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Development of Communities That Advance Education and Social Welfare: From an Incomprehensive Network to a Social Jumping Board

Program's Partners: The Jerusalem Foundation, Jerusalem Corporation of Community Councils, and Ashalim Association

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Definition of the Need

Jerusalem, Israel's capital, has a population today of 728,000, of whom 320,000 or 44 percent are children and youth below the age of 19. This percentage is higher than the corresponding share of children and youth in Israel's population as a whole (34%). Jerusalem is a poor city. The statistical data indicates that a third of its families live below the poverty line. More than 53 percent of the children residing in Jerusalem are defined as poor and are therefore in various at-risk situations. In light of these figures, the field of education and services for children and youth is particularly challenging.

It is a well-known fact that Jerusalem is a multicultural city: 67 percent of its inhabitants are Jewish and 33 percent are Arabs. Of the Jewish population, 30 percent are ultra-Orthodox. The city's inhabitants live in a large number of neighborhoods, each of which has its own unique cultural, religious and socioeconomic characteristics.

Many research studies point to the connection between education and economic situation. Not surprisingly, there is a positive correlation between the percentage of students who receive a secondary school matriculation certificate and their socioeconomic status; there is a similar positive correlation between the acquisition of a post-secondary education and the individual's socioeconomic situation. Furthermore, various studies indicate that parents' involvement in their children's education influences their scholastic achievements (see, for example, Friedman and Fisher, 2002) and that there is connection between socioeconomic situation and parental involvement: The higher the parents' socioeconomic status, the more involved they will be in their children's education.

Over the past few decades, various programs have been developed to help children living in socioeconomically distressed areas and, at the same time, to promote cooperation between the different service systems. Nevertheless, several studies have demonstrated that there is a gap between the needs and the solutions being offered these children and youth and that only a small number of children and families receive support based on innovative and comprehensive approaches.

Rationale

In a desire to advance activities at the neighborhood level for the improvement of education and social services for children and youth and in the belief that quality education is the basic right of each child, the “**Caring Community – Better Together Program**” Program was launched seven years ago. The partners in the program – the Jerusalem Corporation of Community Councils, Jerusalem Foundation and Ashalim Association – believe that each local community, namely, each neighborhood, has the required human resources, wisdom, knowledge and motivation for advancing the education of its children and youth. The program's innovativeness is expressed in a working partnership between parents, children, school principals, the local community council team, and additional professionals in activities aimed at advancing neighborhood children and youth.

The program is based on four central principles:

1. **The child/youth is the focus:** All activities conducted under the aegis of the program are aimed at enhancing the quality of life of children and their families and, at the same time, these activities are part of a comprehensive approach to all the various circles of influence impacting the child's life: family, school, friends, community.
2. **Our children's education is in our hands: We have the capacity, the right and the obligation to shape our own lives and those of our children.** In order to effect significant changes in children's lives in the context of their local community, the local residents must be made aware that they are obliged to assume responsibility for their child's educational processes. They must be full partners in the operation of the program in all its different stages: from planning to implementation.
3. **Every community is unique and thus the program's focus must be at the neighborhood level:** Because of Jerusalem's size, complexity and multi-variegated nature, it is supremely important to operate a decentralized program that will be activated in each neighborhood in accordance with its unique characteristics and which will not undermine its identity, values and communal autonomy.
4. **All the significant players in the child's life must be full partners in thinking, implementation and assumption of responsibility for the child's future:** In order to ensure a suitable response to the needs of children and youth in the neighborhood, there must be genuine cooperation between all the various agencies providing services to children and their families and between these agencies and the parents who are local residents.

The program's goals

The program has three chief goals, which intermesh:

1. To advance children and youth in Jerusalem's neighborhoods so that each child's scholastic, social and personal potential can be tapped
2. To increase the involvement of parents in the community and reinforce their capacity for promoting significant processes that will have an impact on their future and on their children's future
3. To develop cooperation between the educational and social welfare agencies operating in the neighborhood

Thus, the program aspires to create a situation in which the community and its institutions become a "Social Jumping Board" that can enable children to make progress instead of falling between the cracks.

Implementation of the program

So far, seven Jerusalem neighborhoods have participated in the program. The program's duration in each neighborhood is five years. In each of these neighborhoods, a neighborhood steering committee is established. The committee includes parents, local residents, the principals of neighborhood schools, the staff of the local community council and additional professionals; its composition expresses a numerical balance between local residents and professionals. In the first six months of its existence, the committee seeks to create a joint strategic and educational plan that can meet the community's needs. For the next five years, the committee spearheads the implementation of its projects for the realization of the "neighborhood vision." During this period, the steering committee develops mechanisms for negotiations, decision-making, the monitoring of the program's activities and the furthering of cooperation that will ultimately take the shape of permanent institutions in the community and will ensure continuity. Each committee will be headed by a chairperson who has been elected by the local residents.

