

AVI CHAI Releases New Report on Israel Education in North American Jewish Day Schools

NEW YORK, May 1, 2014 – Sixty-five years after its establishment, Israel remains a central feature of Jewish educational programming in North America, perhaps nowhere more ubiquitously than in Jewish day schools. The AVI CHAI Foundation's newly released report, "[Hearts and Minds: Israel in North American Jewish Day Schools](#)," takes the measure of what day schools seek to impart and actually communicate through Israel education, and what students take away as a result. The report was conducted by researchers Alex Pomson, Jack Wertheimer, and Hagit Hacohen Wolf in cooperation with Rosov Consulting.

"Rather than serve as a source of divisiveness as it does in some other quarters of American Jewish society, Israel creates a powerful bond within day school communities. There is much consensus among parents and educators that day schools should inculcate a strong emotional connection to Israel. The current challenge of Israel education is to go beyond the heart and cultivate student thinking about the complexities and realities of Israeli life," said Professor Jack Wertheimer.

Through a survey of 95 North American Jewish day schools, site visits to over a dozen of the schools, and observations of school trips to Israel, the research team gathered qualitative data about how and when material about Israel is taught. In addition, 350 teachers identified by their schools as involved with Israel education were surveyed about their work and its perceived efficacy. Finally, 4030 middle and upper day school students were surveyed about how they think about Israel, how confident they feel in talking about it, and how Israel fits into their larger worldview.

This research led to the following five key findings:

- Not only is Israel education rarely contested in day schools, Israel actually serves as glue holding school communities together. Particularly in schools outside of the Orthodox sector, Israel is the single most important Jewish common denominator binding school families together.
- Israel educators fall into two categories: slightly over two thirds see their role as what we describe as Exemplars: they believe Israel education is best done by sharing something of themselves with students. Slightly under one-third of teachers, by contrast, encourage

their students to learn about Israel through inquiry and study; we call these teachers Explorers. Both types of teachers are found in every day school sector, regardless of denominational affiliation. This last finding constitutes both an opportunity and a challenge: it suggests that there is great potential for professional development across denominational lines; it suggests also that all schools should be alert to how diverse the experience of Israel education is in their classrooms.

- Students' connection to Israel grows from their relationship to the Jewish people. Nurturing connections between students and Jews around the world contributes to their connection to Israel. Put differently, the road toward engagement with Israel runs through students' relationships to other Jewish collectives, wherever they are found.
- When parents model engagement with Jewish communal life, even when they are not specifically active in pro-Israel work, students are more likely to feel strongly connected to Israel. The involvement of parents with Jewish communal life is a stronger predictor of student connection to Israel than whether a student has been on a trip to Israel.
- Day school students are not all the same. In schools of every sector, a significant minority – between a quarter and a half – are relatively detached from Jewish life and especially from Israel. Schools can have their greatest impact on Israel engagement if they build connections with these detached students. While the more engaged students benefit from the school's reinforcement of commitments absorbed in the home, the less engaged students can have their negative perceptions of Israel converted into positive ones if the school creates a culture that is connected to contemporary Israel.

“We are pleased to release this report, which we believe will advance the Jewish community’s understanding and practice of Israel education in Jewish day schools and beyond. We hope funders, organizations, schools, educators, and all those operating in and dedicated to the field of Israel education, will learn from its key findings and their policy implications,” said Mem Bernstein, Chairman of The AVI CHAI Foundation.

The full report is [available online](#) on the AVI CHAI website. For more information or to request an interview with researchers Alex Pomson and Jack Wertheimer, please contact Deborah Fishman at dfishman@avichaina.org.