



SUCCESS STORY

High School Students Experience Democratic Process



Student council elections at three Lebanese high schools exposed students to the fundamentals of democracy.

“This was a unique project. It was a wonderful experience because we decided what we wanted to do; we decided as youth what to do for youth.”

***— Wahid Awad, student,
Universal High School***

*Program Manager:
Jennifer Boggs Serfass,
E-mail: jboggs@usaid.gov
Tel: (202) 712-1004
Web: www.usaid.gov (keyword: OTI)*

September 2008 – Students from three Lebanese high schools experienced the democratic process firsthand while uniting to plan a community development project aimed at benefiting teenagers in a region beset by political and religious divisions.

Led by local nongovernmental organization 05Amam with support from USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives, students from Christian, Druze, and Shiite backgrounds in Mount Lebanon elected nine of their peers to an interscholastic student council.

Edmond Rabath from 05Amam said the election exposed the teenagers to the democratic process. “Young people now have the knowledge to discuss with their parents about elections and can question why they vote for a candidate,” he said.

Following the election, the successful candidates joined a Project Planning and Implementation Committee to come up with ideas for a community development project.

Petra Balout, 16, from St. Therese High School realized that students from different sectarian backgrounds can work together. “I learned how to behave around different people, how to accept different ideas, and how to listen to others,” Balout said.

There were concerns that the sectarian violence that erupted in May would derail the project, but 05Amam’s Hassan Zein explained that the adversity strengthened the students’ resolve. “After the events in May, we didn’t know the future of the project,” he said. “But we found the students automatically were more motivated to work and continue.”

Only one of the nine proposed project ideas could go forward, and Universal High School student Wahid Awad, 16, said it was difficult to choose among them. “The process of deciding on the final project took time. There was some conflict during the discussions,” he said, “but I ended up voting for a project that wasn’t mine. I realized that another idea was more sustainable and suitable.”

In the end, the decision was unanimous, with the students agreeing to develop a university orientation program. 05Amam is exploring ways to help the students translate their idea into action.