



Shlomo Binyamin, Darca HaMatmid Yeshiva in Kiryat Shmona
Shlomo, 15, is a very busy kid with lots of hobbies. He's a graffiti artist, an avid skateboarder and bike rider, a nature buff who likes to travel around the Galilee with his friends, and a computer expert adept at taking apart and building hardware. Shlomo is also active in no less than three different youth groups, and takes part in a special pre-Army Computer Science program. Although he does well in school and takes high-level matriculation classes, he admits that he could do even better if he had more free time. Shlomo is very enthusiastic about his school, a yeshiva which is part of the Darca network. "The teachers are amazing; I love them. They really care. They help kids even after school hours," he raves, adding that, "the school was recently renovated and looks really nice now."



Adam Abu Maruf, Darca Druze High School for Science and Leadership
Adam, 16, is one of those impressive kids who would probably excel no matter where he would be. As luck would have it though, he lives in the Galilee village where the school that was named Israel's best high school for the past two years – the Darca Druze High School for Science and Leadership – is located. Clearly, Adam fits in perfectly. Like everyone else in his school, he will be taking the highest level matriculation exams in both English and Math, along with the highest level in Physics and Computer Science. His English is fluent thanks to the emphasis placed on learning English in Darca schools and also to his affinity for chatting online. Adam is grateful to be able to attend the Darca High School. "It's the best possible study environment. The school inspires me to be my best. It's very intense but I have so many opportunities," he declares. "The teachers are very supportive and encourage me. They're like friends, very nice and smart."



A leadership training seminar empowers teens in Darca schools



Photos: Ronit Ozery

Bareket Avraham, Darca New High School, Bat Yam
Bareket, 16, commutes every day from Gan Yavne, where she lives, to the Darca school in Bat Yam – a trip that takes at least 40 minutes in each direction. It's definitely worth the effort. In her school in Gan Yavne, Bareket's grade point average was around 50 and her teachers gave up on her. When she transferred to the Darca school in 8th grade, her grades quickly shot up to an average of 90. "At Darca, everyone told me that I can succeed; the teachers really tried hard," she says. Today, she is planning to take high-level matriculation exams in Math, English, Biology and Social Studies. "I love school," she enthuses. "I'm on the school volleyball team and was chosen to take a course to become a volleyball referee." In addition to school, Bareket works several evenings a week and volunteers two or three times a week with the police. "My dream is to be a police detective and help fight the war on drugs," she reveals.



Roei Elbaz, Darca's Leadership Program, Mikve Israel boarding school
Roei, 17, grew up in Jerusalem and describes himself as having been "a problem kid who was always getting into trouble and had a police record." He attended a series of different schools, sometimes dropping out on his own and, in other cases, being expelled for bad behavior. Finally, in the middle of 9th grade, he was able to turn over a new leaf when he arrived at the Mikve Israel boarding school. "They treated me well. For the first time, I felt that a school cared about me," he says. He decided to change his ways, and today Roei is an honor student and a leader on the student council. He was selected to participate in Darca's Leadership program – a series of seminars which teaches him important tools. "It's a big honor. Darca has given me a lot," he beams. "Now my parents are proud of me and I know that when I grow up, I want to do something that will have an impact on Israeli society, like being a teacher or politician."

A CHANCE TO EXCEL

Through state-of-the-art technology and an innovative pedagogic approach, the Darca network has transformed schools in Israel's periphery, inspiring students to succeed both in school and in life

| Wendy Elliman and Rebecca Kopans

"The educational system's resources have been unequally shared. Throughout Israel's history, the lion's share has been invested in schools in larger towns in the center of the country, and schools in Israel's periphery have suffered from low expectations and opportunities," says Dr. Gil Pereg, CEO of Darca, the groundbreaking educational network that to date has transformed 28 schools throughout Israel.

Darca ("The Path" in Aramaic) was established in 2010 precisely in order to help rectify this unfair situation, and is supported by its partners Youth Renewal Fund, Alliance Israelite Universelle (KIAH), the Adelis Foundation and the Rashi Foundation. The aim was to build an educationally innovative model to invigorate failing schools in the backyard of Israel's public education system. Today, there are about 16,000 students studying in formerly under-achieving high schools that were completely revamped by Darca, and are now on a par with the country's best schools.

Matriculation rates – a key parameter for academic success in Israel – have shot up in all Darca schools, with an unprecedented 87% of students in these once-failing schools com-

pleting their bagrut (matriculation) exams this past academic year. "Convincing our students 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," explains Dr. Pereg.

Funding is clearly key in the Darca makeover – making it possible to renovate and upgrade facilities and invest in excellent teachers – but, just as important is the implementation of new pedagogic approaches that encourage learning. The way English is taught, for example, has changed. "Most of our students see the language as an impassable barrier, so we teach it in special language labs where they experience the language as part of everyday life. It engages them, gives them confidence," says Dr. Mor Deshen, the network's senior vice president for pedagogy. Another example of Darca's innovative pedagogy is the 'YES I CAN!' classroom, which features yoga balls and desks on wheels, and is free of distracting noticeboards or posters.

Darca's teachers are crucial to the model. "They believe in their students and show it with every word they speak, and students know their teachers believe in them," says

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Darca VP Dr. Noam Seri. The local authority is brought on board, and, since what happens in school often impacts the whole family, parents are also involved, with a tactful hand held out to families who are struggling – providing extra tuition, counseling, emo-

tional support, a mid-morning sandwich, even a winter jacket.

Darca has succeeded beyond expectations. Amazingly, the Darca Druze High School for Science and Leadership in Yarka was named the best high school in Israel for the past two years. Many eyebrows were raised when the Ministry of Education announced that a school that is in the periphery and specifically serves the Druze population is in fact the best high school in Israel, and that its students receive the highest matriculation scores nationwide.

This accomplishment is especially astonishing given the fact that less than ten years ago, given the deep education crisis in the Druze community, the Ministry of Education launched a program to improve education in the community's schools. In 2011, the Darca Network entered the picture and started to invest additional resources in the school in Yarka.

Schools all over Israel are now waiting in line to join the Darca network – in the hope that their students will also benefit from a better and innovative education and a chance to flourish both in high school and, later, in life.

For more information about Darca: www.darca.org.il/en; in the U.S.: <http://youthrenewalfund.org>