

THE STORY OF DARCA



START-UP EDUCATION

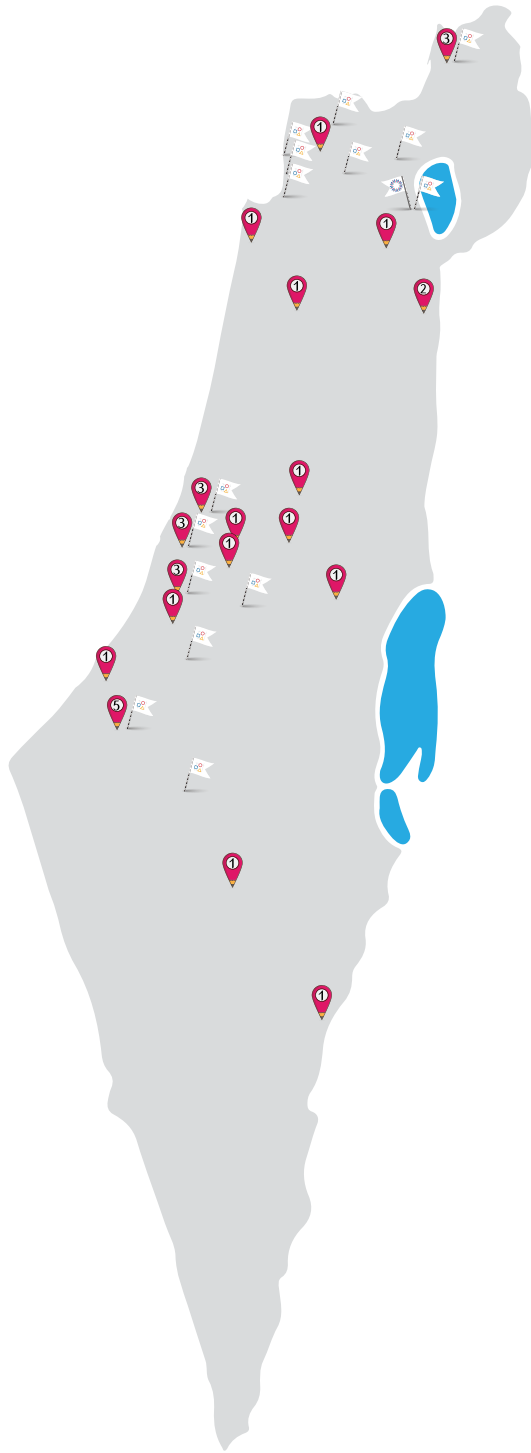


Youth Renewal Fund



INVEST • INNOVATE • EDUCATE

DARCA NETWORK



29,848
Student outreach

3,760
Teachers

32
Institutions

DARCA IN THE COMMUNITY

Darca Schools serves all sectors of Israeli society. Darca currently operates 32 schools and two learning centers throughout Israel, including four schools under its pedagogical auspices. Darca provides an excellent education through innovative educational methods and a learning environment that encourages curiosity and exploration. Darca instills the values of leadership, democracy and responsibility to the community.

DARCA'S MISSION

- » Strengthen Israel and Israeli society by creating social mobility in peripheral communities across the country through access to an educational experience comparable to that available to the wealthier communities.
- » Increase social mobility in peripheral communities across Israel through access to a high-quality secondary education at least comparable to that available to the wealthier communities.
- » Darca promotes humanistic and democratic values, tolerance and active participation in national and community life.





Darca education system thriving across the country

Network of 25 high schools serves secular, religious and Druse populations

■ CEO: It seems almost like magic

08/17/2015

By HAYAH GOLDLIST-EICHLER

Amid the financial and educational difficulties faced by schools in the periphery, the Darca network of high schools has spent the past five years strengthening the pupils, teachers and principals in their institutions.

The network has set a goal of increasing both the rates of eligibility for matriculation certificates among their graduates, and strengthening the core values of the pupils, such as volunteerism and democracy.

Darca, headed by Jimmy Pinto, has grown from seven schools to 25 across the country in the past four years, serving the state-secular, state-religious and Druse sectors, with plans to expand into the Beduin, Arab and possibly ultra-Orthodox sectors.

Dr. Gil Pereg, CEO of Darca, spoke with The Jerusalem Post on Sunday about the keys to success in the schools, as well as future plans for the network.

The schools were established by the Rashi Foundation and KIAH-Alliance, with the support of the Education Ministry, and were joined in 2014 by the US-based Youth Renewal Fund.

According to Pereg, the partnership between the organizations is not exclusively in the realm of financial aid, although he does call the contributions by the organizations “unprecedented” in the education system.

He said that the managerial know-how of the



STUDENTS STUDY at the Municipal High School in Ashkelon. (Kfir Bolotin)

three backing organizations is one of the key elements to the success of the schools.

“Every time I think about how a principal from Netivot here in Israel can learn from managerial or organizational advice from someone with a senior position on Wall Street... I think this is very exciting,” said the head of the school network.

It is hard to ignore the importance of matriculation eligibility in Israel. He spoke of the more than 83 percent of students in the Darca schools who are eligible for a matriculation certificate after completing high school.

Matriculation eligibility, said Pereg, is a tool for social mobility, something very important to the students who come from the periphery and want to enter fields such as engineering, medicine and academia.

Gedera is one example of a town that was struggling in terms of its education system, although it isn't quite considered part the periphery. The Darca system took over all three of its high schools and eligibility rates rose drastically.

The mayor of Gedera even credited the schools with a rise in real-estate prices.

Another example is the rate in Netivot, which rose from 13% up to 60% within two years of Darca managing the school.

Pereg emphasized the importance of teachers and the belief that investing in a support system for them and principals is key to improving the school.

“We know that the position of principal today is extremely complex, very challenging and difficult... specifically in the places we work,” he said.

Principals, he explained, get a wide berth to work as they feel is best suited to their school, but alongside that freedom they are given a support system to lean on when needed.

Pereg himself established his career in education at two of the strongest schools in the country – Blich High School in Ramat Gan and AMIT High School at Bar-Ilan University.

After years of working in two of the country’s strongest schools, he said that when he heard about the plans for the Darca school system, he couldn’t imagine not being involved.

The opportunity to utilize what he had learned in those schools and allow for the students in the periphery to be afforded the same opportunities, was how he felt he had to move forward with his career.

Sometimes, “it seems almost like magic,” Pereg said of the transformation in matriculation eligibility and general excellence at the schools.

But the core of the change, in keeping with Darca’s philosophy and that of its partners, is to ensure that the teachers believe in the pupils and the pupils are made aware of that belief.

Sometimes, he said, it’s hard to make that change, but the language used in the classroom and the way teachers approach the class, makes a difference in the way the students see themselves and that is a key emphasis in the school system.

The change, he said, is visible, when hearing the pupils speak about their futures as engineers, teachers, academics and so on, with confidence, despite the fact that their parents often have no academic education.

Darca and its partners go further than just ensuring excellence in the classroom.

Pereg said it is often difficult to believe what the pupils are missing – food, winter jackets or even a fridge at home.

The Darca schools make sure to deal with these issues, in addition to academic issues, to ensure that these children have their basic needs taken care of.

The US-based Youth Renewal Fund, the newest partner in the Darca system, led by chairman Marc Rowan and president of YRF Darca Sam Katz, brought with the Rashi Foundation and KIAH an investment of \$53 million, making Darca the schools network with the strongest financial backing in Israel.

Due to the partnership between the Rashi Foundation, KIAH and YRF, Darca is expecting to double its number of schools to 50 within seven years.

The point, however, is not to take over the school system.

Pereg explained that what is important is to build a working model, prove that it works and then allow for it to be copied across the country and abroad so as many pupils as possible can benefit from it.

Netivot: Against All Odds

The “General Comprehensive” High School in the southern city was a shocking failure

- A moment before the decision was to be made to lock its doors, Darca took it under its sponsorship and a huge change occurred with principal Cochava Cohen at its helm
- Where there's a will, there's a way

Sigal Arbitman | Published on: 8/28/2014 11:37 PM



We cannot give up. Cochava Cohen Photograph: Dudu Greenspan

The “General Comprehensive” School in Netivot was, for many years, the laughing stock of the city: Parents refused to send their children there, its students were a joke amongst the students in other schools who saw them as juvenile delinquents, crazy and hopeless. The school had no repose from any direction, suffered from pedagogical and disciplinary neglect, and no less than seven principals rotated through there in seven years, an intolerable situation which served as a platform for uninspired educational staff which did not wish to change the status quo. The poor reputation of “General Comprehensive,” the only non-religious school in the city, was so prominent that the municipality itself was prepared to shut it down and disperse its students amongst the two schools located outside the city.

A moment before the seal was placed on this drastic decision, “General Comprehensive” got a final chance when it was put out for bids in a

tender to the national high school networks. The **Darca** Network, founded by the Rashi Foundation, picked up the gauntlet as part of its activities to advance education in the geographic and social periphery in Israel.

The mobilization of the system to save this problematic high school was absolute. **Darca** increased the supply of resources which the school needed and stabilized its administration when it brought in the veteran educator Cochava Cohen who was seeking a professional challenge. After nine years as principal of an elementary school in Jerusalem, she left the capital city and moved her residence to Netivot because of the task placed before her.

Cochava brought about a gradual change over three years. From a failing educational institution which no one wanted, “General Comprehensive,” which adopted the Network’s name, became one of the strongest high schools in Netivot. The rate of those eligible for matriculation amongst its students increased significantly and the syllabus, which includes science and technology classes, was classified as excellent. A skilled educational staff (which included the original staff teachers) led to the improvement of the school’s image and the image of the students who were filled with motivation. “The **Darca** School is an excellent example of what can be done when resources are increased, the quality of the administration in the field of pedagogy is improved and emphasis is placed on values of democracy and tolerance,”

says Jimmy Pinto, chairman of the Network, "Our goal is to raise the motivation of the people in the field, to empower strength to principals and teachers."

The Network's CEO, Dr. Gil Pereg, adds: "There is an unusual story here. We are successful in making a change in all of our schools. It is significant primarily in Netivot, in which we integrate managerial administrative and pedagogical knowhow and work in close collaboration with the Ministry of Education, the municipality and the Rashi Foundation."

To Disassemble and Assemble

I meet Cochava, a pleasant and warm woman, in her office. Her eyes laugh, accompanied by a continuous gleam, in fact when she remembers the first and most difficult year in the challenging position. "The situation was catatonic," she says, "This was a school overflowing with violence and vandalism. The enrollment rate was low and almost did not justify its opening. When I arrived in July three years ago, 13 children enrolled in seventh grade, it's surreal. There was no normal education for non-religious students in this city."

So what drew you here?

"The challenge, the school's great distress and the network's true willingness to help. **Darca** Network, the municipality and the Ministry of Education placed all of the resources and the backing needed to change the school from its foundations in my hands. I will not forget the opening ceremony in the first year, from which I returned home in tears. It was a catastrophe. Teachers ran after students and yelled at them to sit down. It was total chaos, a demonstration of lack of control, to the point where I asked myself - how to I start dealing with all of this?"

And what was the answer?

"That everything starts and ends with the teachers. The chaos continued with the start of studies when one of the teachers said to me: 'There is no difference between a lesson and a break.' There is no listening, there is no respect for the teachers - they curse at them. I remember that I could not

stand on my feet because I was so tired, because all day long I was rushing to put out fires. Students in the twelfth grade told me to my face: 'We give you two months, three at most.'

"That is when I understood that if I succeed with the teachers, I will succeed with the children. I did not give up on any teacher. In the end, those same teachers about whom it was said that they are not fit were the ones who caused the big turnaround. They were paralyzed by the chaos, but today, three years later, there is an active and dominant staff here, with a deep connection between it and the students."

The path to this turnaround was not simple. All of the institution's mechanisms underwent a process of "disassembly and assembly," as it was described by the school's intermediate school counselor, Sigal Gabay, and Cochava the principal describes the moment which almost broke her. "There was a very severe violent incident here, which was the climax of the chaos. I felt that I cannot take any more and we closed the school at 11 in the morning - we sent everyone home."

Cochava stops for a moment and then continues: "This was a foundational incident, after which all of the teachers understood that from here on in, they are laying down a foundation of ironclad discipline amongst the students. Little by little, the students understood that a power had come to the school which must be respected, that the change was beginning. It did not happen immediately after the incident, there were other failures and incidents of violence, but in the end we laid down the law, courtesy was learned between the students and the teachers, and this was the basis for the change.

