

Hand in Hand seeks shared society of Arabs, Jews

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How do you build a shared society that stresses tolerance, when you're surrounded by extremism and separation?

An Israeli organization, Hand in Hand, The Center for Jewish-Arab Bilingual Education, believes it has found the formula: you bring together Arab and Jewish children in equal numbers in bilingual schools, while providing programming for adults that focuses on common ground and breaking down barriers.

The result, Hand in Hand, hopes is the foundation for "a shared society" in which Jews and Arabs move towards equality.

The concept behind Hand in Hand — which translates as Yad b'Yad in Hebrew — appeals to Canadians, as do the bilingual schools and the social action component, said Shalom "Shuli" Dichter, the organization's Israel-based executive director.

Dichter will be in Toronto from June 11-17, on a speaking tour to raise the organization's profile. It is a city with which Dichter is familiar. From 1990-93, he served as the director of Camp Shomria, while also working in the city as a shaliach (emissary)

for the Hashomer Hatzair Zionist youth movement. It was a time he remembers well. He says he was greatly influenced by the city's diversity and how people of a variety of backgrounds got along.

In Israel, Jews and Arabs attended their own schools and hardly mixed. In Toronto, "as a parent, I felt for the first time, diversity," he said.

"I was stunned that in public school, my daughter came home with an Iraqi (immigrant) girl. I was already a teacher, but it was only in Canada that I felt and experienced the notion of equal citizenship. It took me time to understand that all citizens are equal and diversity is the social practice of citizenship."

Although Hand in Hand does not have a formal presence in Canada, it still raises about \$100,000 a year for its programs in Israel.

Hand in Hand operates six schools in Israel, serving 1,750 students. Five offer classes from kindergarten through Grade 6. The school in Jerusalem goes all the way to Grade 12.

The student body is split 50-50 between Arabs and Jews and the curriculum, which follows Ministry of Education guidelines,



Quebec Premier Philippe Couillard meets students at Hand in Hand's Wadi Ara school.

is taught in both Arabic and Hebrew. The schools have proven so popular, there is currently a waiting list of 725 to get in.

During a recent official visit to Israel, Quebec Premier Philippe Couillard, accompanied by Canadian and Israeli dignitaries, visited Bridge Over the Valley, Hand in Hand's Wadi Ara school located in the Arab town of Kfar Kara, northeast of Hadera.

"They were deeply moved and announced they would provide some support to our efforts. We appreciated the visit as Canada

obviously is in a position to offer unique consultation regarding bilingualism and language instruction," said Rebecca Bardach, director of resource development and strategy for Hand in Hand. Hand in Hand goes beyond providing a shared bilingual education, Dichter said. It is also involved in community building, bringing together Jewish and Arab adults in shared events — and not just the parents of the kids attending its schools.

In Jerusalem, for example, Hand in Hand sponsors a basketball team in an adult league. In the largely Arab Wadi Ara neighbourhood, adults get together to play netball, a volleyball-like sport that's popular in Israel.

In some Hand in Hand neighbourhoods, adults gather in the evening in a joint beit midrash/madrassa to study cultural, and some religious, texts. It also arranges "cultural evenings," he said.

Another of Hand in Hand's goals is to encourage social action. "These communities are fostering civic action that calls for equality between Jews and Arabs.

"This is much more than a school. It's the beginning of a movement in Israel that is building a shared society," Dichter said. ■