

## The ripple effect

By [HAVIV RETTIG](#)

Unless your child is a participant, you've probably never heard of the Tafnit, or "turnaround," Program. And that's a shame. For 20,000 schoolchildren in some 200 schools just this year - a tenfold increase in participation from its beginning only six years ago - it has literally changed lives.

Tafnit does the seemingly impossible. It takes a school's lowest achievers, with varying degrees of failing grades, and puts them through a carefully planned and measured process that brings the vast majority of them to the level of their fellow students - and beyond. The program has brought dropouts to matriculation certificates and university studies, and done this across the geographic and social periphery, from Beduin children in Kseifa to poor religious kids in Kiryat Shmona. Each year, teachers, principals, mayors and parents from around the country beg for their schools to be included in the program, and many are turned away only for lack of funds.

Established by the Rashi Foundation's Elie Elalouf, together with the Education Ministry and other bodies, the program has prospered from the start.

What makes Tafnit so attractive? First, it offers hope to children who have lost it, whose awareness of their academic failure is so complete they have despaired of ever overcoming it. For such children, and their families, university-track academic success is an overwhelming experience. Second, it makes good on that hope, producing real results over the past six years for tens of thousands of elementary and high school pupils.

Tafnit has two high-school programs. "Hasam" or "last hurdle" is for those kept from a matriculation certificate by a single failing grade. "Start," run together with the Education Ministry's Education and Welfare Services Branch, is for those with multiple failures who are at risk of dropping out altogether.

It's impossible to argue with the results. In the 2003-2004 school year, Hasam reached 350 kids in 15 high schools who were sent there after their schools concluded that they would not pass the math matriculation exam. Via Tafnit, just one student failed the exam, while the average score was 89.5 in the three-point exam. No one dropped out of the program.

In 2005-06, Hasam reached 494 students in 23 high schools, again sent by the schools themselves. In five subjects - Arabic, math, English, national heritage and history - 92% of the original group finished their exams successfully, with an average score of 79 and just eight kids dropping out.

In 2006-07, a larger group of 586 kids from 21 schools turned out 93% who successfully finished their matriculations. Not surprisingly, Tafnit expects a record 1,100 students in 40 schools to take part in Hasam during this school year.



Pass rates at 90% or more. Tafnit, run by an NGO and the government working in tandem, seems to have avoided the pitfalls of institutional bickering an ego.

Photo: Courtesy

The results of the Start program are even more dramatic. Fully 20% of 17-year-olds do not enter the 12th grade and more than 15% of all 13- to 17-year-olds are in "hidden dropout," meaning they are officially in class, but learn nothing and do not complete the academic requirements for graduation, according to the Brookdale Research Institute. Some of the dropouts leave school by 10th grade. Worse yet, less than half of all 17-year-olds are eligible for matriculation certificates when they reach the end of their high-school years. Start steps into this breach, targeting ninth- to 10th-graders who failed at least seven subjects in the ninth grade.

In three schools in Beersheba, Beit Shemesh and the Beduin town of Hura, Start has taken 197 of the lowest achievers and over the course of the 2006-07 school year brought 73% of them to successfully pass the matriculation exams taken so far, including literature, math, English, Bible, language and history. In the Beersheba school, 55% of the 11th-grade Start group passed the university-track four-point English matriculation.

Start is built to follow the students for three years, so that by the time they reach the end of 12th grade they've covered 11 subjects in the accelerated learning environment.

WHAT IS THE program's secret? What is the methodology that can produce such remarkable results?

According to Tafnit director Nissim Cohen, a veteran education reformer who developed the accelerated learning method it uses, the program places the students into fast-paced, outside-the-classroom learning sessions in which they study the class material faster and sometimes more comprehensively than in the regular class in order to catch up.

To the students' low expectations of themselves, Tafnit responds with a small series of graduated successes. Each of the sessions, conducted several times a week, ends with an exam on the material learned that day. There is no homework at the beginning of the process, and some success is always attained by the end of each day.

In this way, Cohen explains, children used to expecting failure begin to expect success, start to suspect that they are intelligent and capable. After several sessions, the students take an external control exam on the material studied in previous sessions, but they do so after having passed a series of exams on the subject and tend to pass with flying colors.

"When you're given an exam on a difficult subject, and you get 100, you come back for more. It's as simple as that," explains one teacher from a Beersheba high school who works in the program.

"I used to go back and forth," adds 17-year-old Ariel from Beersheba, who was in danger of dropping out of school entirely. "Sometimes I was good in school, sometimes not. Then I heard about the program. There, they put a lot of pressure on me. They give you personal attention. At first I thought matriculation was too hard for me, but they make you believe you can do it. Now I'm going for full matriculation. I figured out that it pays to invest the effort."

BUT IT DOESN'T end there. To the despair felt by the teachers who have lost faith in the often absentee or disruptive student, Tafnit shows that teachers from within that same school - and not outside "experts" - are all that is needed to turn the students around (armed with the requisite teaching hours, of course).

