

MELTON CENTRE FOR JEWISH EDUCATION,  
THE HEBREW UNIVERSITY OF JERUSALEM

**Israel education in North American  
day schools:  
A systems analysis and some  
strategies for change**

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Report submitted to the AVI CHAI Foundation

**Alex Pomson, Howard Deitcher and Michal Muszkat-Barkan  
with  
Naava Frank, Reuven Greenvald, Stephen Markowitz & Pearl Mattenson  
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## 1. Introduction and orientation

*What will it take to provide a systematic, age-appropriate and above all compelling approach to Israel education for North American Jewish day schools?*

At the launch of this project, we argued that in order to provide a defensible answer to this question, it was necessary, first, to survey the field so as to gain as complete a sense as possible of what schools are currently doing. Then, we suggested, it would be valuable to identify and understand instances of best practice that might serve as exemplars or points of reference for others.

In this document, we describe what our research reveals about the present condition of Israel education in North American day schools, and what we think it would take to improve the work of schools so as to achieve the goal posed above. The research methodologies we employed are described in Appendix 1.

Our conclusions are grounded in two core assumptions:

First, that Israel education is complex educational work, made ever more challenging by sociological developments within the Jewish community and by geo-political developments in the world at large. **Israel education is, we believe, a multi-dimensional activity that involves the nurture of (i) an appreciation of Israel's central place in Judaism and Jewish life; (ii) an understanding of the origins of the State of Israel and its contemporary experience; and (iii) meaningful life-long relationships with the State and people of Israel.**

Second, we believe that Jewish day schools have special potential to achieve these three outcomes because they constitute settings where it is possible to coordinate and integrate formal instruction and informal educational experiences; in day schools, teaching and learning can occur in intensive fashion and also evolve over time in ways that are developmentally appropriate; and Jewish learning occurs in all-day schools in nested communities of parents, families and additional significant others. Day schools, we believe, because of these special conditions have the capacity to transform the relationships to Israel of the next generation of American Jews.

Over the last twelve months our research into the practice of Israel education in North American day schools reveals that few schools utilize their full potential to provide outcomes of this order. Instead, as will be described below, we found a field confused by a lack of clear educational purposes, undermined by poorly coordinated and fragmented practices, distorted by an over-reliance on informal educational experiences that are often sub-contracted to external providers, and bombarded by a confusion of initiatives that purport to solve the much discussed disconnect between American Jewish youth and the State of Israel.

However, our research also reveals pockets of quality within communities and schools that provide evidence of how day schools can utilize some of their special potential to mobilize a powerful array of educational vehicles for Israel education. This evidence, as we show, points to the strategies and approaches that if developed appropriately can make a difference to the field as a whole.

## **2. What's wrong with Israel education in North American day schools?**

### **(i) *Confused purposes***

In general, schools cannot design or deliver coherent and effective educational programs unless guided by clearly identified educational purposes. Without a clear sense of the outcomes they desire, they cannot assess the extent to which their programs are successful, and modify them accordingly.

Unfortunately, even many of the most educationally sophisticated day schools articulate vague or imprecise goals for Israel education. A large number have co-opted the AVI CHAI Foundation formulation: "The creation of the State of Israel is one of the seminal events in Jewish history. Recognizing the significance of the State and its national institutions, we seek to instill in our students an attachment to the State of Israel and its people as well as a sense of responsibility for their welfare." More often than not, this carefully crafted statement is not then connected to more immediate or school-specific educational goals.

Most typically, schools talk of cultivating a love for or commitment to Israel, outcomes as likely to be declared by elementary as by high schools. They thereby promise sweeping affective outcomes, but do not identify more proximate or nuanced sets of goals that can serve to guide the development of programs and curriculum (especially Hebrew), and the allocation of resources, in particular that of teaching time.

There are numerous conditions that make the articulation of clear and constructive goals difficult. First, it is not clear whether Israel education is itself a field – what, for example, are its core texts and experiences (other than spending time in Israel); what should educated students know, understand or do; and what is Israel education ultimately for, the intensification of Jewish identity and/or intrinsic purposes concerned with the State and people of Israel? In many communities, the outcomes of Israel education are contested: in orthodox schools there is debate about whether to educate for aliyah (and if so, about what alternative goals are appropriate for the great majority of students who will fall short of this ultimate purpose); in non-orthodox schools there is ambivalence or conflict about the purpose of Israel education when teachers and parents may be uncomfortable with Israel's policies and actions. Under these circumstances, "constructive ambiguity" about educational goals makes it possible for families and faculty who have come together for a wide range of reasons to achieve some measure of accommodation. Ambiguity enables them to "keep politics out" of their interactions and of the classroom, even if it undermines the purposefulness and productiveness of their educational endeavors. Finally, even in schools where there is a wholesale commitment to Israel and Israel education, there is uncertainty about what constitute appropriate goals: on the one hand, schools question the appropriateness of educating for anything other than unconditional support for Israel when, as one head of

**A case in point:**

When asked about the greatest challenge his school faced in the field of Israel education, the head of a community day school rightly admired for the quality of its educational practices, responded:

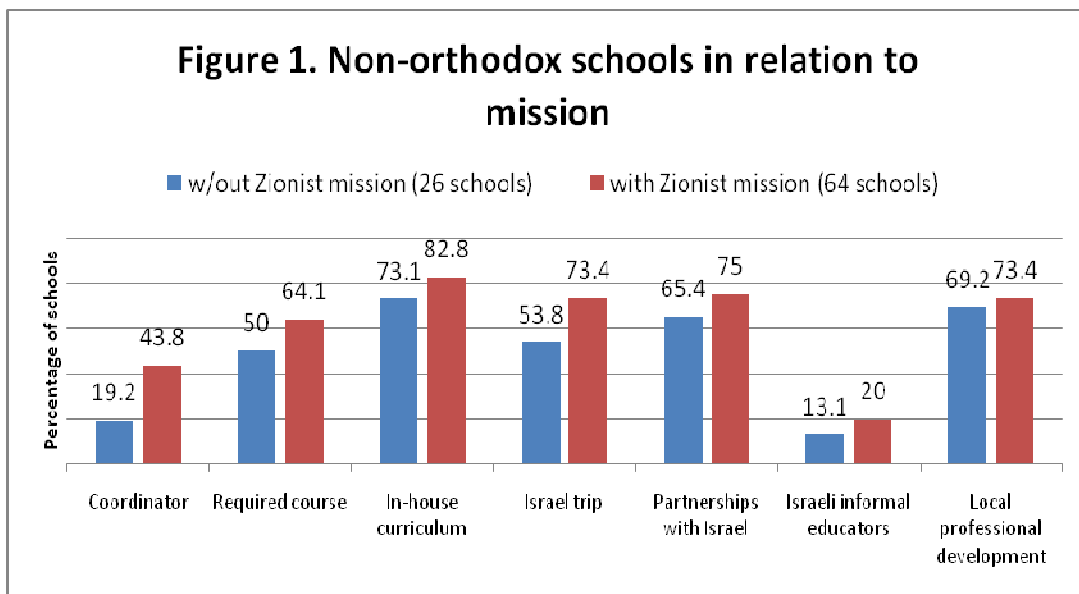
The major challenge... is to what purpose? Is our Israel education program designed to serve as [a series of] building blocks to a culminating experience of the senior trip? Is our Israel education designed to provide our students with tools to deal with anti-Israel sentiment on college campuses? Should our Israel education be designed to make the "gap year" part of the school's culture? Is there a way to make Israel education and going to Israel part of a means of rejuvenating Jewish Life on our school campus upon their return?

