeks to put framing around the opportunities facing the URJ and its youth. As the learning continues, these findings will inform not only the development of strategic recommendations for the URJ, but will also lead the URJ to make values-driven and data-informed decisions about the next stage of its work with youth.

### STAKEHOLDER 1: YOUTH



The bottom line for the URJ’s youth engagement efforts is the youth themselves. Broadening and deepening reach and engagement is clearly the ultimate goal of the Reform Movement’s work with youth. Congregations typically provide the first connection with children and youth through family synagogue membership, and local Temple Youth Groups (TYGs) are the frontline, ongoing provider of services to post *b’nai mitzvah* youth. To complement local activities, the URJ provides opportunities that extend beyond congregational life. This takes place in summer camps, NFTY—the Movement’s youth group—leadership programs (e.g., Kutz Camp: NFTY’s Campus for Reform Jewish Teens), Israel programs (e.g., NFTY-EIE High School in Israel, NFTY in Israel Summer), and social action programs (e.g., Mitzvah Corps, the Religious Action Center—RAC). This section focuses primarily on the value-add provided to the participants of the URJ’s two largest youth engagement

<sup>2</sup> The Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism (RAC) also has a portion of its mandate that deals with youth, however, the RAC was intentionally not a focus of this learning endeavor.



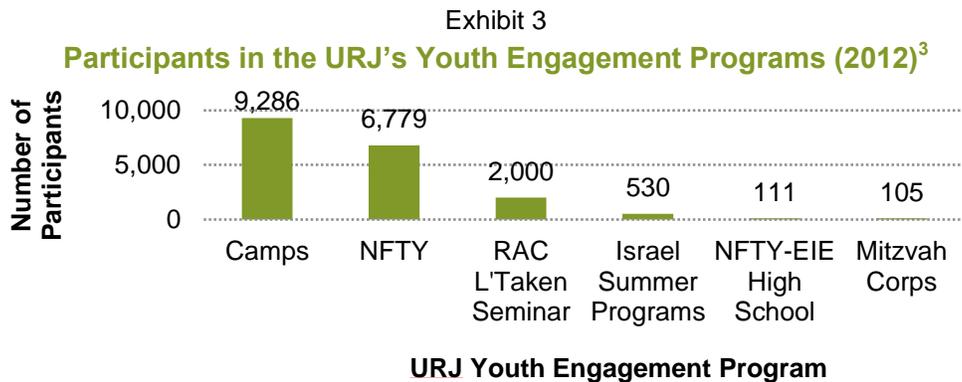
programs, camp and NFTY. Youth who are not participating in the Movement are also a very important part of the broader stakeholder group, however data are currently not available to understand their needs and interests.

### Who Participates in the URJ’s Youth Programs?

The nearly 900 URJ congregations have a total of 286,838 member families, and religious school (K–12) enrollment in these congregations is estimated at 114,531. The exact number of youth affiliated with Reform congregations is not available. The stark difference between religious school enrollment and the number of youth involved in the URJ’s youth programs demonstrates that there is greater market potential for the URJ’s youth programs than is currently being served. Exhibit 3 shows the number of participants across the URJ’s various youth programs (there is likely some duplication across these programs).

*“NFTY has something that few other youth movements do. It has this wave of b’nai mitzvah to recruit from. That is a great first recruitment point.”*

–Jewish National Youth Organization  
Senior Executive



### URJ Mechanism: Convener

**NFTY** – NFTY is the connector for Reform youth across North America. About half, or 499, of Reform congregations send their youth—their TYG members—to NFTY. NFTY offers a broad menu of programs, including five annual North American events and about 100 regional events which, in 2012, attracted a total of 12,612 attendees. NFTY events focus on the principles and values of Reform Judaism; many include Jewish ritual, prayers and learning. They are also social venues, incorporating games and activities, as well as social action and activism. NFTY dues for high school members (grades 9–12) are relatively affordable, at approximately \$36 annually, and the additional cost for specific programs ranges from free to \$171. Recently NFTY introduced no-cost junior youth groups for seventh and eighth graders, in the hopes that these youth will remain active in NFTY through their high school years. About two-thirds (61%) of NFTY’s annual budget in 2012 was covered by participants through program fees and dues.

