

International School in Central Israel Is a Tiny Island of Critical Thinking in a Sea of Rote Learning

EMIS is home to students from around the region and the world, who seek a creative and multicultural environment. But, for parents, it doesn't come cheap

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Principal Gili Roman speaks to students at the Eastern Mediterranean International School in Hakfar Hayarok, August 26, 2019. \ Eyal Toueg

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Sunday, August 25. While hundreds of thousands of Israeli children and teens are enjoying a few more moments of freedom, the students at the Eastern Mediterranean International School, in Hakfar Hayarok youth village, are getting ready for the first day of the new school year.

On the big lawn at the center of the school, a group forms a circle and starts introducing themselves. There is Tamar from Alon HaGalil, Naomi from Germany, Mila from Mexico, Daniel from China, Dagina from Mongolia, Amir from East Jerusalem and Joshua from the United States.

It's no coincidence that the summer vacation for these pupils is shorter. The school year for them is longer than in other schools in Israel's education system and vacations are shorter. That's how it works in [one of the most expensive schools](#) in Israel, with fees running between \$4,000 and \$32,000 a year, including room and board. The school claims that only a few of the students pay full tuition, with others receiving substantial aid, sometimes the entire cost.

Nothing in the school's appearance hints at the big money involved, or at the fact that this is one of Israel's leading schools which attracts outstanding students from around the world. Of this year's 300 applicants from around the world, only 94 were accepted.

The school is small and looks quite ordinary. The building is simple and classes look no different than in public schools. Nothing smacking of riches. On a wall at the school's entrance are the lyrics to John Lennon's "Imagine."

A tour of the classrooms reveals that one of them is dedicated to author J.K. Rowling, full of posters from the [Harry Potter](#) series. Another is dedicated to the work of Mahatma Gandhi, another to Albert Einstein. Outside, things look a little more international: a large lawn from which a path leads to a collection of flags from around the world.

Small classes

In contrast to the public-school system, the number of students per class never exceeds 28 (compared to 40 in regular Israeli high schools), and classes have no high-tech accoutrements.

But all this is secondary to the main and most important thing that distinguishes this school from others: The curriculum does not include the Israeli matriculation exam ([bagrut](#)) and shuns rote learning in favor of critical, creative and independent thinking. Instead of exams, pupils do research projects. Instead of matriculation exams, they take an international baccalaureate program, which enables them to enroll in colleges overseas. It's in

Israel where East Med students face a problem from universities that make it difficult for graduates to enroll.

According to figures released by the school, a fifth of the students are from Israel, and a fifth from the West Bank or East Jerusalem, or from Middle Eastern countries, such as Jordan, Morocco and even [Yemen](#). The latter arrive to Israel through a third country, without their passports receiving an Israeli entry stamp.

The rest come from the four corners of the earth. Classes are in English.

Due to these differences in the curriculum, it's impossible to compare the achievements of East Med students with those in other international matriculation programs, but 90% of East Med's students qualify to take the matriculation tests, compared with 77% on average for other international schools.

The principal, Gili Roman, sits in a small office at the entrance to the ground floor, which contains a round table for meetings with pupils and teachers. The door has a sign saying "Please Disturb." Outside the door parents from Albania, patiently await the end of the interview. They see the sign but politely wait in the hallway. From time to time Roman's deputy, a teacher of politics from Australia, comes into the room to consult on issues relating to the opening of the school year.

"I invite people to disturb me, just like we invite interruptions during classes," says Roman. "We have no problem stopping the class in order to talk politics or about some complex event that's occurred. Disturbances, confusion and difficulties are part of the educational experience of every pupil. Studies aren't always easy since life isn't easy, but they have to be relevant and of value in the life of our pupils."

Chance opportunity

Roman, who has a graduate degree in business administration, came to this job quite by chance. His first school job was as a substitute teacher. During the social protests in 2011, he was part of a group of activists promoting education, which had as its goal the improvement of public schools. "I wanted to change the system, but not from within," he says. "I was repelled by that idea. My dreams did not include being a teacher or principal."

In the end, Roman found himself running a center for educational initiatives in Bat Yam, of which he was one of the founders. “At the center I had the feeling that I can’t tell teachers and principals what to do without having intimate knowledge of what goes on in schools. I came to [Hakfar Hayarok](#) as a substitute teacher and fell in love with it. After six months I became a qualified history and civics teacher, taking on a fulltime job as a homeroom teacher.” After a short period, he became the pedagogical coordinator of the junior high school, and was later asked by Kobi Nave to run the international school, after the previous principal retired. “I was 31 and that wasn’t my plan, but I really loved being a pedagogical leader, and I gave it a chance.”

How difficult is the curriculum?

Roman: “How do you define difficult? If I wanted to focus on difficult, I could make them learn the telephone book by heart. That would be difficult and demanding, but what would that give them? Education is often a difficult emotional and mental experience, but the difficulty should be of some value to the learner. When everything is provided readymade and regurgitated, with pupils required to learn by heart and repeat things, you can’t see the person within the learning process. Our program enables pupils to find themselves in the process of learning.”

But are the classes demanding?

“Very much so. In every course there is a high-level research component, with many elements of analysis. Pupils are required not only to familiarize themselves with the information but to understand it, analyze it and look at it critically. The classes here are complex, with students contending with a significant load.”

What impact does the fact that you’re not preparing for Israeli matriculation exams have?

