

# THE PATH UP

Schools in the Darca network see a huge jump in students successfully taking matriculation exams – thereby enabling them to pursue academic degrees and dream of a better future | Wendy Elliman



Photos: Boaz Ozeri

Students at a Darca school learn through virtual reality adventures



Dima Khizaran



Shira Hadad



Matan Kristal



Netta Goldman



Segev Sabag

Tenth-grader Segev Sabag is fired up about gender equality, and sees a law degree as her first step to combating discrimination. Netta Goldman is planning a future in agro-technology to address what she believes is a fast-looming crisis in Israeli agriculture. Matan Kristal and Shira Hadad both want careers in medicine, and Dima Khizaran, who is Druse, is currently weighing engineering against politics.

These are striking goals because these 15- to 17-year-olds all study in schools in Israel's periphery, where both expectations and opportunities are markedly low. They are among over 15,000 pupils in 27 formerly under-achieving high schools, whose facilities, teaching and results are beginning to compete with those of the country's best schools.

## Innovative model

"The educational system's spoils have been unequally shared," insists Dr. Gil Pereg, CEO of Darca (The Path, in Aramaic), the seven-year-old educational network under whose umbrella these 27 schools are gathered. "Resources and investment have been heavily concentrated in central Israel's larger towns, translating into facilities, labs, teachers and study choices far superior to the rest of the country." Even 'good' schools in outlying areas are outperformed by those in the center of the country, according to Education Ministry national test scores.

Darca was established in 2010 at the initiative of the Rashi Foundation and Alliance Kol Yisrael Haverim (KIAH), who put up \$25 million. When the Youth Renewal Fund (YRF) came aboard four years later, that sum more than doubled to \$53 million – the strongest financial backing ever known by an Israeli school network. Their aim: to build an educationally innovative model to invigorate failing schools in the backyard of Israel's public education system, prove its effectiveness, and offer it as a prototype countrywide and even beyond.

"We feel Darca in our school," says Netta Goldman, 15, a 10th-grader in the Shaked Darca Secondary School in Emek HaMa'ayanot, which joined the network three years ago. "There are changes you can see, like the science lab and the projectors in every classroom, more teachers when classes are too big, and extra help for kids who need it. And there are changes you just feel, like the school really caring about us and wanting us to be happy and do well. When someone believes in you, you don't want to disappoint them."

Matriculation rates have shot up at Shaked and throughout the Darca network. An unprecedented 85 percent of students in these once-failing schools matriculated this past academic year – "a figure whose importance you can't ignore when matriculation unlocks the door to social mobility," says Pereg. "Convincing our youngsters that they CAN

is a large part of this enormous change – and it doesn't end there. It opens the way to higher education and, from there, to successful, fulfilling careers. It puts them on the road to realizing their dreams, like every other young Israeli."

Funding is clearly key in the Darca makeover – enabling staffing, renovations, labs, classrooms, libraries, computers and more – but money is only part of the multi-pronged approach Darca has pioneered. "We see ourselves as an experimental laboratory for today's education," Pereg insists. "We mix, match and modify the best teaching approaches out there – libraries, expanded teaching hours, STEM [science, technology, engineering and math] instruction and more – and combine them with ideas of our own to help youngsters learn and succeed."

## Investing in English

English learning, for example, which opens so many doors, has a brand new format. "Most of our students come from homes without English, and many see the language as an impassable barrier," says Dr. Mor Deshen, the network's senior vice president for pedagogy. "So we teach it in language labs where students stretch out on couches to read English books and magazines from its shelves, record themselves speaking English and play it back to know how they sound – where they experience the

language as part of everyday life. It engages them, gives them confidence."

Pupils are encouraged to keep options wide open by taking English matriculation exams at university-entrance level [4 to 5 points], and almost 90 percent of those who do so succeed. An approach similar to the English language lab is now being developed for math.

A more radical departure is Darca's ultimate learning environment – the YES I CAN! classroom. Ideally to feature in all its schools, the NIS 50,000 prototype opened in the Darca Kiryat Malachi High School in October 2015. An all-Israeli innovation designed by architect Lior Ben-Sheetrit, YES I CAN! seats fidgety students on yoga balls that rest in frames, its desks are on wheels, and it is free of distracting noticeboards or posters. Three of its walls comprise geometric shapes inspired by the video game Minecraft, and its fourth is covered in growing vegetation. Three closed-off workstations are for quiet study.

This year sees Darca introducing virtual travel. Students in Bat Yam's Darca Hammer School are heading for London or possibly New York – and, in the future, perhaps to Machu Picchu, Antarctica or the international space station. Authorized by Google Expeditions, they are donning headsets that take them into virtual 3-D environments, where they will wander, explore and converse. "Their teachers will guide them until

they're comfortable," says Deshen. "Then they'll lead."

Darca's 1,644 teachers are crucial to the model. "They believe in their pupils and show it with every word they speak, and pupils know their teachers believe in them," says Darca VP Dr. Noam Seri.

The local authority is also brought on board, and, since what happens in school often impacts on the whole family, parents are also involved, with a tactful hand held out to families who are struggling – providing extra tuition, counseling, emotional support, a mid-morning sandwich, a hot lunch, even a winter jacket or dental care. All this together, says Pereg, comprises the key to the Darca transformation: how youngsters see themselves.

## "It's all about us kids"

"When Darca came into our school, things changed so fast!" says Segev Sabag, 15, of Netivot's Darca High School, where matriculation eligibility has risen from 13 to 60 percent in just three years. "It's all about us kids. Everything just got better, and best of all was knowing they were doing it for us, that they believe we're worth doing it for."

"I was fascinated by Physics and wanted to take it as one of my electives, but my aunt disagreed, saying it would be far too hard for me," says Dima Khizaran, 17, of the Darca Druze High School for Science & Leadership. "I went to my school principal.

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He encouraged me. He said I could do it, so I signed up – and I'm loving it!"

Nikol Hanimov, 15, is a 10th-grader at the Maxim Levy Darca School in Lod. "When I was in elementary school, it seemed like the last place I'd end up!" she says. "It had the worst reputation." Until the school came into the Darca network four years ago, fully half its Jewish, Christian and Muslim pupils were categorized as youth at risk, and all of them were ashamed to say where they went to school – if they went. "You never knew whether it was class time or recess, because the kids roamed around outside all day," lamented one teacher. It took two years and NIS

1.5 million a year to turn Maxim Levy into a sought-after school. Today, enrolment is up, its students attend class, school violence has nosedived and matriculation rates have soared.

"My electives are Physics, Electronics and Computers," says Hanimov, "but my dream is to open a residential center for youth at risk – not the institutional kind, but a place where kids can live freely and independently. I've heard stories in Lod that make me cry. I want to do something for people like them."

Hanimov is far from alone among Darca youngsters in her confidence and motivation. "I want to join [the crack IDF Intelligence] Unit 8200," says Matan Kristal, 15, of Shaked Darca. Shimon Aharoni, 16, of Darca Hatzvi Netivot is "going to apply to [the elite Air Force commando unit] Shaldag before studying engineering," he says. "I want to be a role model."

Aiming for a maximum of 50 of Israel's periphery schools, Darca is hoping to add Beduin, Arab and possibly ultra-Orthodox schools to those from the religious, secular, Druse and agricultural sectors now under its umbrella.

"Darca has given me my chance," says Segev. "I've always wanted to do things with my life, and Darca has given me a pathway to doing them."

For more information about Darca, go to: [www.darca.org.il/en](http://www.darca.org.il/en); in the U.S.: [www.yrfdarca.org](http://www.yrfdarca.org)





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