

Leaders push for free Jewish preschool in US, Canada

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October 25, 2013

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(RNS) To keep younger Jews connected to Judaism, two top Jewish leaders are pushing free Jewish preschool for every Jewish family in the U.S. and Canada — what they call a “Jewish Head Start.”

The idea is to remove financial barriers that might prevent Jewish families from seeking out a Jewish preschool, and to instill in the youngest Jews a love for the Jewish faith.

“It’s about starting our children off with an exposure to the beauty of being Jewish, to the beauty of our holidays and Shabbat,” said Jerry Silverman, president and CEO of the Jewish Federations of North America, an umbrella group of more than 450 organizations that coordinate and fund educational and charitable programs for Jews and others.

Silverman and Michael Siegal, chairman of the JFNA board of trustees, made the proposal Thursday (Oct. 24) in an op-ed in *The Forward*, the pre-eminent Jewish daily in the U.S. They wrote that free Jewish preschool is one way to act on the Pew Research Center’s recently released study of American Jews, which showed a growing disconnect from Judaism and Jewish institutions.

Nearly six in 10 Jews who married since 2000 married non-Jews (58 percent), and among intermarried Jews, nearly four in 10 (37 percent) say their children are not being raised Jewish, the Pew pollsters found.

Jewish Head Start is in its earliest stages, Silverman said, and may involve founding new schools and expanding existing Jewish preschools. At Jewish preschools,

typically run by synagogues and Jewish community centers, tuition often tops \$8,000 a year. Jewish parents often choose less expensive, secular options.

Silverman estimates that there are approximately 85,000 American Jewish children in each age cohort of preschoolers: 85,000 2-year-olds and a similar number of 3- and 4-year-olds.

Financing for the project has not been secured. But Silverman said he's not worried, and expects Jewish Head Start to involve many Jewish institutions.

"For big bold ideas that can truly move the needle, that can make a difference ... the community really steps up," he said.

In their op-ed, Silverman and Siegal offered three other ideas to stem the decline in the number of secular Jews:

- * Boost the proportion of Jewish children who are attending Jewish summer camp from 10 to 30 percent.
- * Engage the graduates of Birthright Israel, the program that has sent 350,000 young Jews from 62 countries to Israel on an all-expenses-paid trip.
- * Invest in areas where there are relatively large numbers of Jews who have relatively little connection to Jewish life.