On the altar of the laying of the foundation of the ironclad discipline and the mutual respect, Cochava delayed the handling of the school's low pedagogical level by half a year. Issues such as low rates of matriculation eligibility, learning disabilities and various difficulties were put on hold until the required discipline, the determination of clear procedures and the reinforcement of the educational staff, became the authority in the eyes

of the students. "It was necessary to awaken the teachers' belief in themselves; to reinforce them, to encourage them, to help them feel useful, otherwise how can we engage ourselves with excellence", emphasizes Cochava.

Gali Kanfo, Cochava's vice principal, reinforces the principal's statements: "I can testify, as a teacher, that the replacement of so many principals resulted in a lack of stability in terms of the students and the staff. I started to develop separation anxiety, truly! Although there were attempts to improve the situation, to change - none of them succeeded."

Gali, who has been at the school for 14 years, starting as a teacher, continues: "At a certain stage, the educational zeal with which I arrived at this school, and the desire to provide these students with an education that would take them out of poverty and difficulties waned, because nothing changed." But then, **Darca** arrived, with Cochava, and the longed for change occurred.

"Cochava arrived and simply reignited the hearts of the teachers," says Gali with a smile, "People who had faded and given up rediscovered their role and became meaningful once again. Cochava's demand for professionalism, alongside the love which she radiates, created the change which the school needed."

Sigal, the counselor, joins in the praise: "All of the circles vis-a-vis which the school operates - students, parents, the staff, the outside system, informal organizations - understood that here we have someone who is not going to give up on anyone or to anyone, certainly not on the students. Every detail in the bylaws was changed, polished and sharpened. The school took a deep breath and refilled itself."

Connecting the Ends

With half a year in the position, after all of the difficulties Cochava stabilized the school in terms of discipline: the level of violence decreased, students showed up in classes on time and respected the students and the new principal.

"They heard the teachers and saw how they address me and this trickled in", Cochava recounts with satisfaction, "The students who gave me two months, accepted me." The time had now come for a pedagogical changeover as well; stage two which would make the school successful, strong and prestigious - not an easy challenge. The populace of Netivot is characterized by very extreme ends. The strong, successful and wealthy end and the weak end which is handled by welfare services. This is also the student population in the renewing educational institution, and it required balance, for success, as a critical component.

Until the change, the children from the strong population left to study at the neighboring Kibbutzim in higher quality schools which are strong and even elitist, while the weak and non-religious population was stuck in the city and gathered at the laughable "General Comprehensive." After the rehabilitation of the high school commenced, the possibility of studying outside of the city was decreased, and as aforesaid brought about a connection between the strong and the weak at the socioeconomic level, within the walls of Darca."

The way to draw the strong population in the city to the school was by means of an excellent syllabus, such as "Atidim" and "Ta'assi-Yeda" which included the technological-scientific classes. Cochava tells of the large push which these programs provided: "The staff received professional enrichment, and after years of bitterness and frustration, I found teachers who love to come to work. The matter started to take new shape and receive new colors."

Renewal was felt even in the students' enrollment, and as we remember, upon Cochava's entering the position, 13 students were enrolled in the seventh grade and for the coming year, 75 students have already enrolled. Vice-principal Gali: "We provide a solution for strong students and cultivate this group. If in the past, in every grade level, there was perhaps one student who was eligible for matriculation in five units of mathematics, today we expect that there will be 20 students with four and five study units."

The process is a success. The bounce by **Darca** propelled the students and the school's image and its level in an inconceivable manner. "The quality of the students which come here improved," continues Gali, "One thing leads to another. There are no invisible students in the school - we know everyone, know exactly what is happening with them: from what home they come, what difficulties they face daily. Thus, even the weak students receive solutions which are appropriate for them - on the personal level and on the educational level. Despite the extreme ends in educational and social terms, in our eyes all are equal."

Sigal adds: "As counselor, I know all of the students thoroughly. I know them, their grandmother, their aunt, the siblings and parents and everything that they are going through. That is how it works here. There is simply no other way. When they say education is a calling - this is not a cliché. Here, in this school, the expression is alive and well."

To Seize the Opportunity

Not only does the professional staff testify as to the success; so too the local population which is happy with the change. "This school is proof that there is life after death," says Itzik Gerby, father of Oded, a graduate of the school who graduated twelfth grade this year and is studying electrical engineering in the "Atidim" program. Oded nods and says: "Had they not believed in me in the school and gone above and beyond in order to help me succeed, I would not have gotten to where I am."

Oded also says: "In seventh grade I caused a lot of trouble. It got to the point that every week they would send me home, each time for a different reason. I caused many problems: I hit kids, yelled at teachers, fought with everyone. In eleventh grade, they stopped my studies and told me that I would no longer return."

Oded's father remembers: "I asked Oded whether he wants me to find him a different school, but he said to me 'Dad, if I don't go back to study at Darca, I'm not going back to school at all,' in those words. Oded received another chance

and succeeded in changing, as aforesaid, with the help of the dedicated teachers. They stayed with him even after school hours and invested in him until he was eligible for matriculation which included five units in mathematics, as well as physics, until he was accepted into the "Atidim" program. Individual success which serves as an example to others.

"Every year they changed principals. One year they even replaced two," says Oded, "I was sure that Cochava as well would not continue, but after the first year that she stayed, the school became more serious, less of a mess. Then I understood that this is my chance and I simply grabbed it with both hands."

So too Ziv Uziel, aged 16, who will be in the eleventh grade in the coming year, identifies with Oded's statements: "At the beginning the school had a really bad stigma, but now they talk about it in an absolutely different manner - that there is a good staff and a good syllabus. We have help and more reinforcement."

What brought about the change in your opinion?

"It is the integration of a good and charismatic principal and a good staff with a lot of motivation. There were a lot of changes here, changing principals, and there was a feeling of instability. Now the situation is absolutely different. I feel very safe here and believe in this school's abilities."



Going in Darca

With more than \$50 million in hand for the next seven years, **Dr. Gil Pereg, who heads the Darca Schools Network**, is determined to smooth out the "15 percent" gap between the schools in the periphery and the center of Israel. So what if on the way he steps on the toes of the competing veteran networks. He also comments on the performance of his close friend Shai Piron.

[Vered Kelner | [originally printed in Hebrew] June 26, 2014]

Dr. Gil Pereg's memory is filled with all sorts of teachers who left their imprint on him. There's Perlov, the math teacher from elementary school, who succeeded in breathing life into simple fractions; and Rabbi Zerah Novogrovsky, the educator in 11th and 12th grades at the Yeshiva High School in Nahalim, who caused a group of frantic juveniles to become enamored with the Talmud and to study for hours late into the night - far beyond what was required. People who not only opened seductive worlds of knowledge before his youthful eyes, but also instilled in him the rare seed of love of teaching; a seed that sprouted in his twenties, rose and flowered when he became principal of the Blich High School at the age of 35, and allows him today, a decade later, to command 21 high schools as CEO of the young schools network that answers to the name Darca.

For as long as he can remember, Pereg wanted to work in education. But, good boys from Tel -Aviv are not supposed to fantasize about a career in teaching, so he went to study law, and also philosophy, "for the soul." He snuck in obtaining teaching certificate while studying at the Or Ezion hesder yeshiva, which allowed him to earn a living during his legal studies as a teacher at the AMIT Bar -Ilan High School. He

could have continued on to a successful legal career, but, a moment before it was too late, he was offered a job as the vice -principal of the school. He was 27 at the time. "I understood that an opportunity to have a real influence had presented itself and that I would need to decide, and I chose."

Weretherethosewhoraisedaneyebrowatyourchoice? "Yes. People asked, 'are you still at the school? Are you still there?' behind which hid the assumption that if you are capable of doing something in the business or legal world, you don't need to waste your time and be stuck in education. But it appears to me that the legal world is doing very well without me. There are enough lawyers. Our aspiration as a society needs to be that people will stand in line to be accepted to join the educational system."

After a year as vice-principal, he was offered to establish the intermediate school, and after three additional years, when the principal of the high school retired, Pereg was appointed principal of AMIT Bar -Ilan. "The questions already had stopped, because to be a manager is considered legitimate." He demonstrates sarcasm and then adds, "We need to try to bring society to a place in which parents will want their children to become teachers. That being a teacher should be the object of their

longing, not only that they become doctors or 'hi-tech' engineers. It is not just a matter of financial remuneration, albeit that is also part of the issue, but rather also a conceptual consciousness issue. To borrow the Talmudic phrase, what is the place that we, as a society, give to the teachers of children."

At the age of 34, as part of the prestigious *Wexner* Foundation Fellowship, Pereg relocated for a year of studies at the Harvard University School of Government. During that very year, the mythical Blich High School found itself in an administrative crisis. The veteran principal, *Israel Zinger*, retired in order to run for the Office of Mayor of Ramat -Gan, and the school was unable to right itself. "Three principals were replaced there in a year," clarifies Pereg. "It is not simple for an institution with such a name and prestige to go through such a shake-up."

The City of Ramat -Gan gave notice of a tender and Pereg, whose position at AMIT was waiting for him, decided to throw his hat in the ring. "I understood that there was a huge challenge there, so I traveled especially from Boston in order to vie for the position," he recalls.

What was the attraction? Other than to predict the '77 (political) revolution, what is so special about the school?

"Blich School is famous for two central reasons. Both of them are not reasons for which it should have become famous. The first is the election educational project. This began as an educational exercise which predicted several elections' results, and there's a reason for this. The school community represents a very large sampling with more than two -thousand students and a very diverse population. Other than the Arab and Haredi [ultra -Orthodox] populations, there are representatives in the school of almost all parts of society. The second reason for the fame of the school is the basketball team from which many of the best players in Israel came, such as Doron Jemchi and Lior Eliyahu."

And what should have made Blich famous?

"Its educational richness, its pluralism, its high moral education level, the fact that the school fights for every child there, that it conducts itself in an awe-inspiring way."

Does it have a different number of students per class than what most of Israel is familiar with?

"Definitely not. Albeit this is not popular, but I don't think that the number of students in a class is the main key to educational success. Of course, it is not comfortable to teach 40 students in a class, but excellent teachers with whom I worked at Blich held classes of 40 students enthralled with eyes open in wonderment and curiosity. And a lot of studies that attempted to examine the causal connection show that there's no correlation between a low number of students [in a class] and success."

But not everybody has the privilege of excellent teachers. Maybe an average teacher would succeed better with a class of ten students.

"I will say this simply: all of us would want our children to study in small classes and enjoy personal attention. And with that, in a world of limited resources and the dilemma between improving quality of instruction and the increase in the number of hours versus the reduction in the number of students in the class, I believe, even if it is not popular, that we must prefer the first option. The reason is that I am convinced that if there is a teacher who feels himself the world's richest man, truly loves people, loves the teaching profession, sees it as his calling, and knows how to teach beyond what is written in the books, and that if a child asks a question which deviates left or right from what's written in the school book, he has what to say about it, he will be able to deal successfully as well even with 40 students in the class."

"It is correct that personal attention is a little hard to give to 40 students, therefore, we at Darca integrate models of mentoring or individual work in small

groups, but education as education can also be in large classes."

"Putting egos aside"

Pereg's (who is 44) mandate, and that of the Darca Network which has not yet celebrated its fifth birthday, seems albeit like an oily election slogan; yes, they too want to narrow the gaps in education. Except that in their case it comes with the backing of numerical data, proven means, an organized list of goals, and a solid financial back which is not at all evident. It began in December 2010, when Darca was born at the initiative of the **Rashi Foundation** and **Alliance-KIAH**, which provided it with \$25 million for the initial five years of operations. And this support continued just this last week, when the American operating organization **Youth Renewal Fund** (YRF) joined the party.

The three Jewish philanthropic entities that always saw education as the important tie to their activities decided to work together for the benefit of an educational organization, which other than a state budget, now brings with it an additional \$53 million for the next seven years. "What's especially exciting here is the ability by leading figures in the third sector to look at the task together, and to put their egos aside," says Pereg. "This is not a foregone conclusion, and this is the main reason why most oftentimes it does not occur. During the course of the negotiations about the partnership, the entire time we reminded ourselves why we were there: in order to narrow gaps in Israeli society. Then we looked at it and we put ourselves aside."