Some examples of the activities being conducted in the context of the program in Jerusalem's different neighborhoods: Stimulus and enrichment for pre-school children and their parents alongside the provision of tools for children and youth with learning disabilities; development of frameworks for volunteering and community commitment; the creation of leaning centers for improving scholastic performance; youth leadership training courses; programs for preparing students for their matriculation exams; parents' groups aimed at enhancing parental authority; and sports programs for at-risk youth.

The achievements so far

As indicated by the assessment research on the program, the following achievements have already been made in its context (all quotes are from the assessment reports for November 2005 and August 2006):

1. **Improvement of the education level in the neighborhood:** In the neighborhoods participating in the program, improvement can be noted in terms of “educational products” in a variety of channels; for example, an increase in the percentage of students who are eligible to receive their matriculation certificate, higher grades, improvements in the methods of dealing with weak students, and bringing dropouts back into the educational system.
2. **Involvement and participation of parents and local residents:** “New, fruitful channels of communication have developed between parents and the schools.... There has been a significant increase in the number of local residents involved in the educational field.”
3. **Formation of partnerships between the various agencies operating in the neighborhood:** “Both the professionals and the local residents active in the program have developed a comprehensive view of the neighborhood's needs.... Joint work procedures have been developed between the various organizations in the neighborhood.”
4. **Introduction of change in different population groups:** The program is being successfully implemented among Jerusalem's various population groups (secular Jews, ultra-Orthodox Jews, and Arabs) and changes are being introduced in accordance with the needs and norms of local communities.

A story from the field

The following is just one story from the field that can serve to concretely illustrate the nature of the partnership between parents, local residents and professionals in the various neighborhoods participating in the program.

In one neighborhood, 1,000 pupils attend the local elementary school. In the planning stage, the mothers on the local steering committee raised the issue of reading as a central topic that should be promoted among young children. It was also decided that research thinking would be developed. The members of the committee concluded that there would thus be a need for the creation of a school library that would expose the pupils to quality fiction and research literature, would help them develop proper reading habits, and would enable them to borrow books and write research projects. Everyone became involved in the project: For instance, local residents and members of the local community council contacted a carpenter in the neighborhood who was willing to offer his services free of charge in the construction of bookshelves. The

local program committee decided to employ a professional librarian at the library who would guide pupils in their hunt for research material, in their reading and in their preparation of research projects. Today, five years after its establishment, the library is an integral and central part of the school. All of the pupils study there, 500 of them have library cards, and the teachers attest to a marked increase in the number of research projects being written by the school's pupils. For the past year, the library has been operating without any budgetary assistance from the program.

This simple example illustrates the program's essence: The identification of educational needs as perceived by the parents and the professionals; the establishment of a vision by the local program committee; the mobilization of parents, local residents and neighborhood organizations in order to realize the project; and a true partnership between the school and the local community council for the advancement of the children in the neighborhood.

The role of professionals and central issues in the program's implementation

The program emphasizes the role of the professional in the implementation of a complex community project. That role includes the construction of a community and a communal-educational vision, the development of partnerships between various organizations in the community; the ongoing identification of needs, commitment to the principle that the full range of voices in the local community will be heard, and the construction of a framework to ensure the program's continuity. The role involves many dilemmas and various issues that will keep resurfacing at different stages in the program's implementation.

Two central issues should be addressed here:

1. The true capacity of parents and professionals to cooperate as partners and to be equals in the thinking process and in the implementation work

Since the program's creation seven years ago, a recurring issue has surfaced periodically: Can parents and professionals truly be equals in the thinking and decision-making processes? Naturally, we believe that the answer is "Yes." Professionals and parents bring to their joint discourse knowledge from a wide variety of fields and perspectives that complement one another and which thus enhance the program's benefits for the children of these parents. Nonetheless, in the relationship between parents and professionals fears and feelings of uneasiness sometimes surface. We have often heard professionals complaining that the "parents do not understand the professional aspects of the educational and learning processes" or that they "simply do not understand what we are talking about." On the other hand, we have heard parents complain that the professionals are arrogant, conceal information from them, and do not involve them in the decision-making process. The role of the professional guiding the local steering committee is to preserve the proper balance between the two sides. The professional's first task is to create a common

language. In the planning process the parents and the educational professionals develop a common language regarding the neighborhood, existing problems and needs, the “neighborhood vision,” and methods. In the course of the local program committee's work, all committee members must be given the opportunity to express themselves and present their positions, irrespective of their knowledge, status and position on the committee, and, of course, the views of the remaining members must always be respected. This is no easy task. We have encountered school principals who have been insulted because they were not given the respect they felt they deserved. Similarly, we have encountered parents who found it difficult to exercise their right to express their views freely and who were therefore forced to maintain silence. At the same time, we have also encountered parents who exploited their position to launch an unrestrained verbal attack on school principals and on local community council directors. Each time such an incident occurs, it is the professional's role to restore balance and to enable a discourse that respects and builds, because, as the professional must understand, the different perspectives of the parents and the educators constitute one of the local program committee's most important assets and are essential for the program's implementation. One of the mothers in the program has said,