**Camp** – With a mission to provide high quality and wide ranging Jewish experiences in a Reform context to North American Jewish youth, URJ camps incorporate learning, recreation and fun in a balanced program of total Jewish living. The URJ’s 14 camps are located across North America (Exhibit 4) and are diverse in their history, age, size and areas of focus. Total camp capacity varies widely, both by the total number of camp days (ranging from 26 to 60) and the total number of beds (ranging from 200 to 575). In 2012 the URJ’s 13 open camps served a total of 9,286 campers, ranging from 386 to 1,335 per camp (average 714).

<sup>3</sup> Campers are from Kindergarten through grade 12. This exhibit includes non-unique participants; in other words the same person could be captured in multiple programs.



Exhibit 4

**URJ Camps by Location**



**Learnings – Programmatic Offerings**

- Through NFTY, camps, Israel trips and other programs, **the URJ is filling a distinct need for youth to connect and form lasting bonds with other Reform youth beyond their own communities.** The URJ can create specialized niche or regional programs that individual communities cannot, thus creating a distinctive role for the URJ.
- **Limited data about camp and NFTY participants, as well as post *b’nai mitzvah* youth who are no longer active in Reform Jewish life, significantly reduces the URJ’s ability to be responsive** to evolving needs and interests of youth or understand program impact.
- **The URJ’s youth programs are more “youth-driven” than “youth-led”** and are not customized to fit teens’ wide range of interests.
- **URJ youth programs have limited touch points with parents,** who play a critical role in influencing the decisions of their children.

*“At NFTY I meet people at events I know I’ll be friends with for the rest of my life.”* –NFTY Member

**Learnings – Recruitment, Retention & Alumni Engagement**

- **NFTY is dependent on congregations to identify, reach and provide youth with a pipeline of opportunities beyond the local congregation.** The lack of consistently effective, symbiotic coordination between the URJ and congregations limits participation in NFTY and other URJ offerings for youth.
- **Because NFTY recruitment is tied to congregations, it does not appeal to youth who are looking for Jewish life beyond the synagogue** and excludes those who do not meet the congregational membership requirement.
- **Many URJ camps are already at or near capacity.**
- **While NFTY has some flexible engagement structures, they are not yet pervasive.**
- **The URJ can do more to utilize technology to reach and connect with youth,** before, between and after the in-person point of engagement.

**Learnings – Making it Possible: Structures & Operations**

- **There are no formally structured connections—operational or programmatic—between NFTY, camp and other URJ youth programs** that promote a continuum of experiences for Reform youth in the Movement.
- **NFTY’s cumbersome operations detract from a teen-focused experience.**
- To prevent participant drop-off for purely financial reasons, **youth and their families need financial support and compassionate management of scholarships and fee reductions.**



## URJ Mechanism: Leadership Developer

Through NFTY and camp, youth are exposed to model leaders and given leadership opportunities to practice and grow in these realms, aspirationally cultivating a leadership pipeline into the Reform Movement more broadly. The URJ's highest-touch leadership development opportunity is Kutz Camp, an immersive summer experience focused on leadership development and the application of skills.

### Learnings

- **The URJ has some strong leadership components in many of its youth programs, but has not explicitly created a leadership framework or tracking system** to understand its impact on creating a leadership pipeline into the Reform Movement.
- **The URJ does not intentionally cultivate youth leaders within its umbrella structure.**<sup>4</sup>

## STAKEHOLDER 2: PROFESSIONALS



The youth work of the URJ—and the Reform Movement overall—is driven by its professionals,<sup>5</sup> who give exceptional amounts of time and spirit to the youth. This group of over 3,500 professionals across the Movement includes those who are employed directly by the URJ (primarily NFTY and camp staff) and those working at the congregational level (youth professionals and educators). The issue of professionalizing and enhancing youth professionals' long-term effectiveness is critical to the acquisition and retention of well-placed professionals and to the ultimate success of the Movement's efforts with youth.