It is not surprising, given this uncertainty, that when our researcher visited the school she found administration and faculty reporting discomfort with talking about Israel in staff forums, a generalized uncertainty about the appropriate goals of Israel education in a pluralistic setting where there is such a range of opinions and commitments, and, perhaps most tellingly, resentment among some faculty at the time allocated to Israel programming (although actually quite limited compared to some schools).

school put it, "we don't pay Israeli taxes or serve in the army." On the other hand, educating for unconditional support is seen to be difficult when, as a different head pithily expressed it, "Israel makes it so hard to love her." Schools struggle, for a host of wholly understandable reasons, to determine what the appropriate goals of this endeavor are.

This absence of clarity is not a merely academic matter; it has profound practical consequences. As we show below, ambiguity, imprecision, and uncertainty about the purposes of Israel education undermine every facet of schools' work in this field, resulting in the fragmentation of practices, a lack of continuity and coherence across educational experiences inside and outside the classroom, and inconsistent decision-making about what to adopt of the many Israel programs and initiatives currently being offered to the field.

These problems represent a missed opportunity. As Figure 1 shows, schools with a Zionist mission statement do exhibit a more intensive approach to Israel education, as seen most vividly in the non-Orthodox sector where a significant minority of schools is not committed to a Zionist mission. Such intensity, even when haphazardly practiced, represents a foundation on which to build a more carefully-articulated, coherent, and systematic approach to Israel education.



*(ii) Fragmented practices*

Many of the most powerful moments of day school education that children experience are concerned with Israel. Some of the many examples our researchers heard about include: participating in student-led celebrations of Yom Haatzmaut or Yom Hazikaron; performing in a Hebrew version of a Broadway musical; schmoozing every lunch-time with a sherut leumi girl about her family "back home"; working for many hours on a science project with a fellow student from a partner school in Israel; designing a 15 minute PowerPoint presentation with the help of a skilled history teacher that places Israel's recent operation in Gaza in historical context; taking a semester-long high school elective on contemporary Israeli literature. These diverse experiences testify to the wide range of educational vehicles that schools can mobilize both inside and outside the classroom to advance the goals of Israel education. [These vehicles are described more fully in Appendix 2.]

For all of their individual power, however, the pieces of Israel education are invariably delivered in silo-like fashion; they may even compete with one another for time and resources. In exceptional schools, Israel education provides a context in which a school's distinctive qualities play out in an ongoing fashion – for example, its commitment to integrating teaching and learning across subject areas, to creating a truly bilingual environment, to faculty collectively shaping curriculum, and to students exercising leadership. But in most cases, powerful moments of Israel education are experienced as distinct moments in time with little connection to what came before or after; they are taken on as the projects of discrete cadres of individuals (students, faculty

**A case in point:**

Few day schools are as invested in the provision of Israel experiences for students, faculty and families as a Conservative elementary school we studied. For the last six years the school has organized a two-week trip for Grade 8 students during their last semester in school. It commits funding to ensure that all students participate. For the last three years, a parent-donor has fully underwritten the participation of over 100 staff members in the Kivunim summer program for teachers and staff. Two years ago, the head of school led a summer trip to Israel for families that will be run again this year.

The school is driven by a deep appreciation for the power of Israel experiences in shaping the Jewish identities of participants. And yet, these experiences are only connected in a limited way to the rest of the school's efforts in Israel education. The Grade 8 students participate in limited pre-trip programming, and they have very little-post trip involvement in the school. Teachers return from the Kivunim trip inspired, but there is no formal design within the program itself or once teachers return for linking what participants experienced with their classroom practice.

As in many other institutions, the school's investment in a powerful vehicle for Israel education is weakly connected to other opportunities for Israel education.

or specially hired professionals) who don't coordinate or even communicate with the rest of their colleagues and peers. As a consequence the impact of these experiences is often short-lived or much diminished, and Israel is seen as something exceptional, isolated from the flow of normal life in school, and, by implication, America.

The sharpest expression of this problem of fragmentation is seen in relation to the general lack of connection between the "Israel experience" or Israel trip that many schools provide and other vehicles that schools use for Israel education. Just over 40% of modern-orthodox and nearly 70% of non-orthodox schools commission or organize a program in Israel, varying in length from two weeks to three months. When utilized to its fullest capacity, this experience can serve as both a culminating focus for processes of Israel education that have been conducted over many years, and as a resource that enriches the Israel-related aspects of school culture, with returnees bringing back to school knowledge of and enthusiasm for Israel. In most instances, however, schools organize this experience as a passing-out exercise. So as to cause minimum disruption to the rest of the curriculum, it is more or less the last thing students do before they graduate Grade 8 or Grade 12. Invariably, too, because schools lack the resources and know-how, they sub-contract the programming of these experiences to specialist providers in Israel who, more often than not, create a program with limited direct connection to the specific elements of Israel education that students encounter over their years in school. What could be (and in a very few instances is) a synthesizing and energizing experience, ends up overshadowing and perhaps overwhelming all other aspects of Israel education, as seen in Table 1 where the responses of schools that provide a program in Israel are compared in relation to the question, "Of all the programs in your school which in your view has the greatest impact on students' connection to Israel."

Table 1: Relative impact of the Israel trip

<b>Among non-orthodox schools:</b>	<b>Among orthodox schools:</b>
64% only mention the Israel trip	30% only mention the Israel trip
21% mention the trip and something else	9% mention the trip and something else
15% don't mention the trip at all	61% don't mention the trip at all



Another pervasive aspect of fragmentation is seen in the lack of connection between the teaching of Hebrew and the other ways that children, in the elementary grades especially, learn about Israel. Data from schools indicate that most of what young children learn about Israel occurs in Hebrew-as-a-second-language and at a pediatric level, with limited connection being made to other parts of the curriculum. This is because, as was intimated above, Israel education, as an amorphous field, lacks an obvious home in the curriculum outside the Hebrew classroom. In the best instances, this can be an advantage, with schools (such as one Conservative elementary school) claiming that "Israel is not a subject; it is part of everything we do." More commonly, because Israel education has no particular home in regular classrooms, it occurs in a highly episodic and irregular fashion, usually when triggered by the promptings of the annual calendar.

*(iii) Discontinuous practices*

One of the greatest strengths of day school education derives from the fact that, over many years and many more hours, students are socialized into a covenantal community and have an opportunity, each in their own ways, to wrestle with Jewish ideas and concepts. For educators, the day school setting provides an opportunity to design a series of experiences that build on one another and that can exercise an accumulative effect over time.

