

Hili Tropper had no teaching experience when he became the principal of a tough school in Ramle whose students were expelled from everywhere else. This year, the school boasts a record number of full matriculation certificates / Sarah Rosner



Students at a Branco Weiss school who dropped out of other schools study for their matriculation exams

DECIDING NOT TO GIVE UP

Yael took his Math exam in hospital pajamas. It turns out he just fled from the hospital, where he was treated for injuries after falling from a horse. “They treated me and I came straight back to school for the matriculation exam,” he brags. “See what terrific kids these are,” says Hili Tropper, principal of the Branco Weiss School in Ramle. “They want to learn and succeed.”

About 24,000 students drop out of the school system every year in Israel. The injured boy and his classmates were almost part of that statistic, having been expelled from a number of high schools, and were one step away from dropping out of the system altogether. But they decided not to give up, and what’s more important is that the system decided not to give up on them. There is only one admission criterion for this high school: that other schools don’t want you. About half of the students know police stations from the inside. Others have problems at home, problems with the bank, or behavioral problems. Nine of the 12 high schools run by the Branco Weiss Institute are defined as schools for these students, who are considered “at educational risk.”

“I saved a child today”

Tropper’s superiors also took a risk by hiring him. He had no previous experience in administration or teaching and came to education from the social-action angle. He is the son of Dr. Danny Tropper, who founded “Gesher,” an organization that promotes dialogue between secular and religious Jews. Tropper himself has founded prominent social organizations such as “Maagalei Tzedek,” which introduced the “Social Seal of Approval” for businesses.

“The school’s job is to change students from a situation of ‘surviving’ - and they have every reason to be that way - to a life of being dreamers, people who aspire, who don’t just check off another day of school,” Tropper says. “Our students had report cards full of failing grades. After a few months in our

school, every one of them is taking the matriculation exams. It’s incredible. It is a long process, which succeeds thanks to the children’s commitment. The credit is theirs.”

Miri, a student at the Ramle school, confesses: “I need a little more attention. I have no problem saying that. I drifted from here to there and I gave up on school. I would put on a school shirt for my parents and then go back to bed. Nobody called from school for several months. Here, if I don’t show up just one day they call my mother.” Miri is on her way to completing a full matriculation certificate and also volunteers in a special education school in Ramle.

Every teacher at the school teaches several subjects, so they spend as many hours as possible with the students, win their trust, and get to know them closely. They also make home visits. If a student has a court date, they accompany him. “The homeroom teachers are like the students’ mother and father,” says Tropper.

“A child with problems at home has less time to study. Children will make progress only if we send them the message that we’re with them all the way. A teacher who succeeds here goes home and says ‘I saved a child today.’ I see teachers who come also on Friday and on Saturday night to sit with a student. The teacher leaves school only after the last student leaves.”

A holistic approach

Along with the daily scholastic struggle, emphasis is also placed on enrichment activities. The school’s students have already produced two CDs of original songs this year, which they wrote and composed. There is also a horse farm and psychodrama, cooking, and photography classes.

During the last annual trip the school surprised the students with a flight over Israel. Many of them were exposed to different regions of Israel for the first time. “At the beginning of the year they fight with me a lot and get angry a lot, until trust develops,” says Tropper. “Sometimes they can say a sentence that sticks

a knife into your heart, like ‘You too will give up on me in the end.’ It’s a very long process.”

Twenty-four thousand students drop out of the system every year, and it is estimated that thousands more are hidden dropouts, but Tropper believes that this gap can be closed. “There aren’t enough tools to hold on to all the students who drop out, but we can reduce the number,” he says. “If we open a school like this in every city we will already be reducing the amount. Look at these kids. I tell them: don’t be the best of the dim-witted, be the best of the best.”

The Branco Weiss Institute for the Development of Thinking was founded 19 years ago by Dr. Branco Weiss, a Swiss entrepreneur, out of a commitment to social empowerment and a belief in providing young people with the tools for self-development. His approach to philanthropy is based on long-term responsibility and commitment with clear results. Since its inception, tens of thousands of students have taken part in the Institute’s ability-boosting programs and thousands of educators have benefited from its teacher training courses.

During the past decade, it has also run its own school network, which has grown to 12 schools all over Israel, nine of them for children at risk. The educational approach is holistic, with an emphasis on individualized instruction. The Branco Weiss Institute develops original, innovative educational models and adapts thinking and learning programs from leading universities around the world to Israel’s educational environment, in full cooperation with local educators and the Ministry of Education.

The Branco Weiss Institute welcomes cooperation and partnership with people and organizations that share its belief that social change is possible and can be achieved through excellence in education - providing young people with the tools to advance and play a constructive role in building Israeli society. ■

Interviews by Efrat Zemer. For more information about the Branco Weiss Institute, please contact Merav Cohen at merav@brancoweiss.org.il.