

"IT'S NOT A SCHOOL FOR RICH PEOPLE": THE SECRET OF THE BEST HIGH SCHOOL IN ISRAEL

The School of Science and Leadership in Yarka has been the best school in Israel for two years in a row. ■ The school has only 200 pupils from the Druze community who have passed entrance exams, and the dropout rate is zero. ■ School Principal Kamil Shela: "We want our students to be at the top of the job market and the country." Lior Dattel | 23.08.2017



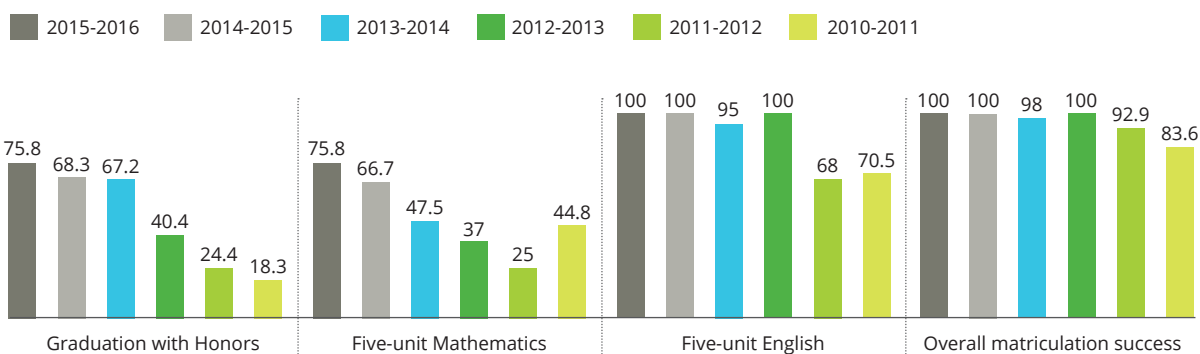
School of Science and Leadership in Yarka, yesterday. "We consider many proposals and choose what is most appropriate for our students and for the subject matter." Gil Eliyahu

What makes a high school the best school in Israel? Is it a big budget, location, good teachers, teaching methods, or perhaps choosing good students to start with? Kamil Shela, Principal of the Science and Leadership High School in Yarka, argues that the answer is clear: "We are focused on quality, we have high standards for our students - and then, once accomplished, we raise our standards even higher. For us, the goal is to fulfill their ambitions. We want our students to be at the top of the market and the country - and gain access to all fields. Therefore, we need to lead them to the highest achievements in the country. We believe in every student and know each one can make a difference in society and affect hundreds more.

According to Ministry of Education data released this week, the Druze school in Yarka is the best in the country - for two consecutive years now. The high school not only leads in the matriculation success rate - 100%, along with only 34 other schools in Israel- but also as measured by the quality of students' matriculation certificates. As the data show, the rate of students with who matriculate with honors is the highest of all the high schools in the country.

In addition, it is the only high school in Israel where all students learn English at the five-unit level, and the percentage of students taking five-unit math is the highest in the country 75.8% in the 2015-2016 school year. Currently, all the students take five-unit mathematics. The dropout rate at the school is zero. In

First in the Figures Excellence and Matriculation Success at the Yarka School, in percentages



TheMarker

terms of educational climate, students report low rates of violence and are highly motivated to learn.

The success of the Science and Leadership High School in Yarka is impressive. Students' achievements are higher than in the most affluent high schools in the country, and also as compared to other private schools in the center of the country that charge significantly higher tuition. This is also considering the economic background of the students, and the fact that a decade ago, the school failed to meet its objectives, faced a crisis and nearly closed. However, this is a school that selects its students carefully - no more than 200 - using entrance exams before admission to the school, and it accepts only the best Druze students from communities in the North.

According to Ministry of Education data - reported in TheMarker two months ago - a large proportion of the high-ranking schools in Israel use entrance exams to select their students or charge high tuition - or do both. And yet, the school in Yarka is more successful than the others in the various parameters, although the road to these achievements was long and hard.

