

### **Ya Salam: Spoken Arabic in Israel's Jewish Schools**

Today (24<sup>th</sup> May, 2016) the Ministry of Education announced a new policy to integrate a mandatory curriculum for the study of Spoken Arabic in 5<sup>th</sup> & 6<sup>th</sup> Grade classes in Jewish elementary schools in Israel. This unprecedented move lays the ground-work for building tolerance and understanding, and is the culmination of over a decade of Abraham Fund action and advocacy.

Eleven years ago, in January 2005, the Abraham Fund piloted a new program “*Ya Salam*” teaching Arabic language and culture to 5<sup>th</sup> Grade students in five elementary schools in Haifa and two in Carmiel. The cities’ mayors: Yonah Yahav and Adi Adler were central in their commitment to participate in the Abraham Fund Initiatives’ pilot program.

During the subsequent academic year, the program expanded to 11 schools, and then to every school in those cities and additional schools in Jerusalem. In 2010 the program was made mandatory in schools in the Northern Region and in Haifa, and since then has been implemented in 200 schools, impacting 24,000 students yearly, across Israel, from the Upper Galilee to the Negev, and constitutes 85% of the elementary students currently studying Arabic in Israel today.

The flaws and weaknesses of past Arabic educational curricula led us to create an innovative alternative:

- The *Ya Salam* syllabus focused on Spoken Arabic, instead of written Arabic which is learnt in high school and does not prepare students with communication skills.
- We started the study of Arabic at a younger age, in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, Instead of waiting until high school. Instead of using textbooks that perpetuate stereotypes and preconceived notions about Arabic, we incorporated materials that show Arab citizens as they truly are.
- Instead of teaching Arabic with the aim of “know your enemy”, we introduced Arabic as a way to befriend your neighbor.
- Instead of using Jewish teachers, we integrated Arab teachers into Jewish schools, acting as cultural ambassadors to their students and the wider school community.

The program’s development was based on the theory that it is possible to teach Arabic in a way that students will enjoy, and thus will want to activate in their daily lives. This responded to decades of failed Arabic instruction in Hebrew schools, resulting in Jewish citizens who do not speak Arabic, despite its status as an official language of Israel. We also



יזמות קרן אברהם (ע"ר)  
מبادرات صندوق إبراهيم

## The Abraham Fund Initiatives

Building a Shared Future for  
Israel's Jewish and Arab Citizens

בניי مستقبلًا مشتركًا لليهود والعرب مواطني إسرائيل

בונים עתיד משותף  
ליהודים ולערבים אזרחי ישראל

wanted to prove that Arabic education is of critical importance for coexistence and a shared life. We believed that in light of the Arab-Jewish divide in Israel, an attractive and effective teaching method will help to mitigate racism and discrimination towards Arab citizens, and will encourage partnership and integration.

The in-depth evaluation of the program confirmed our theory: students in the Ya Salam program quickly picked up spoken Arabic, learned to love the language, and identified more closely with Arab citizens than their counterparts who did not participate in the program. The teachers, about one hundred of them to date, integrated well into the schools, with many taking on additional professional duties within their schools.

Using the program evaluation as a platform for advocacy, we paved in-roads into the Ministry of Education, forming strategical alliances and partnerships, and advocating for the adoption of Spoken Arabic across the Jewish school system. We presented our experience and research at a special hearing of the Education Committee of the Knesset in 2014, at which the Ministry of Education committed, for the first time, to developing a mandatory curriculum for Jewish schools. Today's announcement is the result of these efforts.

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