### Who Are the Reform Movement's Youth Professionals?

**NFTY** – NFTY is supported by a team of 31 staff members—12 full-time North American and 19 regional staff members (11 full time and 8 part time)—in programmatic and administrative positions.

**Camp** – Most camps have between two and four year-round full-time professional staff positions, for a total of about 50 across the URJ camps. They are joined by approximately 1,500 seasonal staff each summer. The URJ North American Camping Committee (NAC), within the URJ, includes another 14 staff members who manage the URJ's camp system.

**Congregational Youth Professionals** – The URJ knows the least about the Movement's wider youth professionals in congregations. Over 2,000 individuals serve as junior or senior youth group advisors/directors, youth engagement professionals/clergy, education directors, or in similar roles.

### What Do We Know about the Movement's Youth Professionals?

This research included a survey of youth professionals working in the various arms of the Reform Movement. Of the approximately 500 youth professional respondents:

- The average age is 42 years old (range: 19 years to 72 years).
- More than three-quarters (79%) have worked in the Reform Movement for more than four years.

<sup>4</sup> While there is a robust leadership mechanism in the NFTY structure (although it takes college-age youth and not teenage youth), there are no structures that serve the Movement in its entirety.

<sup>5</sup> In this report we refer to youth professionals as an all-inclusive term for all people who are working with youth in the Movement, including youth educators.



- The majority (74%) hold multiple roles, ranging from two to seven, with many holding roles of both educator and professional; in practice there is not a clear distinction between these two roles.
- Just over half (54%) work full time.
- The majority have some Jewish education, most commonly, having taken courses in Jewish studies or thought (72%).
- Salaries for those working full time are, understandably, significantly higher than for those working part time.
- Increased compensation is the top factor that would increase their chances of staying in their role (60%).
- They give a mean rating of 3.9 on a scale of 1 “not at all likely” to 5 “highly likely” for their likelihood of continuing direct Jewish youth engagement work in the next five years, and a mean rating of 4.4 on their likelihood of continuing to work in the Jewish community in the next five years.
- Approximately half (52%) note that the most common limitation on their work is a lack of available funding.

## URJ Mechanisms: Professional Development Provider

**Movement-Wide** – The Reform Youth Professionals’ Association (RYPA), a URJ partner, was launched by a group of professionals in the field in late 2011 to provide “leadership, vision, community and advocacy (for youth workers).” This professional network is focused on professional development and support for youth workers. RYPA currently has 75 members of which approximately half are URJ staff.

**Congregational Professionals** – The URJ provides youth-oriented congregational professionals with resources, publications, curricula and webinars which address adolescent development, Judaics, informal education and other issues. The URJ also uses community organizing principles to encourage shared programming across congregations and increase efforts to engage parents. Regionally focused URJ staff also offer ad hoc support services to professionals, though only some of this support focuses on youth professionals.

**NFTY Professionals** – The URJ opportunities for NFTY staff include an annual allocation of resources and limited subsidies for professional development opportunities each year, access to the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) nine-month training and Certificate in Education for Adolescent and Emerging Adults, and an annual three-day staff meeting.

**Camp Professionals** – The NAC of the URJ, which is responsible for camps, offers professional development opportunities to camp professionals, many of them in collaboration with the Foundation for Jewish Camp, including gatherings of staff across camps, fellowship opportunities and other opportunities.

## Learnings

The URJ has not done a needs assessment of its professionals—in camp or youth engagement more broadly—regarding the areas where professional development could be of support to them. Below are anecdotal reports about the effectiveness of URJ’s professional development offerings.