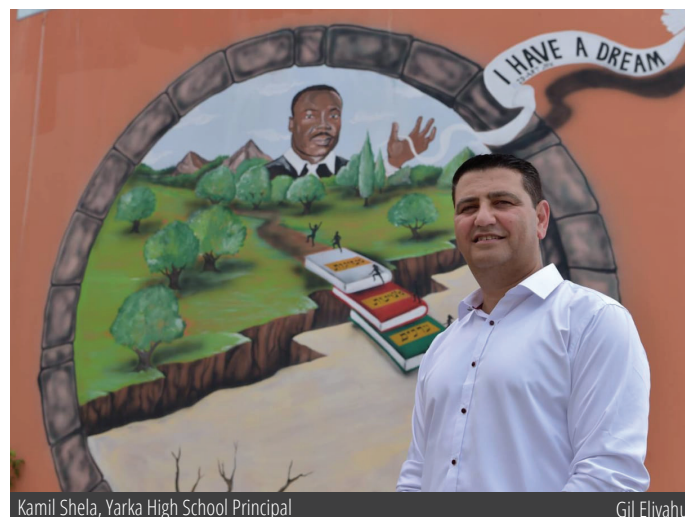
"The Ministry of Education has always supported us."

According to Shela, "The achievements stem first and foremost from collaboration inside the school - among the principal, teachers and students, but also from the surrounding community and the Ministry of Education, which has always supported the school.

Shela says that "the impact of our school is felt not only by our students but also by the rest of the schools in the Druze community, in the region and the country. The accomplishments of our school encouraged competition with other schools, and you see it. We excel in all areas. In the past, we went to the top schools in Israel to learn from them, and we're still learning, but they also come to learn from us."

This is Shela's fourth year as principal of the school. He started working as an English teacher and homeroom teacher when the school opened 2002, and he advanced to the position of principal. The school was founded as a school for outstanding students, because there was no such school in the Druze community and its leaders has a desire to improve the education system. However, the school failed to meet its goals for a long time.

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.



Kamil Shela, Yarka High School Principal

Gil Eliyahu

In 2011, the Darca Network, of the Rashi Foundation, entered the picture. Darca now operates about 30 schools in the country, 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. Today the school in Yarka is the only regional school in the Druze community, and the only school in the Druze community recognized by the Ministry of

Education as a science school, which allows it to be selective of students.

“Since my first day as principal, we have focused on the school’s vision - which is to produce the country’s Druze leaders in politics, academia, science, the public sector and the military. We have increased the percentage of students taking five-unit math and English, which are the most important subjects in academia, and today all our students take five-unit math and five-unit English. However, the idea was not only to increase the number of students taking the highest levels, but also their achievements, and today the average score in math is over 85, and in English, it is 91.

Carefully selected teaching faculty

According to Shela, one of the most significant success factors of the school is carefully chosen teachers. Criteria include at least a master’s degree. “The issue of selecting the faculty is very important to us. It is important to us to have excellent teachers who have intellectual rigor and a strong work ethic, and who care deeply about the students. Those who want to teach at our school observe a lesson and then teach a lesson themselves, a lesson I participate in as well. In the end, the students and the subject coordinator express their opinions about how suitable the teacher is to the school. If there is a consensus among the students and faculty, we hire the teacher. Of course, we require at least a master’s degree to work as a teacher at the school.”

You have chosen the best students. Is it any wonder they succeed?

Shela: “This cannot be taken for granted. When we established this school, there was a very big education crisis in the Druze community. The Druze community did not have a school to support and promote students with excellent potential. Establishing this high school gave us the opportunity to realize the potential of each and every pupil.”

But you just help the good students, right?
“There were good students in the past who got

lost in high school. When we first established this school, students aspired to do four units of mathematics, and now they aspire to excel in five units. Then, they just wanted to do well in their matriculation exams, and now they want to excel. They didn’t have a framework then, but now these kids can compete with any student in the State of Israel for first place- and not only in matriculation.”

“Our goal is to make a difference at school – and also in society – and to put students in a position where they can compete with the best students in Israel. We want our students to be at the top of the job market and the country – and have access to all fields. We believe that every student can make a difference. One student can affect another hundred.”