Pereg, in fact as one who began his educational career in the heart of the affluent center, is convinced that he knows well why a young girl in Kiryat Malachi goes home at 12:30 p.m., at an hour where her friend in Kfar Sabba receives two additional hours of mathematics, and why a principal of a high school in Givatayim succeeds in managing a school budget with a far higher level of skill than that of his counterpart in Ashkelon. This is

the backyard of public education, the one that is a little less comfortable to look at. Where the financial gaps between parents multiply themselves at the expense of the next generation.

The focal points of the problem, he analyzes, are twofold: the first - in the large and strong cities, the municipalities maintain a skilled and experienced education department which provides a strong administrative and pedagogical backbone to the schools; in the periphery this for the most part does not exist. The other focal point Pereg refers to in short as the "15 percent." These are the percentages of the extra budget which the rich municipalities like Raanana, Kfar Sabba and Ramat-Gan provide the schools, beyond the budget from the state, at the expense of the payers of municipal property tax. These are the percentages which allow the educational institutions in the financially well-off areas to enjoy another theatrical presentation, more laboratory hours, more choice of administrative programs, another technological study track, another cultivated yard. The task, as Darca Network sees it, is the smoothing out of these two humps and the equalization of the starting conditions between the center and the periphery. "Darca acts in order to balance and equalize the financial situation between a school in Netivot and Kiryat Malachi with that of a school in Raanana," explains Pereg, "and in addition to this, also provides professional support, as a sort of mobile education department, which is strong, which is composed of excellent excelling former school principals whom we recruited to our headquarters, who work with our school principals and maintain the work that the Ministry of Education and the local authorities have done up until now."

Can any school integrate into Darca?

"The school needs to be in the periphery from either a geographic or social standpoint. The school needs to be a complex place with challenges. For example, there is the Emek Hama'ayanot School, which took upon itself the task of establishing

a large and comprehensive program for autistic children, alongside an additional varied population. Complexity can also be dealing with a large population of immigrants. Complexity can be a school located in a neighborhood which has a lot of unemployment."

"We are not scared of challenges. We seek them out. A school in a buffer location, a school on the border. We look for places that need change and want it. It is very easy for a local authority to see the network as a sort of ATM. But we don't want to be in such a place. We want to work in the location with the local leadership which places education at the top of its agenda and is prepared to keep working on this."

How do you know if the local authority wants to keep working on this?

"It is not easy to know, but you figure it out. You converse with people, visit, see what they ask you."

But every politician will declare that he wishes to improve the educational system?

"True, but when you converse with the head of the municipality, and you feel that the person who stands before you is looking to roll the problem over to somebody else, then no, thank you. The local municipality is a central part of the story. And by the way, the municipality will also take part in financing this whole story. If in prior years they invested in the school, they will continue to invest even after Darca enters the picture. As Darca's chairman, *Jimmy Pinto*, continually emphasizes to us, the philanthropic funds which we bring with us are precious and substantial amount of money, but we want to see that it is not simply replacing money which was there previously. Its purpose is to create supplementary power, not in order that somebody take the money and build a boardwalk in his name."

Many claim that the local municipalities are a den of corruption. Do you also feel this way?

"Some of the heads of municipalities are dealing

with very difficult pressures, and some of them fail. I am thankful that in the places in which we work, we have encountered people who are very impressive and dedicated, which we find to be a privilege to work with them, but as we all read in the press, there is no doubt that there are also islands of corruption."

"There are schools which are flooded with programs"

Let's say a few words about the structure of the high school educational system in Israel. Contrary to elementary schools which belong to the state and are administered by it, high schools operate under one of the two following umbrellas: the local municipality or a school network (such as ORT, Amal, and AMIT, the three large networks). In Israel there are approximately 1,000 high schools, a third of them are owned by networks.

Why are there even networks?

"ORT and AMIT are older than even the years of Israel's existence. Everything comes back to the Compulsory Education Law, which during its first stages covered only elementary education. These outside networks were funded by philanthropic groups of Jews around the world wanted primarily to provide professional - technological education."

With the years, more schools' networks went and grew, such as Atid, Branko Weiss, Morasha, Dror and more. Some of them have an ideological justification, a specific educational platform which they seek to promote. Some of them see it as a good business. Why business? Because the budget that comes from the state finances not only a network's schools, but also the network headquarters: the CEO, his second in command, this person in charge of that and that person in charge of this...even the rugelach for the meetings held. Pereg, albeit, is careful not to spar with the competing networks, but it is fairly clear that in his opinion some of them conduct themselves shiftily, with the objective

of financing a bloated headquarters for no good reason.

And here Darca enters the picture. Like the other networks, Darca also receives state financing for the schools in its control, but as a declared policy, it does not take any of it for overhead. Darca's headquarters, including salaries for Pereg and his staff, as well as the supplemental money that it invests in its, are funded from a different wallet-that of contributing philanthropists. "Because the goal is to narrow gaps, not increase them. We want children in Kiryat Shmona and Netivot to enjoy the same things that children in central Israel enjoy," states Pereg, who was appointed CEO of the network in April 2011.

It begs the question why the **Rashi Foundation** and **Alliance-KIAH** desired establishing a new network of schools of their own. As aforesaid, over the years they operated in the field of education in the periphery. They financed intervention programs such as the national school lunch program or advancement of excelling youth. On its face, they did exactly what philanthropists are supposed to do, but it turns out that at times, good intentions are not enough.

What's wrong with the intervention programs, for example?

"Intervention programs can be very helpful when they lead to implementation of structural change within the organization itself. I learned from the first chairman of Darca, hi-tech entrepreneur Avigdor Wilentz, that if intervention programs continue to be crutches for a weak organization, the organization will continue to atrophy because it will lean on the crutches more and more. Many intervention programs succeed in making a change ad-hoc, but the minute they disappear, the change disappears, and sometimes an intervention program itself is harmful."

Harmful?

"If you bring outside tutors who will do exercises with children in preparation for a math exam, at a certain stage the teacher can take less and less responsibility because somebody is doing the work for them. A useful intervention program needs to mentor the teachers, to give them the tools they need because they are the ones who remain in the school. What happens today is that at times the number of entities intervening in schools is so large, that the result is that they collide with one another. That the principal goes from being an educational leader to being a traffic cop. 'You go here and you go there.' There are schools riddled with programs because of all the people with good intentions who bustle about the place."

From - 13% eligibility for matriculation, to - 60%

Darca's financial policies-waiving overhead and adding 15% to the school's budget-caused uproar in the networks market. Less so for the ideological networks and more for the networks that are motivated by financial objectives. As far as they were concerned, Darca broke the dishes.

For a school to change owners, the local municipal authority needs to initiate a tender. In all of the tenders in which Darca submitted bids since its establishment, it won. The competitors were not ecstatic. "Ten claims have been submitted against Darca up to this point by networks which lost the tenders. In all ten instances, we have remained with the school," says Pereg. "In one of these cases, one of the networks was not embarrassed to claim that Darca's bid must be invalidated because it would mean we would operate at a loss and it is not commercially wise. Our attorneys' work was easy. In all these cases, we won because the court understood that these entities are trying to prevent competition, and if there's something that the marketplace, even the educational marketplace, needs-it is that there be competition. 'And the envy of scribes shall increase wisdom.' It is good that now the other networks are trying harder. It is good

that the schools are now benefitting from bigger budgets because Darca presents an alternative."

When Darca receives control of a school, before it does anything, it needs to learn about that school. "When the staff of Darca enters a school, it looks a little bit like the reality TV show *Extreme Makeover*. The analysis takes place over long weeks. We try to do this with a lot of humility and with cooperation from the educational staff. We do not change the staff. Only if we encounter a principal who is impossible to work with, then we reach an understanding and the principal is replaced."

One of the first schools into which Darca was integrated was the only non-religious high school in Netivot. "A high school that was in absolute crisis when we entered it three years ago, with 13% eligibility for matriculation. Inconceivable," he tells. "The national average that same year was 48%. The staff was frustrated and the head of the municipal authority, *Yehiel Zohar*, issued a tender. After we won the tender, he made his staff available to us and even took part in financing a portion of what we did. We brought a new principal there, who had previously managed an elementary school in Jerusalem. A leader. *Kohi Cohen*. We guided her, accompanied her. It was very hard in the beginning. But within two years this school passed the 60% eligibility rate for matriculation. We estimate that in the coming years they will get to 70% and even to 80%. It is true that a matriculation is not everything, but in today's Israel it is still a tool for social mobility."

Beyond eligibility for matriculation, how do you measure success?

"You can see it in the increase in enrolment. From having schools in which children did not want to enroll and which stronger families sought ways to avoid, you now see an increase in the number of students. You see a balancing of the budget in the schools, an increase in the number of students that later go and serve in elite units in the IDF. You see more children active in youth movements, more

children volunteering. You see a dramatic decrease in violent situations in the school. These are all things that can be measured."

Pereg explains that contrary to the schools in more strongly based areas, the Darca schools are not always able to rely on the students' families. "For many of our students, the teachers and the school serve in roles which in more privileged communities are filled by parents. For example, if a child in the seventh grade comes to us from a single-parent home, with a mother who works double shifts, with a second grade reading and writing ability, who is going to make sure he gets private lessons? Darca. The child needs professional analysis, but the mother does not have money or time to take care of it. Darca Network will take care to provide him that analysis, and also emotional support, and will also take care of all of his welfare needs. A sandwich in the morning, food in the afternoon, and sometimes even clothing and dental care. But what is most important is to do that in a way in which the student will not feel as if he or she is a charitable case. As far as the student is concerned this is all part of the daily care he or she receives from school in order to allow them to do well at studies. And when a child feels that his school is like family he would want to feel belonged, to progress, to excel. This, if you would like, is the entire Torah on one leg."

French-American Collaboration

Thus was born the connection between **Rashi** and **Alliance-KIAH** of France and the American organization **Youth Renewal Fund (YRF)**.

The Darca Schools Network was born with a pronounced French accent. So it is, when leaning on two philanthropic organizations which are identified with French Jewry: the **Rashi Foundation** and **Alliance-KIAH**. The former is a fund from the wealth of one person, *Gustave Leven*, who passed away five years ago. Pereg did not have the privilege of meeting him, but he heard much about him from his nephew, *Hubert Leven*, the current president of

the **Rashi Foundation** and one of the key driving engines of the Darca Network.

"*Gustave Leven* was a Holocaust survivor who made a fortune in water," tells us Pereg. "He bought a small water factory and turned it into the most successful brand in the world, Perrier water. He apparently was the private individual who contributed more to Israel than any other person. This is at least what the President of the Country *Shimon Peres* says of him. In the 30 years of its existence, the **Rashi Foundation** invested hundreds of millions of dollars in the periphery in Israel, in three central fields-education, welfare, and health. Beginning with the School Lunch Project, which began and became a national project. Dozens of educational programs to develop excellence into narrow gaps, centers for youth in distress, shelters for women battered by family violence. Always quietly. Always humbly. There is almost no place named for the Foundation, and certainly not named for the founder. They invested in projects and in people. Gustave Leven, who was not a religious man, called his foundation the Rashi Foundation as a tribute to another French Jew (the 11th Century exegetist *Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki*)."

The French connection permitted also the convenient connection with **Alliance-KIAH**, an organization which was established by French Jews already 150 years ago. "In fact, *Gustave Leven's* grandfather, *Narcisse Leven*, was one of the founders of **Alliance-KIAH**," Pereg tells us. "He, *Carl Netter* and *Adolphe Cremieux* and others were partners in the establishment of the organization which dealt both in defense of Jewish rights in Europe, as well as the advancing of education and learning in North Africa, in Eastern Europe and in the Islamic nations."

"**Alliance-KIAH** had a wonderful network, which at its height, before the large immigrations from the Arab countries to Israel, operated approximately 100 schools throughout the world with the motto 'all Israel vouch to each other.' But on the heels of

the large immigrations, most of the schools closed and in the last few years **Alliance-KIAH** focused primarily on educational programs that it promoted and financed in the field of educational excellence and promotion of a social and pluralistic Jewish identity." Through **Alliance-KIAH**, Pereg met the person who would become the chairman of the Darca Network, the businessman *Jimmy Pinto*, the founder of the Founder of the Israeli subsidiary of the Edmond de Rothschild banking group.

