

Positive Role Models

At the Ethiopian National Project's (ENP) Youth Outreach Center in Lod, teenagers hang out, chat and laugh as they move from the computer room to the arts and crafts activity space, while sounds of music emit from the music rooms / Abigail Kooper

The center is just one of 28 similar centers set up around the country by the ENP to provide a social and supportive after-school framework for Ethiopian-Israeli teenagers who live in the surrounding neighborhoods. These centers attract over 2,500 teenagers, providing them with a safe refuge from the difficult situations they sometimes encounter at school or at home.

The activities are run by Ethiopian-Israeli professionals who become positive role models with whom the teenagers can identify and with whom they can discuss the problems and challenges of being a minority group in Israel. Over 70% of the teenagers attending these centers said that they don't currently participate in any other after-school program and 68% said that they have never participated in any other after-school program. Most importantly, 96% of the Ethiopian-Israeli teenagers who visit the ENP-supported centers have stayed in school.

Set up in 2003, the ENP is a multi-year program developed to fill in the gaps of existing government and NGO programs for the Ethiopian-Israeli community. "We checked the needs of the Ethiopian children in Israel and found that there already were support programs in place for infants and for school children, but there was a support gap for the 13 to 18 age group," says ENP Director General Dr. Nigist Mengesha. Through education programs in schools and in the youth outreach centers around Israel, the ENP aims to provide a network of support for the teenage children of the Ethiopian-Israeli community, of which 70% of its members are below the poverty line.

Cycle of despair

The Ethiopian-Israeli community, comprising around 115,000 members, of which 34,600 were born in Israel, faces singular difficulties when integrating into Israeli life. The transition from a predominantly agrarian society to a modern, high-tech, mainly white Israeli environment is daunting. These new immigrants do not understand the new language or its culture and they tend to have little or no formal education. Their children, quicker at adapting to change, become the



Photos: Robert A. Cumins

eyes and ears of their parents, often creating an unhealthy role-reversal: instead of parents looking after their children, it is the children who are fending for their parents.

Ethiopian-Israeli families have on average bigger families than the general Jewish Israeli population and there is a higher incidence of single-parent households. Just 57% of the working-age population has an elementary school education or less and, in spite of some government assistance, most Ethiopian-Israelis have found it hard to enter the workforce. Employment levels for Ethiopian-Israelis are around 52%, compared with 71% for the wider Israeli Jewish population.

Ethiopian-Israelis thus live in low income and peripheral communities around the country, where job opportunities are already low - thereby perpetuating a spiral of despair. These factors have led to poverty, drug and alcohol abuse and to a significant rise in family violence. Teenagers living in this environment of despair, frustration and violence are at high

risk of being sucked into a cycle of destruction: becoming despondent, failing classes, taking part in dangerous activities, getting involved in fights, turning to drink, drugs and violence and dropping out of school, at times the only safety net in place.

In 2004, only 19% of Ethiopian-Israeli seniors passed their high-school completion exams, compared to 56% of the total Jewish population. If circumstances don't change significantly, warns Mengesha, 12% of Ethiopian-Israeli youngsters in school today will not graduate from high school, perpetuating a next generation of poverty and despair. "We make every effort to prevent second and third generation poverty within the community," she asserts.

A holistic approach

The ENP is funded by the UJC/Jewish Federations of North America, the Israeli government, the Jewish Agency for Israel, the



Ethiopian-Israeli teens who attend ENP after-school programs benefit from the supportive framework

program and encourage them to study and to attend classes in the youth centers.

Lack of funding

The program is already reaping its fruit: in 2007/8, approximately 7,500 students benefited from the program, up from 4,400 in 2005/6. In 2006, 32% of Ethiopian-Israeli seniors who attended high schools with ENP programs tested well enough to get into college, compared to 23% of those who attended high schools without the ENP programs. "Success is easy to measure through school grades," asserts Mengesha, "and each step forward is a victory." In the short term, the aim is to get students to pass the matriculation exam and get accepted to a university. In the longer term, the aim is to help these teenagers become fully integrated in Israeli society.

Mengesha takes pride in the community's achievements to date, despite all the hardships encountered. "We are training three groups to take part in Israel's municipal elections and we expect to get members of our community onto the city councils," she says. "We see their influence. They will look after the interests of the community."

The ENP program does not encompass the whole of the country - just those areas, cities and towns that have a high concentration of Ethiopian immigrants or those cities in which Ethiopian integration problems are the most acute. However, in these tough times securing funding for the program has become an extremely difficult task. The ENP requests that donors commit to financing the program for a number of years, to make sure the children can be followed until completing their studies and enlisting in the army. However, says Mengesha, it is very difficult to get donors to fund the program for more than a year at a time, often hindering processes.

There are currently 16,000 Ethiopian-Israeli children aged 13-18, but only 8,000 of these benefited from ENP's programs in 2007/8. The number will fall to just 5,000 if the lack of funds continues, fears Mengesha. Should they fail to provide a support line for this young at-risk group, its members will become a burden on the whole of Israeli society. "This problem is of the whole Israeli society and not just of the (Ethiopian Israeli) community," she says, adding that if ENP doesn't reach these kids, they will miss their potential. "People gave me the opportunity to be who I am here in Israel and everyone should have that same opportunity," she summarizes. ■

For more information, go to www.ujc.org/enp.



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American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and Keren Hayesod. Dr. Mengesha, herself a new immigrant Ethiopian Jew, joined the ENP when it was set up in 2003, after having previously served as director general of FIDEL (Aleph Bet in Amharic) Association for Education and Social Integration of Ethiopian Jews in Israel.

Representatives of the Ethiopian-Israeli community play a key role in running the

project and are an integral part of it. "We work with the community and not for the community. We work from the bottom up and not from the top down," explains Mengesha. ENP staff walk through the neighborhoods and talk to the teenagers on the street, enticing them to come to the centers and take part in the various activities which are all given for free, says Amir Tewabe, nationwide operating manager of the centers. These professionals also encourage the teenagers, talk to them and share experiences, fears, victories and defeats.

The ENP uses a holistic approach when dealing with the children, providing them with practical help in their studies through special lessons on a wide variety of subjects, as well as emotional support. Junior and senior high school students meet an average of four hours every week in small groups of six or less for a variety of activities, including English and Math tutoring, empowerment workshops, peer mentoring and a variety of enrichment classes, such as music, theater and Capoeira.

There are also identity workshops and tours around Israel and around the country's universities. "We build up their identity," says Mengesha, stressing that Ethiopian Israeli youngsters feel that they don't belong to the Israeli majority and yet they do not identify with the African-American cause either.

Teachers and parents are also enrolled in the effort to prevent the drop-out phenomenon. ENP professionals meet with teachers and headmasters to explain to them the tough absorption conditions faced by the children and their families. "We talk to teachers and headmasters of the school and explain to them what is going on with these teenagers," says Mengesha.

Parents are encouraged to go and visit the schools and meet with teachers and school principals, in an effort to get them to overcome the fear of the system and to try and bridge the culture gap. Most parents, says Mengesha, are very happy for their children to enter the