

BRINGING OUT THE BEST

For the past seven years, the Darca educational network has been working hard to resuscitate failing schools and give hope to forgotten students from Israel's periphery, contributing to a brighter future for communities where unemployment is high and the social fabric is fraying ■ Julie Eltes

For the second consecutive year, The Darca Druze High School for Science and Leadership in Yarka was selected as the best high school in Israel by the Ministry of Education. This school is not located in Tel Aviv, Haifa, Jerusalem or any other influential city – but in a small Druze village in the Galilee (northern Israel). Still, 75% of its students – the highest proportion in the country – were recognized for outstanding achievement on their matriculation certificates. The school also boasts a zero-dropout rate. How did a failing high school with no funds, attended by students whose parents didn't complete high school, weren't used to sitting through class and had no expectation of succeeding in school, manage to rank first?

Using groundbreaking methods, Darca (Aramaic for "The Path") is infusing an educationally innovative model in the school – with astonishing results. Darca is a non-profit organization operating a network of 30 schools and learning centers throughout the country, created by the Alliance Israélite Universelle (Kol Yisrael Haverim, KIAH) and Rashi Foundation in 2010, and later backed by the Youth Renewal Fund with the support and the encouragement of Israel's Ministry of Education. By providing strategic guidance, research and philanthropic support to teachers in Israel's geographic and socio-economic periphery, the network finds the best approaches to help the students learn and succeed.

Success story

The Darca Druze High School for Science and Leadership in Yarka is the only high school in Israel

where all students learn English at the five-unit level and take five-unit mathematics (the highest levels). If today the success of the Science and Leadership High School is impressive, that was not the case a decade ago. The school could not meet its objectives, faced a crisis and nearly closed. In 2009, given the deep education crisis in the Druze community, the Ministry of Education launched a program to improve education in the community's schools.

Among other things, former Education Minister Gideon Saar led the Government's decision to recognize the school in Yarka as a "clear national interest," which led to increased budgetary support. In 2011, the Darca Network entered the picture and started to invest additional resources in the school – mainly for professional development of teachers and new teaching methods. Since then, achievement at the school has taken off.

Reborn as a school for outstanding students, the Darca Druze High School for Science and Leadership selects its students carefully – no more than 200 are enrolled – using entrance exams before admission to the school. The school accepts only the best Druze students from communities in the North. Darca is usually opposed to selective admission in its schools; however, it made an exception for the school in Yarka in the spirit of equality. Indeed, a government decision determined that, since schools cultivating excellence in the Jewish and Christian communities already existed, there should also be a school that would lead the Druze community forward.

Highest achievement in Israel

The Darca Druze High School for Science and Leadership is not the only school in Israel to use entrance exams. In fact, many of the high-ranking schools use entrance exams or charge high tuition, sometimes both. Yet, the school in Yarka is more successful than the other schools, in numerous parameters. The school in Yarka charges tuition, but it is relatively low (NIS 2,500/year) and used mainly to pay for an annual school trip. What makes the difference is the school vision. The Darca Druze High School for Science and Leadership is focused on producing the next Israeli Druze leaders in politics, academia, science, the public sector and the military.

Darca, to which the school in Yarka belongs, has the highest achievement rate in Israel, according to the Ministry of Education. In addition, unlike any other edu-



Photos: Maxim Golovanov

ational networks, Darca is the only network that does not charge management fees. Instead, schools are able to invest their entire budget in their students, through innovative initiatives. Virtual reality, escape rooms and holograms entered the curriculum and interactive games took over the Darca education system last year. Thanks to the brand-new mixed reality technology developed in Israel by Applixor, students can now revive every still object on the screen, in 3D, using glasses and a special pencil to bring it closer to them as if holding it in their hands. It was designed to familiarize students with human and animal organs to help teachers in biology or anatomy classes.

Textbooks and notebooks are also often replaced by riddles, English code words and mathematical formulas to be cracked. The escape room trend, which in less than a decade has become very popular worldwide, has also reached Darca schools in Israel. Students turn into detectives and seek clues to solve a mystery that will pave their way out of a classroom where chairs and tables give way to a maze full of challenges – all in just 45 minutes. And visits to the Great Wall of China, Machu Picchu or Antarctica are not just a distant dream of an 'after army trip' anymore. Using virtual reality glasses and the new 360° Google Expedition software, students can explore over 100 interactive destinations and tour the world individually or in groups, accompanied by real-time explanations from the teacher – all without leaving the classroom.

The youngest and the best

Darca is sustained by donations from Israeli and international foundations, businesses and individuals, in addition to the budget provided by the Israeli Ministry of Education. However, Darca is still a relatively young network. A young network with a great vision. The amazing accomplishment of the school in Yarka is only proof to this claim. With excellent teachers, appropriate resources, and the continual support they need, students do not just want to do well anymore. They want to excel.

Darca gives ongoing training, guidance, professional development and support to the faculty all year long to make sure no student is left behind. But part of the success is also due to financial investment in the schools. Darca invests one million shekels a year (\$285,000) in each of its schools, providing additional resources that other schools receive from local authorities and parents. In fact, Darca makes sure schools in the periphery are not lacking funds, by adding another 5% to 15% to the state budget to bridge the gap and make sure everyone can realize their potential. It is not a large budget, but it makes a huge difference.

Darca is perhaps the youngest school network in Israel, but it is also the best school network in Israel, one that is planning to grow and continue to make a significant change in narrowing Israel's educational gap.

For more information: www.darca.org.il/en. In the USA, go to www.yrfdarca.org

Left and below: Innovative teaching methods in Darca schools include escape room-style challenges



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