This accumulative aspect is almost entirely absent from the work of Israel education in most of the schools we studied. With the exception of one school that bookends students' high school years with two Israel experiences, each with its own focus and dynamic, our site visits provided very little evidence of schools developing an approach to Israel education that was informed by a clear sense of scope and sequence.

On the contrary, personnel in the K-12 schools we visited indicated how they were trying to determine what a developmental approach to Israel education might look like, and how their high school programs might build on or deepen the experiences of middle and elementary school. They were struggling, for example, with the challenge of how to cultivate a love for Israel in the lower grades that might then be complicated but sustained through the higher levels of school.

At this time, we see little evidence of such developmental processes. Instead, we found a disconnect (really a chasm) between a tendency in both orthodox and non-orthodox elementary schools to focus the formal work of Israel education in Hebrew classrooms where it tends to be conducted by teachers of Israeli origin, and in high schools where it is centered in the history classroom and invariably led by North Americans. Outside the classroom, there is a similar lack of continuity from one year to the next and at best an annual cycling through ritual experiences that often possess great power but that also struggle to overcome a sense of déjà-vu among students. Ironically, if there is any developmental progression it is in relation to the Israel-trip. A number of elementary schools refer to a widely enjoyed program on Yom Haatzmaut that involves the youngest students taking a simulated trip to Israel around their school, with tickets, airline meals, sand and more, and the same students' experience some eight years later of a real trip to Israel. What happens in between seems much less vivid.

**A case in point:**

In a large K-12 Solomon Schechter school, the goal of “developing love for Israel”, as affirmed in the school's mission statement, is manifested in a great variety of activities most of which are co-curricular. With its commitment to elevating and supporting student leadership, the shape, timing and content of these activities depend on the initiative of either students or teachers, but lack a clear sense of programmatic priority. Therefore, despite the presence of a charismatic and much admired coordinator for Israel education and a fairly well-developed sense of the ultimate purposes of Israel education, factors that are absent from many schools, these activities are scattered across the child's experience of school without any real sense of coherence or any real or obvious connection to the formal curriculum.

As the faculty readily admit, in the context of an impressively open school culture where staff input is encouraged, although many students pass through twelve years at the school, their developmental needs are not often considered nor are the differences between the youngest and the oldest students, both in terms of knowledge and sophistication.

***(iv) An over-reliance on experiential education***

When school heads reflect on what aspects of day school education have the greatest impact on students, the great majority point to programs and interventions that occur

outside the classroom spaces where their students spend the bulk of their time. They point to special calendar events and ceremonies, relationships with Israelis working in their schools or in partner communities, and, of course, their programs in Israel. As seen in Table 1, other than at the lowest grade levels where schools do not provide trips to Israel, and where, as indicated above, Israel education is centered in the Hebrew language classroom, Israel education is perceived to have its greatest power when conveyed by the vehicles of informal or experiential education.

**Table 2. "Of all the programs in your school, which in your view has the greatest impact on students' connection to Israel?"**

	<b>Trip</b>	<b>Personnel</b>	<b>Curriculum</b>	<b>Informal events</b>	<b>Partnerships</b>	<b>All combined</b>
K-6 (15 schools)	5 %	20 %	<b>30 %</b>	25%	15 %	5 %
K-8 (78 schools)	<b>31 %</b>	16 %	17 %	23 %	10 %	2 %
K-12/9-12 (56 schools)	<b>31%</b>	13 %	15%	30 %	8 %	3%

The materials that schools use in the classroom also tend to be heavily skewed towards what we call an "experiential" rather than a "cognitive" perspective. Having analyzed more than 80 set of curriculum for teaching about Israel published over the last ten years by commercial or not-for-profit publishers, we found that these programs predominantly emphasize their relevance to the students' lives and experiences rather than focus on abstract concepts or academic content. They eschew teaching-for-understanding and instead try to cultivate an emotional or personalized response.

Of course, in and of itself, a preference for informal/experiential education is not necessarily problematic. Our concern is with the skewing of practice towards informal education in a setting whose *raison d'être* was, historically at least, the provision of formal education. It leads us to wonder whether in the field of Israel education we are witnessing

what Isa Aron (following Christian educator, John Westerhoff) once called a paradigm of "enculturation" rather than one of "instruction". Enculturation, Aron explained, constitutes the broadly conceived task of introducing children into a set of values and norms, and initiating them into a culture and its commitments. Instruction is a more narrowly conceived task that assumes the child's pre-existing commitment to a culture and society; it is concerned with helping children acquire knowledge of the ideas and skills that society values. Enculturation, Aron argued, is advanced by providing young people with well conceived and positive Jewish experiences; instruction occurs typically within the walls of the classroom in an interaction between the teacher and learner.<sup>1</sup>

We sense that when it comes to Israel education, schools are engaged in enculturative work. Schools, whether Orthodox or non-Orthodox, are seeking to cultivate commitments and inculcate values by providing students with formative experiences. They don't seem ready to assume that students' commitments are firm enough that as educators they can focus on instruction. It is as if they are engaged in Israel advocacy work with their own students.

This is no small matter: first, because the great majority of those who work in schools were trained as classroom-based instructors and not as enculturative (or experiential) educators; second because conceived in these terms the outcomes or outputs of Israel education – like those of informal education in general – are especially difficult to assess. When the goals of an educational process are attitudinal or emotional, it is hard to determine when and what to assess as indicators of learning. Finally, these tendencies result in a dumbing down of Israel education wherein it seems reasonable, so one of our researchers was told, to advise the latest *sherut leumi* recruits to a school that "what they teach is not as important as who they smile at". Such advice reflects how schools try hard to make children feel good about Israel, but attach less importance to what they learn and understand about it.

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<sup>1</sup> I. Aron (1987) "Instruction and enculturation in Jewish education", Paper presented at the conference on research in Jewish education, Los Angeles, June, 1987.

*(v) A congested field*

As part of our research, we conducted a review of more than 40 programs and products (not including curriculum) that are currently offered to schools so as to enhance the Israel education they provide. The sheer quantity of what is offered to students, schools and teachers is remarkable, as is the variety of outcomes promised. We doubt whether there is any other aspect of the day school experience that is so well endowed.

Israel experience providers offer programs ranging in length from two weeks to three years. They provide high school students with opportunities to live with Israelis, go to school with them, study together, meet them or simply hang out. Participants can receive high school credit, improve their Hebrew or have fun. They can travel with their parents, their close friends, students from other schools, or by themselves, and they have the option of visiting Eastern Europe and Holocaust sites on their way to Israel or as part of the Israel Experience, but, interestingly, never on their way home.

In North America, schools are offered programs that, in the words of their providers: encourage critical thinking about the issues affecting Israel; empower peace builders; prepare students for the anti-Israel and anti-Semitic attitudes they will encounter on college campuses; promulgate the connection between Torah and Israel; develop young leadership and increase Jewish knowledge and commitment to Jewish life and learning; build living bridges through people-to-people connections; recreate the excitement and adventure of an Israeli archaeological excavation; and provide opportunities for Hesed and Tzedakah. There are programs that provide opportunities for: coexistence training; political leadership training; environmental education; for training to become advocates for Israel through journalism; to think about media representation of Israel; and to learn the lessons of the Holocaust.