In fact, it is the effort made by Tafnit to train local teachers, rather than provide experts, that marks one of the program's unique qualities. Since its goal is to produce a school that can do what Tafnit does even after the program's funds and experts have left for other struggling schools, it isn't enough to bring in specially-trained staff to work with struggling children for hours on end. In keeping with the program's guiding principle of empowerment, the school's teaching staff is turned through special training into Tafnit staff. A teacher is selected to undergo Tafnit's week-long training sessions, and will then coordinate the program in the school. In this way, says Cohen, the knowledge, the methods, the encouragement and commitment become part of the culture of the school.

"[Tafnit] doesn't just teach the kids that they can succeed in school, it teaches the teachers the same thing," says Cohen. "You can't imagine the frustration of a teacher who sees her students fail, and feels she is helpless to change the situation."

"When the program leaves the school, the concepts remain," agrees Gila Nagar, head supervisor of the Education Ministry's Southern District. Nagar also sees the program as one of the more serious ones the ministry works with.

"It's hard to inject a new program into the system," she says. "The system is naturally conservative, and there are lots of plans and programs on paper that never go anywhere. But when you believe in the idea, when people are receptive to it because it answers a real need, then the program can be absorbed by the system."

Nagar understands the value of the program first-hand. The daughter of a poor, immigrant family from Ofakim, she believes Tafnit was more easily and quickly integrated into the Southern District "because here we live the reality. How many children left my class in Ofakim and, since they didn't have my teacher, ended up somewhere else? It's not a sure thing that a teacher leaves college with the belief that every child can be successful. It's been an unproven motto. But now, [Tafnit] has give the proof, the test scores."

This is one of the reasons the program, run by an NGO and the government working in tandem, seems to have avoided the pitfalls of institutional bickering and ego.

"We started down this road with similar beliefs," says Amira Chaim, head of the Education Ministry's Southern District. "The basic idea - that everyone, but really everyone, can realize his potential - isn't new. We believed we can and must break the connection between success and socioeconomic status. This is a good example of how a government system is a consumer of the third sector. It's the third sector connecting to our needs, and that has been the source of the success. They are the small cog that can push the larger cog of the education system. We brought together resources - not just money, but also knowledge - and we built everything together from the start."

COHEN SAYS that's one of the secrets of the program's spectacular success. "Go into the field, into the schools," he exhorts, "and ask them there if there is cooperation between Tafnit and the Education Ministry. This joint work goes down to the level of individual teachers."

For him, the close cooperation is more than just good politics or fund-raising. It is a belief that the program carries with it national responsibility. "The ministry, the state, has to be sovereign in the system. The third sector [NGOs] must never take responsibility for the education of the children, even if it can come into the system with something to contribute."

For Elalouf, the program fulfills the Rashi Foundation's belief that "every child can succeed," and its goal of helping children in the geographic and social peripheries to succeed despite initial setbacks. This goal, according to Elalouf and the foundation, cannot be achieved without the direct support and participation of the Education Ministry and other government bodies.

The close work with the ministry has also meant that Tafnit has spread to all sectors of society; some 18% of its activities are in non-Jewish schools.

For Yousef, an educator in Hura, the program is a potential savior of Beduin education. "The statistics for the Beduin are far below average," he says. Tafnit "is the first time we have a real opportunity. [The Hura high school's] average matriculation statistic is 28%-30%. This year, the first Tafnit class will graduate with more than 80% passing the matriculation exams." Indeed, more passed this year from the Start class for "failures" than from the school's honors track.

According to Yousef, it's also cut down the violence in the school, since students who aren't learning are wandering the premises making trouble.

The program is spreading like wildfire. According to Chaim, "Teachers, council heads and principals come to [the ministry] every year asking for this program, but we don't have the budget to meet the demands."

For Tafnit to work, she notes, "you have to have the conditions. You need classrooms, teaching hours, professional accompaniment. This is a very difficult and complex program, and even after six years we haven't been able to expand it to the entire education system."

The program is expensive. According to Cohen, Start costs an extra \$1,200 per student per year above the standard per-pupil expenditure of the Education Ministry. The math matriculation sessions cost some \$500 per student per year, and the elementary program, which take the bottom quarter of sixth-grade classes and pushes them ahead to join the rest of the class in scores, costs \$270.

Tafnit has many partners helping its work. Beyond the Education Ministry and local council budgets that help run the program, and the fund-raising capabilities of the Rashi Foundation that founded it, it get help from other major philanthropists, including the Jewish Funders Network, Israel Diamond Exchange, Alliance, the Gilbert and Glencore foundations and Check Point. They donate because the end results are measurable and spectacular.

As Chaim explains, echoing others, "In the end, this process is real, and you can't put a price on that. This child goes to better places in the army, and then to the university instead of a mechanics' course. Along the way, you got the parents involved and believing."

Asked what got everyone working together so well, Nagar replied simply: "Success. It's not just the grades, either. What happens to a parent who sees, instead of a zero, a 60, 70 or even 80? What does this do to a kid for the first time in his life? What about the teacher who doesn't want to give that zero or even check a failing exam? We've thrown a stone and it has caused many ripples, many circles."