According to Dr. Gil Pereg, CEO of the Darca Network, the network is opposed to selective admission and does not allow it in the network’s schools, except for the school in Yarka. “The story of the school in Yarka differs because it is operated according to a government decision that determined that just as there are schools cultivating excellence in the Jewish and Christian communities, so there would also be a school established that would lead the Druze community forward.”

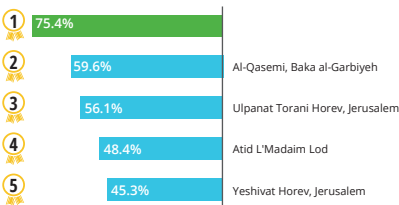
“Fortunately, we added this school to our network some six years ago. We remember the first few days and our conversations with leaders of the Druze community. Even after the school was founded, they were frustrated that it did not meet expectations, even though it was selective of students back then as well. We oppose selective admission, but this is a special and unusual case of a community that was experiencing a major crisis and wanted to develop a model of leadership and excellence, and they are entitled to that.”

And tuition is not a barrier?

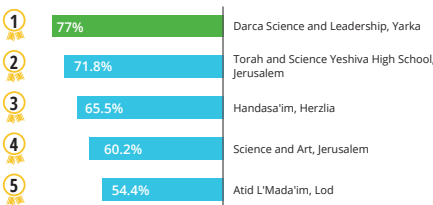
Shela: “This is not a school for rich people. The tuition in our school is 2,400 shekels a year, and that includes an annual trip that is a large part of the cost. These payments are lower than the limit set by the Ministry of Education, and they

Educating for Excellence The Five Top High Schools in Israel

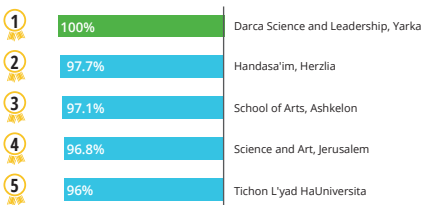
Graduation with Honors*



Five-Unit Mathematics Matriculation



Five-Unit Mathematics Matriculation



To Qualify for Graduation with Honors: Students must have 30 matriculation units with at least 5 units of English and 4 units of math and a 90% average, or at least 25 matriculation units with 5 units of math and 5 units of English and an average of 90%.

are significantly lower compared to other schools in the country. Access to school is not limited to those who can pay. The network has invested a lot of money in scholarships, and there are other grants from the Ministry of Education. Money does not play a big role here, and students who have financial difficulties and want to attend our school are supported."

How do you encourage students to study five-unit math and English?

"When we started to implement our ideas and increase the number of students in higher level math, an atmosphere was created that encouraged achievement. One of the students in our school got a 754 on the psychometric exam, and since then all the students want to get a higher grade than that. The atmosphere at the school is that of confidence in students, and it encourages them to succeed."

And that doesn't create too much competition and pressure among students?

"The students here really do feel the competition, so we work very hard on social aspects too. We do everything to ensure that students feel like they belong here. We are a father and mother for some of them, and our goal is to help them fulfill their dreams. This year we helped two of our students publish books they had written by themselves - each one wrote a novel. Students feel connected to the school and consider it their second home. They are taught not only about studying, but also about the importance of the contribution to the community, and they realize they can do many things on that level as well."

Do students buckle under the stress of such a heavy course load?

"Our students are strong in school, and this is what they and their parents want, and we encourage it. Time is used efficiently, there are innovative and effective teaching methods here, and they do not

feel overloaded. Students also participate in some of the decisions about what goes on at school."

There are also robotics and space studies

Among other things, the school established a simulation center to enhance self-confidence and leadership in students. At the center, students develop the ability to speak in front of an audience, and deal with job interviews and decision-making. The simulations are photographed and later analyzed with the students.