There are just as many initiatives aimed directly at teachers. They are offered lesson plans; primary resources and maps; (innovative) curriculum units; multi-media tools; workshops; teacher institutes; networking opportunities; expert support; seminars; and opportunities to join conversations, communities of practice and/or networks with their peers. Some programs promise aesthetic education, personal discovery, and enrichment to replenish their energies and deepen their connection to Judaism and to Israel. They can access professional development for anything from one week to one year; in Israel; in New York; in their communities; their schools; their classrooms and from their home computers. Meanwhile, a small army of consultants and coaches work with communities, schools and principals to review, revise and reconstruct their curriculum; develop a vision for Israel education; get better value for their investment in Israel programming, and make it more current, authentic and engaging.

When schools lack a steady sense of their goals, this bombardment is less an opportunity than a challenge. As competing products and people vie for attention, it can result in a kind of fatigue in which schools pass-up quality products or opportunities, or alternatively sign up for programs and materials that are not consistent with their objectives or with other activities they already provide. The main criterion for selection becomes cost, rather than value or fit. In our view, the frenzied search for better or more powerful products (particularly curriculum) says less about the quality of what is already in existence, much of which is thoughtful and creative, and more about a

**A case in point: (While we were collecting data, a high school senior wrote to us about Israel education at her school. She vividly conveys the extraordinary array of possibilities in this congested field)**

Israel is taught in many different ways at XXX. The sophomore year history curriculum is European history, and second semester is devoted to Israel, the Mid-east, and Zionism. Lashon/Ivrit classes teach stories or poems, many of which are either written by Jews, Israelis, and/or Zionists. Hebrew literature is taught with a Zionist angle, and with Israeli history in mind... Juniors and seniors are required to take a Jewish History class, which goes through Israeli history...

As far as extra curriculars go, there are Yom Haatzmaut programs, Yom Hazikaron programs, and of course, preparation for the Israel Day Parade. Various speakers are brought in throughout the year for assemblies to discuss current events and news related to Israel.

And there's the Israel Awareness Commission. We run weekly meetings either discussing Israeli history or current events, and getting students' opinions on the latest news. We use newspaper articles to start the talks, or documentaries, online videos (from Palestinian Media Watch) or even news videos. In the past we've used sources provided by The David Project, and most recently from StandWithUs, an Israel advocacy organization. In Commission meetings, we are sure to emphasize that Israel isn't perfect and makes mistakes like every country, and its leaders are regular politicians, subject to scandal or setbacks like everyone else.

We run programs throughout the year that teach Israel in a fun way, because we know that not every student reads our IA bulletin board. For example, the Environmental Commission was running a "Green Day" program, so we partnered and had a segment labeled "Israel and the Environment." ... Through programs like these, we can display Israel in a more positive light, instead of just portraying it the way the media does: full of violence and instability.

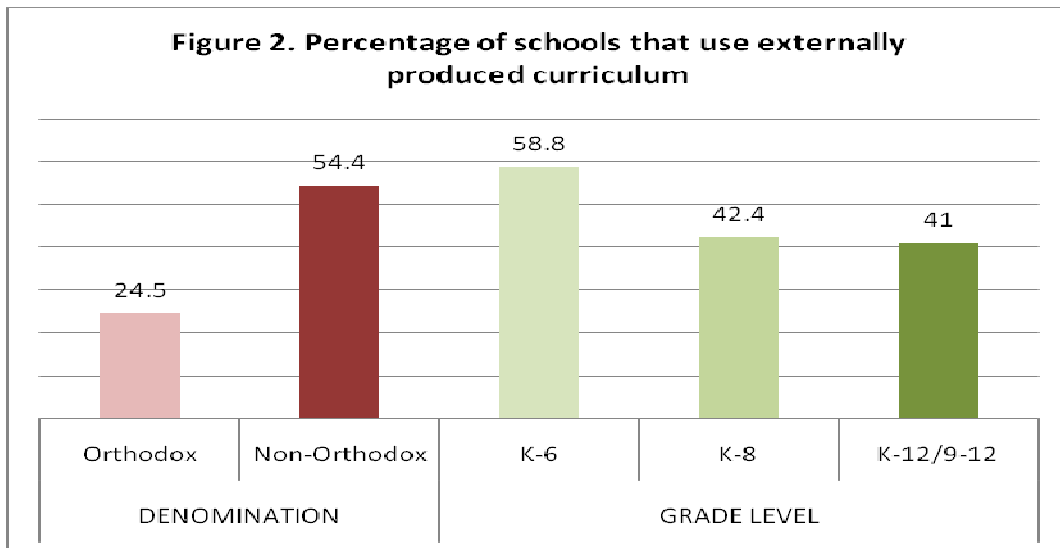
Even Color War has an Israel theme, sometimes teams are named after different parts of Israel, and have to do research and presentations based on Israeli history.

In a few weeks we'll be partnering with the Tzedakah Commission to raise charity for Sderot, and the IA commission will have a 30 minute presentation on what's going on in Sderot, and the history surrounding its problems.

Though Israel isn't officially a majority in our curriculum, it is brought up in many areas of our education, as well as in our numerous extra curricular activities. Speaking of which, I would like to apologize for not answering you sooner, I've been very busy with the extra curriculars XXX offers.

poor sense of how to align and incorporate these products into the ongoing work of schools so as to maximize their potential impact.

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that although over the last ten years more than 70 different commercially produced curriculum packages and programs have been developed for use by day schools and supplementary schools, barely a majority of day schools have made use of these materials, as seen in Figure 2. (In fact there is strong qualitative data to indicate that these data are inflated by schools that see Hebrew curriculum as a proxy for Israel curriculum.)

