

CJE Brings Interfaith Family Education to Forefront

Nearly 58 percent of Jews in America who have married since 2005 are in an interfaith marriage. That statistic from the 2013 Pew Research Center survey, combined with the number of interfaith marriages reported by synagogue schools in the Greater Palm Beaches, prompted the Friedman Commission for Jewish Education (CJE) to explore interfaith family education during its 20th annual Summer Institute for Educators.

“When several education directors told us that significantly more than half of the families they are serving in their synagogue schools and preschools are interfaith, we knew we needed to address not only the child in the classroom, but the interfaith family as a whole,” said CJE’s Senior Director Lynne Lieberman.

CJE invited internationally recognized Jewish intermarriage expert Dr. Keren McGinity to be the keynote speaker and facilitator at the seminar. McGinity is the director of the Interfaith Families Jewish Engagement



Participants in the Commission for Jewish Education’s 20th annual Summer Institute for Educators

graduate program at Hebrew College and founding director of the Love & Tradition Institute.

“I felt privileged to be a part of this community’s first-time examination of this issue from an educator’s point of view, and I sensed a great open-mindedness among the teachers,” said McGinity. “If Jewish educators connect with families where the parents observe different religions,

or even where both parents are Jewish but observe Judaism differently, we enable everyone to better appreciate and understand Judaism as a whole. That ultimately strengthens us and represents the true

diversity that exists in our community,” she added.

Conference attendee Joshua Ackman, education director at Temple Shaarei Shalom in Boynton Beach, said he came away with ideas that celebrate family diversity.

“Sometimes it’s not about re-inventing the wheel. Sometimes it’s about looking at it from a different angle,” noted Ackman. “CJE’s Summer Institute gave us some opportunities to reflect on that, and now we are planning to put up a large world map and ask the students where their families are from. We feel a small step like that will open up the right kinds of discussions about culture and eventually faith. If that leads to engaging one more family today than we did last week, then that’s a success.”

McGinity says preschool is an especially crucial time. “Children begin to think ‘Who am I?’ before they turn three years old. That is an opportunity to give children and their families the tools and experiences to build their Jewish identity.”

Preschool teacher Raleigh Hahn says she and the other preschool educators at The One School at Temple Beth Am in Jupiter are inspired to modify their unit on heritage and family background for the coming school year. “We used to spend one week on the heritage unit, but this year we will try to make it a year-long project that acknowledges the different cultural and religious backgrounds of our preschool students,” said Hahn. “The benefit is that the more families are involved in their children’s school lives, the more they’re going to support in their home what’s going on in the classroom.”



CJE Senior Director Lynne Lieberman, seminar facilitator Dr. Keren McGinity, and CJE Director of Professional Development Robyn Hurvitz

McGinity emphasizes that it’s a team effort among school, parents, and communal leaders. “Understanding the importance of those connections helps us recognize that an interfaith marriage is not a problem, it is an opportunity,” she stressed. “It’s not intermarriage that influences the Jewish future — it’s how we as a community respond to intermarriage that will influence the future.”