



**ARMENIAN GENERAL BENEVOLENT UNION**

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## MELKONIAN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTE

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### AGBU's Commitment to Education: Placing MEI in Context

Education has and will continue to be an important program area for AGBU. Throughout its 98-year history, AGBU has devoted much energy, thought, and resources to establishing educational programs that meet the needs of Armenians throughout the world. The emphasis and priority given to education have been essential in addressing the organization's overall mission: To preserve and promote the Armenian identity and heritage through educational, cultural and humanitarian programs. Over many decades, AGBU's pursuit of its educational mandate has resulted in numerous projects tailored to the specific needs of individual communities. Such initiatives—orphans, schools, scholarship programs, internship programs, study-travel programs and the like—were established as a response to the demands of the time.

One of the major strengths of AGBU has been its ability to adapt with each Armenian generation and to establish programs driven by evolving concerns and requirements. Whereas the promotion and preservation of the Armenian identity may, at certain times, be appropriately served through the establishment of schools, at other times such goals may require the implementation of alternative programs. Education must be viewed in the broadest of terms, beyond academia, and as an activity for all age groups.

As AGBU approaches its Centennial, AGBU's leadership finds itself once again striving to address the questions of how best to meet its mission in education, given the complexities and diverse needs of Armenians throughout the world. What may work in the Middle East is not necessarily the right approach for Europe; what Armenians in South

America require may be different from what is needed in North America. In recent years, AGBU leadership has begun reevaluating the status of its worldwide education programs to determine how best to address the increasing challenges faced in carrying forth the many initiatives established during the past century. In particular, the organization is conducting an extensive evaluation of its day schools, located in eleven countries, to determine the extent to which they address the priorities of Armenian youth today. AGBU is identifying current efforts that have the greatest chances of success, where the education provided meets high quality standards and where the economics of the setting, as well as the local population, make the schools truly viable institutions.

Unfortunately and with regret, certain AGBU schools—similar to many other Armenian schools throughout the Diaspora—are confronted with declining enrollments and increasing costs. This decline is caused by a number of factors: the integration of new generations into the larger mainstream settings of their countries; the attraction to local public and private non-Armenian institutions; and the belief of many young parents that a better future for their children will be secured by enrollment in non-Armenian schools. While AGBU lauds the many important contributions of its academic institutions over the years and commends what has worked well in many settings, it has become paramount for the organization to reexamine the extent to which the schools today fulfill AGBU's education mission. In so doing, it will be better positioned to make informed decisions, supporting what works well, improving what could work better, and finding alternative solutions for what no longer works.

## Historical Perspective

To shape future directions for education, it is important to understand and reflect on the historical accomplishments of AGBU. Three distinct periods with very different needs can be identified.

Following its inception in 1906, AGBU's efforts in education were directed toward the requirements of Armenians living under Ottoman rule. AGBU focused on the provision of grants and subsidies to schools and orphanages in support of Armenians in their homeland. From 1909 to 1914, the Central Board of Directors established no less than 40 schools in Armenian villages and towns in Eastern Anatolia. These were precisely the types of educational initiatives that Armenians needed, and AGBU stepped forward with appropriate responses.

The Armenian Genocide was to change everything. Between 1915-1921, the young organization lost one of its most important strongholds. Gone were all the schools, orphanages, teachers and pupils. In one tragic stroke, a decade of efforts was eradicated. Reflecting the needs of the time once again, AGBU was forced to mobilize quickly and relocate its educational programs to areas where large numbers of Armenian refugees had congregated.

