

The Marker

Perfect: The Best High School in Israel 2013

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Last week the Beit Jann Comprehensive School was at the center of media attention after it was announced that in 2012 the village ranked third in Israel for the number of its 12th grade graduates eligible for matriculation ■ And now for the 2013 figures

Shortly after Carmiel, turn north at the Rama intersection and continue straight until the right turn to Beit Jann. At the edge of the mountain, 150 kilometers from Tel Aviv, you will find the Beit Jann Comprehensive School. It is the best high school in Israel, at least if judged by the main goal of enabling students to graduate from high school with a matriculation certificate.

Last week the school was at the center of media attention, after it was announced that in 2012 it ranked third in Israel for the matriculation rate of its 12th grade graduates. But along the path to this achievement, the school underwent a real transformation: According to the information that the school received recently, at the end of the last school year

(2012-3), the matriculation rate has reached 100%.

Accordingly, next year, when the data for 2012-3 will officially be published, it will become one of the leading schools in Israel, surpassing schools from established communities in the Sharon region and the center of Israel. Among them are selective private schools with especially high tuition fees. Beit Jann is one of the poorest localities in Israel, ranked in the second decile by the Central Bureau of Statistics. Yet it will once again be recognized as one of the communities enjoying the best education in Israel.

As recent as 1999, the matriculation rate of the school's graduates was only 13%, among the lowest in Israel, but since then it

has gradually risen each year. This accomplishment is part of the quantum leap of the Druze education system in Israel, which showed this year the highest increase in matriculation eligibility (7.8% increase in the proportion of 17-year-olds eligible for matriculation, compared with an increase of 1.7% throughout Israel and 0.8% in the Jewish sector alone).

In 2012, the matriculation rate in the Druze sector reached 54.8%, higher than the national average of 49.8% and similar to the level in the Jewish sector of 55.3%. This change in Druze society and in Beit Jann was brought about by the same school teachers, who were not replaced and who did not receive outside reinforcement. The students are also the same students who had previously studied in those schools and who had failed in the past. The dropout rate went down as well.

The school in Beit Jann succeeded even though some of its students were particularly weak, and despite the difficult economic situation in the village. The school does not charge excessive tuition, select its students, or cause weak students to discontinue their studies. On the contrary, its staff actually located several students who had dropped out and convinced them to return, just before they began studying in vocational schools.

The school's achievements shatter one of the basic assumptions in the education system – that not all of the students can complete high school with full matriculation, and therefore they should be offered alternatives, such as vocational schools.

The target of 100% matriculation success was set in order to focus on the main goal of not giving up on any student. This is similar to the general goal set for all the Druze schools. "I went to the principals and told them that strengthening only the strongest is no big deal; that we must go to

the weakest students and give them the best pedagogic service", says Mohana Fares, the Supervisor of Druze and Circassian Education at the Ministry of Education.

In order to do this, 15 schools in the Druze sector have introduced programs of the Yeholot association, a subsidiary of the Rashi Foundation that works in cooperation with the Education Ministry's Division of Social Services. Yeholot trained the teachers in the method of accelerated learning that was developed by its director Nissim Cohen.

The high school diploma is the most basic requirement for finding meaningful work, and a step along the path to academic studies. Nevertheless, in the sad reality of the Israeli educational system, this achievement cannot be taken for granted. Less than half of the high school graduates attain matriculation certificates. Even in the wealthiest cities, not all the students succeed in obtaining the certificate, and in some of the poorest communities, 70% or more complete their studies without matriculation.

Among those we met in Beit Jann is 18-year-old Rachel, who three years ago gave up on her studies, decided to learn hairdressing, and planned on becoming a housewife. But today she holds a matriculation certificate with extended science and technology studies and is interested in studying teaching. We also met 18-year-old Khakmat, who told us that he could have "ended up in jail", but instead he attained full matriculation and is planning on studying in one of the academic colleges in northern Israel.

Lions in the Hallway

When you look at the school building in Beit Jann, it is not clear how it manages to provide 790 high school students and 660 middle school students with the basic conditions for studying; and it is certainly not clear how they achieve such impressive

results. It is especially apparent that the building has not been renovated by the Ministry of Education since it was built about 30 years ago. The school doesn't have a proper yard, only a small space in the center of the structure, and the paint is peeling off some of the walls. According to the Ministry of Education data, the school is especially crowded, with an average of 37.6 students per high school class, which is above the average class size nationwide.

The superior achievements of the school relate only to the high school students. In the standardized *Meitzav* tests in middle schools, it ranked in the fifth decile, while half of the middle schools in Israel did better.