When Darca began on its path in 2010, the two organizations provided it with \$25 million, but approximately a year-and-a-half ago the executive committee decided to expand the Network's horizon with the help of an association of friends in the United States. "During the course of recruiting additional donors, introductory and work meetings were set up with the management of Darca and the management of **YRF**, an acronym for **Youth Renewal Fund**, which was established 25 years ago by a group of leading businessmen in the United States, headed by Marc Rowan and Sam Katz." The meeting between Darca and YRF traveled to unexpected levels; a meeting that was intended to review the willingness to assist with donations turned into a strategic joining of forces of organizations possessing experience, knowhow and success, to create synergy with great power. Why shouldn't **YRF** operate its programs in an effective ownership framework and not only as an outside intervention program? This meeting created something almost without precedent in the third sector world and it is a journey of complete merger, collaboration and unification between organizations in Israel.

"There is no 'school solution'"

Pereg on the first year in office of his good friend, Minister of Education Shai Piron.

One of Pereg's close friends is Minister of Education Shai Piron, and on the background of this acquaintance, Pereg declares that "the matter

of education is truly in the Minister's soul." The criticism regarding Piron's volatility, he waves off with the assertion that "we are only a year after his entering office, and very interesting things are happening. I am very often in the field and hear the big hopes, and alongside them, naturally, the fears as well. It seems to me that for the most part there is a broad consensus regarding Rabbi Piron's vision. The question is 'what is the correct pace in which to do these things?' To this question there is no 'school solution'."

In the last year, the ORT Network stood at the heart of the Sapir Sabah affair and her claims against the teacher Adam Verete. In your opinion, is it appropriate that teachers speak with their students about politics or about subjects which are embroiled in controversy? "In the tension between the fear of indoctrination and the fear of critical thinking, because of the noise which it sometimes is likely to cause, I lean towards being far more fearful of indoctrination and I'm willing to therefore pay the price. In general, how can you deal with questions of Jewish Israeli identity, for example, without dealing with the difficult questions and loaded content?"

"The last elections provided us in many of our schools with challenges that were not easy. Some of our principals, mainly in small and relatively homogenous communities, found themselves under great pressure from parents, some of which were active in various parties, who wished to expose the students to a narrow and one-dimensional worldview of the breadth of opinions in Israeli society. The principals got from us all of the support, instruction and encouragement needed to engage in significant activities in the schools which provide a response to the very broad spectrum of opinions in Israeli society today."

"More than once this caused us an uproar in the system, appeals by parents who thought that the school needs to be a sounding horn for one approach or another, and we continued with what

we were doing. In the end, I believe that when you give principals as well as teachers the appropriate educational tools as well as encouragement and backing to deal with educational subjects with high explosive potential, everything for the most part goes smoothly. And when there is a mishap along the way? We deal with the mishaps, from an approach that sees these too as an educational opportunity."



Hi-tech Studies in a Gedera High School

From a Local Council with moderate educational achievements, the percentage of graduates eligible for matriculation in Gedera has surged by 30%: "We have a wonderful staff that has changed its philosophy, training and educational methods". The first hi-tech program is scheduled to open shortly.

Published: 27.01.16 19:10 Noam (Dabul) Dvir

At Darca Begin High School in Gedera, a hi-tech program is scheduled to open shortly. The school will become a national model, with its students studying 'computer integrated manufacturing systems' in mechanical engineering. The knowledge and tools should give them an advantage when being drafted into the IDF and in the future job market. If the teacher manages to get the class to quiet down a bit.

"The students are students and our job is to make them want to be in this school - and I have the feeling that they do", says school principal Rochele Tal. "This class is not chosen by many students", adds student Chen Tinaami, who plans on becoming an engineer. "This is something that helps me achieve my dream. This class is extremely helpful for me - and

grants me a matriculation diploma in technology and academics," she explains.

Statistics show that in recent years, Gedera has surged in education. From a stagnating system under a relatively socioeconomically poor local authority, Gedera has managed to create leadership among its high school students, reflected in a 30% increase in the percentage of students eligible for matriculation over the last three years. For example, Darca Begin High School grew from 69% eligibility for matriculation in 2012 to 90% this past year. At the same time, Darca Netivei Noam High School in Gedera surged from 82% to 98% eligibility for matriculation.

Two main changes contributed to [Gedera's] success. The first and most surprising involved a change in philosophy and pedagogical methods introduced by the Darca network, with faculty and administrative staff remaining in their positions rather than being replaced. "Without the staff, this would not have happened", clarified Tal, the Darca Begin High School principal, adding, "The same team that produced 63% eligibility for matriculation is the same team that helped 90% of students be eligible for matriculation [this year]. We have a wonderful staff that simply



Millions have been invested by the Darca Network (Photo: Noam Dvir)



underwent a philosophical change, professional training and in learning methods."

The second move involved the addition of millions of NIS that the Darca High School network brought with it. The Darca network was founded in 2010 by the Rashi Foundation and Kol Israel Haverim (Alliance Israelite Universelle), and supported by the Ministry of Education. In 2014, the Foundation joined as a partner in management of the U.S.-based nonprofit Youth Renewal Fund [now doing business as YRF Darca].

"Everyone collectively realized that something had to happen in order to improve results, which were not good; 53% eligibility for matriculation in 2008 is not a good result for a flourishing town," says the Director of the Education Department in Gedera, Anat Koch, who claims that "education is a Sisyphean task, and matriculation eligibility is not the sole objective."

As previously mentioned, the big money comes from external donors and not the government, which raises the question of the entry of outside parties to the education system. "We invest nearly 40% of the authority's budget in education" says Council Head Yoel Gamliel. "We reached an agreement with Darca - the entity

that is operating all high schools in the town - in which for every shekel invested by the council, they would invest double. As professionals they are making a concerted effort and we are providing support. My job today is to control their performance along with the director of the Education Division, which makes sure that all educational plans are implemented.

Darca operates in 27 schools across the country and covers tens of thousands of students. During the last five years of operation, the network average for matriculation eligibility was 85%, compared to the national average of 53%. The network's operations are based on a professional staff that brings advanced management and pedagogical techniques to schools, as well as budgets that help foster a culture of excellence.



Transcript of Video Segment - Gedera Education



Host: Forget about the bound sheets for the final paper. This class in Darca Begin School has a 3D printer and will soon pilot the first hi-tech classroom.

Yoni: We're trying to give students the tools that engineers work with on a daily basis. They're currently using a software known as Sunny Box which high-tech engineers, entrepreneurs and dreamers use for product design.

Chen Tinami: Yes...this is something that helps me achieve my dream...I want to be an engineer and this class is helping me a great deal. It offers me a matriculation diploma in academics and technology.

Host: Over the past three years, Gedera's education system has taken a huge leap forward, with a 30% increase in student matriculation eligibility rates. No teachers or administrators have been replaced but with the arrival of the Darca School network and the Rashi Foundation came new learning methods as well as millions of shekels toward advancing students.

Anat Koch: The Darca network, which entered the scene over the past several years, is part of the local authority. Everyone together realized that something had to occur to change results; the results were not good. Today, the eligibility for matriculation in schools is around 90%, with Darca Netivei Noam School at 98%. Darca Ramon School has 93% eligibility and Begin School saw the most significant increase from 53% to 90%. Education is Sisyphus work. Anyone in the field of education who thinks that we're in this to boost test scores overnight is missing the point.

Host: Back to the future, in the next academic year, the school will launch a pilot in which studies will be adapted to advanced hi-tech industry.

Rochele Tal: This school will be home to a national pilot program, converting the school into a hi-tech high center, with an investment of NIS 7 million from the Ministry of Education. We, in fact, are becoming a national pilot for computerized systems. Students are students and we – our role is to make them want to be here. I don't consider it easy, it's difficult...[but] everyone entering seventh grade completes 12th grade. There are no dropouts in this school.

Host: And now in light of the positive data, the question must be asked about the tremendous amount of money coming from donors and who is responsible for the children's education.

Yoel Gamliel: Today it's different. Today, there is parental awareness, which was not the case before. Parents also invest and cooperate. Parents today want to know. We invest almost 40% of the authority's budget in education. We also reached an agreement with Darca, which is essentially operating all programs in the town. Every shekel invested by the council, they invest 2, and they are professionals. We see this and we note the progress.



From Failure to Excellence in Two Years: The Story of a School in Lod

Everyone who knew of the Maxim Levy High School in Lod wanted nothing to do with it. Principals were replaced at a dizzying rate, teachers stayed their distance, students stood around with nothing to do and violence ran amok. That is, until two years ago, when a major change occurred, transforming the school into an embracing educational institution that encourages excellenc.

Noa Nebet 03.04.2015 12:43

The road to Darca Maxim Levy High School in Lod transverses winding roads, some of which are full of potholes, while others are littered with trash at the side of the road. Upon entering ,the neighborhood of Ganei Aviv, where the school is located the view switches to high-rise buildings, relatively new, and well-manicured traffic roundabouts. Two gates welcome us at the school's entrance: "Good Morning," a young man greets us with somewhat surprising manners. Within a few moments, it becomes clear to us that this is Max Kutob, 12th grade student and bass player for the rock-metal band Black Pampers. He explains to us how to get to the principal's office, and continues to class.

The school is comprised of two buildings: one old and slightly dilapidated, which recalls Israeli schools of the 1970s, and the second new, polished and inviting. The gap between them reflects the revolution that this high school has undergone over the last two years. From a school that made a bad name for itself in the city and went through three principals over four ,years, to a point where its students feel that they belong to it, and are no longer ashamed to say that they study there.

Ganei Aviv is considered a relatively good neighborhood although it is located a few minutes'

walk from the Rakevet railway) neighborhood, known as a faltering neighborhood) where drug



Photographer: Eyal Toeg

dealers operate and more than a few murders have occurred. Because of its rough state, the municipal services are not able to provide care for people who need it. The entire city, which has 70,000 residents, suffers from problems that have been created over decades of neglect, Jewish-Arab tension and high crime rates. Whoever was able to leave has left, and those who remained in the city are families from a low. socio-economic status.

"Many factors turned this into a volatile geographic location, and the school needs to operate amid this," says Guy Zoabi language arts teacher. "The students grew up with a feeling of a city that is

not a city, a place with a negative image, feeling exposed to harm. When their basic needs are not met, learning is really a privilege."

Today Lod is undergoing a process of change: the appointed council has been replaced by Mayor Yair Revivo. The percentage of students entitled to a matriculation certificate has increased and today stands at 44% – still low, but an improvement. In the city, the NGO Ayalim set up a student village that operates a volunteer corps of young families. Real estate projects that were established there have attracted young couples who benefit from low cost of living relative to that of the affluent communities and from easy access to the metropolitan city of Tel Aviv. Many of them have joined the residents' council, which advances social issues before the municipality and other authorities.

We encountered Mali Elias, principal of the high school for the last one and a half years, surrounded by students. She refers to them by their first names and it seems like she knows all of them: she tells one to go to class, asks another how she is doing and inquires why one of them did not come to school last week. In the previous high school in which she worked, Blich in Ramat Gan, that was almost impossible: There were 400 students in each grade. But at Darca there are a total of 300 students.

That is not the only difference between Blich, the cloth from which Elias was cut, and the high school that she now runs. Blich is an elite school and economically stable, whose students mostly come from Ramat Gan. It is well known for its mock election event that takes place before national elections, for its major investment in sports and science and also to its graduates' high enlistment rates in combat units.

In contrast, Darca High School in Lod was nearly the complete opposite for many years: a weak school in terms of studies, which struggled to contend with the difficult challenges that came with its location. Limited resources and problematic management left it behind, with violence, intergroup tension and a low rate of matriculation in the national matriculation exams.

"If a stranger were to have entered the school, he would not have been able to tell if it were class time or recess, because all the students were roaming around outside," said one of the tea teachers.



The revolution for Darca began two and a half years ago, when the school went from being under the auspices of the municipality to the Darca Schools network. In the first stage it went from a 6-year school to a 4-year high school, from grades 9-12. After that, the network tapped Elias, who arrived in July 2013, just two months before the start of the school year.

"The primary goal was to stabilize the school and to restore the confidence of parents and students in the system," she says. "I sat here each day and spoke with the teachers, parents and students. Darca did not leave me alone; managing a school is a lonely task, but here I have a support network.

Elias arrived at Darca after 17 years as an economics teacher, educator, community organizer, grade principal and assistant principal at Blich, and after Gil Pereg, CEO of Darca Schools and former Blich principal, approached her. "I saw a challenge here," she says, explaining why she left her calm workplace. "I came into that every student is able to reach their potential if given the right resources. Apart from that, I felt that if I left Blich I would not be missed there, but here there is a sense that I am needed. I came for a visit and someone told me that there was a lot that could

be done here.