In the immediate aftermath of the Genocide, AGBU, while making great efforts to supply humanitarian assistance to refugees, continued on its vital mission to provide educational programs. Schooling for refugee children was organized, often under tents or in the open. As these communities gradually settled, AGBU resumed its earlier practice of providing grants for the creation of an educational infrastructure. Within a few short years, Armenians in the Middle East, specifically in Syria and Lebanon, were once again able to provide their own education to their own children in their own institutions. These responses were made possible by the continuing degree of relative autonomy granted to distinct and highly cohesive minority groups, such as Armenians, within these regions. With integration into the larger society not a prime concern among these communities, Armenians could focus on developing and maintaining ties to their cultural roots through such programs. Based on this same rationale, in 1926 Garabed and Krikor Melkonian entrusted AGBU with an institution to serve as an orphanage in Nicosia, Cyprus: the Melkonian Educational Institute.

AGBU's concentration on the Middle East continued into post-war Soviet period. With Armenia and Eastern Europe under Soviet occupation, the communities of the Middle East were considered the hope and future of an Armenian nation. Unfortunately, starting in the 1950s, political upheavals and ensuing instability in this region prompted Armenians in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Iran to begin a new pattern of emigration. Once again, Armenians sought refuge and the opportunity to preserve their heritage. The new immigrants found their way to existing communities outside the Middle East, primarily in the United States, Canada and Australia. These new destinations provided a completely different environment for minorities: one which invited, if not required, assimilation to a Western socio-political culture. Gone were the days of individual communities distinct from the indigenous population.

AGBU once again recognized and carried out an appropriate means to respond to the needs of Armenians in these Western communities. Over the next 35 years, AGBU expanded its fully-accredited educational institutions. Schools in North and South America, as well as in Australia, were established with the primary goal of providing education consistent with the standards of the respective local communities, while offering curriculum to promote and perpetuate the Armenian language, culture and history.

The continuous prevailing political instability in the Middle East region and the attraction to Western culture encouraged the further emigration of Armenians. Today, the Armenian population in the Middle East, while continuing to fulfill an important national and geopolitical role, has been reduced to less than 300,000 from its peak of over a million. Over the years, the Armenian community in Cyprus has also been affected, reduced to less than 3,000 as a consequence of a wave of emigration, mainly to England. In addition, the fall of the Soviet Union and the independence of Armenia led to a further movement of immigration into the Western Diaspora and Russia.

With Armenian communities continually displaced throughout the past century, AGBU has adapted its responses accordingly. As we enter the 21st Century and attempt to address an even more fluid and rapidly changing social, political and technological climate, it is important for AGBU to reassess the effec-



tive use of its resources, in terms of both human and financial investments.

## AGBU Educational Mission Today

Today, through specific endowments and general donations, AGBU administers or financially supports 17 AGBU day schools, 7 AGBU Saturday schools, 3 Children's Centers in Armenia, the American University of Armenia, Yerevan State University and 20 non-AGBU Armenian day schools and Saturday schools. AGBU allocations and grants for education in over 20 countries, including university and college scholarships, total over \$5,000,000 annually.

In the United States, the Los Angeles-based AGBU Manoogian-Demirdjian School, with an enrollment of over 950 students, runs a successful operation on a financially self-supportive basis. It will soon benefit from an expansion of its facilities as it seeks to serve a community of over 500,000 Armenians. It is well recognized that greater Los Angeles has become the most densely populated Armenian community in the Western Diaspora and AGBU, as well as other Armenian institutions, will appropriately devote further efforts and resources there. Similarly, in the Detroit area, the AGBU Alex and Marie Manoogian School (now a Charter school) has more than doubled its population to about 375 students, and through its academic success has become a school of choice to many parents.

In Syria, the AGBU Lazar Najarian-Calouste Gulbenkian School in Aleppo serves about 1,600 students, accommodating a large and stable community. Through a generous donation from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, the school recently expanded its premises to accommodate the growing number of students who will benefit from the modern facilities. AGBU will continue to support institutions that remain an essential part of our heritage in selected communities.

The Lebanese and Iranian communities that have suffered from their respective civil wars in the late 1970s and 1980s remain, nevertheless, strongholds of Armenian life. Therefore, AGBU shall carry on addressing the needs of its schools in these areas, but at the same time, will examine ways to maximize the efficiency of such operations, in light of new enrollment patterns and local conditions.