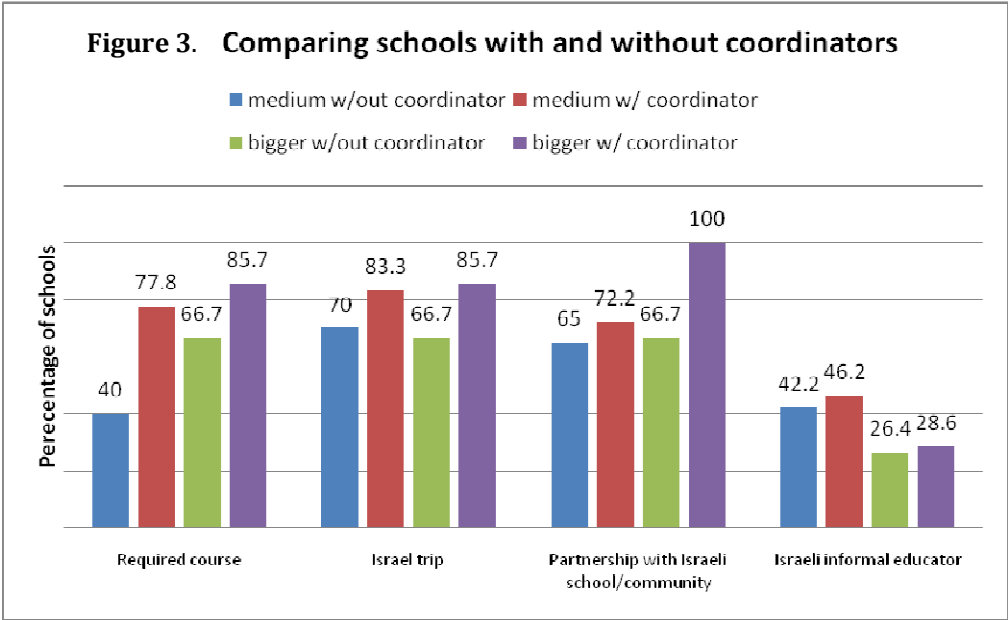


***(vi) A lack of expertise***

One last challenge that faces the field reflects not so much something we found, but rather something (actually a few things) we didn't find. As has been emphasized above, Israel education is a multi-dimensional activity that straddles the formal and informal curriculum; it calls for work with teachers and with a battery of external providers; it requires organizational skills and educational ones too; and it is often conducted in more than one language.

There are very few individuals who have mastered all of these skills, although we suspect that these skills can be learned if a framework existed to teach them. Given the confusion about what the field of Israel education is and what it is for, it is perhaps not surprising that such a framework does not exist. At this time, if schools appoint an individual to coordinate the work of Israel education (which is the case in only about a third of the schools we surveyed), such an individual is as likely to emerge from the history department as from the Hebrew department, or this person may simply be asked to incorporate the coordination of Israel education into a larger set of responsibilities as an informal educator/co-curricular coordinator. There is currently no path of professional learning or experience into this specialized work. Nor is there any professional framework that is specifically dedicated to supporting and developing those who hold such responsibilities.

Schools with the most coherent and systematic approach to Israel education employ individuals whose workload includes an assignment (equivalent usually to between a fifth and a half of their time) to coordinate the many aspects of their activity. As Figure 3 shows, their presence is significantly correlated with the provision of Israel related learning and experiences in schools.



With a coordinator, medium-sized schools (with 251-500 students) and bigger schools (with more than 500 students) are both more likely to require their students to take a



discrete course about Israel, provide an Israel experience, partner with an Israeli school, and employ Israelis on short-term contracts as informal educators. These are some of the most powerful vehicles for Israel education, and they encompass many aspects of school life. And yet, we suspect that the quality of the coordinator's contribution will be hit-and-miss until such people can learn the core functions of their work in a systematic fashion, and until there is greater theoretical sophistication about their goals and practices.

*(vii) Summary*

Lacking in clear or proximate educational purposes, the work of Israel education in North American day schools is advanced by a set of powerful educational vehicles, but it is invariably fragmented, lacking in scope and sequence, and heavily reliant on experiential education (with the challenges that implies). In exceptional cases, it is coordinated by a nominated staff member who nevertheless lacks specialist knowledge to navigate through the overwhelming array of opportunities and programs offered to students, teachers and schools.

**3. Obstacles to change**

It is often said that societies get the schools they deserve. In other words, weak school systems may not so much reflect a lack of resources, but rather a lack of societal will to allocate resources differently. By the same token, the weaknesses we have identified in day school Israel education may not be due to a lack of investment or know-how but rather a lack of will or purposefulness that in turn can be attributed to a deep-seated ambivalence or uncertainty about the place of Israel in American Jewish life. Thus, to take a mundane example, when more than half of the schools who responded to our survey indicated that the greatest challenge they face in Israel education is a lack of time and/or money, as shown by Table 3, this may say less about the availability of these resources and more about the reluctance of schools to allocate them differently. When only 10% of Orthodox schools identify finances as their major challenge, it does not mean that money is less of a problem for them than for their non-Orthodox counterparts, but rather that, from their perspective, the provision of Israel education is a necessity rather than a luxury item.

**Table 3. "What are the major challenges in relation to Israel education in your school?"**

	<b>Educational</b>	<b>Technical</b>	<b>Organizational</b>	<b>Financial</b>	<b>No problem</b>
Orthodox	30%	23%	27%	10%	10%
Non-Orthodox	23%	11%	26%	32%	8%
Combined	26%	15%	26%	25%	8%

Our colleague Lisa Grant has noted that while demographic data attesting to a growing distance between American Jewish youth and Israel are new, the dilemma of Israel education is not.<sup>2</sup> Ambivalence about the purposes and practices of Israel education run deep. Grant notes that thirty years ago Barry Chazan observed that the goals for teaching Israel were “low-level and ambiguous....reflect[ing] no ideological principles beyond the assumption that Israel is important, nor do they delineate any clear sense of the meaning of Israel for Jewish life.”<sup>3</sup>

Our research confirms that Israel education is pursued most forcefully in those contexts where the immediate and/or wider community supports this endeavor. Thus, modern orthodox schools, where Zionism is more integral to their institutional *raison d'être* than in other day school settings, showed, in their responses to our survey, that they were much less likely than non-orthodox schools to regard time and/or money as their primary challenge. In schools such as these, where almost all students spend at least one year in Israel after graduation ("High school is for five years" is what one school's spiritual leader tells perspective parents), the question is not whether Israel education is worth the time or money, Since the laubut rather what are its ultimate purposes and how are they pursued.

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<sup>2</sup> L. Grant (2008) "A vision for Israel education", Paper presented at the Network for Research in Jewish Education conference, Cleveland, June 2, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> B. Chazan (1979) "Israel in American Jewish schools revisited", *Jewish Education*, 42:2.

The impact of context is no less palpable in those schools where the local Jewish federation has created a deep and multifaceted relationship with a partner Israeli community. While such partnerships formally exist in communities across North America through programs such as the Jewish Agency's Partnership 2000 framework, their implementation is uneven. Where these relationships are well-funded, multi-generational and multi-institutional, as in Los-Angeles/Tel Aviv and Boston/Haifa, local day schools benefit not only from the greater availability of resources for building sustained relationships with Israeli schools, they operate in a local culture where such relationships are expected and valued by parents and professionals, and they can draw on local expertise about how to nurture them. As Jack Wertheimer has argued in a different context, local community culture can exercise a profound and distinctive influence on how Jewish education is conducted.<sup>4</sup>

#### **4. Evidence of good practice**

While these larger sociological and contextual factors may lead to despair about the possibility of ever improving the practices of Israel education in North American day schools, our research provides enough evidence that even when schools sail against the prevailing winds of communal norms, they can deliver Israel education that is compelling, age appropriate and sustainable. In this section we describe a small number of instances, selected from the 15 schools where we conducted site-visits, that provide examples of how this occurs. By providing such examples we don't mean to suggest that these schools can serve as blueprints for others; that is unlikely because of the localized and contextually-specific character of so much of the work schools do in this field. Instead, we draw attention to the radically different means by which schools can arrive at similarly noteworthy outcomes. These instances provide evidence of the multiple routes schools can pursue, if guided by strong leadership, towards facilitating the development of Israel education of depth and meaning. They underline how there is no single script for doing Israel education well.