“The entire academic program here is based on thinking and making choices. Studies here consist of six main clusters, and every pupil has to choose one subject from each cluster. Every subject has a final assignment, with other assignments along the way, as well as exams. At the end of every year, a pupil has to submit an academic-level thesis on a subject of his choice, with one of the teachers serving as a professional mentor.”

Are there exams on the material they learn? Is their knowledge tested?

“There are tests, but we don’t say that they have to cover specific material. We need to teach concepts and investigate these together. We talk about shaping and analysis of information, not rote learning.”

So what interests your students? What kind of theses do they submit?

Roman calls on one of the school’s graduates who has come on a visit. “Mohammed, what did you write your thesis about?” The answer is Eminem.

Eminem?

“Yes, the rapper. This was a work in English literature that included a literary analysis of his songs. Some students have examined the psychological effects of the totalitarian regime in North Korea, one girl looked at the concept of gender-neutral education, while another did a thesis on the geopolitical impact of the relations between Hezbollah, Syria, Iran and Russia. I have another pupil who wrote a paper on the way blacks are represented in American culture, using Beyonce’s album Lemonade.”

Can they write on whatever they want?

“As long as it’s 4,000 words long and meets rigorous academic standards, accompanied by a qualified teacher, I have no problem with it.”

The decision to run a program in Israel that is not directed at matriculation exams is no less than revolutionary. For many years, many educators and academics, teachers, principals and pupils have harshly criticized the system. They argue that it poses many stumbling blocks, is irrelevant to anything outside of school and the world of employment, and doesn’t help develop the skills required of graduates in the 21st century.

The bagrut, critics say, forces teachers to teach only material that will appear in tests, leading to widespread cheating and an industry of experts offering learning-disability diagnoses to give teens a boost.

Where did the education system in Israel go wrong?

“It doesn’t give the teacher and pupil any space in the learning process. In the end, the teacher and pupil are alienated by their learning. The system is still designed to transfer blocs of information

to students, with very little thinking and autonomy. The curriculum in our school is based on the premise that students' opinions are important, that their analysis is important as is the way they see things. The research they do is based on their areas of interest, and they are part of the process. They don't learn just for a bottom line that is a mark at the end."

No language arts

The international baccalaureate program is used in 5,000 schools around the world, including two other Israel-based international schools in [Givat Haviva](#) and East Jerusalem. At East Med, they emphasize peace in the Middle East. Alongside teaching the curriculum, the school operates a center for conflict resolution, named after the American billionaire [Leon Charney](#), where pupils conduct debates and learn about conflict management.

Pupils are required to join in extracurricular activities such as sports, art, culture and youth movements, or to take part in a model United Nations where each student represents a country and its policies. In Israel there are other schools that simulate UN debates, and these schools compete with each other.

The East Med school was established five years ago at the initiative of Oded Rose, the CEO of the Israel-America Chamber of Commerce, who went to a similar school in Canada, and Kobi Nave, the director of the Hakfar Hayarok Youth Village. It operates like a private high school: There's an admissions committee that bases its decisions on interviews and previous school performance. There is no supervision by the Education Ministry, only by the company that manages international matriculation programs.

Despite this, the school is not defined as private and gets limited funding from the Education Ministry. Teachers belong to the teachers' association, like other Israeli high school teachers, although some of them have private contracts. In 2018, the ministry gave the school 2.2 million shekels (\$620,000), about 40% of what other schools get for high school students. The school's annual budget is 11 million shekels.

Why would students from the US or Europe, who have many other choices, come here?

"I think that many students are attracted to the creative and intellectual openness that exists in Israel, as well as to the free and in-

your-face entrepreneurial spirit that is more abundant in Israeli schools.”

But many of them are leaving a comfortable life with their families to live in a boarding school in a dangerous part of the world?

“These are kids with something burning inside them, who find it unsatisfactory to be where they are, because they want to grow. They feel like changing the world. Many of them see the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as an opportunity to learn about solving conflicts. On the other hand, there are students here for whom things weren’t working well at home or in their previous schools, and they find some kind of refuge here.”

How do they get accepted?

“We don’t have entrance exams. There is a process that examines their suitability to living in a dorm, as well as their level of maturity and emotional readiness. Then we look at their motivation. The process consists of two interviews and three essays they write -- one about why they want to study here, another describes an experience that changed the way they think and another in which they ask themselves a question and then answer it. They provide report cards and references from teachers and other students. They have to be very articulate in English.”

Eye on potential

And in terms of achievements?

“We try and see if they have the potential to succeed in our program. We mainly consider their motivation.”

And all of this depends on their parents’ ability to pay tuition.

“When a student is accepted, we present him with a sliding scale of fees, and he and his family choose what they think they can afford, providing data about their financial situation. Most are highly subsidized. Tuition costs are not an obstacle here, and are lower than in similar schools around the world. Ultimately, fees here are similar to tuition fees in other boarding schools.”

When you started, were you worried about your lack of experience in teaching and administration?

“I did have concerns, but these can’t stand in the way of decisions such as these. I don’t look at things through my individual lens, but through the impact I want to have. Running a school with a mission like this and with the pedagogical concept it has is definitely difficult, but it’s an opportunity to do something unique, one you can’t refuse, regardless of age. I believe that with the right approach, a well-formed educational vision and sufficient resolve and investment one can overcome challenges and obstacles. Running this school is fulfilling a dream I didn’t even know I had. Advancing peace and dealing in education, breaking new ground, that’s something exceptional I’d like to invest everything I can into, in order to ensure success.”