- **RYPA is, to date still a nascent network and has failed to create or support a youth professionals’ community.**
- **Youth congregational professionals are not major beneficiaries of the URJ’s professional development services.**
- **NFTY professionals do not receive systematic professional development support.**
- **URJ youth professionals appreciate the HUC-JIR certificate opportunity.** While only a small number are able to take advantage of this certificate—each annual cohort consists of only 16 students—professionals do report feeling supported by the URJ in their ongoing education as a result of this program.
- **Camp professionals have access to and take advantage of more diverse opportunities for training than other youth professionals, primarily through the Foundation for Jewish Camp.**



## URJ Mechanisms: Convener

While the URJ's professionals attend a significant number of gatherings, the vast majority of these are targeted to youth, with the professionals (with volunteer support) staffing them. The URJ however does have several convenings whose focus is the professionals themselves.

**Youth Engagement Conference (YEC—formerly known as the Youth Workers Conference)** – Every other year, this conference brings together youth professionals, clergy and lay leaders to learn, network and share ideas on how to nurture and grow youth programs.

**Communities of Practice** – Communities of practice provide opportunities for congregations with shared concerns and interests to advance their current strategies. While these are not oriented only to youth-focused professionals, many of the topics will target youth issues.

### Learnings

- **The YEC achieved only limited success in its broad goals.** While some sessions received positive reviews, overall participant feedback from the 2013 YEC indicates that there is room for improvement in achieving impact.
- **The YEC successfully exposed participants to outside thinking.** For many, conferences provide opportunities to learn about new topics and approaches.
- **The YEC did not build deep follow-up into its conference structure or post-implementation.**

*“The visit to the FAME Church was the highlight of the conference. I want to attend conferences like this to try new things that I normally wouldn't be able to, and this was a great example. It also demonstrated to me the priority of the CYE to learn from non-Jewish colleagues and organizations. I thought the whole day was exceptional.”*

– Youth Professional

## STAKEHOLDER 3: INSTITUTIONS – CONGREGATIONS & CAMPS



The lion's share of the direct work being done with youth in the Reform Movement is through the institutions, primarily URJ-affiliated congregations and URJ camps. In these models, the URJ is not a direct program provider but rather is supporting these institutions so they can be more efficient and effective in their work with youth. The URJ's support of institutions has strong reach power (i.e., changes that can affect more young people). Where the line of authority or influence is thinner (i.e., with congregations), the possibility of making change is more limited. The fine balance between reach potential and line of authority is particularly striking when affecting change on the institutional level.

### What Are the Institutions that the URJ Supports?

**Camp** – The URJ's camping system—the NAC—is a committee of the URJ. This system, unlike any other structure in the Jewish camping world, has centralized the ownership of all URJ camps so that, from an operations perspective, the URJ owns all of the Movement camps,<sup>6</sup> employs all camp staff, and is responsible for their operations. From a mission perspective, the URJ is focused on ensuring the reach and success of its camps as a whole, in addition to the success of any one single camp

---

<sup>6</sup> 6 Points Sports Academy and the soon-to-be-opened 6 Points Science and Technology Academy are operated on leased, not owned, facilities.



**Congregations** – The Reform Movement is the largest Jewish religious movement in North America, with approximately 900 URJ-affiliated congregations serving in total more than 1.5 million Reform Jews. Although each congregation is an autonomous nonprofit organization, and very individual in its programs, worship style and culture, they share a set of core values. Congregations are neither owned nor controlled by the URJ. Congregations pay dues to the URJ (which also support HUC-JIR) and, in return, receive certain benefits.

### **URJ Mechanisms: Innovation Seeder**

**Camp** – The URJ has embraced the specialty camp model as a means to attract new campers from families that would not otherwise send their child to Jewish camp. 6 Points Sports Academy was launched in 2011 and has demonstrated impressive growth over its first three summers; 6 Points Science and Technology Academy, currently in development, is scheduled to open in summer 2014.<sup>7</sup>

The URJ is also exploring innovative partnerships between camps, congregations and day schools, including a day camp pilot between Philadelphia area congregations and Camp Harlam, and the Nadiv Program, which shares Jewish educators at three camps with congregational or day school partners. In addition, the URJ is hiring a Director of Youth Engagement for Texas and Oklahoma to partner with URJ Greene Family Camp and Reform congregations in those states to enhance youth engagement.

