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School's in Innovative program closes gaps in low income neighborhoods

Transforming Underachieving Schools with Large Numbers of Ethiopian Students

• By LIDAR GRAVÉ-LAZI

Walking into the first-grade classroom at the Dizengoff School in South Tel Aviv, the sound of two dozen pupils reading aloud echo throughout the room. “The children are encouraged to read out loud,” Mary Ann Stein, president of the Moriah Fund, told The Jerusalem Post. Stein is one of the driving forces behind this unusual approach to teaching, unique to only some two dozen schools throughout the country. It was introduced by the Israeli Center for Education Innovation (ICEI) in collaboration with the Moriah Fund, the Education Ministry, and the Fidel Association for Education and Social Integration of Ethiopian Jews in Israel. The teaching program, based on the Balanced Literacy Model developed by the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project of Columbia University, was initially intended for some of New York City’s underachieving public schools. The program is being applied in Israel as part of a school-wide reform to improve the outcome of underachieving elementary schools with a high concentration of Ethiopian pupils. “When we began the program, we walked into a school in Netanya [with a large population of Ethiopian pupils] and we learned that 30% to 40% of fourth graders could not read at a first-grade level,” said Stein, who used to be a lawyer in the juvenile court system in the US. She said she realized that many underprivileged kids she encountered in the courts were there because their schools and teachers had failed them.

“The same was happening here [in Israel] with Ethiopians,” she asserted. “Everything was blamed on the children, the parents, and the culture. We began funding after-school programs for Ethiopian children, but the problems just continued. “We worked with the advocates who were very distressed that the children were being written off and being sent to special education. ”The problem, Stein said, was that educators traditionally “teach frontally to the middle level,” leaving behind the children that may need a little extra attention. Over time, the teachers give up on them. “It was our sense that the problem wasn’t the kids, the parents, or the poverty – those were handicaps – but we felt we could go into the schools and improve the situation,” she said. The basis of the innovative program focuses on improving literacy by strengthening reading and writing skills through individualized teaching methods. “We don’t give up on these kids,” she said, “and that is really a remarkable feat to bring the kids up without separating them” from their peers. “It is not only the weaker students who benefit but also the stronger kids who improve, and we make sure they can keep growing.” After the initial success in turning around the school in Netanya from an underachieving school eight years ago to a successful one today, the program has vastly expanded in partnership with the Education Ministry. “You change education school by school, you can’t do it top down,” she said. “You obviously need to do this in collaboration with the top, but the change

“The ICEI has brought creativity to our school, something we did not have in the past,” Tomer Rabi, the Dizengoff School’s principal told The Post.

has to come from the school and the principals and the teachers.” Today the program has expanded to operate in 23 schools across 12 cities, from Hadera to Ashkelon. Don Futterman, IECEI’s executive director, told the Post that “the program aims to improve the entire school. It’s a huge investment in improving teaching and school leadership.” Futterman explained that the program introduces a specific model for teaching literacy – reading, writing, speaking, and listening – by transforming the classroom environment to include a large library of books which are leveled by difficulty. “We’ve individualized the instruction by having every child read at their own level, and we also do a lot of writing,” he said. “We found that this benefits all the kids.”

The program also brings in a full-time literacy coach, who trains the teachers in the new method of teaching literacy. “Every lesson is planned to the minute so there is a lot less frontal instruction, and instead teachers can help the kids in small groups during class time,” Futterman said. The revolutionary system doesn’t stop with the school – a parent liaison is also brought in to work with

parents and extend the program to the children’s’ home environment. “We are trying to reinforce reading, writing, independent thinking, and also the notion that the home has to be a partner for these kids – if you see the home as disconnected or as a burden, you are sacrificing a huge potential resource,” he said. This school-wide and community-wide investment has had a remarkable effect, turning around schools that were performing at the bottom of the Education Ministry’s standardized tests and turning them into successful high achieving schools. “The ICEI has brought creativity to our school, something we did not have

in the past,” Tomer Rabi, the Dizengoff school’s principal, told the Post. Rabi, who grew up in the south Tel Aviv neighborhood, came back to his community to serve as principal two years ago. “I can see the difference in the level of the school when I was here and today,” he said. “When there are new immigrants in a school, it usually brings down the level of the school, and so we see that there are schools who fight not to include new immigrants. But here these students don’t lower the level – on the contrary, they are among the leaders of their class.” Rabi credited the program with strengthening and empowering the pupils, and minimizing gaps among Ethiopian pupils and their counterparts. “When we always talk about [closing] gaps in

Israeli society, this is what we mean – to provide an equal opportunity to children from wherever they come from and provide them with books, if not at home then in school,” he said. He explained that most educational programs helping underprivileged children are geared toward helping weaker students at a later stage in life. “Most of the assistance children receive is in high school to



A FIRST-GRADE CLASS learns vocabulary at the Dizengoff School in southern Tel Aviv this year, as part of a new initiative to help underachieving Ethiopian pupils and their classmates. (Israel Center for Educational Innovation)

help the weak students, but if we started by strengthening all students in first grade, we would achieve much greater heights,” he said. He asserted that this program engages pupils when they are young, minimizing gaps that would otherwise have developed over the years. “A child who develops such a strong vocabulary in first grade – it will stay with him for life,” he said. “The importance is to create a strong society, not to create a weak society and then to invest in the weak. The reason that this is working is because we are investing in the right place.”