

widely, to unanimous acclaim. That is really an ego boost. Both the video and my hard-won right to show it are accomplishments that I am very proud of!

At the time when he wrote this article, Aaron Binik-Thomas was a high school senior. He served as 2003-2004 Co-Chair of the Israel Teen Council of Cincinnati, OH.

Editor's Suggested Discussion Guide:

- Who are the young adults in your community whose passions about Israel can be channeled into creative programs and initiatives? How could you include these voices in discussions on Israel education?
- This article highlights how a young adult's Israel experience led to an ongoing relationship and involvement with his community. How does/could your community engage alumni of Israel experiences beyond the parameters of the trip?
- Aaron's community fully supported and encouraged him. What mechanisms are in place in your community to support a young leader's pursuit of civil justice or protection of basic freedoms? How would a young leader access these supports?

INTRODUCTION BY THE EDITOR

Finding ways to address the challenges and to achieve excellence in Israel education has confounded educators in all aspects and venues of Jewish education. NACIE, the North American Coalition for Israel Education, is the communal partnership established in 2003 to spearhead vigorous innovative efforts to deepen community-wide engagement with Israel. In this article, Sandy Katz, NACIE's Executive Director, shares the initiative's goals and aspirations.

NACIE: A Partnership to Deepen Community-Wide Engagement with Israel in North American Jewish Life

SANDY KATZ

The relationship between North American Jewry and Israel has arrived at a critical crossroads. In spite of North American Jewry's remarkable support for the State of Israel during the past three and a half years – as reflected in its high level of affection, devotion and commitment – there is surprisingly strong evidence pointing to a serious decline in engagement with Israel among members of the community. Community leaders in North America realize that currently available Jewish educational frameworks and resources are not powerful enough tools for stimulating a strong and enduring connection between American Jews and the State of Israel. Educators, communal professionals, and lay leaders are asking themselves, “How can Israel be transformed into a core component of Jewish

identity among North American Jewry?”

One of the answers is the North American Coalition for Israel Education (NACIE). Formally inaugurated in November 2003, NACIE's mission is to intensify the significance of Israel as a core component of Jewish identity in North America. Predicated on the assumptions that local communities are the locus of change; building a coalition of community players and institutions is essential to ensure that integrated and comprehensive Israel education can take place; the local federation is the convener of the community coalition; and national organizations and their relevant agenda have a key role to play in support of the change in communities.

What makes NACIE unique?

Its vision: NACIE seeks to engender a fundamental shift in the relationship between North American Jewry and Israel. This shift will be manifest in increased levels of emotional engagement and passion about Israel; active participation by North American Jews in the multi-faceted life of Israel; the development of shared, concrete and compelling visions of what Israel means to the North American Jewish community; more opportunities to be inspired by the history, culture and ideas of Israel; integration of Israel into all facets of Jewish life; and the creation of synergies in the local communities around Israel-related issues.

Its organizational approach: For the first time, North American Jewry – represented by the Federations, United Jewish Communities, central agencies for Jewish Education, the religious movements, national educational organizations and other community institutions – in partnership with the Jewish Agency for Israel, are devising a holistic strategy for Israel education. This community-wide project will set the standard for transforming Israel into a core and integrated element of Jewish education while allowing each community to select its own gateway to change.

At the same time, the NACIE national umbrella organization offers a range of integrated and comprehensive educational services to Jewish communities throughout North America – including the provision of creative programmatic and material resources; consultancy, collaboration, and community-building; professional development; and conceptual deliberation.

Its content: In the past, Israel education programs have, by and large, been developed from an Israeli cultural and social perspective. For the first time, the NACIE team is explicitly exploring both on the philosophical-conceptual level as well as the practical level, the place of Israel in North American Jewish life. The team is asking which aspects of Israel are relevant to Jewish communities abroad, what can be integrated into Jewish life in North America, and how can this be achieved.