Inside the school, the situation is different. Several years ago, the school administration collected contributions from local residents and initiated a renovation on its own. The principal, Ali Salalkha, hired an artist who decorated the walls of the hallways with drawings of trees and forests ("in order to allow for a relaxed atmosphere and also to hide the electric and heating cables", he says).

In the hallways, there are quotations of Druze wise men, whose pictures are also hanging on the walls ("in order to inspire the students and to provide role models"), and the supporting pillars were decorated to simulate the look of marble ("The students won't scribble on walls that look like marble"). The most outstanding element is two lion sculptures at the entrance to the school's hallway ("I wanted to project strength and nobility, so as to affect the atmosphere").

"Before the year 2000, the place was especially neglected", Salalkha tells us. "The success started small", adds Fares. "We started with a group of 30 students who took part in a Yeholot project. Everything was done in coordination and cooperation with the Ministry of Education,

but the impact was broader. It opened up many obstructions in the school. After the initial success, the appetite of the students and the staff increased. We broadened the activity for the weakest students, and this is what led to the gradual and steady increase in matriculation success."

"Everyone Can Succeed"

"It used to be that a weak student was weak, end of story. Here they began really seeing the students. They take the most difficult students and touch their hearts, speak with them. The students understand that the teachers will help them, no matter what. It's not just a social project," Fares emphasizes, "it's a social revolution. It has improved the situation in the entire community. The parents feel now a sense of pride."

At the end of the school year, when the results of the matriculation exams became known, the school held a particularly festive end-of-year celebration. "This was the first time that all the graduates participated in the event and felt that they were all among equals", said Salalkha. The guest of honor was someone the students haven't met before – Nissim Cohen, Director of the Yeholot Association.

Cohen himself was a dropout from the education system. After completing a Master's degree in sociology of education, with honors, he began developing a program to ensure that no child is left behind. Cohen called it the "accelerated of reduction of gaps" method. In the early 1990's, together with the Ministry of Education, he began its implementation in high schools in the periphery, as well as in a Ministry of Labor school that he ran in Jerusalem. Since 2001, the method is being implemented through the Tafnit program of the Yeholot Association, as part of the Rashi Foundation's activity in Israel in the fields of welfare and education.

The Association headed by Cohen focuses on schools in the periphery and in weak

communities – Jewish, Druze, Arab and Bedouin. It operates two main programs in approximately 100 schools, one of them targeting the weakest students, who have failed most of the subjects in middle school and were about to drop out.

The success rates are astounding: At the end of 2012, with the assistance of the existing school teachers, 66% of the program participants completed high school with full matriculation, enabling them to pursue academic studies. The second program is intended for students who are expected to fail the matriculation exam in a compulsory subject, such as math or English. About 90% of the participants complete high school with a full matriculation in all the subjects.

The Association's activity has helped to increase the matriculation rates in a number of Israeli schools, but this is the first time it has allowed a public school to achieve a success rate of 100%. "With very few exceptions, everyone can succeed at school – regardless of their background", says Cohen. "In order to succeed, one must set challenging goals and take systematic action. We work in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and the school's management team and staff, without any external teachers. As an ethical society, we have an obligation to ensure that everyone will succeed in school."

Cohen states that "Even today there is a correlation between scholastic success and socio-economic background. This correlation is detrimental to us, contributes to rifts in society and causes a loss of human capital. It hurts the school and it hurts the children who adopt failure and lose the belief in their own ability, and for lack of choice turn to other alternatives, which may include crime."

The program that Cohen developed is highly demanding for the schools and the teachers, but also requires immense efforts

from the participating students. Some of the students in the program begin high school without basic knowledge or the ability to read and write. They enter into intensive study that includes "marathons", after the school day and until nighttime, as well as during vacations and holidays. At the end of every lesson there is an exam. Six months after starting the program, at the end of grade 10, the students complete matriculation in math at the 3-unit level units – "in order to show them that they can, and in order to begin reducing the gap", Cohen explains.

The students spend most of their time studying, without much time for social life – not at all an easy task for students who had expected to leave school. Therefore, a substantial part of the program is dedicated to building their motivation and maintaining parental involvement. The method requires the teachers to personally know not only the students but also their parents. Cohen says that some of the parents lost their faith in their children's ability to succeed in school, and the teachers must restore that faith.

Your method takes all the childhood out of school. It leaves the students only with classrooms, studies and examinations.

