



BRIDGING THE GAPS

The Ethiopian National Project (ENP) provides educational support, special programming in youth outreach centers and more to help Ethiopian-Israeli teens bridge scholastic and social gaps and integrate more fully into Israeli society / Ilana Kraus

I am so grateful to ENP and to my teachers. Maybe one day I will be able to teach students who need extra help and my own story will help motivate them. If I can do it, anyone can." The words of Melkamo, an 11th grade student, express in a nutshell what the ENP, the Ethiopian National Project, is all about: giving Ethiopian-Israeli youngsters the booster shot they need to succeed. It also builds bridges between the teenagers and their teachers and parents, their past and their future.

Conceived in 2000 as a partnership between the Israeli government, world Jewry, and the Ethiopian-Israeli community to address the most pressing social and educational needs of Ethiopian-Israelis, it only got underway in 2004, with far less than the \$330 million in matching funds originally envisaged. "We started at that time with \$2 million raised by North American Jewry and funds made available by the Israeli government," explains Dr. Nigist Mengesha, the program's director general.

"Our surveys showed that the government and other organizations were already involved in employment projects, and a great deal was being put into education on the pre-school and elementary school levels. But there were many drop-outs among junior high and high school aged kids, and a more than 600% rise in juvenile delinquency. The percentage of matriculation eligibility was very low. So it was determined that ENP would focus on the 13-18 age group, teenagers in schools and youth at risk, and community empowerment," she recounts. Later on, ENP also introduced a unique model for dealing with the critical issue of domestic violence.

Fewer drop-outs

Since it was launched in the 2004-5 school year, the program has turned the statistics around for thousands of Ethiopian-Israeli teenagers. In 2007, 52.4% of Ethiopian-Israeli students who participated in the ENP's Scholastic Assistance Program were eligible for matriculation certificates, required for higher education, in contrast to only 37% of

Ethiopian-Israeli students nation-wide.

Since the Project's first Youth Outreach Centers were set up in 2005, there has been a 60% decrease in the number of Ethiopian-Israeli youth with police files. "The drop-out rate has also been drastically reduced," Dr. Mengesha states. "Fewer kids are going to boarding schools. More of them are getting into better high schools and earning higher level matriculation certificates," she adds.

More than that, as Melkamo's remarks suggest, the extra help he received from ENP has shown him and his fellow students that they have what it takes to succeed and that one day they will be able to give back to their community. Working hand in hand with school staff, government ministries, organizations and the Ethiopian-Israeli community, ENP tackles the toughest problems facing Ethiopian-Israeli teenagers and helps them achieve their full potential.

Looking at the big picture, Dr. Mengesha declares: "We give them the chance to break the cycle of poverty." With 68% living below the poverty line, the Ethiopian-Israeli population, which currently numbers 120,000, has the country's highest rate of poverty. Along with the social deprivation and problems of cultural transition, this continues to have a negative impact on the community's 16,000 youngsters in the 13-18 age group.

Role models

ENP's approach is three-pronged. "We work in schools, in after-school programs and in the community to empower the youth as well as the Ethiopian-Israeli community as a whole," Dr. Mengesha goes on to explain. To ensure continuity between the classroom and ENP's Scholastic Assistance enrichment program, they work directly with the principals and teachers in the schools where it operates.

All the Ethiopian-Israeli students in these schools are given the option of participating. An individual program is built for each one, and their progress and attendance are closely monitored. Contact is maintained with parents and lunch is also provided. They work



in small groups, six to a class, and they meet several times a week after school, getting help in math, English and language skills.

Youth counselors provide social and emotional support, to supplement the intensive scholastic assistance provided. "Because the youth counselors are Ethiopian-Israelis who have completed academic degrees, they serve as role models," Dr. Mengesha emphasizes. "One of the important by-products of our Scholastic Assistance program has been the breaking of negative stereotypes and changes in attitude among the non-Ethiopian-Israeli educators," she notes.

Moreover, as scholastic abilities are boosted, so is the self-image of the participants, and the community as a whole. "Until ENP, very few realized the high potential among Ethiopian-Israeli kids," she adds.

ENP outsources all of its programs to providers such as Fidel, an Ethiopian-Israeli organization, the Association of Community Centers, ORT, and Branco-Weiss Institutes. "We employ field supervisors," Dr. Mengesha explains, "who closely monitor and evaluate the activities." Like most of the instructors working in ENP's various programs, they are also academically-trained Ethiopian-Israelis.

