

INTRODUCTION BY THE EDITOR

Student demand for more and better Israel education has resulted in a unique partnership between a national Jewish organization and a day school, and the creation of an innovative Israel education program for high schoolers. Rebecca Neuwirth of AJC describes how the partnership was forged, and how the program (IKAR) was tailored to the specific needs of the school and its students.

IKAR: Israel Knowledge, Advocacy and Responsibility

REBECCA NEUWIRTH AND CARA SUVALL

IKAR,¹ Israel Knowledge, Advocacy and Responsibility is an Israel education and advocacy program developed by the American Jewish Committee (AJC) and Solomon Schechter High School of New York (SSHSNY). IKAR was first implemented at SSHSNY during the 2002-2003 school year.

The goals of IKAR are

1. to create a sense of connection to Israel among Jewish high school students,
2. to give the students a sense of confidence in their knowledge of Israel,
3. to spark students' curiosity about Israel and motivate them to embrace continued learning, and
4. to help students develop the tools to effectively stand up for Israel in a variety of environments if they choose to do so.

This interactive program begins with an introduction on "Why Israel Matters," which sets the foundation for four workshops on important topics and issues affecting Israel: "History and Borders," "Democracy in Israel and the Middle East," "The Issue of Refugees," and "Israel in the Media and Public Debate." IKAR also includes a month-long classroom unit on Israeli history, society and culture geared specifically towards students in upper grades at day schools.

Recognizing a Need

The need for a program such as IKAR was articulated by the SSHSNY students themselves. Following on a speech by Israeli Consul General Alon Pinkas at their school, a number

of students took the initiative and approached their teachers asking for more programming and information about Israel.

High school is an ideal time for students to receive an intensive Israel education. Israel has become a prominent topic on college campuses since the beginning of the current violence, and Jewish students are frequently unprepared to present their views in what is often a contentious environment. IKAR was developed to facilitate learning about Israel in a constructive setting because both AJC and SSHSNY realized that the best opportunity students have to learn is *before* they find themselves in an antagonistic situation. Jewish high school students are sophisticated enough to understand many of the subtleties involved in issues concerning Israel and, in the context of day schools, Jewish camps, Hebrew schools and other venues, have the luxury of being able to do so in an open and exploratory environment.

In many Jewish day schools and institutions, there is no formal focus on educating about modern Israel. Students have very few resources to learn about contemporary Israel, and fewer opportunities to grapple with difficult questions they may have about the situation in the Middle East. Much of the Israel education that exists today has not changed over the years, while the situation on the ground and the needs of high school students have done so dramatically.

IKAR was designed specifically to meet these needs. One of the most important aspects of IKAR is that it was developed to be flexible. This allows educators to tailor the focus of the workshops to suit the interests and concerns of

their students and educational environment, as well as to use the material in a variety of settings and given different time constraints. AJC and SSHSNY have worked to ensure that the lessons and workshops employ a variety of educational approaches, including open lectures, small discussion groups, and ample visual aids.

Program Challenges

Teaching high school students about contemporary Israel is a difficult task; students are inquisitive, skeptical and they come to the table with their own opinions and backgrounds. Students get turned off immediately if they feel that a program is propagandistic or has a “hidden agenda.” Because topics in Israel education are highly politicized, IKAR has been designed to be a moderate and responsible program; IKAR’s approach is to present concrete information and let the students draw many implications and conclusions for themselves.

IKAR uses the existing knowledge of the participants on current topics to delve into discussions and activities about Israel’s history and values, encouraging students to teach each other and to discover information on their own. For example, in the “Democracy in Israel and the Middle East” workshop, the lesson begins with a student-led discussion on U.S. democracy. The teacher uses the students’ existing knowledge as a starting point for learning about similarities and differences in the Israeli system. Furthermore, recognizing that the concept of “democracy” is abstract for many young people, the lesson offers concrete examples of how freedom of speech, rule of law, and universal suffrage distinguish Israel from other countries in the Middle East. Because IKAR facilitates learning about Israel instead of directly teaching about Israel, the students have the opportunity to discuss and engage the issues instead of having them presented in black and white.

A further dilemma that AJC and SSHSNY faced in creating the IKAR program was determining the balance between education and advocacy.

AJC and SSHSNY decided that both are vital in the program, but that they should be delineated as far as possible and that advocacy should build on knowledge. This separation allows the students to focus on learning without thinking about an agenda or becoming defensive. IKAR advocacy focuses on public speaking, understanding the boundary between criticism of Israel and anti-Semitism, and role-playing that prepares students to speak up and take action in real situations – all skills they will likely need when continuing on to college environments and beyond.

Spreading the Word

IKAR is the product of a true partnership. Everyone who has been involved in realizing IKAR feels privileged to be a part of this exciting program. Special mention goes to Meredith Katz, the IKAR educator at SSHSNY, who has been a partner in developing materials and piloting them. We are delighted by the resonance that IKAR has found within the community. Clearly, there is a need for discussion on how to teach Israel, and for materials that facilitate the process.

IKAR is currently looking toward three goals: the creation of additional workshops and units reflecting changing realities on the ground, the continued implementation of IKAR at SSHSNY as a model program, and the attempt to help others in educational institutions around the country adopt this or similar programs. We hope to find success in all areas and to play a role in shaping the next generation of American Jews and friends of Israel.

Rebecca Neuwirth is the Director of Special Projects and Cara Suvall is an intern at AJC (The American Jewish Committee).

¹ The acronym IKAR is a Hebrew word roughly translated as “the essence,” or “the crux of the matter.”

Editor's Suggested Discussion Guide:

- IKAR has articulated four goals for Israel education for high school youth:
 1. to create a sense of connection to Israel,
 2. to give the students a sense of confidence in their knowledge of Israel,
 3. to spark students' curiosity about Israel and motivate them to embrace continued learning, and
 4. to help students develop the tools to effectively stand up for Israel in a variety of environments if they choose to do so.

How well do these goals balance advocacy and love for Israel and knowledge of Israel? What other goals might you propose for your community?

- The authors present some of the obstacles and challenges inherent in developing

and implementing a program like IKAR, and how they were addressed by the program's developers. What obstacles and challenges do you see? How might they be overcome?

- The article presents IKAR's approach by describing a few of the program's units. How might these approaches be applied in educational settings in your community? What other settings (in addition to Jewish day high schools) would benefit from a program such as IKAR?
- The authors describe an initiative that involved a partnership between two very different agencies with a focus on a common goal. How might organizations in your community partner on a local level to advance Israel education and advocacy? What are the "assets" that each partner can bring to the table? Who are the stakeholders from each organization who must be involved in such a conversation and venture? How might the partnership be forged?