Fifty percent of the students are categorized as at-risk-youth: "Students who need to care for their younger siblings, children whose fathers are in prison," Elias offers as examples. This dictates policies that aren't common in other schools: There are students who receive regular phone calls every morning from their teacher and if they do not come to class, someone drives to pick them up.

Every morning about 40 students come to the education counselor to receive sandwiches because they did not get breakfast at home. Sometimes Darca Schools is obligated to provide assistance for families and students, for example with electrical appliances. "If a family needs a refrigerator, Darca will arrange for them to get a refrigerator," says Elias.

Elias refuses to foster an atmosphere of victimhood, and students are therefore required to give back to the community, according to her "in order to show them that there are people worse off than them." "We aren't prepared to allow them to become dependent on welfare, and we want them to have a sense of equality; that they are capable and able. On the other hand, they are much more appreciative than other youths from stable neighborhoods.

The high school is open to any student in Lod, irrespective of his grade-point-average or which elementary school he attended. Despite the basic differences that are likely to be created as a result of this decision, Elias is convinced that this will not harm the targets of excellence of the high school, "because every student is capable of succeeding." As proof of success, she offers the percentage of those entitled to matriculation certificates from the school: three years ago it was 48%, now it is 65% and she hopes that it will hit 75% this year. By comparison, the national matriculation rate in Israel is 53.4%.

In order to make this possible, every student entering ninth grade is charted, and is given a tailor-made personal program: courses in strategic learning, emotional enrichment programs and

more. The learning is differentiated or adapted for each student: If one of them is not focusing in class, the teacher will sit with him on the grass outside. If the teachers notice that he is going through emotional difficulties, he will get support in this area. There are three classes in each grade for students with learning disabilities, who receive resources in the form of additional hours from the Ministry of Education, from the municipality and from Darca; a theory class, and a science class. The objective is a full matriculation certificate, although for some students, completing 12 years of education is a fitting enough goal.

In order to demonstrate the extent of the school's diversity in terms of student demographics, we are introduced to Anwar Hasnin, a 12th grade student, who chose biology as her course of study and is debating whether to pursue psychology or education for her undergraduate degree. "The



Photographer: Gil Cohen-Magan

school has changed," she says. "They have ingrained a respect for intellectual pursuits in us, explaining why it is so important. My parents insisted that I study here, because it is considered a good school."

Amid all of this, how does the school deal with the wide gaps between students? "We do not give up on them," says Adi Diamant, educator and psychology teacher. "Many of them do not believe in themselves, and we explain that there's always a chance and push each of them to do realize their full potential. Even a small step forward gets a positive reaction."

Also learning with Hosnin are Max Kotub - the

well-mannered youth from the entrance - and Eli Sitman, who plays with him in the band. "A few years ago the gap between well-off students and students from weaker families was very palpable," says Sitman. "Since then it has changed. Today there is no difference between students and all of us share a common goal - to graduate with a matriculation certificate and to advance."

The rate of violence in the school has plummeted", adds Kotub". "Now there is more attention to discipline, the teachers are not interested only in our grades, but also in exactly what we are doing. Right now the teachers are more focused on discipline; they are not just concerned with our grades, but also with what we are actually doing at any given moment. They are much closer to us and also spend time on our social activities. This school is like a melting pot; there's no racism on any side."

Abed al-Naqib, a ninth grade student, is from a generation that does not know the school's earlier incarnation, but he is heard plenty about it. "In the past, they said in Lod that this was a weak high school in terms of studies," he said. "Today they do not give up on a single student, and this is very noticeable."

Most of the students are Jewish and only about 15% are Arab. Even the Jewish students constitute a heterogeneous group: Most of them are children of Russian immigrants and a minority of them are Ethiopian immigrants. The result is a mixture of Muslim, Christian and Jewish students. "Nobody here pays attention to the ethnic background of his fellow student," says Elias. "They see each other as people with a common language, and beyond that, it does not really matter to them. It is important to us that everyone expresses himself and therefore when a Muslim student approached me and said she wanted to walk around with a veil - I told her there is no problem with that."

Attempting to establish the Israeli Identity

As the recent elections approached, Elias decided to introduce into the high school a custom that originated in Blich: A mini election system. For three weeks the students heard the platforms

of the parties, hosted politicians, prepared campaigns and finally, voted at a colorful event that hosted the students of grades 9 through 12 from across the city. "The students are quite distanced, not just here but in general. They did not know which politician led which party, and it was important for us to bring them closer to the political experience." Says Elias, "It is important for us to provide the basis for the Israeli identity so that they feel they belong to the State."

But not only knowledge was missing here. A tour of some of the schools shows that the greatest challenge facing the teachers is to persuade the students that they can dream and that they can replace despondency with hope. "When I was a young girl, it was clear to me that you were given a goal and went about achieving it" says Hadass Farhi, tutor and language teacher. "But when I ask my students what their dream is, they answer me 'to have my own home'. They do not mean a home that they own, but simply that they will have a place to live. I explain to them that the matriculation certificate is not the objective, but the means through which they will achieve the greater objective - and we are helping them to put that together."

Where do you see the school in ten years from now?

Elias: "I want to prove that even a school on the city's community periphery that has a bad name, can, when given strong leadership and a supportive network, attain excellence."

Despite the many difficulties that the education system faces today?

"The people here are not the education system or the Minister for Education, but the teachers, and the moment they push ahead with a formulated agenda, where everyone is participating in the building of a dream and is recruited to the cause - it is possible."

"With the addition of minimal resources and excellent management - we can narrow the gaps in education"



Gil Pereg

Photo Negba

Darca (Aramaic for 'The Path') Schools was established five years ago by the Rashi Foundation and KIAH (Kol Israel Haverim), with the support of the Ministry of Education, and last July the American YRF (Youth Renewal Fund) joined as a strategic partner. Currently, the

network includes 25 high schools throughout the country with 14,000 students and 1,500 teachers.

"Our agenda is simple: To bring excellent education to the schools on the geo-social periphery, says Darca's CEO, Dr. Gil Pereg, who was previously the principal of the Blich High School, where he met Mali Elias. "We are looking for high schools in need of change so we are not selecting places where it is easy to work, but communities that are facing a challenge: The absorption of Aliyah, poverty, a high rate of unemployment and especially communities experiencing an educational crisis and that are interested in change. You could say that we are making an extreme makeover to the schools."

Darca invests 10-15% in addition to the budget that is allocated by the Ministry of Education in each high school and Pereg notes that to date, the Maxim Levy High School has had some NIS 1.5 million invested in it every year. "We wanted to enable the children of Lod to learn in a school that offers opportunities such as those of the strongest municipalities", he says. Happily for us, it has been quickly proven that when you give children the same conditions - they attain achievements. True, they come to us with considerably greater gaps that are found in the major municipalities, but when there is a teaching team committed to the task and an educational

management to back the required resources, the sky's the limit. It encourages me as an Israeli citizen, because this tells us that with the right investment – which is not astronomical, we are not talking about unreasonable sums at national level – it is possible to decrease the gaps in the education system. With a slight increase of resources and especially with the right management, we can offer every student in Israel all the possibilities and not to close children off in a system that will steer their path towards a particular status."

In fact, the Rashi Foundation has entered the vacuum left by the State in the education system.

The Ministry of Education and the local authorities have done much in recent years. We see ourselves as an empowering body, that does not operate in place of the Ministry of Education but rather, alongside it. Just as the Rashi Foundation has shown in other projects with which it has been involved, so with the promotion of educational institutions in the periphery, the leadership effort that we are making in schools will eventually affect many other places in the country."

The Maxim Levy High School has undergone some difficult aftershocks during recent years. How did they receive you the?

"In the third sector there are many bodies with good intentions and many intervention programs, but sometimes they do not succeed. We, in contrast to others, are not working like other external programs but take full responsibility for the school and by doing so help the staff to rebuild the community faith and trust in the school. There is no doubt that everywhere we go, there is some initial skepticism as to whether we are just another body that will be around for a year or two or whether this is a sustainable fundamental change. Currently, after a period in Lod, where what we are doing there can be seen, it is easier to bring about the changes that need to happen and this means not just transferring resources but changing the paradigms in people's minds. This is the most important thing for the periphery: To transform the term excellence into a legitimate ambition that is not reserved only for such places as Ramat Gan and Kfar Saba.



Israeli school builds cool classroom for ADHD teens

Bouncy chairs, distraction-free décor, walled-off workstations, desks on wheels and a living green wall provide a winning educational environment.

By Abigail Klein Leichman | OCTOBER 12, 2015, 7:00 AM



The yoga-ball chairs let students expend energy while learning. Photo by Roi Mizrahi/Xnet

Imagine the perfect classroom for kids with attention and learning disorders: bouncy chairs made from yoga balls, distraction-free décor, walled-off study/tutoring cubicles, desks on wheels and a touch of the outdoors.

Only there's no need to imagine it. The unique "Yes I Can!" classroom at Darca High School in Kiryat Malachi opened this school year. And if it proves to be a good working model, the Darca network will implement this totally Israeli innovation in its other 24 high schools serving the socio-economic periphery of Israel.

"The students already report that it is much easier for them to study and concentrate in the new classroom, thanks to the clean design – no notice boards, posters, accessories, decorations etc., as in a regular classroom," principal Michal Hazan tells ISRAEL21c.

"This helps to create a calm atmosphere and minimize distractions. The three enclosed workstations for individual study also help in isolating students from the noise made by their classmates, as well as from visual interferences."

Architect Lior Ben-Sheetrit, 32, chose the



Enclosed workstations limit distractions. Photo by Roi Mizrahi/Xnet

design details and furnishings for the 60-square-meter room after extensively observing the 55 students and talking with them and their teachers about the difficulties

they experience in a standard setting.

"For example, the students explained that it is very hard for them to sit on regular chairs and concentrate, while the teachers said that the students keep moving and shifting during classes," says Hazan. "Thus, the chairs made of yoga balls within a frame were designed to channel the students' energy and give it an outlet."

Inspired by watching some of the kids playing the popular video game "Minecraft" – in which players break and build with blocks to create imaginative structures – the architect decided to incorporate simple geometric shapes and a "green wall" of vegetation to resemble the game's environment.

Ben-Sheetrit was working with a \$50,000 budget provided by donors including Israel's Harel Insurance and Finance company, Kol Yisrael Haverim (KIAH) and the Rashi Foundation. The Darca network was established five years ago by the Rashi Foundation and KIAH with the support of the Education Ministry, joined in 2014 by the US-based Youth Renewal Fund.

"As a network, Darca joined forces in this project with Kol Yisrael Haverim and Harel Insurance company to experiment with different ways of dealing with challenges teachers face," says Darca CEO Gil Pereg.

**"It's not about computers
and walls, but about
changing the way these kids
see themselves."**

He explains that Darca takes over poorly performing schools and brings in new management and leadership from excellent

schools throughout Israel to work with the existing staff. The 700-student junior-senior high school in Kiryat Malachi became part of the network two years ago.

“In Kiryat Malachi, we also built the kids a new library and we’ve added more teaching hours and STEM [science, technology, engineering and math] instruction, and new innovations like the Yes I Can! Classroom,” Pereg tells ISRAEL21c.

“Some of these ideas we find from other places around the globe, because we see ourselves as a laboratory for experimental solutions to the challenges of education in the 21st century. The [Yes I Can!] classroom is an example of Israeli design innovation, and in our Ashkelon and Bat Yam schools we’ve done something similar in the English language classrooms.”

However, he emphasizes, “In the end, it’s not about computers and walls, but about changing the way these kids see themselves,” noting that Darca schools are experiencing a huge rise in the number of students earning academic diplomas and considering higher education.

Pereg adds that Darca places an emphasis on involving parents in the educational journey. “What we do with the kids often has a direct effect on functioning of the entire family,” he says.

Hazan reports that parents of kids with ADHD and learning disabilities are “very excited both about the idea of creating a special class and about its beautiful realization.”

But nobody is as excited as the students themselves. “They greatly appreciate the efforts that were made for their benefit, and feel that the concept was developed with much respect for their needs and wishes and with the aim of creating a welcoming and aesthetic learning environment,” Hazan tells ISRAEL21c.





