

English-speaking teenagers lost for words in Israeli school system

Anglo File

Andrew Eisenstein

At his public school in New York, Arad Horovitz was a popular honors student with a knack for math. However, after his family moved to Israel in 2009 and the 13-year-old transferred into an Israeli middle school in Ra'anana, his grades plummeted and he had trouble making friends.

"He totally shut down," said his Israeli-born mother Yael. "It was all because of the language. He just didn't know Hebrew well enough."

The school offered little support, Yael said, so she pulled Arad out and enrolled him in an English-language high school program for new and returning immigrants at the Hakfar Hayarok youth village and school in Ramat Hasharon.

Although he had to skip a grade to join the program, Arad soon began to flourish academically and socially. "It was like he was a different person," Yael recalled.

While the absorption process presents unique challenges for every member of an immigrant family, it can be especially trying for teenagers. They must contend with heightened social and academic pressures, on top of the usual difficulties associated with moving to a new country.

So the decision to shut down the English track at Hakfar



The Hakfar Hayarok 12th-graders in Eilat.

Abigail Tramer

Hayarok after only three years – Arad is part of the last graduating class of 12 – has been greeted with consternation by parents and school administrators alike.

"This is a group that needs extra attention, and they're not getting it," said Lori Bacher, a native of Michigan who holds a master's degree in education administration and helped launch the program.

Having previously studied and worked at Hakfar Hayarok, Bacher raised the idea with administrators there of starting a high-school track that would prepare immigrant students to take the *bagrut* (matriculation examinations) in English.

The program opened in September 2010 with 40 students in grades 9 through 12. A few months into the first year, though, it became clear that there had been a "misunderstanding" with the Education

Ministry over its *bagrut* language policy, and that some of the enrolled students might not be able to graduate as a result.

"We made a lot of checks before and we understood that it's possible that all of the students can take the *bagrut* in English," the school's principal, Kobi "Sisco" Naveh, said this week. "It was a misunderstanding. We did our best to change the rules but we failed."

Naveh said he petitioned the then director general of the Education Ministry, Shimshon Shoshani, to accommodate the students, but to no avail.

Shoshani told Haaretz that he did not recall discussing the issue with Naveh. He called the *bagrut* language policy logical, noting: "We would like the students to integrate into society. If I immigrate to the United States, don't I have to take the SAT in English?"

In a statement to Haaretz

yesterday, the ministry said: "The manner in which new immigrants and returning citizens take the *bagrut* examinations is currently under review."

After the discrepancy came to light, Hakfar Hayarok gave each affected family the option to stick it out and appeal individually to the ministry for leniencies, such as extra time for the children to take the exams in Hebrew, or to leave. Bacher resigned suddenly, and the school decided not to recruit any more students.

Some children did receive leniencies, Naveh said, while others were pulled out of the program. He said most of the program's 25 graduates had a full *bagrut*, considered a prerequisite for gaining entry to elite army units and universities.

Parents of current and former students said there was much to recommend the Hakfar Hayarok program, including the dedicated teachers and small class sizes. But some complained that it was initially disorganized and that they had been misled about the *bagrut* issue.

Despite the failure of the English-language track at Hakfar Hayarok, Naveh said that the school will try again in September 2014, when it plans to launch an International Baccalaureate program.

Naveh commiserated with frustrated parents, saying, "There just aren't enough solutions for English-speaking students here."

Read the full story at haaretz.com