AGBU recognizes the important role of its schools in Canada and South America and will continue monitoring closely the evolution and development of these institutions. The Montreal, Buenos Aires and Montevideo schools, with large numbers of students and active efforts from the local communities, continue to receive AGBU's support. They will be afforded opportunities to prosper.

It is important to note that AGBU will also continue to give serious consideration to low enrollment levels and high deficits as one of the determinants of the long-term viability of its schools, particularly if such institutions no longer fulfill the missions for which they were established. AGBU believes that any elementary school with a population of less than 120 cannot easily meet required academic and pedagogical standards of quality education, which remain a primary prerequisite for our support. For example, serious consideration should be given to AGBU's school in Athens, where enrollment for the present year consists of 64 students, including its kindergarten, with a current deficit of about \$275,000. Likewise, our school in Sydney, operating with about 35 students, is of serious concern to us, and we need to consider alternative programs that could well achieve better results for the benefit of the community at large.

We believe that some of these efforts can evolve with the assistance of local AGBU committees, thus creating alternative and more responsive programs, such as Saturday schools, summer camps, trips to Armenia, internship programs and Young Professional groups. Opportunities to merge Armenian schools in some communities should also be explored, our priority being the survival of Armenian education rather than the short-sighted promotion of any given school. In so doing, our members will apply their human and financial resources toward more productive and rewarding activities. In all likelihood, some communities can benefit more from the development of new programs aimed at serving a far larger population.

As for other AGBU schools not specifically mentioned above, we will continue to do our best to resolve their challenges and issues with the hope of a brighter future.

## The Melkonian Educational Institute

At the noble initiative of the Melkonian brothers, AGBU undertook the responsibility of MEI as one of its major responses to the Genocide. MEI's institutional goal was to educate and care for the needs of orphans of the Genocide. Over the past 77 years, however, MEI has passed through several stages of development. A review of MEI's history helps us to better understand its exemplary contributions in the past, as well as the difficult challenges it has faced in recent years.

### Stages of Development

#### 1926 through the 1960s: *An Evolving Role and Purpose*

During its earliest years and in consort with the Melkonian brothers' vision, MEI met extraordinary humanitarian goals by providing refuge to thousands of orphans left destitute on the plains of the Ottoman Empire. As the years progressed, the Central Board of AGBU, recognizing the difficult conditions facing Armenians who were resettling throughout the Middle East, proceeded to expand Melkonian from a refuge for orphans to an accredited educational institution. As Armenians in the Middle East became more established in their communities, MEI became focused on preparing and educating Armenian youth who would assume leadership roles in their communities - those who would excel in the arts, education, civic leadership and the like. MEI prepared editors, novelists, writers, poets and teachers who would return to their local communities to assume positions as staff of Armenian newspapers and literary publications, as well as in Armenian schools and other institutions in an attempt to further develop and maintain a mainstream Armenian society within the Middle Eastern communities. At this time, Armenian was actively spoken in homes, at school and even at work. Armenians socialized within their own communities and thus lived a life almost segregated from the local non-Armenian population.

However, this wave of exclusive "Armenianism" began to change in the 1960's when local Middle Eastern countries, which had acceded to independence from foreign European powers less than 15 years earlier, began taking charge and organizing themselves as national, mostly Arab, states. This imposed a new, more integrated lifestyle for all communities, including the Armenians.

Furthermore, the establishment of the National Baccalaureate Standards in many of those countries now required every citizen to meet national standards for entry to local institutions of higher education and made Arabic the basic primary language of the national educational system. This created a new dimension for the education of Armenian youth. Up to this time, the Armenian population residing in these countries generally did not have the opportunity, nor did they make an effort, to learn the local language.