**Congregations** – To ignite change across the Movement, the URJ has launched youth-oriented initiatives to seed innovation. The leading example is the BMR, a joint project with HUC-JIR Rhea Hirsch School of Education and its Experiment in Congregational Education. The goal of the BMR is to empower synagogues to return depth and meaning to Jewish learning and reduce the staggering rates of post-*b'nai mitzvah* drop-off. The URJ has also incentivized congregational innovation, specifically around member engagement, new member recruitment and youth engagement, through a series \$5,000 one-year incubation grants.

### **Learnings**

- **The URJ's bold steps to create new specialty camps are showing promise; given the newness of other pilot camp initiatives, it is too early to see definitive results.** The primary purpose of developing new specialty camps is to attract new campers from families who would not otherwise send their child to a Jewish camp. 6 Points Sports Academy has proven this to be true, with close to half of new campers each year having never attended a Jewish camp before (46% in 2012, 43% in 2011 and 44% in 2010).
- **Many of the URJ's recent efforts, including the BMR, are attempting to innovate in areas where it has the least amount of direct influence, namely congregations.** Thus, even if pilot programs are successful, scaling them Movement-wide will be a challenge for the URJ. In contrast, the area where the URJ has the greatest leverage around youth—NFTY—has seen the least amount of innovation.
- **While individual efforts are commendable, depending on the potential of scalability, the small size of some initiatives may limit their reach and potential impact.**
- **The URJ has been less effective in seeding grassroots innovation to scale,** though its nascent efforts hold promise.

---

<sup>7</sup> Both camps are part of the Foundation for Jewish Camp's Specialty Camp Incubator. The Jim Joseph Foundation fully funded the first Incubator, including 6 Points Sports Academy and four other specialty camps. The AVI CHAI Foundation joined as a co-funder of the second cohort of four additional specialty camps, including 6 Points Science and Technology Camp. Over a period of five years, FJC provides operational guidance, support and mentoring to help new camp directors move from camp concept to opening their doors and growing their programs.



## URJ Mechanisms: Convener

**Camp** – The URJ brings camp staff together to learn and share with each other at least annually; many camp staff members spend time together in Israel. Additionally, the NAC’s centralized structure provides a bird’s-eye view with which it can informally facilitate the sharing of best practices and troubleshooting of challenges across camps.

**Congregations** – The URJ has piloted a limited number of efforts to convene congregations in certain areas around youth engagement. For example, in a March 2013 retreat, the URJ convened 39 congregational staff from 17 different congregations in the Chicago Area. These efforts, rooted in concepts of community organizing, have the potential to serve a currently unmet need—the intentional linking of congregations who might not have yet found healthy levels of collaboration and dialogue on issues that challenge them.

### Learnings

- **The URJ’s convening of camps effectively supports camp staff networking and sharing of best practices.** The NAC was designed, in part, for this very function, and URJ camp staff as well as lay leaders benefit on multiple levels from being in community with their peers. Such efforts will lead to a continued sense that the camps are part of a system and a Movement, allowing for intentional navigation of challenges, experimentation and a shared platform for strategic change. Shared convenings of camp, NFTY, and congregations is not done with the same level of intentionality as is dedicated to the camp world, limiting networking and the sharing of best practices throughout the Movement.
- **The URJ is not systematically and strategically convening external institutional stakeholders—congregations—in support of youth engagement work, and it remains to be seen whether there are strategic reasons for the URJ to grow this function or not.** The March 2013 Chicago retreat described previously was, on the surface, a productive day, however, this was a relatively isolated effort; the URJ has not played a strategic role in connecting and networking institutional stakeholders within or across regions.

## URJ Mechanisms: Organizational Support Provider

In establishing the NAC, the URJ created an infrastructure and capacity builder that provides back-office supports for URJ camps. This includes developing policies and procedures, providing human resources functions, centralizing technology, supporting marketing and communications, and more. Income generated by camps is routed to a communal pool of resources that is reallocated to address immediate needs faced by camps (e.g., septic systems). The URJ does not provide this type of direct organizational support to congregations, as they are independent entities from the URJ.

