

Translation from Hebrew

This is how Be'er Sheva fought for 100 dropouts

The "Start" (Success) project: 87 of 100 students achieved a matriculation certification

By Mijal Grinberg, Haaretz, 22 August 2007

"From 7th to 9th grade, I hardly ever entered the classroom. My mother would drop me off at the entrance, I would wait for her to leave and then turn around and go to have a smoke or return home," says Tom Mehraban, an 18-year-old from Be'er Sheva. "I had 13 failing grades at the end of the year and a 100 in sport." Mehraban is one of 100 students in the city who were on the verge of dropping out of the education system at the end of 9th grade. Fortunately, the person responsible for the education portfolio in the city, Rubik Danilovich, decided not to give up. (His own personal past included eight failing grades that prevented him from matriculating.) Two schools in the city joined with other organizations to start a unique project for these students: Start Success.

Today, three years later, 87 of the 100 students who began to study in the framework of this project have successfully completed their matriculation exams. The decision to establish the project was accompanied by a directive from Danilovich for high school principals in the city to allow any student to take the matriculation exams – even if this lowers the city's average score.

Support for the Start Success project comes from two city schools, Nissim Cohen of Tafnit [Program], the Sacta-Rashi Foundation, the Shach"ar Branch of the southern district of the Ministry of Education and the Check Point company. The total investment per student is NIS 6,000 a year.

Mehraban's school did not allow her to continue on the regular matriculation track at the end of 9th grade. Therefore, she decided to transfer to another school in the city, Makif Vav [Comprehensive 6], and to join the project. "I was afraid at first because they told us that it includes 50 marathons in which you study from morning till night. I told my mother that I prefer to stay at home," she said. But she ultimately decided to join.

The project was implemented in Makif Vav [Comprehensive F] and Makif Zayin [Comprehensive 7], which each school taking 50 students. In Makif Vav, the students were split into three groups, with a teacher and two teaching assistants assigned to each group.

Shula Luk, Mehraban's teacher, says there were 11 students in her class and that most of them had failing grades in most subjects. "Suddenly you have a quarter [of the number] of students you usually have," Luk notes. "This changes the whole method of work. It enables you to have conversations and to monitor each child, to know exactly what his situation is at any moment and on any topic."

Her role as a teacher included close follow-up of each student's academic situation in all of the subjects of study. "We checked their situation every day. In this way, I was able to know if the child needed practice that would strengthen him for continuing onward," she said.

The project is built upon a number of basic principles. The first is to provide an experience of success to students who are accustomed to feeling failure. This is done various via tests and evaluations throughout the process on a daily basis, reinforcing the student or, alternatively, serving as an assessment tool for examining the points where he needs to improve.

Another significant principle was the program's personal approach and love. The parents say that if the child did not arrive at school in the morning, the teacher would immediately call his home to check what happened. The teachers did not suffice with telephone calls and found themselves more than once sending a grandmother to wake up the student or they would come themselves to the student's home to bring him to school.

Another principle is to find "a significant other" to mentor the child through the project. This figure participates in setting joint goals.

The "significant other" for Maoz Bracha was his parents, who mobilized for this mission and say that they themselves experienced a significant process. "The transition of Maoz from elementary school to middle school was very difficult," says his mother, Smadar. "Many times he did not go to school and he finished middle school with a large number of failing grades. And then came the proposal to take part in the project."

But, according to Bracha, the school also made sure to find a "significant other" for children who did not receive support from their parents. They would recruit whoever was necessary – an uncle, brother, soccer coach."

The mentors were significant partners in the project, monitoring the students and even coming to encourage them during the marathons. From the perspective of the Bracha couple, the most significant lesson they experienced was in a meeting with a psychologist in the framework of the program: "In this meeting, we learned first of all to accept the child as he is. Not to tell him: 'You're no good.' But rather to tell him: 'What you did is okay, and you can do even more,'" Smadar said.