Consequently, enhanced educational opportunities were made available to Armenian students in the Diaspora. Many families chose local elementary and secondary schools as they sought to provide their children with the skills needed to excel in their adoptive communities. Others still chose to move to the West seeking better options and new lives. As a result, the number of students that MEI was able to attract from the Middle East diminished significantly, thereby leading the institution to its third stage of service.

#### The 1970s and the 1980s: *Decades of Transition*

In the mid-1970s, MEI experienced increasing difficulty in attracting students and in balancing constant deficits. This was due primarily to a vast decline of the population of potential students hailing from the Middle East (formerly the largest student pool) and Greece. As such, the Central Board of AGBU seriously considered and resolved in 1975 to discontinue the institution.

However, with serious commitments from MEI Alumni and MEI's local school Board, the Central Board opted to give MEI another chance and reached an understanding with local management to establish a new trial period. Under these terms, the school would have to attract students in appropriate numbers, provide a high quality education, and maintain an acceptable level of operational deficit.

While the overall pattern of emigration from the Middle East and subsequently away from MEI continued, MEI was given a brief respite during the Lebanese Civil War and the Iranian Revolution. Families who, for one reason or another, remained in the region opted to send their children temporarily to MEI in order to spare them the hardships of war. In the fall of 1980, for example, 108 children from Lebanon and Iran were

enrolled at MEI (78 from Lebanon and 30 from Iran). However, this surge in enrollment was short lived (presently only 40 students from both countries are enrolled in the school). In other words, if not for the Lebanese civil war and the turbulence in Iran, MEI would not have had sufficient enrollment to warrant its existence as a viable institution in the late 1970s.

Despite the fact that the commitments made earlier by the alumni and School Board were not realized and in order to give MEI one more chance to prosper, the Board set aside its concerns again in order to continue offering a residential-based educational setting. In fact, at this time, in the mid-1980s, the Board took further steps and attempted to make MEI as attractive as possible by expanding the boarding facilities of the school, adding two modern buildings with a capacity to lodge 350-400 students. The aim of the Central Board was to provide MEI with the infrastructure to compete with Western schools in order to attract a new generation of Armenian students whose parents, particularly MEI alumni, had settled in the West.

At the close of the 1980s, MEI once again faced enrollment issues as the conflict in Lebanon subsided, and the migration to the West resumed. Within this context, it appeared unlikely that MEI would be able to meet the Central Board's earlier stipulated mandates, despite substantial levels of scholarship aid extended to students. In fact, MEI has been unable to attract more than 200 or so boarding students after building those new facilities, a far cry from the anticipated 350-400 enrollment. In short, aspirations that Armenians who settled in the West would send their children to MEI, or that alumni, who lived primarily in Western countries, would support the school either by enrolling their own children or grandchildren or by substantially helping the school financially proved to be unrealistic and did not materialize. Even with qualified and dedicated administrators at the school, and the commitment and leadership of its successive school boards over many years, MEI was not able to regain its earlier prominence.

### The 1990s: *Redefining MEI Once Again*

Following the collapse of the USSR, MEI was introduced to a potential new student pool that could rejuvenate its declining ranks. The acceptance of

students from Eastern Europe, however, brought with it a significant demographic shift: the once homogenous and primarily Middle Eastern student body, which shared a common history and cultural base, now became one of unquestionable diversity. While this diversity was celebrated, it also created issues difficult to overcome for ensuring a homogenous education to all MEI students.

During the 1990s, MEI's enrollment of students from Albania, Armenia, Bulgaria, Rumania and Russia rose noticeably. In fact, throughout this period, students from these countries represented a substantial proportion of all enrollments. While AGBU remained enthusiastic about this development, it also viewed it as an opportunity to evaluate the long-term viability of this new student composition and to examine MEI's role within the new context of the Armenian world.

### MEI Today: *Student Body Demographics*

In autumn 2003, MEI's enrollment of 206 students, came from 16 countries and brought with them various backgrounds, culture and language skills. Almost 10 percent of the current student body is non-Armenian. The largest numbers of students come from Cyprus and Armenia, followed by Iran and then Bulgaria, Lebanon and Greece. While a number of students hail from Cyprus, it must be noted that the large majority of Cypriot Armenian parents, in fact, have chosen to enroll their children in non-Armenian institutions.

