

## **The Arab Democratic “Yaffa” School\***

### **The Arab Democratic School of Jaffa: An Overview**

The Arab Democratic School of Jaffa was founded in the summer of 2004. The foundation of the school was an initiative of a group of parents of 150 pupils that were seeking a better educational system for their kids. They joined Mary Copti, a well known educator from Jaffa with 35 years of experience in the educational field, and together with The Arab League of Jaffa they founded the school.

This year, the school serves 200 pupils from kindergarten till the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. The professional staff consists of 22 teachers and the principal, all qualified educators. The school provides education for Arab pupils from Jaffa and its surroundings disregarding their socio-economical background and it is the only Arab school in the state that offers a democratic education emphasizing on children’s right of studying and expressing themselves in their own language through their own history, literature and art.

### **The Status of The Educational System in Jaffa**

The educational system which serves the Arab community in Jaffa is among the weakest in Israel. High drop-out rates - averaging between 40 and 50 percent, inappropriate curricula, high turn-over among teachers and lack of educational services, all contributed to accentuate the effects of poverty and institutional discrimination on educational performance. Moreover, divided between public and private church schools, as well as between public Hebrew and Arab schools, this diverse system is largely un-coordinated. As a result, it is difficult to properly address pressing challenges facing the local community as a whole. Parents' participation and involvement remain marginal, at best; further alienating students, parents and educators. The end-result of these processes is not only a weak educational performance of the system as a whole, but also marginal percentage of students who are successful in obtaining the Israeli Certificate of Matriculation (*Bagrut*) at the end of the twelfth grade.

\* (Description Made by School Director Mrs Copti)

## **The Arab Democratic “Yaffa” School**

The Arab Democratic School emerged over the above background. It aims to offer the local community not only an adapted school - able to meaningfully address social challenges - but also a school which is able to enhance parental cooperation and participation. Indeed, within the broader context described above, the Arab Democratic school offers a unique institutional platform where parents have a say, participate as equals in decision-making and contribute to define the school's Vision and its internal governance. We strongly believe that offering such opportunities to parents and educators places the community on solid grounds to implement effective educational strategies. All decisions are made by parents and teachers, with the full participation of the school's principal.

Furthermore, the school has an internal mechanism of decision making in the form of a parliament composed of pupils, teachers and parents.

This parliament gathers once a week, where the assembly discusses motions for the agenda proposed by pupils, parents or teachers where the different committees of the parliament carry out the parliament resolutions.

The parliament is backed up by an educational platform that provides decision making and non-violent conflict resolution skills.

## **The Arab Democratic “Yaffa” School Projects**

Each year every pupil gets to choose one project amongst several proposed projects:

### **1. “Jaffa – Autobiography of a city”**

This unique project is funded by “Ayam” a non-profit organization that aims to a public multi-cultural discourse in relation to the untold histories and hidden memories of the different communities in Palestine/Israel. Members of the organization train the teachers and the pupils to investigate and document the history and culture of Jaffa by giving them investigation skills as well as technical skills of documentation such as video (camera and editing), sound recording etc... in order to collect information using these various methods on the contemporary and recent histories absent from the official historical narrative.

The information from these various sources will be placed on a web site, thereby enabling a knowledge process which may, eventually, lead to healing and reconciliation.

## **2. “Peace Child”**

The “Peace Child” project is done in collaboration with the Jewish Democratic Open school. Pupils from both schools meet once a week for an acting workshop instructed by an Arab and a Jewish instructor. They deal with subjects addressing past and contemporary issues in the form of a theatre play they write and perform together.

The goal of these meetings is to expose and bring into discussion and understanding different perspectives and thus to the acceptance of the other.

## **3. “The Artist Critiques Society”**

This project, funded by the Rabin Center comes to give the pupils artistic skills enabling them to examine their own lives, and give voice to their feelings and perspectives as well as to develop a sense of criticism in a way that will encourage them to be more involved and responsible of what happens in their environment.

### **What are the Challenges Facing the Arab Democratic School?**

The Arab Democratic School is facing considerable challenges associated with the funding of its activities. This includes funds that will enable the school to rely less on school fees for economically disadvantaged families who wish to enroll their children in the school. This is critical if we want to sustain a social diversity in the school that covers the needs of all children regardless of their socio-economic background.

Funds are also needed to secure the running costs of the school. This includes paying teachers' salaries and their associated benefits as defined by law, maintenance costs and physical upgrading costs. The fact that the school is currently housed in a rented building adds considerable strain on our resources.

Furthermore, the school is lacking of proper equipment such as furniture (desks, chairs, and whiteboards), books for the library, an overhead projector, a video projector, a video camera, a digital still camera, toys for the kindergarten etc...