Cohen: "And what is the alternative? Is there an easy solution? The required work is essential for rebuilding the children's confidence in their own ability. Giving in to easy solutions does not challenge children who have experienced so many failures, and it is a trap for us all. The children learn a critical lesson – that in order to succeed, one must make an effort, and that's not so bad. They also enjoy the personal attention, and above all the continuing scholastic success. About 20% of the program graduates, who had been on the verge of dropping out, participate today in academic studies."

In Cohen's words, "The school teachers are the ones who work hard and out of the routine. We must increase the cooperation with the Ministry of Education and find a way within the system to compensate, train, support, and encourage these wonderful educators."

All of the students who participated in the program agreed to join it after they were identified at school and met with the teachers working in the program. "The student has to understand what is involved and what the difficulties are. He shouldn't be forced to join the program. During the discussion, the student understands that he is in a problematic position with future risks, and therefore it is best for him to change the situation", says Eyad Mohana, the pedagogic instructor of the program. "These are students who find it very difficult to believe in themselves after all the disappointments they experienced. They say, 'Where have you been until now? After nine years of failure, you say that everyone was wrong and you are right?' Sometimes the staff has several conversations with the students in order to recruit them."

"We constantly explain to the students that in order to succeed, one has to work and make an effort. We bring them to understand that they do grasp the material and control their own success, but it happens after a lot of effort. Yes, they will study on weekends and during unusual hours round the clock."

Jalal Saad, the pedagogic coordinator, adds: "The moment the students experience success, after being used to scores of 10 or 20 in math, they feel motivation that continues to drive them on. We've instructed the teachers that every time a student receives a good grade, one of the teachers calls to tell the parents. Up until then, it was customary to involve the parents only when there were troubles."

"Sometimes the students can't believe their achievements. They tell us about past experiences, and on occasion you are embarrassed to hear the remarks they heard from teachers, who told them that they have no ability and are worthless. I don't blame the teachers. They are also caught up in the same concept that these students lack ability", adds Saad.

Changing Attitudes in the Sector

During the past two years, the increase in matriculation rates within the Druze sector has been the highest in Israel. If the trend continues next year, the level of eligibility among the Druze is expected to surpass that of Jewish schools. The change in the Druze sector began in the early 2000's, and is evidenced also by the increase in the number of university graduates and the decrease in school dropout rates. This is the product of a multi-year plan led by Fares and the Ministry of Education.

Over the last decade, the Druze also benefitted from two government decisions that added budgets designated for them to government ministries, as well as from donations through JDC Israel. "With the budgets, we were able to invest in teachers and in student tutoring hours. We closed gaps with several very good programs", says Fares, "but the best thing that happened is the connection with the Yeholot association."

"I heard about Nissim and his association, and I went to meet him together with the Supervisor for the Northern District of the Education Ministry. There are many nonprofits that work in the schools, and the supervisors aren't aware of them at all. But here there was a joint investment, both financially and educationally. We built a five-year program, with a goal of 80% matriculation success within the Druze sector. We are on the way to realizing it." Today there are 190 Druze students from villages in northern Israel at the Technion. In order to illustrate how deep the change

within the sector is, Fares notes that half of these students are female. Nevertheless, he adds that some religious families still don't allow their daughters to study in mixed-gender frameworks, and that there are not enough places of employment for Druze women in the north.

"We built the program in order to succeed, and we managed to change attitudes and increase awareness within the Druze community. Parents now have a sense of urgency in education. In my opinion, it is also connected to frustration: they saw that others can enjoy a better lifestyle due to education, and they understood that we need to look after ourselves – take action so that our children will be educated and trained, and not wait for anyone."

Fares visited some of the parents of students who attend high schools in which the Yeholot program operates. "It wasn't easy to go to the parents. The aim of the visit is to make them believe in the ability of their children, who have failed in the past. We repeatedly said to the students, 'You failed because of the errors of other people, not because of your own errors. You can succeed!'"

To be the Best

One of the first questions I asked Fares and Salalkha, after they presented the data for matriculation eligibility over the past decade, related to copying on tests. "You would probably not ask that if we were talking about a Jewish school that succeeded", commented Cohen, but Fares quickly responded, "When I talk about the achievements of the sector, someone from within the community can also get up and say that it's surely due to copying."

However, he adds that, "There is copying everywhere, and among the Druze the number of voided exam booklets decreases as the matriculation success increases. We give the students tools so that they will not need to copy. Every person has self-

respect. According to our values, copying is a sort of stealing, and I trust the students not to do that."

