



The Israel Children's Zone (ICZ) is a JUF initiative designed to provide a holistic intervention for all students in state-run elementary schools (grades 1 through 6) in Chicago Jewish Federation's Partnership Region of Kiryat Gat, Lachish and Shafir, located an hour's ride from Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. The Partnership region, located in the periphery and populated by a majority of low-income families, suffers from considerable gaps in academic performance vis-à-vis the national average. In order to close the academic gaps between the region and central towns and cities, ICZ provides a creative model that combines a number of intervention programs that have been tested and proven effective in different regions of the country. ICZ has formed a regional platform that connects the government, the local authority, the heads of education at the city/regional council level, school principals and teachers, bringing together numerous complementary intervention programs so that every child receives tailor-made solutions addressing individual strengths and weaknesses.

The program conducts a complete evaluation of each student, and together with school principals and teaching staff, creates a work plan with school-wide as well as individual goals, making use of the relative strengths of each school.

Based on the belief that every child has the potential to excel, ICZ addresses four core areas that influence a student's performance: the emotional, academic, family and social spheres. By mapping each student's needs, strengths and weaknesses, ICZ works in these four core areas to leverage strengths and address weaknesses.

The project, launched in the 2013-2014 school year, is planned to operate for a period of at least five years and encompasses all 17 elementary schools and over 6,000 students aged 6 to 12.

Funding for ICZ comes from the government, local authorities, private corporations and non-profit organizations. Seed funding has been allocated by JUF through the Partnership with Kiryat Gat, Lachish and Shafir.

First year results of academic performance, emotional development and school-wide metrics are very encouraging and reflect a marked improvement in all indices:

- Personal: Children in the program displayed greater levels of self-confidence (9.5% improvement), ability to cope with stress (10% improvement) and age-suitable independence (4% improvement).
- Academic: Greater level of motivation to learn (11% improvement) and significant improvement in test preparation and ability to complete assignments (3% improvement). Average grades rose from 61 to 70 (Hebrew) and from 62 to 67 (math). There was a marked improvement in other core subjects as well.
- Family: Participants displayed improved relationships with parents (8% improvement).
- Social: Marked improvement in refraining from engaging in verbal and physical violence (5% improvement).

ICZ currently runs in all 17 schools in the region; in nine schools in its entirety and in the remaining eight schools it operates on a reduced scale due to shortage of funding. In the present school year (2014-2015) and the next, emphasis will be put on raising the necessary funds to provide the entire complement of programs to all 6,000 pupils in the 17 elementary schools in the region. The Ministry of Education, School principals, teachers and parents along with the directors of education of Kiryat Gat, Lachish and Shafir have received ICZ in an overwhelmingly positive manner and there is great expectation for the program to continue bearing significant fruits in the future.

ICZ represents an unprecedented effort in that it brings together so many different players who are cooperating for the first time on such a large scale – a regional scale, encompassing so many schools and students. It is a modular platform that can be adapted and fitted to other locations in the country. As an endeavor that is the first of its kind in Israel, there is a fair chance that ICZ's success will serve as a model to be copied and replicated in other towns and regions throughout Israel's geographic periphery, benefitting tens of thousands of additional students.