



**How to Expand the Circle of  
Excellence while Ensuring  
Access to Opportunity  
Insights from a US Study Tour**

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# How to Expand the Circle of Excellence while Ensuring Access to Opportunity

## Insights from a US Study Tour



After seven years of activity and towards formulating a “roadmap” to reinforce excellence in middle school mathematics and the sciences, Eli Hurvitz, Naama Axelrod Tayer, and Lena Raved (of the Trump Foundation), together with Edit Yerushalmi (Weizmann Institute), Talli Nachlieli (Levinsky College), and Michal Ayalon (University of Haifa) set out for a study tour in the United States.

We took advantage of the AERA Annual Meeting in New York to meet with education experts, to visit educational institutions, and to learn about research and practice in the field of teaching middle school sciences and mathematics. We met with Pamela Grossman, Arthur Levine, Paul Cobb, Karen Hammerness, Janine Remillard, Peggy Brookins, John Hattie, Hilda Borko, and others.

Additionally, we visited the Advanced Math & Science III School (New Visions Network) and Paramus High School, the headquarters of the RELAY School of Education and STEM Teachers NYC (Columbia University).

- A noteworthy statement was that middle school presents an opportunity to create social justice, equal access and development of a positive self-image. Others preferred the notions of defining high standards for everyone and setting goals that will enable students to progress to high school, higher education and the labor market.
- In schools with students from wealthy backgrounds, there is also a strong motivation to excel and there are high expectations on the part of parents, teachers, and students. Schools with students from underprivileged backgrounds offer a mirror image – neither students, parents nor teachers do not believe that the students can and should succeed, and give up at the outset, “this isn’t for us”.
- In the latter schools, teachers are mostly young and imbued with ideology, but lacking experience. This widens the huge gap in student achievements. On the other hand, we saw an example of a public school whose student population comes from difficult backgrounds, but which sets a high level of expectations for the students and teachers, endorses a student-centered teaching approach and succeeds in promoting excellence.

- Parents from weaker socioeconomic backgrounds pin their hopes on and assign the responsibility to the education system to provide their children with the tools, skills and knowledge that will prepare them for higher education, which is perceived as a means to ensure employment security.
- At the same time, many claimed that it is necessary to persuade parents of the importance of investing and persisting in studies, and to make relevant information about higher education available to them (especially for parents whose children are the first generation to go on to higher education). For example, to show them that choosing excellence tracks is more significant than the grade-point average.
- The gaps accrued in neighborhood elementary schools are manifested in district secondary schools. These gaps require modifications to teaching and creation of personalized curricula with emphasis on providing solutions in two spheres – emotional and pedagogical. Afternoon and vacation remedial classes are needed to reduce the gaps in knowledge and skills.