And Cohen adds, "This is a problematic thought. The Druze have ability like everyone else does, and they succeeded thanks to hard and systematic work. They withstood challenges in a way that brings great honor to all of Israeli society, and what's nice about it is that they themselves recruited the people and achieved success." "It took us four years to reach a matriculation rate of 100%. It didn't happen overnight", says Salalkha.

"Three years ago we began focusing on the weak students through the work with Yeholot. Some of the students almost didn't know how to read and write, and had more than 9 failures on their record. We succeeded in convincing them that they are completely normative, but had been neglected in earlier stages. We convinced them that it is worthwhile for them to succeed, that a matriculation certificate is the ticket to a better future, to academia, to family and to better status. Their integration into studies had a good impact on the entire school."

Why was the number 100 set as the goal?

Salalkha: "Every student is important. I wouldn't want my child to be without matriculation, so why should another child be without it? There is no reason for us not to succeed. The Jews are also a minority, and look at what they have accomplished. I could have gone on as usual and made excuses for my failures, but I want this society to be the best in the world."

The high school Principal, Zaid Kablan, adds: "We succeeded in enabling a humiliated population that had never experienced success, to feel pride; to switch from a bad situation to a place that considers the future and how to succeed and to contribute to society."

Jalal Asad, the Ministry of Education's Supervisor for Druze schools in the Northern District, concurs and notes: "The concept that says that you should believe in children is not simple. It was difficult to believe that certain students would succeed, but slowly the school staff succeeded in instilling the belief that it's possible among parents and teachers. Several years ago, there were parents who sent their children to other schools, but when they saw that the school is progressing with strong and consistent steps, and heard from students who succeeded, they joined in."

"I would have ended up in jail"

"If I hadn't participated in the program, I would have ended up in jail. I was a very troubled child. No one, not even my parents, paid attention to me. Everyone looked at me differently. They let me understand that I can't get anywhere and that they don't know what will become of me in a few years", says Khakmat Najem, a graduate of the program. "Now I want to succeed and to go far. In ninth grade I failed eight subjects. Today I have 34 study units in my matriculation certificate, including science and technology subjects."

"Sometimes we studied at school from eight in the morning until 12 at night. They always told us to forget the words, 'I can't'. They told us, 'Say that you can'. They strengthened us all the time. When you take a test and pass, the fear of failure begins to disappear. The first time that I succeeded in a matriculation exam I was amazed. I didn't believe it was me. I ran home to my parents with a feeling that is impossible to describe."

Rachel Kheer, another graduate of the high school, explains: "When I was in middle school I didn't study and I didn't want to go to school at all. I didn't expect to get to high school, and certainly not to complete matriculation. The atmosphere and the teachers at school made me feel that I

wouldn't do anything good in life. I wasn't supposed to study in high school. After middle school I signed up to study cosmetics in a vocational school, but the pedagogic coordinator talked to me and brought me here.

"I thought I would be a homemaker, but today I already want to go to college. My parents are very proud of me. My father hung the certificate at the entrance to the house. Yesterday I went to an open day at Tel Hai College, and they told me that I could be accepted, but I am checking additional colleges. I want to study education and art therapy. I love helping children, and I want to help them just like the teachers here helped me."

What needs to be fixed in the educational system?

Kheer: "The way the teachers relate to students. Until I met the teachers here, the teachers didn't take care of the children at all. They weren't able to, or they didn't want to. There are teachers who won't help a student who says he didn't understand the lesson. They only say that it's because he wasn't concentrating at the beginning of the lesson. The teachers go ahead with the strong students and leave the weak ones behind."

Mizanah Salalkha, a teacher at the school, coordinated the program last year and worked with the students; now she is the pedagogic instructor for the program at the school. "I have been teaching here for 12 years, and when I began the training for the program I didn't believe in it. I always knew that there were some students who succeed and others that don't. It was very difficult, and when I worked with the eleventh grade, I cried a lot.

I once specifically said to the coordinator that they would not succeed, and there was a lot of tension. But slowly, in the classroom, I began to feel that I was

fighting for the students. I fell in love with them. When you look into their eyes and see how they devote their whole selves to succeeding, there is no other possibility."

"It's difficult for teachers to believe, after years in which they know that not everyone succeeds", says Mohana from Yeholot. "Not only the teacher thinks that way – so do the parents. This method shatters the old one. Today's schools are unable to deal with half of their students. We think that the existing approach doesn't succeed with

everyone, and that a structural change must be introduced into the school. The students here feel that they have been given attention for the first time in their lives."

And the coordinator, Saad, summarizes: "This method created a change in the mindset of the teachers at school. It made them see the fact that even the students who have the lowest achievements can succeed, and they discovered that this is really true."