### Learnings

- **While the NAC performs many functions very well, it is markedly isolated from other URJ youth engagement efforts.**
- **The NAC’s centralized structure creates tensions in the field, which limits its overall value add.**
- **The URJ is exclusively focused on marketing its own camps at the expense of providing an immersive Jewish camping experience to as many Reform Jewish youth as possible.**
- **The NAC’s umbrella role positions it to collect and use data to inform planning and decision-making for individual camps and camps system-wide.**



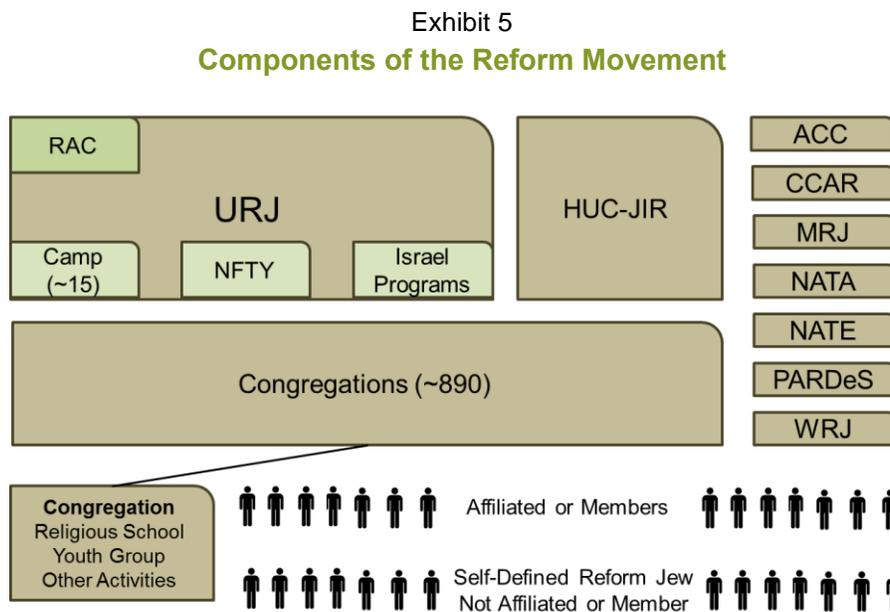
## STAKEHOLDER 4: THE REFORM MOVEMENT



By its very nature, a movement is difficult to put boundaries or delineations around. Purveying a system of values and rituals that are rooted in millennia of tradition and change, the Reform Movement—like other social or religious movements—sees its future in its youth. Engaging on multiple fronts as a hub of the Movement, the URJ’s work with youth is critical for broad impact. This section assesses the value that the URJ contributes to the full Reform Movement in the field of youth.

### What Is the Reform Movement?

The current organizational map of the Reform Movement is illustrated in Exhibit 5. Each block is an independent or an “affiliate” organizational body. Reform Jews who participate in programs of one sort or another, or who are members of synagogues comprise the group of affiliated Reform Jews. Self-defining Reform Jews with minimal or no engagement with any of the organizational bodies also appear in the exhibit.



There are multiple ways in which stakeholders within the Reform Movement engage with each other. One can refer to oneself as a Reform Jew and have no formal affiliation with any institution, instead only espousing to the values, worldviews and practices of Reform Judaism. Other individuals and families pay dues or fees to a synagogue or to a specific part of the URJ (NFTY or camp). With the strong independence of congregations (along with the traditionally strong role played by rabbis in the Movement), there is no clear linear hierarchy between the national and the local, no one body dictating organizational behavior (besides the highest level issues), and a complex set of challenges facing any one body striving to make Movement-wide change. Ultimately, the highest degree of direct interface with youth is under the purview of organizations functioning on the local level.