The Central Board believes strongly that over time, the post-Soviet countries will reach their respective levels of maturity and integrate with the customs of the Western world. The Armenians in Bulgaria, Rumania and Russia will most likely follow the patterns of Armenians of North America or France, rather than those of former generations in the Middle East. Providing education for a few students will not sufficiently serve the needs of these former Soviet era communities. These societies will benefit more from alternative local programs that AGBU should help initiate and develop.

In regard to students from Armenia seeking an education at MEI, who today represent more than 20 percent of MEI's student body, AGBU will continue to support the educational system in Armenia in its efforts to promote high quality education there and

encourage those students to pursue their secondary education in the homeland.

Furthermore, the number of students from Lebanon, already greatly reduced compared to prior decades, will continue to diminish. AGBU maintains three schools in Lebanon that satisfy the academic requirements of the region at a far more reasonable cost, particularly since in recent years, the aggregate population of these schools has been reduced by more than 50 percent of their initial capacity. These schools are prepared to educate the handful of current Melkonian students from Lebanon.

MEI students from Cyprus are provided a government subsidy for education tuition and do not require a boarding school setting. In fact, the majority of students from Cyprus are currently enrolled as day students at MEI. Certainly, these students are entitled to quality primary and secondary education. There are three primary Armenian schools in Cyprus and the Central Board is considering various alternatives to secure creditable secondary education for these Cypriot Armenians.

## MEI Today: Financial Considerations

MEI's continuing deficit levels have been taken into consideration, but have not been the primary issue of concern throughout the evaluation process. AGBU has, instead, focused its attention on MEI's recent educational performance and its current ability to fulfill a role similar to that which it fulfilled through the late 1960s. If MEI's current structure provided exceptional opportunities to its students as it had done in the past, substantial subsidization under those circumstances would be warranted. Unfortunately, this is not the case, in spite of the diligent efforts of committed School Board members, the Principal and the teaching staff.

Most MEI students do not cover the costs of attending the school even though, compared to similar institutions in the area, MEI requires a relatively much lower financial commitment. In 2002, only 18 percent of the MEI student body covered their costs in full, while more than 40 percent did not pay for any of the costs and another 40 percent paid only a limited portion.

The Central Board has assessed carefully MEI's fiscal requirements since the 1990s. For illustration

purposes, as we review MEI's budget for 2003-2004, some major patterns to consider include:

- > Annual Operating Projected Budgeted Expenses are 1,107,200 CYP for a total of 206 students, including 149 boarding students.
- > Projected total income is 498,000 CYP, which is 45 percent of the school's operating costs (this includes the Cypriot Government subsidy of 66,900 CYP, income from other AGBU scholarship funds of 42,000 CYP and tuition and fees from parents of 300,000 CYP).
- > AGBU's subsidy of 609,200 CYP supports 55 percent of the operating costs.

It is clear from these figures that substantial external funds are necessary to operate MEI. On average, AGBU provided a subsidy of approximately \$6,000 for each student in 2003-2004.

The Central Board has taken significant steps to assess carefully MEI's recent performance, the continued challenge of demographic shifts and their affect on the make up of the student body, and finally the financial burdens of the institution. The Board has decided and strongly believes that the greater Armenian community as a whole would benefit more from a reallocation of the Melkonian Brothers' gift in the fulfillment of its mission of the preservation of the Armenian heritage. New projects, consistent with the vision of the Melkonian Brothers and the mission of AGBU, will be established both in and outside of Cyprus.