The students report that it is much easier for them to study and concentrate in the distraction-free classroom. Photo by Roi Mizrahi/Xnet

TURNING FAILED SCHOOLS INTO WINNERS

The Darca educational network has found a formula for transforming some of the weakest of Israel's schools into models of success, giving thousands of students in the periphery a shot at a future they never dreamed of / Wendy Elliman

Teachers at the Hammer Boys School in Bat Yam are deciding whether to take their junior high students to London or New York on their upcoming virtual reality trip. At the Gymnasia in Kiryat Malakhi, pupils sit on bouncy yoga balls at desks on wheels against a wall of live green foliage. Over 15,000 students in these and 25 other schools nationwide spend part of class-time stretched out on couches reading books and magazines, watching videos on tablets, speaking on camera, writing speeches and performing plays.

"We mix, match and modify the best of what's out there, and combine it with ideas of our own," says Dr. Gil Pereg, CEO of Darca, the six-year-old educational network to which these 27 schools belong. "We see ourselves as an experimental laboratory for today's education."

Darca (Aramaic for "The Path") is clearly on the right... path. In schools once known for poor performance, children from disadvantaged homes are now looking toward a future in engineering, teach-

ing, medicine, academe and more. An unprecedented 85 percent of students in this backyard of Israel's public education system matriculated this past academic year. Given that matriculation unlocks the door to social mobility that figure says a lot.

The Darca network was created in 2010 at the initiative of the Rashi Foundation and Alliance Kol

GEDERA'S MAYOR CREDITS RISING
REAL ESTATE VALUES WITH DARCA'S
TAKEOVER OF THE TOWN'S THREE
STRUGGLING HIGH SCHOOLS

Yisrael Haverim (KIAH), French philanthropic organizations long involved in educational interventions in Israeli schools. Their aim: to invigorate failing schools in educational crisis in Israel's geographic and socio-economic peripheries. Joined three years later by the US-based Youth Renewal Fund, they have together furnished Darca with \$53 million — an unprecedented sum for Israel's education system.

The schools in Darca's sights are doubly dis-

advantaged: First, they serve communities with high unemployment, large new immigrant populations and fraying social fabric; and, second, unlike schools in stronger areas, they are administered by small local authorities with neither experienced education departments nor funds to supplement Education Ministry budgets.

The Darca Maxim Levy School in Lod was one of these: It had three principals in four years, its Jewish, Christian and Muslim pupils were ashamed to say where they went to school, and fully half of them were categorized as youth at risk. "You never knew whether it was class time or recess, because students roamed around outside all day," said one teacher.

Believing that children in Lod, Netivot and Kiryat Shmona are entitled to an education equal to that of children in affluent communities, Darca looks for schools just like the Maxim Levy one. It has pioneered a multi-pronged makeover which — with funding support, and teachers, parents and the local authority on board — can turn a school around within a couple of years.

With good English opening many doors, language teaching is a first emphasis. "Most of our students come from homes without English, and many see it as an impassable barrier," says Dr. Mor Deshen, Darca's senior vice president for pedagogy. "In addition to our two English centers, we have

continued on page ??



Children at a Darca school. "We see ourselves as an experimental laboratory for today's education," says Darca CEO Dr. Gil Pereg

continued from page ??

English labs in all our schools so students experience the language as part of everyday life. These are rooms with couches where youngsters can take a book off a shelf and lie down to read it, a big TV-video, a booth with headphones where they can record themselves and play it back so they know how they sound. It's a format that not only engages the kids, but also allows teachers to work with small groups, addressing all ability levels."

Students are encouraged to keep options wide open by taking matriculation English at university-entrance level (4- to 5-point), and almost 90 percent of those who do so succeed. An approach similar to the English-language rooms is now being developed for math, with Darca's first model math room to open at the end of the year.

The network's ultimate learning environment is the YES I CAN! classroom. Ideally to feature in all Darca schools, the 50,000-shekel prototype opened in the Darca Kiryat Malakhi High School in October 2015. An all-Israeli innovation designed by architect Lior Ben-Sheetrit, YES I CAN! makes learning fun while improving concentration: It seats fidgety students on yoga balls, resting in frames; its desks are on wheels; it is free of distracting noticeboards and posters; three of its walls comprise geometric shapes inspired by the video game Minecraft, and the fourth is covered in growing vegetation. Three closed-off workstations are for quiet study.

Compelling as YES I CAN! may be as a learning en-

vironment, Darca is introducing a technology that will take its students far away from it. This year they will go either to London or to New York — and, in the future, perhaps to Machu Picchu, Antarctica or the international space station. Authorized by Google Expeditions, pupils in Bat Yam's Darca Hammer School will don headsets that take them into virtual 3-D environments, where they can wander, explore and converse. "Their teachers will guide them until they're comfortable there," says Doshen. "Then they'll lead."

The virtual reality and YES I CAN! attention-grabbers are underpinned by tried and tested techniques — libraries, expanded teaching hours, STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) instruction and more. But the key to the Darca transformation,

MATRICULATION ELIGIBILITY IN THE DARCA HIGH SCHOOL IN NETIVOT ROSE FROM 13 PERCENT TO 60 PERCENT IN JUST THREE YEARS

according to Pereg, is neither libraries nor computers, but about how the kids see themselves.

"Working with the network's 1,644 teachers is crucial," says Doshen. "They must believe in their pupils and show it with every word they speak — and their pupils must know their teachers believe in them. We've adapted a U.S. model, the Indiana Critical Friends Group, to work with teachers on this and on their professional development, and to support them and get their feedback, so that we can modify what

we do to fit each school and community."

Since what happens in school often impacts on the functioning of the entire family, parents are also brought in. And in struggling families, Darca holds out a hand — arranging extra tuition, counseling, emotional support, a mid-morning sandwich, a hot lunch, even a winter jacket or dental care — and doing it as if this is what schools routinely offer.

Six years on, schools in Israel's periphery are clamoring to transfer to the Darca Network. They see balanced budgets in its schools, plummeting violence in its playgrounds, more of its students volunteering, more of them active in youth movements, and growing numbers of their graduates recruited to elite army units. They have seen matriculation eligibility in Netivot's non-religious Darca High School rise from 13 percent to 60 percent in just three years; they have heard Gedera's mayor crediting Darca's takeover of the town's three struggling high schools for rising real estate values; and they have seen Lod's Darca Maxim Levy High become a sought-after school.

Aiming for a maximum of 50 of Israel's periphery schools, Darca is hoping to add Bedouin, other Arab and possibly ultra-Orthodox schools to those from the religious, secular, Druze and agricultural sectors currently under its umbrella. It has yet to lose a tender.

"We're not looking to take over Israel's school system," Pereg stresses. "What we're doing is building an educationally innovative model, proving that it works and offering it as a prototype country-wide and even beyond."

For more info see www.darca.org.il

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



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



Students at a Darca school learn through virtual reality adventures



Dima Khizaran



Shira Hadad



Matan Kristal



Netta Goldman



Segev Sabag

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.

“WE MIX, MATCH AND MODIFY THE BEST TEACHING APPROACHES OUT THERE – LIBRARIES, EXPANDED TEACHING HOURS, ‘STEM’ INSTRUCTION AND MORE – AND COMBINE THEM WITH IDEAS OF OUR OWN TO HELP YOUNGSTERS LEARN AND SUCCEED”

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; in the U.S.: www.yrfdarca.org

"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 Druse High School for Science & Leadership. "I went to my school principal.

YES THEY CAN!



Darca is a ground-breaking educational network that is succeeding in turning around failing schools in Israel's periphery through innovative teaching methods and extensive investments

■ Wendy Elliman

It used to be that only youngsters who had no choice would attend the Darca Maxim Levy High School in Lod. The school ran through three principals in four years; fully half of 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 things at Maxim Levy on their head. Today, enrolment is up, its students attend class, school violence has nosedived and matriculation rates have soared. In this and 26 other schools in Israel's geographic and socio-economic periphery, once known for poor performance, children of under-educated parents are looking toward futures in engineering, teaching, medicine, academe and more. An unparalleled 85 percent of them matriculated this past academic year.

Providing the tools

This sea-change can be laid at the door of Darca, the educational network to which these 27 schools belong. Darca (Aramaic for ‘The Path’) was created in 2010 at the initiative of the Rashi Foundation and Alliance Kol Yisrael Haverim (KIAH), who put up \$25 million to invigorate failing schools in the backyard of Israel's public education system. 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.

All three organizations have long focused on narrowing Israel's educational gap. “Increasingly, they saw that intervention programs – bringing in, say, extra tutors for a math exam – can't answer today's needs,” notes Darca's CEO, Dr. Gil Pereg. “They concluded that it was better by far to mentor the school's own teachers and give them the tools to do their job. And that's only one piece of turning a school around. A comprehensive plan was needed. And that led to setting up a new educational network.”

It is a network whose funders never saw their participation limited to money. Between them, they have significant managerial knowhow to contribute – which means a school in Netivot, say, can access organizational advice from a senior figure on Wall Street.

Wall Street is a long way from the challenged schools that Darca aims to turn into high-quality educational institutions with strong core values and solid matriculation results. “These schools are in Israel's periphery and usually serve communities where unemployment is high or the social fabric is fraying,” says Pereg. “They're administered by small local authorities with neither experienced education departments nor funds to supplement Education Ministry budgets – the fabled 15 percent which wealthier municipalities redirect from property taxes to longer lab hours, another study track, a pretty school garden.”



Educational laboratory

Darca levels out the 15 percent, doing the renovations, and providing the libraries and computers – but it does far more than this. “We see ourselves as an experimental laboratory for today's education,” says Pereg. “The parents of many of the children we teach didn't complete high school. Many of our youngsters come from homes without English, and many are unused to sitting through class or have any expectation of succeeding in school. So we mix, match and modify the best teaching approaches that are out there, and combine them with ideas of our own to help these children learn and succeed.”

English language, the key to many doors, is one emphasis. “Most of our 15,000-plus pupils see English as an impassable barrier,” says Dr. Mor Deshen, Darca's senior vice president for pedagogy. “We have two English learning centers, as well as English labs in all our schools where students experience the language as part of everyday life. These are rooms with couches where youngsters can take a book off a shelf. We make it a relaxed part of everyday life. We have English ‘labs’ in two of our schools so far, with couches, a big TV-video, and a booth with headphones where they can record themselves and play it back so they know how they sound. It's a format that not only engages the kids, but also allows teachers to work with small groups, addressing all ability levels.”

Students are encouraged to take matriculation exams in English at university-entrance levels, and almost 90 percent of those who do so succeed. An approach similar to the English labs is now being developed for math,



“Our supporters are enabling us to build an educationally innovative model. Our aim is to give children in Lod, Netivot and Kiryat Shmona an education equal to that in Israel’s affluent communities”

with Darca’s first model math room to open at the end of the year.

Innovative classrooms

The network’s ultimate learning environment is the ‘YES I CAN!’ classroom. Ideally to feature in all Darca schools, the NIS 50,000 prototype opened in the Darca Kiryat Malachi High School in October 2015. An all-Israeli innovation, YES I CAN! makes learning fun while improving concentration: it seats fidgety students on yoga balls resting in frames; its desks are on wheels; it is free of distracting noticeboards and posters; three of its walls comprise geometric shapes inspired by the video game Minecraft, and the fourth is covered in growing green vegetation. Three closed-off workstations are for quiet study.

Compelling as YES I CAN! may be as a learning environment, Darca is introducing a technology to take its students far away from it. This year, authorized by Google Expeditions, junior high students in Bat Yam’s Hammer School will don headsets that transport them to a virtual 3-D environment (this year, it will be London or New York), where they will wander, explore and converse.

With a handful of exceptions, the 1,644 men and women teaching in Darca’s schools have come joyfully under its umbrella. “We function as a kind of mobile education department, providing them with professional support,” says Deshen. “They contribute their knowledge about the school and the community. More impor-

tant than all of that, however, is helping to restore their belief in pupils and to demonstrate it to the kids with every word they speak.”

Since what happens in school often impacts on the home, parents, too, are brought along on the educational journey. Darca holds out a hand to struggling families, arranging extra tuition, counseling, emotional support, a mid-morning sandwich, a hot lunch, even a winter jacket or dental care — and doing it as if this is what schools routinely offer.

Proving that it works

Six years on, schools in Israel’s periphery are clamoring to transfer to the Darca Network. They see balanced budgets, more of its students volunteering, more of them active in youth movements, and growing numbers of their graduates recruited to elite IDF units. They have seen matriculation eligibility in Darca Netivot’s non-religious high school rise from 13 percent to 60 percent in just three years, they have heard Gedera’s mayor crediting Darca’s takeover of the town’s three struggling high schools for rising real estate values, and they have seen Lod’s Darca Maxim Levy High become a sought-after school.