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<sup>4</sup> J. Wertheimer (2007) "Cultures of Jewish education: How communities address local educational needs", in J. Wertheimer (ed) *Family matters: Jewish education in an age of choice*. Brandeis University Press. 213-256.

*(i) Defying community ambivalence – tacitly and explicitly*

A number of day schools on the West Coast are located in communities where there is widespread ambivalence towards Israel, even among highly affiliated Jews. Under these circumstances, (non-orthodox) schools that exhibit a deep commitment to Israel and to Israel education might be assumed to jeopardize their student enrollment. We found two West Coast schools that address this challenge in radically different ways: one follows a low-key, almost folksy, approach that parents find highly inclusive; the other, by developing a highly-visible, richly-resourced and unambiguous set of strategies, makes it clear to prospective parents where the school's commitments lie.

*The first school - a small, financially-challenged, community elementary school - is located in a highly unaffiliated community where there are no other day school alternatives. The admissions director reports that parents come to the school with fears that day school education will "affect their lifestyle." The school manages, however, to include Israel (and the rest of Jewish studies and life) in its activities in ways that are non-coercive and apolitical. Israel is an identifiable presence in the school as one of its carefully developed guiding values, and is a natural part of what they do, but that is less a consequence of any specific programs they provide, and more a result of the positive feelings about Israel conveyed through the convictions of the staff, a beloved group of individuals. These convictions are well articulated by the school's principal who explained to a member of our research team that "[our relationship to Israel] is like our relationship to America: there is struggle that comes along with commitment."*

*Hundreds of miles away in a different west coast community, another Jewish community elementary school has made its relationship to Israel so central to its purposes and programming that, according to its board chair, families (like his) self-select into the school even though many don't reinforce Jewish or Zionist values at home, or feel no more than neutral about Israel. Perhaps reflecting the political turmoil in the local environment, the school's commitment to Israel is grounded in a broader (arguably less controversial) goal of cultivating in its students a sense of Jewish peoplehood. Thus, while the school has developed a multifaceted relationship with a partner school in Israel (with well-supported student and faculty exchanges, extensive joint project work, and cutting edge virtual interaction), it is also connected to a Jewish school in Turkey, together with its Israeli partner, with whom they have recently developed triangular programming. While the approach is often unconventional, there is no doubting the clarity of the school's goals. As the head of Judaic studies put it: "we want to create a generation of leadership such that when the school disappears from their lives, they will be advocates for Israel wherever they are."*

***(ii) Resisting academic pressure***

In the competitive world of private high school recruitment, the one asset that is more valuable than any other is a school's record of where its graduates have gone to college. This fact of life has led the majority of non-orthodox Jewish high schools to delay their semester-in-Israel programs until the last months of Grade 12, after college applications are (successfully) concluded and the high school academic program complete. Schools fear that scheduling a program in Israel any earlier would jeopardize their students' academic prospects. We found two high schools that nevertheless exhibit fearlessness about such matters.

*Since it was established seven years ago, a large community Jewish high school has made student exchanges with Israeli schools the central organizing framework for Israel education. Guided by the desire, as one trustee put it, to ensure that "Israel is not just a subject, but part of [the students'] lives," and benefitting from extensive experience and resources at the local Jewish federation, Grade 10 students have the option of participating in either a short-term exchange (3 weeks in Israel, 3 weeks in the US) or a long-term exchange (3 months in Israel, 3 months in the US). Last year, 43 students did the former, 39 the latter, and 33 neither. With students living in one another's homes and attending one another's schools, the program requires creativity and sophistication so that school is not entirely on hold when the Americans are in Israel and the Israelis are in America. The head of school forcefully argues that, contrary to expectation, the program does not compromise academic quality but enhances the school's appeal; the school is energized by the returnees' passion, and its formal curriculum is strengthened by the students' transformed language skills and life experience.*

*On the other side of the country, a large K-12 Solomon Schechter takes a less radical but nevertheless forthright approach to reformulating the balance of the high school curriculum. During the high school years the school runs two trips to Israel for all students, a two-week trip during the first weeks of Grade 9 in which all students participate, and a semester-long program during the last months of grade 12 in which more than 90% chose to take part last year. While this arrangement requires only some tinkering around the edges of the high school program (missing some time at its beginning, and completing the curriculum in three and a half years instead of four), its structure powerfully shapes the orientation of the program as a whole, with Israel providing its beginning and end in both social and academic terms. The trips provide content and focus for curriculum and experiences conducted during the intervening years. The arrangement also models the head of school's more informally stated goal that students should continue to go back and forth to Israel throughout their lives given that Aliyah is an option for only a small minority.*

### ***(iii) Promoting Aliyah***

For modern-Orthodox schools, the relationship to Israel serves as one of their primary identification markers. However, their commitment to Israel, like much else in modern Orthodoxy, is hedged by competing sets of values that exist in a fine state of balance. While aliyah and the observance of mitzvot exclusive to the Land of Israel constitute ultimate values for modern Orthodox Jews, "many [modern Orthodox] parents", so one school trustee observed to us, "would rather someone else's child make aliyah". We, nevertheless, found two schools that unambiguously encourage students to consider aliyah although they go about it in significantly different ways.

*The head of a K-12 modern-Orthodox day school in the mid-west reports, "we talk openly about aliyah and would like all of our students to consider it. They should all be struggling with it." To great symbolic effect, the school gives pride of place in its annual journal to the stories of alumni who are now living and studying in Israel; the centerpiece of Yom Haatzmaut celebrations involves honoring families that are about to make aliyah; and academic counselors encourage students to think of going to university in Israel and staying there. In programmatic terms, the school works towards these outcomes through a mix of academic and experiential means familiar from other modern-orthodox schools. Where it is exceptional is in its commitment to employing shlichim and to accommodating their needs by running staff meetings in Hebrew, and by communicating in Hebrew with all faculty. At the present time, there are four educator couples, a Torah Mitzion Kollel of four men, and two sherut leumi girls on the payroll; 16 people all employed as shlichim. The extra costs they generate are covered by a small number of highly devoted families. This seems to be money well spent, since, according to the students who our researchers interviewed, their knowledge and attitudes towards Israel were influenced more by the shlichim than by anything else in the school.*

*At a Yeshiva high school in the southern United States, the head of school explained that on principle he does not employ shlichim: "how can they model aliyah if they're not American themselves? Besides, they don't understand American students." Instead, the school's bylaws include a requirement that only religious-Zionist teachers can be employed to teach Judaic studies. Over the ten years of the school's existence this principle has remained non-negotiable unlike in many modern-orthodox schools where the struggle to recruit advanced Jewish studies faculty often leads to the employment of faculty who are less than enthusiastic about Zionism. In another unusual step, the school recently invited Nefesh B'Nefesh – an organization that advocates and facilitates aliyah – to meet with its senior class and to expose them to aliyah options following a year of Torah study in Israel. As the school's monthly newsletter made patently clear to parents, most of whom, in the head of school's view, have no intention of leaving one of the most desirable modern orthodox communities in America, this was the first time the organization has been invited to do programming in any high school.*

#### ***(iv) Committing to Hebrew***

Ten years ago, in a masterful history of Jewish education in America, Jonathan Sarna described how, for much of the twentieth century, day schools and supplementary schools were in the thrall of Hebraism, a belief that modern Hebrew was "the key to the survival of Jewish life in the United States".<sup>5</sup> Although the Hebraist movement had completely collapsed by the 1970s (its downfall, Sarna argues, as swift and complete as that of Communism), a small number of day schools continue to defy the hostility of American society to foreign languages. We found, for example, a couple of schools that successfully make the Hebrew language central to their educational and Zionist mission.