"When we talk with students about becoming future leaders, we also take care to prepare them for it. We do not just prepare them for academia, but also for other places they may reach in the future. We also bring in experts who prepare them for different situations, such as experts who prepare them for job interviews. In the coming school year, we are going to bring people in to prepare students interested in exam preparation for medical school here at school," says Shela. In addition, the school focuses on the study of robotics, and a space studies center sponsored by Rashi and Ramon has been established.

"We use any innovative method that can result in high student achievement. We use technology in the classroom, but we also engage in personal conversations with students and involve them in the school community. There is not one recipe for success. We examine many ideas and proposals, and choose what is most appropriate for the students and the subject matter."

What did you find that works for math or English studies, for example?

"In mathematics and English we often use the flipped classroom method. Instead of the student learning from the teacher, he or she learns the material at home before coming to class. In this way, we encourage students' natural curiosity. Sometimes we let students stand in front of the class and deliver a presentation, or teach. There is no better way to learn yourself than to teach. And this also encourages other students to do it."

Why is it important to you that your students fill key positions in Israel?

"The Druze are an integral part of this country, and the country's success is also our success. We all have the same goal. If the Druze community advances, I am sure we can advance many things in the country, in the military, politics and academia." In addition to the success of the Science and

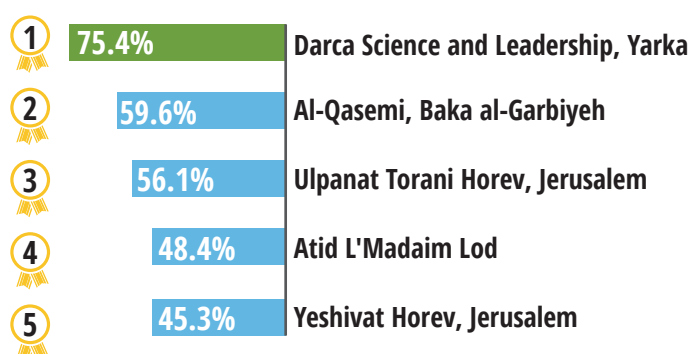


Leadership School in Yarka, other public schools in the Druze community are also succeeding. The high school in Beit Jann, which does not have selective enrollment, had a matriculation success rate 99.5% this year, after earlier peaking at 100% matriculation success - this despite the financial hardship of students at the school. The school implements a program sponsored by the Rashi Foundation that focuses on improving weaker students' academic achievement.

most important."

"In terms of the network, it is important for every school to have the best teaching team possible, but it is also important that they receive ongoing training, guidance, professional development and support. Ultimately, the people who do the work are the people in the classroom. If you don't have a talented team and principals like Shela who make sure that no student will be left behind, it is impossible to reap the results."

Percentage of Students with Excellent Matriculation Certificates



Simulations for job interviews, advanced robotics and self-confidence building: The formula of the best high school in Israel

But part of the success is also due to your huge financial investment in school.

"We invest a million shekels a year in each of our schools, and basically we provide them additional resources that other schools receive from local authorities and parents. I was the principal of Blich in Ramat Gan, and the local authority there, like other affluent local authorities, invested funds in the school beyond the funds from the State budget. Darca makes sure schools are not lacking. We are not talking about extreme increases, but about budget supplements of 5%-15% of what the State provides. We've found this is enough for schools to realize their potential."

According to Pereg, "Our process in the Druze community was parallel to that of the Yeholot Association in the Druze community. Darca led the high-achieving team and Yeholot simultaneously supported the weaker students. Today, we can see that the Druze community is in a different place."

The Darca secondary school network, to which the school in Yarka belongs, was established by the Rashi Foundation and is supported by the American organization YRF. According to data from the Ministry of Education, this educational network has the highest achievements in Israel. And unlike other educational networks such as ORT and Amal, it is the only network that does not charge the schools management fees. Instead, schools are able to invest the entire budget they receive from the Ministry of Education in their students. However, this is still a relatively small network.

According to the CEO of Darca, who was previously the principal of Blich High School in Ramat Gan, "We see in this amazing accomplishment of the school in Yarka proof of our claim - that in an excellent school, with the right faculty, correct budgeting and all the support it needs, students will reach the highest achievements. In all schools, the components of faculty and leadership are the