



Students Seen ‘Suspicious’ Of Israel Education

Study released at national day school conference; technology, special ed also major themes.

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Los Angeles — Mike, a junior at a Jewish day school, says he has a deep and unwavering connection to Israel, but also acknowledges that he feels he has been “spoon fed propaganda” about the Jewish state from his teachers over the years.

That ambivalence is typical of day school students, according to a study unveiled this week at the annual North American Jewish Day School Conference here, attended by more than 600 educators from Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and community day schools across the U.S. and Canada.

Alex Pomson, senior researcher at the Melton Centre for Jewish Education at Hebrew University, which carried out the study, noted that Israel experiences outside of school — such as camp, youth groups and especially visits to Israel — are more effective than what is taught in the classroom.

“The challenging conclusion,” he said at a plenary of the three-day conference, is that students are “suspicious” of what they hear from adults and “distance themselves from what they hear in the classroom.”

He told The Jewish Week in an interview that while he had been skeptical of the benefit of school trips to Israel for seventh and eighth graders, because they are so young, he now believes that the earlier youngsters are exposed to “the real rather than the theoretical Israel,” the stronger their ties, which are heightened by social networking with Israeli peers the youngsters meet on their trips.

He cautioned, though, that the study, which is part of a larger project involving interviews with high school juniors attending day schools in the U.S. and Australia, is only “the tip of the iceberg.

“There is a lot going on under the surface,” he said of day school students.

The study, which Pomson described using video clips of sample interviews, was based on extended talks with 43 students from four U.S. day schools (two community schools, and two Modern Orthodox).

The conference was the second annual collaborative effort bringing together Pardes, the Reform day school association; the Solomon Schechter (Conservative) day school association; Yeshiva University (Orthodox); and Ravsak, the Jewish community day school network.

Financial concerns no doubt were a motivation in holding a joint national conference, but attendees interviewed from each of the denominations and community schools praised the effort and said they benefited from the exchange of ideas.

In addition to how day schools teach Israel, other major themes of the conference were technology and special education.

The Avi Chai Foundation, Jewish Education Service of North America, and New York's Jewish Education Project and UJA- Federation launched DigitalJLearning.org, a portal for sharing information about and "making the case for" online learning.

Sessions included presentations on robotics, "virtual world" computer games, distance learning, Skype-based classes and other high-tech tools for making Jewish day schools more engaging and cost-efficient.

In a keynote address, Marina Bers, a Tufts professor of computer science and child development, urged Jewish schools to embrace a "playground" approach, rather than a "playpen" approach, to technology and learning. Children, she said, learn better when given opportunities to explore, be creative and engage in hands-on problem-solving activities.

Bers is helping to oversee a pilot robotics program at Boston's Jewish Community Day School, which is integrating robotics projects into its Judaic studies.

Even many sessions that were not technology-related sounded similar themes of promoting creativity, fresh thinking and alternatives to traditional frontal learning.

An architectural firm demonstrated budget-conscious school building and classroom designs that encourage students to work on independent and group projects.

In another keynote address, Ron Clark, an educator who has earned presidential honors and been named Disney Teacher of the Year, repeatedly emphasized the need for teachers to fill classrooms with creativity, fun, physical activity and "a sense of urgency and excitement."

Despite his obvious cultural differences from the Jewish, mostly urban, mostly middle-class and affluent audience, the high-energy, Clark, who speaks with a Southern drawl, got a standing ovation at the conference. He told of his successful struggles with disadvantaged and underachieving students in Harlem and in rural North Carolina.

He noted that his Ron Clark Academy in Atlanta, a “model” school that also offers teacher training for people from around the country, features such architectural quirks as a tube slide, secret passages and a library in which students can bungee jump, he said.

Meanwhile, special education was also heavily featured at the Conference. Philanthropist Jay Ruderman, who recently assembled a national network that includes several mega-philanthropists and the Jewish federation system to advance inclusion in all Jewish institutions, convened several sessions for donors at the conference.

More than 10 special needs-related sessions addressed everything from Asperger’s and autism to special-education lessons from public schools to Jewish teachings on special needs to “creating inclusive classrooms for all learners.”

In an interview with The Jewish Week, Ruderman said “this is not a fringe issue. This is a central issue to the Jewish community.”

He noted that the need to accommodate and welcome Jews with special needs is one of the few issues that unites all streams of Judaism.

Conference sponsors included Avi Chai Foundation, Covenant Foundation, PEJE, the Kohelet Foundation, the Center for Initiatives in Jewish Education, and the Educational Records Bureau.

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