*While many day schools located outside the largest Jewish communities in North America struggle to find sufficient numbers of Hebrew speaking and pedagogically adept faculty able to deliver a quality Hebrew language program, a large and long-established Solomon Schechter elementary school in the southern United States has broken out of this double bind in a somewhat controversial fashion. When the need arises, which is not often because of low teacher turn-over, the school recruits faculty directly from Israel on long-term contracts, that is, not as shlichim. Initially, these recruits are appointed to a one-year heavily-mentored position. If successful, they are then offered a full teaching position. The school's Hebrew speaking culture is further enriched by the presence of native Hebrew speakers across the faculty (perhaps up to half), and by the profile of the school's senior leadership team, most of whom were either born in Israel or are fully bilingual. This has resulted in a culture where Hebrew is widely integrated across the curriculum, where students choose to take Hebrew electives in the middle school, and where for the last five years parents have been taking Hebrew classes with the school's American-born bilingual middle school principal.*

*In a different Solomon Schechter school in the heart of one of America's largest Jewish communities, they follow a different approach that takes Hebrew no less seriously. When this small elementary school was founded 13 years ago, the head of school had hoped to create a Hebrew immersion program, but parents were resistant because they feared its impact on academic success. Instead, today, the school employs a tracking system that allows those who are capable to achieve unusually high standards in Hebrew. With every core classroom teacher required to be a fluent Hebrew speaker, Hebrew and the study of Israel are integrated across the curriculum. None of the teachers are themselves Israeli (although some were raised in America by Israeli parents) because, so the head of school explained, he couldn't find any Israelis open to the school's distinctive pedagogy. Because of their fluency in Hebrew, however, the faculty is able to connect all aspects of the curriculum (music, art, social studies, and science) to Hebrew and Israel.*

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<sup>5</sup> J. Sarna (1998) "American Jewish education in historical perspective", *Journal of Jewish Education* 64(1-2): 8-21.

## 5. What the field needs.

As our work has progressed over the last year, we have asked ourselves what we at the Melton Centre can do to make a positive difference to the field we have explored and to whose inherent importance we are deeply committed. This, after all, was the animating purpose behind our research. In this section, wary of overburdening an already congested educational environment, we sketch the general features of a strategy for transforming the day school field.

In our view any strategy must have four qualities. It must be:

**(i) Manageable:** *it should focus on a carefully defined, but strategically important, sector of the day school system, rather than plan to change more than 300 schools.*

In educational terms, the day school field is a relatively small one. We estimate that there are about 300 schools whose value system is informed (explicitly or otherwise) by Zionist commitments and that might be sympathetic to the notion of transforming their approach to Israel education. Nevertheless, a change-initiative aimed at 300 schools will still be unwieldy. We, therefore, suggest concentrating efforts to transform Israel education within day high schools, a sector that consists of approximately 80 institutions. At this level, the goals of Israel education are especially tangible, with graduates able to spend time in Israel and/or proceed on to university campuses. With significant Israel advocacy efforts already having been directed to this sector, there is also a real appetite in schools to experiment with other more balanced educational approaches.

**(ii) Measurable:** *a change strategy should build on our research knowledge to facilitate the design of policies and programs (what we have called intensifiers and vehicles) that will make an identifiable difference to the outcomes of Israel education.*

We have been privileged to learn about some outstanding practices that in many cases are not known beyond the walls of the schools we visited, and in some cases not even by most members of the particular school communities concerned. We have also been able to develop a clear sense for ourselves of the interrelationships between these practices, and



the interventions that can be developed and delivered to maximize their potential. These relationships are depicted in Appendix 3.

Any future initiative should build on this research knowledge to provide schools with: (i) compelling reasons to transform their practice, and to expose what Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey call "the competing commitments that keep things the way they are"<sup>6</sup>; (ii) it should provide schools with emotional inspiration and affirmation for taking on new practices since change is often not brought about through reasoned argument; and (iii) schools should be provided with measures of the (positive and negative) impacts of any changes they introduce, so as to enable them to develop their programs in planful fashion.

**(iii) Emergent:** *at the same time, a change strategy should incorporate a bottom-up or field-driven component, with each new phase being progressively shaped by what is learned from and produced by earlier phases.*

Historically, attempts to change day schools, such as the Tenakh benchmarks project, have pursued a top-down approach. Such strategies have some chance of working in fields where there is some level of agreement about desired outcomes and about the practices that can produce desired outcomes. Consensus of this sort is absent, however, from the field of Israel education for sound ideological and practical reasons.

#### **Looking for synergy**

As we indicated in an earlier section, our research for The AVI CHAI Foundation led the Jim Joseph and Schsuterman Family Foundations to ask us to study the use of curriculum in teaching about Israel in Jewish day schools.

This smaller-scale study resulted in the following recommendations that we include here so as to indicate where there may be intersecting areas of activity between the broad vision for change in Israel education articulated in this document and what we have proposed elsewhere.

(i) Teachers need help with accessing and evaluating the great quantity of curriculum material already available for teaching about Israel; at present they don't know about the existence of much of this material or what purposes it can serve.

(ii) Carefully conceived professional development must help teachers learn how to adapt curriculum material so that it meets higher order educational goals that go beyond training students to make a case for Israel.

(iii) A special effort must be made to connect at the classroom level what is learned about Israel in the Hebrew language curriculum to other parts of the formal school curriculum, in the sciences as well as the humanities.

(iv) School leaders - at the middle management level - must learn better how to coordinate the study of Israel in the classroom with other Israel education experiences to which students are exposed. In this way, curriculum can become the bedrock for all that students discover about Israel in school.

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<sup>6</sup> R. Kegan & L. Lakow Lahey. 2009. *Immunity to change: How to overcome it and unlock the potential in yourself and your organization*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press.

We envisage a process, therefore, that will provide opportunities for practitioners to reflect on their experiences of change as they occur and also to learn from one-another. Such frameworks, enriched by reliable data, will both stimulate an appetite for change in schools and will change expectations about what is possible in this field. In development terms, the challenge will be to develop real and virtual settings where schools can engage in and exchange their learning.