“Our aim is to give children in Lod, Netivot and Kiryat Shmona an education equal to that in Israel’s affluent communities,” says Pereg. “Our supporters are enabling us to build an educationally innovative model, to prove that it works and offer it as a prototype country-wide and even beyond.” ■



For more information about Darca, go to www.darca.org.il/en. In the US, go to www.yrfdarca.org

The Top High School Network in Israel: Ministry of Education Rankings Revealed

The Ministry of Education compiled, for the first time, data on the achievements of students attending private education networks that operate hundreds of high schools and that are funded with billions of NIS per year

By: Lior Datal | April 24, 2017

The government channels billions of NIS to private education networks that operate high schools but until now has never known whether these large budgets are justified. Data compiled by the Ministry of Education for the first time on the achievements of the networks reveal that most networks find it difficult to reach achievements which justify their budgets.

The education system believes that the new ranking will change the balance of powers in the high school system, and may result in a transfer of high schools in the networks - either amongst themselves or among local authorities. The Ministry of Education wishes to establish the new system in order to replace the schools' operators that are not functioning adequately or whose achievements are low.

A letter sent by Director General of the Ministry of Education Shmuel Abuhav, to the heads of the local authorities states that

a comprehensive review conducted by the Ministry of Education, whose results are published here for the first time, revealed "no significant advantage to private operation (education network) over operation by the local authority. We identify throughout the continuum ownership that performs well, alongside ownership with achievements that need improvement, and these issues must be reviewed on an individual basis."

TheMarker analyzed the new Ministry of Education data, focusing on six of the largest educational networks in Israel - Ort, Amal, Amit, Bnei Akiva, Atid and Darca. These networks collectively operate 304 schools and are budgeted about 2.9 billion NIS per year, tens of millions of which are used for overhead for the network.

Private Education Networks in Israel Put to the Test

The standardized score based on Ministry of Education Model that compares education networks in Israel, without taking into account socioeconomic classes of students in the networks, in points (500 = average)

■ far above average ■ above average ■ near average ■ below average ■ far below average

	Eligibility for Matriculation	Excellence on Matriculation Exams	5-Unit Math	5-Unit English	Ethics (exams)	Dropout Prevention	Average*	Number of The Schools in the Network**	Annual Budget and its Sources
Darca	542	539	529	547	527	473	526	23	Approximately NIS 175 million (government ministries)
Amit	530	517	524	520	497	520	518	55	NIS 445 million (government ministries)
Ort	512	498	518	506	510	500	507	99	Approximately NIS 1.2 billion (government ministries)
Bnei Akiva	514	501	507	476	497	524	503	39	NIS 195 Million (government ministries)
Atid	468	528	525	503	471	494	498	36	Approximately NIS 370 Million (total revenues)
Amal	503	484	508	500	474	516	497	52	Approximately NIS 630 million (government ministries)

*The average of the indices presented

**According to the Ministry of Education

Source: Quality of Education Networks Model from the Ministry of Education, based on 2015 data, processed by TheMarker.

On the Road to New Tenders for High Schools Management

The new Ministry of Education model is designed to allow local authorities to compare performances of the various networks, within the confines of a tender for selecting operators for schools. To date, there was no consensus on a basis for comparison, and financial proposals of the networks constituted a key consideration in the tenders.

The Ministry of Education instructed all local authorities to hold, within two years, new tenders for the operation of high schools in their jurisdiction that are managed by education networks. The authorities were also instructed to emphasize data on quality of the networks that are now being published. The data is based on eligibility for matriculation certificate, dropout rates, excellence in matriculation exams and other data, as well as the percentage of students in five-unit matriculation math and English and school atmosphere. In Jewish schools, the Ministry of Education also examined IDF recruitment rates. The goal being to cause the authorities to invest the budget they receive from the Ministry of Education in educational networks that were found to be top notch, and to replace schools operators that are dysfunctional, or with poor performance.

In order to rank the networks, the Ministry of Education reviewed the accomplishments of every school operated by educational network for at least three years, and weighed the achievements into a total score in each parameter. At the same time, the data is biased in some cases since they include a comparison between networks with diverse schools across Israel and schools from various economic classes and sectors. The Ministry of Education therefore developed a comparative model designed to be fair. In addition to the data published here, the local authorities have received access to the quality parameters that take into account the economic circumstances of the students' families, and comparison between similar schools.

Amal Network at the Bottom of the Table

The quality model developed by the Ministry of Education awards scores in every parameter. The average score being 500, and a score of 400 considered particularly low. The calculation of the average also includes high schools operated by local authorities. As is seen in the attached table, in most parameters, the education networks - with the exception of those excelling - do not pass the average and their performance is occasionally subpar.

Of the six education networks we examined, the veteran Amal network was ranked in last place, in the average score received from the Ministry of Education in the parameters that were examined - rate of eligibility for the matriculation among students, rate of students with excellence on the matriculation exams, percentage of students in 5-unit Math, percentage of students in 5-unit English, dropouts rate and ethics (cheating during matriculation exams). Atid education network was ranked just above Amal, by one point above Amal's score.

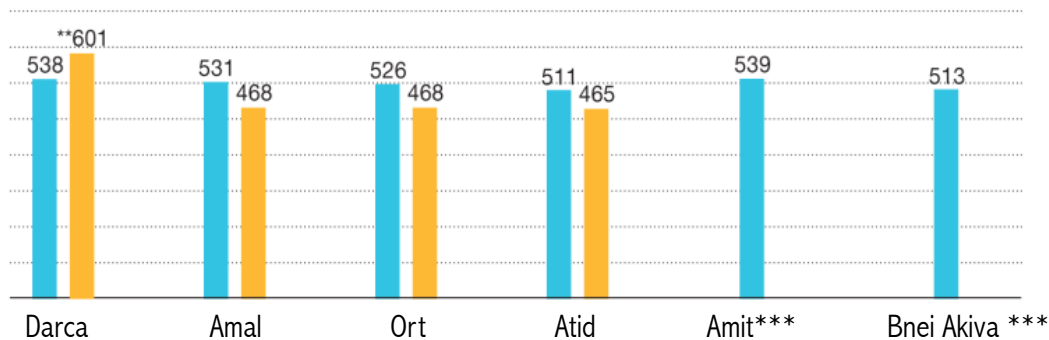
Ort was ranked third, right after by the religious Amit network, which ranked second. Ranking first in the averages of the parameters reviewed by the Ministry of Education is the Darca Network, the smallest of all networks examined - which also achieved the highest scores in most of the Ministry of Education individual parameters. The network, founded by the Rashi Foundation and supported by the American Youth Renewal Fund, YRF, operates approximately 25 schools across the country, with a budget of about NIS 175 million per year allocated by Ministry of Education. Darca is the only network that does not collect overhead from the Ministry of Education budget, but rather operates on philanthropic support.

Severe Gaps between Arabs and Jews

Average score of schools in the parameter for rate of eligibility for matriculation, in points*

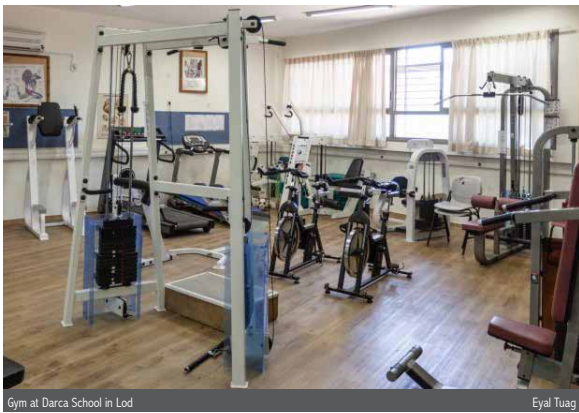
■ Jewish schools

■ Arab Schools



*Average in each parameter = 500 points **Based on one school only, Yarca ***The Amit and Bnei Akiva networks operate Jewish schools only

Source: Quality of Education Networks Model from the Ministry of Education, based on 2015 data



Gym at Darca School in Lod

Eyal Tuag

The other networks, whose performances are lower, charge a certain percentage of the budget received by the local authority for every student as an overhead.

Darca network is ranked first among the six education networks in the parameter of eligibility for matriculation certificate, in the parameter of excellence in matriculation exams and in five-unit Math and English. The network's success is impressive in light of the fact that it only began operating in 2011 particularly in disadvantaged towns and neighborhoods. Its current eligibility rate for matriculation on average is about 85%, far higher than the national average. Darca is followed by Amit, whose percentage of eligibility for matriculation is higher than average - the network ranked second in the relevant parameter.

At the same time, Darca network is ranked last among the networks examined in the parameter for dropout rate. The network's score in this parameter may be attributed to re-registration of students who transferred from veteran institutions of the network to new institutions and not actual student dropout.

In accordance with the policy being spearheaded by Secretary of Education Naftali Bennet, the Ministry of Education also examined implementation of the program to increase the number of students studying 5-unit subjects of math and English. According to the ranking, the highest percentage of students in the subject belonged to Darca network. In the ranking of the number of students in 5-unit Math, Bnei Akiva network ranked last of the networks under review. The same holds true for the number of students studying 5-unit English. Amit network is ranked second in this parameter.

The schools' efforts to prevent Students from dropping out was reviewed by the Ministry of Education in order to encourage them to invest in weaker students and to not cause them to leave the school in order to improve the percentage of students eligible for matriculation in the institutions. The network that excelled in this parameter was Bnei Akiva, followed by Amit network, with Amal coming in third.

The religious ulpanas network Zvia is ranked high in the Ministry of Education parameters, but was not included in the review by TheMarker. Although it is a large network that operates about 50 high schools, it is difficult to compare the data to those of other networks, since only religious girls attend, and in some schools, students are screened before being admitted to the studies and pay high tuition.

Amal network is ranked last in the parameter of the percentage of students excelling on matriculation exams. The percentage of students eligible for the matriculation certificate is ranked fifth, followed by the Atid network. Amal received a relatively low score in the parameter of the percentage of students studying for five-unit math and English. Only the Bnei Akiva network ranked lower than Amal.

Atid network was the penultimate ranking with the general average score. Despite its poor average, Atid is one of the leading networks in terms of percentage of students excelling on matriculation exams, ranking second in this parameter whereas Amal ranked last in the same parameter. Atid ranked second in this parameter as well as in the percentage of students in 5-unit Math. In contrast, Amal ranked third as one of the top networks in preventing student dropouts.

Ort, Israel's largest education network that operates about 100 schools, did not rank first in any of Ministry of Education parameter. The average score awarded to it for percentage of eligible students for matriculation was lower than the score awarded to the other three networks - top-ranked Darca, second-ranked Amit and Bnei Akiva. Ort was followed by Atid and in last place by Amal. Ort ranked fifth among the six networks reviewed by TheMarker in the parameter of students excelling on matriculation exams (where number of units of study is high, and the grades are high - for example, students with matriculation diplomas with a minimum of 30 units of study, five units in English and minimum four units in Math, and an average score of 90). They were followed by Amal. The score of the number of students studying five-unit Math and English in the Ort network was lower than the other three networks. At the same time, the score awarded to Ort in maintaining exams' ethics was particularly high, and the network ranked second in this parameter.



Minister of Education, Naftali Bennet

Olivier Pitussi

A Rethinking in the Arab Authorities is Required

The re-examination by the Ministry of Education will require a rethinking by the local Arab authorities regarding the operation of high schools in their jurisdiction. Many Arab schools are operated by education networks due to the authorities' inability to cope with operating them, and due to a desire to improve achievements by selecting an outside operator. At the same time, the data compiled by the Ministry of Education reveals that not all private education networks are successful in positively impacting schools in the Arab sector. In his letter to the authorities, Ahuvab wrote: "We notice that there are some owners that are weaker in their work with certain populations and in specific parameters".

The average data is significantly affected by geographical spread of the schools of each network. The accomplishments of Jewish schools of Amal are significantly higher than the 24 schools in the network of the Arab, Druze and Circassian towns (gap of about 140 points). In a review of Jewish schools only, Amal ranked third in eligibility for matriculation - since the achievements of Jewish schools are significantly higher than the Arab schools. In the ranking of Jewish schools only, Amit network (which does not operate Arab schools) leads, followed by Darca network, behind by only one point, which operates only one high school for non-Jewish students - an excellent Druze high school in Yarca. They are followed by Amal and then Ort. Ranked fifth is Bnei Akiva (513 points) - which is bypassed by several networks, when only the Jewish schools of each network are ranked. Bnei Akiva is followed closely by Atid network (511 points in Jewish schools only; Bnei Akiva also does not operate Arab schools).