How is the NACIE vision being implemented?

NACIE is currently being implemented in nine pilot communities throughout North America, including Palm Beach, Miami, San Francisco, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Bergen County, MetroWest, Washington, D.C., and New York. Each year, four to six additional pilot communities will be brought on board. Smaller communities may be able to participate through the creation of regional models.

To foment a complete and far-reaching revolution in the way that children, youth, and adults engage with Israel, each of these pilot cities has created a wall-to-wall Coalition for Israel Education, with the local Federation at its head; these coalitions encompass central agencies for Jewish education, day schools, congregational schools, synagogues, JCCs, summer camps, student organizations such as Hillel, and any other relevant institutions. The pilot communities have appointed professional directors for their coalitions and have assigned prominent lay leaders to team with them to provide the necessary vision and leadership to promote the systemic change required.

Another fundamental component, which has solidified the integral partnership between North American Jewry and the Jewish Agency, has been the assignment of a Jewish Agency consultant to each of the pilot communities. These consultants are help to facilitate the establishment of local coalitions, map Israel education that is taking place locally, and helping to develop an initial work plan as well as a long-term strategy.

What are our benchmarks for success?

After X number of years, what changes will NACIE have wrought among North American Jews? How will we know we have achieved our quest to significantly raise the level of engagement with and passion about Israel in a given community?

In general terms, NACIE envisions greater participation on Israel Experience trips and other forms of involvement with Israel, higher levels of professionalism and knowledge of Israel among Jewish educators, higher enrollment levels in Jewish-

Zionist educational programs for older students, and more opportunities for encounters between Israelis and North American Jewry.

Possible local outcomes of the NACIE initiative may include:

- A campus-based Hillel House where a large number of Jewish university students have visited Israel and/or participated in long-term study programs there, are engaged in Israel advocacy, and work as camp counselors, Hebrew school teachers, and youth group advisors;
- A Federation that sees Israeli education as a top programmatic priority, emphasizes fundraising for Israel and Israel education, uses Israel as a gateway for involving new unaffiliated leaders in the community, and relates to Israel in ways that go beyond security crises and philanthropic contexts;
- Synagogues that send their rabbis to Israel for professional development seminars, organize family missions to Israel, and integrate the idea of Israel into prayer services, sermons and other aspects of congregational life;
- JCCs that incorporate Israel into more of

their activities, including but not limited to camps, and send personnel to Israel for in-service training;

- Day school and congregational schools that spend more time talking about Israel and displaying Israel in their hallways and classrooms, send educators to Israel, and incorporate more learning about Israel into their Judaic curricula

...And, most importantly, the primary success indicator will be

- An entire community that engages in Jewish identity-building processes that integrate Israel into Jewish identity; is involved in programs that promote substantive interaction with Israelis on issues of common concern; attends communal events that relate to Israel; visits, talks about and learns about Israel on a regular basis; has a sophisticated understanding of contemporary Israeli issues; and, above all, shares a deep and fervent sense of belonging to the State of Israel and the Land of Israel.

Sandy Katz is the Executive Director, of NACIE (The North American Coalition for Israel Education) of The Jewish Agency for Israel.

Editor's Suggested Discussion Guide:

- This article places a high premium on individual communities clearly articulating their own philosophy for Israel education. Has your community clearly defined its stance toward Israel education? What would be the appropriate venue for such discussions? Which key community lay and professional leaders need to be involved? How could these discussions be convened?
- At the end of her article, Sandy Katz presents a vision of a community that is fully engaged with Israel and Israel education.
 - What are your criteria for successful

community engagement in Israel education? How will you know if your efforts are successful?

- What specific types of programs, structures and initiatives would you like to see in your community?
- What are your community's assets (and potential assets) that can be leveraged for a communal effort such as NACIE? What obstacles and/or resistance would need to be overcome? How might your community capitalize on its strengths and achievements in this area, and overcome its obstacles and resistances?