## The Melkonian Brothers' Donation

The Melkonian Brothers entrusted their resources to AGBU and therefore the Central Board must and will honor the philanthropists by ensuring appropriate allocation of these resources. Over the years, AGBU has carried the great responsibility of managing over 900 permanent endowment bequests and donations to its organization. It becomes the fiduciary duty of the organization, through its governing body - the Central Board - to ensure that the income from such endowments is directed to its intended purposes, meets the mission of the organization and adapts as necessary to address the evolving demands of Armenians throughout the world. Over the past century, many donors have placed their trust and confidence in AGBU to manage and

direct resources in the most prudent and beneficial way possible. AGBU's success in carrying out its mission in the future lies in its ability to attract and maintain the trust of its donors. The organization cannot and will not ignore the requests of its past donors, especially the Melkonian Brothers who stand apart as great benefactors.

## Perpetuating the Melkonian Brothers Memory

Garabed and Krikor Melkonian were extraordinary figures of their day, possessing immeasurable foresight and philanthropic motivations on behalf of their fellow Armenians. They remain amongst the grandest of all benefactors of our people today. The Melkonian brothers entrusted to AGBU the responsibility of managing and directing the proceeds of their gift and donation toward programs that can be of the highest, most noble and far reaching value to all Armenians. In addition to their gift of the MEI property in 1926, Garabed Melkonian in 1930 named AGBU in his will as the sole executor and beneficiary of his estate. AGBU, through its Central Board, assumed full responsibility for protecting the value of their bequest by ensuring that appropriate resources were directed to the perpetuation of our Armenian heritage through the education and advancement of generations of young Armenians to come.

AGBU reconfirms its long-held view that "education" is the most valuable tool in maintaining and strengthening the Armenian presence and identity. In our current environment, we must carefully examine who we are trying to educate, in what cultural settings they reside, and what it takes to build and strengthen ties to a rich and glorious heritage. New realities create new challenges: the Armenian language may be spoken less and less by our younger generation, yet the spirit among our youth remains as strong as ever. We must encourage this new generation in preserving and promoting the Armenian language and heritage throughout the 21st Century. AGBU will also continue to dedicate efforts to Armenians living in Armenia, as the new nation requires considerable financial and moral support.

In assessing its educational mission, AGBU has realized that about 90 percent of young Armenians in the Diaspora are not enrolled in Armenian schools. There are roughly 2.5 million Armenians in Diaspora locations where AGBU is active—at least

400,000 or so are estimated to be school-aged children. At best, we believe that only 10 percent are enrolled in Armenian schools. Given this situation, AGBU must also consider how to reach out to the remaining 90 percent of Armenian youth not enrolled in Armenian schools. The Central Board strongly believes the Melkonian Brothers would expect the AGBU leadership to engage in such bold thinking so that its future programs would have a significant effect on the entire Armenian community, similar to the impact MEI had during its earlier years.

## Alternative Initiatives

In addition to its existing educational and various other groundbreaking programs, AGBU has already learned through its experiences what it takes to attract and meet the aspirations of our younger generation. Our Young Professionals network, summer internship programs, summer camps, Saturday schools, evening Armenian language classes, quality programs in the arts, lectures and publications in foreign languages promoting the Armenian culture are making steady and positive progress in captivating our young in unique ways. It is essential for the advancement and evolution of Armenians in the Diaspora to explore and establish more innovative programs throughout the world. We must think globally and locally by creating mentoring programs and infusing Armenian-based curriculum and extracurricular activities in non-Armenian schools and universities. In these fast-changing times, we must explore the great opportunities afforded to us through modern technology, such as the Internet, and take advantage of the vast possibilities available in Armenia such as establishing study and travel programs for our Diasporan youth there.

While deliberating its difficult decision regarding the future of MEI, the Central Board considered various alternative programs, designed to reach out to a larger number of Armenians and further enhance the purpose of the Melkonian Brothers' gift.

The Central Board believes that one of the strongest approaches for helping Armenians throughout the Diaspora maintain their identity and heritage is through their relationship to Armenia. Maintaining the Armenian language and traditions will continue to be a difficult task as future generations become