My contribution was no greater than that of anyone else. The program is built up by a group of people who really care – parents and principals – people who want to promote change. And I am one of them, I am part of them. The program is built not on me as an individual, but rather on the group. I have been a partner in all the meetings and in the learning process. The investment is immense and it requires you to put in a lot of time.... I have learned that there are other people like me in the neighborhood who really care....

We believe that this is the strength of the “**Caring Community – Better Together Program**” Program, and we know that we are in a continual process of learning about a genuine partnership between parents and professionals.

2. The ability of educational institutions to develop partnerships with other educational institutions without any threat to their status as separate, independent organizations

One of the program's goals is to develop partnerships between educational and social service organizations operating in the community. In one neighborhood, for instance, there can be three elementary schools, one secondary school, a local community council and a social services bureau. How can all these organizations work together? Is a partnership between them at all possible? In the course of our work in Jerusalem neighborhoods, we have encountered two chief difficulties faced by the directors of organizations in the area of structuring cooperative relationships:

1. The difficulty in seeing the broad community picture: The administrative task

of any educational or communal organization is immense in itself. Many directors of organizations do not have the time to deal with matters not directly concerned with the school/institution they run and thus find it hard to develop a broader systemic, neighborhood-oriented perspective.

2. The threat to the organization's integrity and independence: The fear that any form of cooperation will undermine its institutional independence will cause an organization to limit the moves it will be willing to make in the direction of partnership. That fear might also diminish the extent of resources and benefits the organization could receive for advancing local children and youth. Moreover, often the various organizations in the neighborhood think that they are in competition with one another.

Thus, not surprisingly, for most of the neighborhoods involved in the program, the formation of the neighborhood steering committee for the “**Caring Community – Better Together Program**” Program constitutes the first time that the representatives of all these organizations have ever sat together. The planning stage is the first opportunity to create joint thinking on the situation of the neighborhood's children and youth and to develop a broad systemic and neighborhood-oriented perspective. From this point on, the professionals – the program coordinator and the local community council director – face the challenge of creating and preserving partnerships. Here as well, the task is not simple. In some cases, we have managed to establish genuine partnerships as well as transparency and a pooling of resources. In these instances, the organizations have cooperated with one another in the promotion of joint programs and in the advancement of educational initiatives. There have been other instances where the desire to create partnerships was not realized and conflicts arose between the various organizations, necessitating many hours of conciliation and mediation. In most cases, we have learned that the partnerships have their ups and downs and that this is undoubtedly a subject in which we should invest considerable efforts so that the partnerships can be effectively promoted in the neighborhood. The role of the professional is to help the directors of institutions in the neighborhood develop a neighborhood-oriented perspective and see the “value added” of joint action. The professional must also eliminate threats to the integrity and independence of any of the local institutions. The most effective way to do so is to treat each institution with the utmost respect. At the same time, there is a need for clearly defining the areas in which there will be cooperation between the various organizations. In this way, each organization will know the precise borders of the partnership. We have also learned that symbolism and visibility are essential. For example, when the neighborhood programs are advertised, the logos of the various organizations participating in the program must be displayed; this deepens the feeling of partnership and togetherness, while extending respect to each participating organization.

At the municipal level, the program as a whole constitutes a partnership between three major institutions, which are independent and widely known in Jerusalem: the Jerusalem Corporation of Community Councils, the Jerusalem Foundation, and the Ashalim Association, which was founded jointly by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the Israeli government. The fruitful cooperation between these three organizations in spearheading the program delivers an important message to the neighborhoods: Partnerships are possible and they also enable breakthroughs in the advancement of children and youth.

To sum up, we have presented here the essence of the **“Caring Community – Better Together” Program** – its goals, achievements and challenges. The program's uniqueness is expressed in the joint action undertaken by parents, local residents, children, school principals, members of the local community council and other professionals in order to advance children and youth in the neighborhood. The idea of partnerships in education has been discussed extensively; however, there are very few programs that implement it. We believe that, in the modern era, professionals have an important role to play in the local community: To promote true partnerships and to establish genuine connections between parents and professionals as well as between the professionals themselves – for the future of local communities and for the future of the children and youth who live in those communities.

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