**(iv) Sustainable:** *finally, a change strategy should build a groundswell of commitment within schools so that they rather than outside forces (such as philanthropists and consultants) are champions, agents and leaders of change. Ultimately, we expect that change will only occur if schools want to change themselves.*

It will be important to involve school-leaders from the earliest phases of a change initiative since in the long-run they will have to carry the change process forward once funding cycles are complete. Strategically conceived RFPs can stimulate collaborative innovations that extend beyond single institutions. Structured in this way, RFPs can also encourage the sharing of costly programs and resources such as Israel experiences and Israeli personnel. Again, it will be vitally important to support networks between schools that can facilitate knowledge sharing and collaborative practices.

## **6. Why the Melton Centre?**

The Melton Centre for Jewish Education represents the Hebrew University's commitment to the advancement of Jewish education worldwide. With 13 core faculty members and 19 adjunct faculty and researchers, the Melton Centre is the largest academic institution devoted to Jewish education in the world. The Melton Centre is involved in 3 major arenas of activity: **academic** – MA & PhD programs, annual international research conferences, and a range of academic publications; **professional development** – short- and long-term programs for senior educational personnel the world over; and **educational projects in the field** – including curricular development programs, in-service training programs, adult education, and computer-supported collaborative learning.

The Melton Centre has considerable experience with the educational questions and contexts addressed in this report. Our development ideas build on work that faculty members at the Melton Centre have been doing to advance Israel education in a variety of Diaspora settings. These experiences have provided us with insights, skills and institutional capacity that can be brought to bear on work with North American day schools.

Our work has taken place in a variety of settings, at the Hebrew University and abroad in the schools themselves.

1. About eighteen months ago, the Melton Centre launched an *Israel Education think tank* for a group of scholars committed to developing this field. The twelve members of the group from universities in Israel, Australia, the United States and Canada presented papers at a by-invitation that addressed two key questions: What are the purposes of Israel Education and what sorts of outcomes can Israel Education hope to achieve in today's Jewish world?

The work produced by this group has provided the framework for **an international conference** on "the purposes and practices of Israel education" to be held in December 2009 at the Melton Centre in partnership with MAKOM, a Jewish Agency unit focused on Israel education.

2. In a recent project, we worked for three years on a curriculum development project with eight *Australian Jewish High Schools*. The schools developed a wide variety of curricula – with both formal and informal components – that introduce “Israel” as an area of subject matter into school life. The schools spanned the ideological and denominational spectrum, but working within a common process, each was able to design its own curriculum. The results of this project have been a significant increase in the number of hours dedicated to the teaching of Israel in all of the schools involved as well as a significant improvement in the innovative quality of the curricula and teaching in this area.

3. For more than twenty years the *Senior Educators Program* at the Melton Centre has provided Jewish educators of great promise with a year long program of study and

professional development at the Hebrew University. In recent times, since the start of the second Intifida, a key element of the program has involved working with participants to translate their understanding of Israel as a laboratory of contemporary Jewish culture into conceptions for Israel education in their home communities.

4. As a spin-off from our experiences with the Senior Educators Program, we will be launching in November 2009, **a new professional development program for Israel educators** that will combine year-long on-line study in the field of Israel education with a four week summer seminar in Israel. Entitled, "Enhancing Expertise in Jewish Education: Exploring issues of Israel and Diaspora", the program's first cohort is expected to include two groups, one from North America and one from South America. Bookended by group seminars in their home countries, participants will study within separate on-line asynchronous and synchronous formats, coming together for four weeks in Israel two thirds of the way through the program.

## **Appendix 1: Data Collection**

Data for the project was collected in the following ways:

### ***1. Quantitative research – to generate base line data.***

We designed, developed and administered a carefully focused questionnaire about schools' practices in the field of Israel education. Distributed to all schools identified as Reform, Conservative, Community or Modern-Orthodox, we finally received responses from 47% of those surveyed, a group of 143 schools whose general composition more or less reflects the make-up of the originally identified research sample.

### ***2. Qualitative research – to identify benchmarks of good practice.***

The second strand of our research was directed towards identifying and describing a sample of schools whose practices can serve as exemplars or points of reference for others. Through a process of consultation and selection we identified a set of 15 schools from all denominations and regions of North America, and of different grade levels and sizes. Each of the schools was visited by a research-team member whose site reports provide a rich account of the schools' goals for Israel education, the practices in which they engage, and what the schools perceive to be their successes and challenges.

### ***3. Studying curriculum for teaching about Israel***

With complementary support provided by the Jim Joseph and Schusterman Foundations, following a connection made by AVI CHAI personnel, we have conducted a comprehensive study of more than 80 curricula used to teach about Israel in North American day schools. As part of this work, we have catalogued and analyzed curricula produced for day schools by commercial presses or by not-for-profit organizations over the last ten years, and used the same analytical tool to review select samples of curricula developed in-house by schools.

### ***4. Taking stock of a congested field***

Finally, in a last phase of data collection we conducted a scan of the major initiatives and programs currently taken up by day schools. This scan of Israel experience, partnership programs and informal education and personnel development/recruitment initiatives complements our investigation of the curriculum that schools use to teach about Israel.

## **Appendix 2. Vehicles of Israel education**

Our data analysis reveals that schools make use of five primary vehicles for Israel education. Each involves its own financial and opportunity costs, and produces distinct educational outcomes. The differences between these outcomes have never been explored, nor has the potential that might exist in their careful combination.

**Israel experience** – A great many opportunities exist for students to spend time in Israel in programs ranging in length from two weeks to three years. The arrangement and focus of these programs vary greatly, from conventional tours of Israel that include some opportunities to meet with Israelis, to programs for living with and attending school with Israelis that also provide opportunities to tour. Many programs offer the option of combining an Israel experience with a visit to Eastern Europe and Holocaust sites.

**Informal events** – With widely varying differences in expertise and ambition, scale and scope, schools celebrate and memorialize key moments in the history of the State of Israel. They also provide specially programmed events that can occur at almost any time of the day or week to explore, experience and advocate some aspect of contemporary Israel. These programs take place on or off the school's premises, and involve every imaginable mix of young and adult participants.

**Curriculum** – Formal arrangements and educational materials exist for teaching about Israel in almost every subject area and discipline of the day school curriculum, in Jewish and/or general studies, Hebrew and/or English, at all age levels, and as discrete teaching units and/or integrated into other concerns. The delivery of curriculum is as likely to be mandated as to be a consequence of a teacher's own special interest.

**Personnel and professional development** – Schools employ Israelis (and/or North Americans with particular commitments and skills) on short-, long-term or permanent contracts so as to provide students with role models and resources that can connect them and the school to Israel. Additionally/alternatively, they provide professional development (locally and/or in Israel) for faculty so as to enhance their understanding, commitment and interest in Israel and/or their capacity to teach about it.

**Partnerships and person-to-person relationships** – Schools maintain relationships with Israeli schools and organizations to different degrees of intensity and extent. Connected by video, email and letter exchange, by shared internet sites such as Second Life, by visits to one another's schools by individual or small groups of teachers, and by trips taken by large numbers of students in both directions, these relationships can be project-focused, connected to an Israel trip or ongoing throughout a student's day school career.

# A conceptual model of Israel education in North American day schools

