

Cities accuse Kfar Hayarok of teenage 'brain drain'

By Or Kashti

The Kfar Hayarok youth village near Tel Aviv is at the center of a storm over its Levi Eshkol public school, with parents and authorities in neighboring municipalities clashing over the school's special programs which are drawing talented students from the surrounding area.

In the past year the Education Ministry has been engaged in a well-publicized legal battle against a private school near Netanya, the Havruta High School for Leadership and Culture, on the grounds that the school is drawing gifted students from their local educational establishments.

However, critics claim that the ministry has been too lax enforcing the same policy directive against the Levi Eshkol School at the Kfar Hayarok youth village – between Tel Aviv and Ramat Hasharon – even though that, too, has been taking students from neighboring schools.

In the past the ministry had not insisted on strict enforcement of guidelines requiring the students' home municipalities to approve their transfer to Kfar Hayarok. Proof that the policy is being more rigorously enforced comes via a lawsuit from a group of parents, who want to force their home communities to approve their children's transfer to the youth village school.

About a third of the students at the Kfar Hayarok school, which serves Grades 7 through 12, live in the youth village dormitory. Most of these children come from deprived socioeconomic backgrounds. Their other classmates come to the school each day from a number of communities in the center of the country, largely because of special study courses offered at the school. These include an educational track taught in English, veterinary studies and a special arts program.

The non-resident students pay supplemental tuition fees of about NIS 11,000 a year, which the youth village's director, Kobi Naveh, says goes mainly to fund bus transportation and school

lunches. Some opponents of the school have suggested, however, that at least a portion of the high fees go to finance the special courses of study at Kfar Hayarok, which are less readily available at regular public schools.

Students wishing to attend the school must take exams and undergo other screening tests, for which a fee is charged – apparently in violation of Education Ministry directives. Naveh noted that demand among students to enroll at the school is much higher than what the school can accommodate.

After years of complaints that students at Kfar Hayarok were not

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getting the required approval from their home communities to study at the youth village, the Education Ministry issued a directive in December 2009 ordering the school not to accept students without it, followed by another order that the approval must be provided at the beginning of the admissions procedure.

The Kfar Hayarok school has said that it no longer admits students without the approval of their home communities, but Naveh acknowledged that the rule had previously not been rigorously enforced.

The enforcement of the ministry's policy, however, has led two groups of parents, from Kfar Sava and Petah Tikva, to file a lawsuit over the refusal of municipal authorities to allow their children to study at Kfar Hayarok. The parents are claiming that the change in policy was instituted rashly and in violation of what the parents say is their right to decide where their children are enrolled.

"We are not ready to accept the decision [to withhold approval for the children to study at Kfar Hayarok] at least without a fight," said Moshe Haber, one of the Kfar Sava parents petitioning the court.

The refusal of local authorities to approve students' transfer to the youth village school is a battle over prestige says Naveh, who adds: "The sole harm is to the ego of the directors of the [municipal] education departments in view of our success."

However, education system sources said that the departure of students has also on occasion resulted in problems at the schools from which the students are departing, due to a reduction in the number of classes in the students' local schools and an increase in class size.

In one case, instead of three 7th grade classes with fewer than 30 students in each, the school eliminated a class and organized only two classes in the grade level with nearly 40 children in each classroom.

"Who decided that the personal desire of a student to transfer to Kfar Hayarok is more important than the edu-

cational well-being of all the other students in the grade, who now have to be crowded into [fewer] classrooms?" said a source in one local education system.

"Kfar Hayarok is taking our strong students, [and] harming public education," said Ron Nahman, the mayor of the West Bank settlement of Ariel. Nahman calls Kfar Hayarok's backing from the Education Ministry "a big, continuing scandal."

"We're not against Kfar Hayarok," says Avi Kaminsky, the head of the Rosh Ha'ayin municipal education department, "but want it to conduct itself like any other school in the State of Israel, meaning that it will respect the decisions of local authorities and not send the parents to fight us."

Kaminsky also demands that the municipalities be allowed to compete on a level playing field: "If the Education Ministry allows Kfar Hayarok to open academic programs with impressive sounding names like veterinary studies or environmental leadership and allows them to charge parents high fees, we too want to do that," Kaminsky says.

Kaminsky acknowledges that when the numbers of students seeking to enroll at Kfar Hayarok were small, it did not create a problem, but he says the numbers have been growing. "[Kfar Hayarok] is opening elitist academic tracks, picking its students according to their grades and their parents' economic capacity, while we are obligated to accept every student," he says, adding that local authorities are only asking for education policy to be enforced on an equal basis.

Naveh, who has worked at Kfar Hayarok since 1968, counters: "I had a dream that Kfar Hayarok would integrate the relatively weaker dormitory students and the strong students from the surrounding area." He says the special academic tracks were developed to attract students from the region, adding: "I am pleased that we have been successful with this, against all the odds."

If his school is not allowed to admit students from the region, he adds, it will have to return to educating only students from distressed backgrounds, and "that would be a serious mistake," Naveh warns.