In total, the differences in scores given in the parameter of eligibility for matriculation among Arab and Jewish schools, in accordance with the Ministry of Education review, is 100 points higher. These figures correspond with the existing gap in Israel's education system, in which the eligibility for matriculation exams in Arab society among 17-year-olds totaled 48.4% in 2015. For the same age group in the Jewish population, the percentage of students eligible for matriculation in that year amounted to 75.6%. The accomplishments of Arab schools in the Ort, Amal and Atid networks are similar - and significantly lower than the accomplishments of students attending schools operated by these networks in Jewish towns.

One of the networks included in the Ministry of Education review is Sakhnin Education Network, which operates 20 schools in Arab towns. In some areas, the accomplishments of the network were higher than the accomplishments of the large networks. The score awarded for percentage of students eligible for matriculation in the Sakhnin authority is 501 - 40 points higher than the score received by Arab schools in the large networks. Here, too, the accomplishments of Sakhnin network is compared

to general achievements (including Jewish students), and in some cases, the Sakhnin network outperformed some of the Jewish networks. If the Sakhnin network was included in the general average ranking (it was excluded because the Ministry of Education model addressed only some of its schools), its average score in each parameter (507) was higher than the score for Amal, Atid and Bnei Akiva.

Affluent Towns Receive Large Budgets

One of the explanations of the gaps that are revealed between the networks can be attributed to the Ministry of Education's budgeting method. The Ministry of Education provides larger budgets to high schools in more affluent towns. The reason being that the budgeting method incentivizes the matriculation exams, allows for services provided to students, such as libraries and laboratories, averages teacher seniority and inclusion, and encourages studies in more prestigious study tracks, e.g. Science and Computers. As a result, schools with greater resources - particularly in affluent towns - earn relatively large budgets whereas high schools in weaker towns, particularly Arab towns, are negatively affected. The Ministry of Education is currently sending larger budgets to students in religious high schools than to Arab students.

The Ministry of Finance recently tried to spearhead a differential budgeting initiative for high schools, since there is no budgeting mechanism that offers affirmative action in budgeting for weaker schools. The initiative was halted by the Ministry of Education.

At the same time, the budgeting mechanism is not the only reason for the gaps revealed in the education system. The results of the Ministry of Education review charge the local authorities and education networks, which are budgeted by the government, to examine the level and quality of studies offered by the schools, and to ask themselves what is their responsibility for the state of students attending their schools.

"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



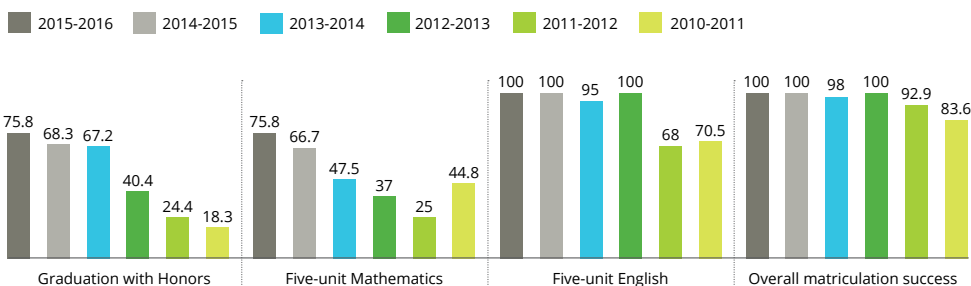
School of Science and Leadership in Yarka, yesterday. "We consider many proposals and choose what is most appropriate for our students and for the subject matter." Gil Elyahu

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.”

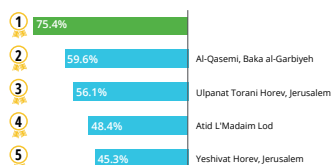
“Fortunately, we added this school to our network some six years ago. We remember the first few days and our conversations with leaders of the Druze community. Even after the school was founded, they were frustrated that it did not meet expectations, even though it was selective of students back then 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?

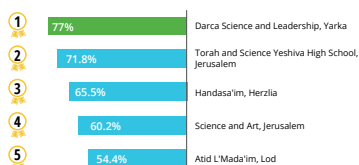
Shela: “This is not a school for rich people. The tuition in our school is 2,400 shekels a year, and that includes an annual trip that is a large part of the cost. These payments are lower than the limit set by the Ministry of Education, and they

Educating for Excellence The Five Top High Schools in Israel

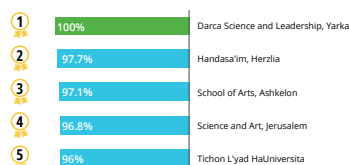
Graduation with Honors*



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

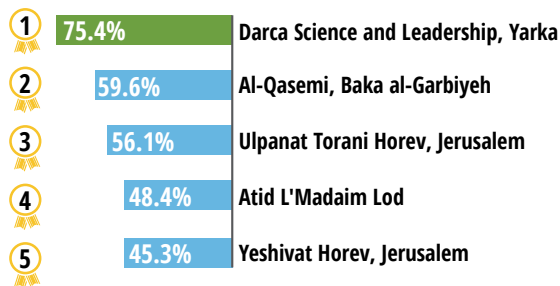


Yarka High School

Gil Eliyahu

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.

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

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

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 reap the results."

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."



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-

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





Photos: Maxim Golovanov

cational 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



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 narrow Israel’s educational gap



INVESTING IN THE FUTURE

Jimmy Pinto and Sam Katz have held senior management positions in corporate finance, project financing, venture capital and international marketing. For them, however, Darca is the best investment opportunity they have ever come across

■ Wendy Elliman

“Getting a return that’s many times greater than your investment is simply good business, and Darca provides an incredible investment multiple,” says Jimmy Pinto, the French-born MIT graduate who founded and managed the French Rothschild Banking Group in Israel until his retirement five years ago. “Today, there are already some 3,000 youngsters in Israel who have matriculated high school because Darca invested in their education – and that benefits not only them, but also their families and their country.”

Innovative prototype for invigorating failing schools

Darca (Aramaic for ‘The Path’) is a non-profit educational network created eight years ago to promote equal educational opportunity in Israel. The Darca Network is supported by five leading philanthropic partners – YRF, Azrieli Foundation, Alliance Kol Israel Haverim, Rashi Foundation and Adelis Foundation – and is targeting high schools in Israel’s geographic and socio-economic peripheries where educational opportunities and expectations are low. The Network’s aim is to build an innovative prototype to invigorate these failing schools in the backyard of Israel’s public education system.

Currently serving some 16,000 students in 32 schools – Haredi, religious, secular, Druse, Bedouin – it plans to double that number, according to Private Equity Fund manager Sam Katz of New York City, founder of Darca’s American sponsor, the Youth Renewal Fund (YRF). “We believe that this model of private investors and activists working with the city or government for the public



good can stimulate the entire system, both in education and in many other areas of public life,” he says. “We hope that once the Darca model is running in 60 high schools, it will be taken up by all 250 schools in Israel that would most benefit from it.”

The YRF came on board in 2014 as Darca’s leading strategic partner, bringing the original investment of \$25 million up to \$53 million. The strongest financial backing ever known by an Israeli school network, it was boosted yet further this year thanks to a strategic alliance between Darca and the Azrieli Foundation led by Danna Azrieli, which will bring in an additional \$30 million investment over the next five years.

All Darca’s sponsors (YRF, Azrieli, KIAH, Rashi and Adelis) see their involvement as an investment, rather than philanthropy. “Education’s payoff is long term,” says Katz. “Its benefits aren’t visible for a long time. That’s why educational reform in Israel now is critical, to create the social mobility that will enable it to thrive in the future, and to confront its security, governance, technological and social challenges.”

Applying business principles to education

Katz, Pinto and their colleagues believe that business principles – good management, fair pay, motivation, incentivization, quality control and strong accountability



Photos: Guy Yechiely, Rotem Golan

at every level – can be effectively applied to public enterprises. “That’s what we all bring to Darca,” says Pinto, the Network’s current chairman and one of its founders. “We’re bringing to Darca what we’ve learned in the business world. Because we’ve all made our mark elsewhere, we have neither hidden agendas nor ego issues. So when we’re faced with difficult decisions, our guide is always what best serves the youngsters in our care, and not what benefits the organization.”

Katz describes Darca’s business-focused take on Israel’s education system. “We want to instill good management and evaluation criteria,” he says. “First, we demand accountability, and measure our results very carefully. Where we don’t get the cooperation or the results we expect, we terminate our investment. Second, our model creates leverage for the money. We’re one among several educational networks that municipalities can choose to manage their schools – one which is highly sought after both because of our strong value proposition (the population we serve wants what we provide), and because we charge no overhead. In fact, we supplement the State education budget by up to ten percent. That makes us a very compelling choice. With Darca come extra funding and better results.”

Neither Katz nor Pinto is given to hyperbole, but neither can avoid it when they talk of Darca. “We’ve exceeded our expectations,” says Pinto. “We couldn’t

know when we began, whether what we proposed was sustainable. A lot of money was put on the table – enough for four to five years – but four to five years only allows a small impact, and we weren’t looking for a small impact!”

Eight years on, the program has proven sustainable. “It’s grown and continues growing,” says Pinto. “We’re now directly in 32 high schools, and serve up to 30,000 more youngsters, primarily through our new partnership with the Azrieli Foundation. In Kiryat Shmona, Gederah and Netivot, the public high school administration is entirely under Darca.”

Excellent return on their investment

According to Dr. Gil Pereg, CEO of the Darca Network since its inception, facilities, teaching and results in Darca schools are beginning to compete with those in the country’s best schools. Critically, matriculation rates have shot up to over 88 percent, “a figure whose importance you can’t ignore when matriculation unlocks the door to social mobility,” he says.

The impact of education on social mobility is clearly understood by Darca’s investors, says Katz. “Many in YRF, like myself, come from middle-class backgrounds, and were lucky enough to go to good schools and universities, which propelled us into professions where we’ve succeeded, and have put us in a position where we can contribute to others. We’re not trying to be Israel’s Education Ministry. We are simply people who love Israel and are trying to work from the inside, as an agent for positive change.”

Both Katz and Pinto already see the return on their investment as excellent. “Darca is impacting beyond what we do, and will continue doing so,” says Pinto. “One example is our policy of never taking overheads from school budgets – which is, essentially, taking money away from the kids. This isn’t true for other networks, but, because of us, they’re now taking less, even though they’re not yet at zero. And the Government has now ruled on the maximum overhead that can be charged.”

Darca’s ultimate success will be to make itself redundant, says Katz. “Public need should not be financed by the private sector. We’d like to see Israel getting to a full, government-financed differential education budget – a trend that has begun under its present Education Minister. It makes no sense for high school students in north Tel Aviv to be budgeted the same amount as those in Kiryat Shmona, when North Tel Aviv’s municipality can add extras that are out of reach for Kiryat Shmona’s.”

“While Darca’s future economic and social impact can’t be precisely measured, its outreach is clearly appropriate for the start-up nation,” says Pinto. “If Israel is to remain a high-tech leader, it can’t write off the kids in its geographic and socio-economic peripheries. Upgrading their education should be a national goal. Hopefully, this upgrade will be extended to revitalizing failing elementary and junior high schools, too, where the return on investment will surely be even higher. Interventions like ours will produce great citizens, and give more Israelis a stronger future. What better return can anyone expect on their investment than that...” ■



Education’s payoff is long term. That’s why educational reform in Israel now is critical, to create the social mobility that will enable it to thrive in the future”

For more information about Darca: www.darca.org.il/en. In the U.S.: www.youthrenewalfund.org

VISIT DARCA

The Darca network serves all sectors of the Israeli population; operating and managing 32 schools and learning centers nationwide, in addition to 70 intervention programs in various schools. A significant portion of the network's resources are invested in the development of programs to support school leadership teams, while simultaneously promoting academic achievement, social values and social responsibility. Darca offers its teachers continuous training programs so that they can effectively teach and convey humanitarian and democratic values to students, as well as to provide high-level studies in STEM, English, Literature and all other academic subjects.

Darca Schools is continually expanding its reach in order to serve an increasing number of communities in Israel. We invite you to visit one of our schools and witness this change in action. Partners who choose to take part in this meaningful and ongoing process with Darca Schools will have a far-reaching and significant impact on the future of myriad students in Israel.

To schedule a meeting and a visit, please contact us at:

212.207.3195 | www.youthrenewalfund.org