### URJ Mechanisms: Innovation Seeder

One of the primary media for innovation to take root is through an organization’s thought leadership, defined not only by the idea or “thought,” but also by its implementation. The URJ has dabbled in its thought leadership positioning throughout the years, and many involved in the Movement look to the URJ to play this role, seeing it as the national voice for Reform Judaism around values, politics and more. Around youth, the URJ tried to catalyze a Movement-wide conversation around the need to re-think its approach and investment in youth through the CYE, beginning with the 2011 Biennial.



## Learnings

**The URJ has not focused its efforts on seeding Movement-wide innovation.** The URJ utilized its thought leadership mantle around the launch of the CYE at the 2011 Biennial, but failed to maintain the attention of the Movement after that because of its lack of a “call” to its stakeholders. Thus, the URJ’s broad thought leadership around youth has not extended beyond its internal constituency, and those on the inside are waiting for what’s next. Furthermore, the URJ has not achieved the deep or significant buy-in of key players, like the HUC-JIR, which would aid in driving the momentum across a diversity of stakeholders.

### URJ Mechanisms: Youth Knowledge House

Tied to thought leadership, the URJ is the only entity with potential access to broad-based data and the ability to understand, apply and translate those insights to the Movement as a whole.

## Learnings

**Organized and effective collection and dissemination of the Movement’s rich knowledge has not been a priority for the URJ.** Acting as a knowledge house includes gathering data, assessing data, communicating findings, and applying learnings to practice. Whether it is to understand youth and trends, opportunities to further enhance the effectiveness of youth, or decrease the learning silos between URJ institutions, on all counts, this has not been an area that the URJ has systematized or prioritized.

*“We need more data to present to our leadership beyond the 80% drop-out statistic. What are teens engaged in? What do they want and need synagogues to provide? Otherwise it feels like the blind leading the blind.”*

–2013 YEC Participant

### URJ Mechanisms: Convener

As described previously, the URJ’s convening function where it gathers members of the Movement—representatives of official bodies (e.g., congregations, camps, NFTY) and others who find a home in the Movement, its values and programs—is a very powerful one. No convening is as large and prominent as the Biennial, which is a platform for gathering, thought leadership, inspiration, and launching innovative approaches and campaigns.

## Learnings

**The Biennial is an extraordinary opportunity to decrease individual and institutional silos, drive innovation, and set in motion new initiatives, but its return on investment is severely hindered without a follow-up plan.** Theories of effective convening focus on the importance of clarity regarding follow-up plans—what happens in the days and weeks following a gathering. Professionalism of the convener is often measured by how much has been planned and how much will be rolled out as follow up, particularly follow up that engages the participants and addresses their needs and aspirations. This is a complex endeavor. While the Biennial attracts an important constituency in synagogue leadership, it does not adequately meet the convening needs of the wide variety of stakeholders attending.

## CONCLUSION

As an umbrella institution housing and providing services to many “significant others,” the URJ has a discrete choice about where and how it provides the most value to its stakeholders. Through activities that strive to engage and retain Reform youth, the URJ offers supports and services to youth themselves, to the professionals who work with them, to the institutions who conduct the programs, and to the Reform Movement as a whole. This is not a



simple endeavor. It necessitates managing a complex and concurrent series of strategies, many of which are dependent on the buy-in of others to gain traction or create measurable impact.

Achieving the URJ's goals around youth engagement will require more than simply identifying approaches where the URJ can reap the most return on its investment. The URJ will need to incentivize all stakeholders to prioritize youth and to move beyond silos to nurture the journey of a young person in the Reform Movement throughout her/his life. With intentional cultivation of organizational relationships throughout the Movement, the URJ will affirm its role as a hub supporting the multiple stakeholders responsible for bringing youth to the forefront of the Movement.





---

2040 Bancroft Way, Suite 400  
Berkeley, CA 94704  
tel 510.665.6100  
fax 510.665.6129

[www.btw.informingchange.com](http://www.btw.informingchange.com)  
[@informingchange](https://twitter.com/informingchange)



425 West 8th Avenue, Suite 324  
Vancouver, British Columbia  
Canada, V5Y 3Z5  
tel +1 604.737.3676  
fax + 1 604.737.3686

[www.leadingup.org](http://www.leadingup.org)