Evaluation is an important component of ENP. "All of our objectives are measurable," Dr. Mengesha points out. Indeed, ongoing evaluation reports have been prepared over the years. One piquant finding in the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute evaluation of 2005-2007 was that non-Ethiopian-Israeli students in schools where ENP operates wanted to participate in the after-school program as well.

Community empowerment

"For youth at risk, ENP has set up Youth



Robert A. Cumins

Left: Participants in ENP's Scholastic Assistance Program
Below: Girls at an ENP Youth Outreach Center perform at an ENP Ethiopian Cultural Benefit
Lower left: Children in Ashdod deliver jelly donuts to the needy during Hanukkah



Outreach Centers in the 26 communities where we operate. Local authorities make the buildings available to us and also take care of maintenance," Dr. Mengesha explains. With a view to empowering youth and helping them take responsibility for their lives, the centers deal with social problems and school attendance. They are equipped with computers and provide a wide variety of programming that attracts teenagers.

"We also work with parents, and strengthen the kids' connection to Ethiopian Jewish culture. They come away with pride in their heritage and enhanced self-esteem," Dr. Mengesha adds. She also confirms that the centers have saved countless numbers of youngsters from drugs, delinquency and alcohol abuse.

The third component of ENP's program is community empowerment. "We're a bottom-up approach," Dr. Mengesha stresses. From its inception, ENP has involved members of the Ethiopian-Israeli community. Moreover, ENP's program trains them to take on leadership positions within the community and on the municipal level. Some have become involved in local government and sit on their

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city councils.

Not only do the ENP steering committees in each community have Ethiopian-Israeli representatives, but so does ENP's Board of Directors. Dr. Mengesha notes that Netzigut, which represents 24 Ethiopian-Israeli organizations, is one of ENP's partners. Stressing the importance of community empowerment, she declares that "change agents cannot come from the outside."

Under the umbrella of its three major components, ENP runs other programs, including ENP-Atidim for high achievers, school cultural mediators, IDF preparation, parents' workshops, alcohol and drug abuse prevention, leadership training and university scholarships. University students who receive scholarship have to give 60 hours a year of work in return and often work with ENP programs.

The issue of domestic violence was given high priority in 2006-7, in the wake of increased spousal deaths. A special campaign was initiated with funding from North American Jewry through the Jewish Federations of North America's Israel Emergency Campaign. "We placed ten Amharic speaking social workers

in domestic violence prevention centers," explains Dr. Mengesha. "They received special training at Bar-Ilan University and after two years, the Ministry of Social Welfare incorporated them in their basket of services. We focused on ten locales and instituted round tables in these cities with the police, welfare authorities, and community organizations," she adds.

The focus was on raising consciousness and on prevention. Para-professionals have been trained to be on the lookout for family conflicts that could blow up. In addition to a radio and television campaign in Amharic, the program also recruited and trained community elders to provide traditional conflict resolution.

Lack of funds

A joint venture from the original concept to the financing and implementation, ENP was given a nine-year mandate to work with the community and help it solve its problems. In addition to the government of Israel and the representatives of the Ethiopian-Israeli organizations, ENP's partners include the Jewish Federations of North America (formerly UJC), the Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI), the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee in Israel and Keren Hayesod-UIA. It has stepped in to fill a vacuum, not to duplicate the efforts of others, Dr. Mengesha stresses.

"But," she notes with obvious distress, "our funding has been cut dramatically and we have had to drop schools and communities. In 2007-8 we were preparing almost 8,000 students for matriculation, but only 4,000 kids in 2008-9." Due to lack of funds, ENP has had to pull out of schools in communities such as Migdal HaEmek and Upper Nazareth and entire cities, including Jerusalem and Haifa, while remaining in poorer cities, such as Afula and Beit Shean. "We don't select specific children, but target communities and schools," she points out.

"It's manageable to help 16,000 teenagers get on their feet," concludes Dr. Mengesha. "The cost is just \$1,000 per child. If we were able to reach one of every two teenagers for the coming four years, the transformation in Israel would be undeniable - but no one knows if we will get the funding we need." ■



For more information about the Ethiopian National Project, please visit www.enp.org.il.