

The Branco Weiss Schools for At-risk Students: Paving a Path for Every Child



The Need

Every year, some 26,000 students drop out of the education system.¹ The majority of them drop out during the transition from junior high school to high school; the phenomenon peaks at eleventh grade, when 9.8% of boys and 2.6% of girls drop out.

Israeli society pays a heavy price when students drop out of school: an inability to find their place in the IDF and in the job market, and sometimes even criminal behavior – all of which demand tremendous resources in the areas of welfare and law enforcement. The heaviest loss, though, is borne by the children themselves – who feel like second-class citizens, alienated from Israeli society.

The Branco Weiss Institute is a nonprofit organization that has been running a network of schools for at-risk students for the past 17 years. These schools give children one more chance to complete 12 years of school and receive a matriculation certificate.

Since 1998, at least 2,500 at-risk students graduated the Branco Weiss schools with, a high-school diploma, better tools for a productive and meaningful living, and most importantly – a belief in their abilities for life.

Some of the Students Characteristics

In care of welfare department	48%
Criminal record	32%
Learning disabilities	86%
Dropped out of more than one school	59%
Out of school for more than a year	39%
Supervised by a probation officer	26%
Academically at eighth-grade level or below	86%
Boys	78%

¹ Central Bureau of Statistics, *Statistical Abstract of Israel* 2010.

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Operating on a Sustainable Model

In 1998, the Branco Weiss Institute established its first school for at-risk students, in Merom Hagalil. Since then, 13 more schools have been founded: Golan-Katzrin, Kiryat Shemona, Tiberias, Hadera, Beit Shemesh, Ma'ale Adumim, Ramle, Modi'in, Beer Sheva, Eilat, Bat Yam, Or Yehuda, and Pardes Hanna. A total of 1,600 students attend these schools in 2016.



The Branco Weiss schools operate under the supervision of the Ministry of Education and are funded on the basis of its budgeting standards.

Each school is also part of its local authority's school system, and enjoys the local authority support as every other school of that municipality.

As licensed educational institutions, they are ensured continuity of operation for many years to come.

Our work in a large number of schools has given us *excellence and expertise in organizational and budgetary management*. This permits maximization of the resources that the state and other agencies allocate to the schools and optimal utilization of the educational model.

And yet, support is very much needed in order to sustain the Branco Weiss unique educational model. For that purpose, we strive to collaborate with generous contributors who share our belief that social change can be achieved through excellence in education.

Catalysts for Social Change

All of our students experience success throughout their three or four years in the school and take the matriculation exams. But the real change that these schools offer their students is a change in the negative, passive, and destructive ideas that were imprinted on their souls by their past experiences. *They learn to believe in their abilities to integrate into society. They learn to find the inner strength to cope with the*

challenges they face, and they also learn that there are people in society who accept them, care about them, help them, and encourage them. Every year, some 300 12th-graders graduate our schools and go out on their way as adults who have learned to trust others and believe in themselves.



The experience in the schools is significant not only for the students; it also **brings about a change their families and broader community can feel**. Not surprisingly, it is often the parents who had given up on their children much earlier, and their only request is “just do something with my child.” Now they see the child growing stronger, setting clear, mainstream goals for himself and working diligently to achieve them. This brings about changes both in their perception of their child’s abilities and in their hope for a better future, as well as a change in their perception of the individual’s capacity to grow and function proactively. The

community as a whole experiences a change, from seeing the child as “destined for trouble” to understanding that it is possible to get through to struggling students.

Community-building activity is an integral part of these schools’

comprehensive approach to education. Every student engages in it. In the Tiberias school, for example, the students guide younger students on educational field trips to the city’s archaeological park; in the Ramle school, they get certified as assistants to horseback-riding therapists and work in stables with special-needs young students. In Beer Sheva, the students adopted the local branch of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and take care of its animals.

From the educational point of view, there are at least two reasons for this. First, it is part of the children’s process of changing their self-image from that of a frustrated victim in an alienating society to that of persons with something to offer others. The children undergo a significant and empowering experience when they realize that they are needed. Second, this activity imbues them with a feeling of social responsibility.

Therefore, the presence of the Branco Weiss schools for at-risk students in the community constitutes a vibrant center of educational excellence. It exerts an individual influence on every student but also extends to the entire community.

An Original and Innovative Model for Action

In Israel in the 21st century, six-year schools often have classes of 35 students and apply one-size-fits-all learning methods that ignore students’ individual needs and unique

learning styles. Teachers are required to engage with dozens of students, whom they teach for many hours a week.

The Branco Weiss schools offer a different education model, based on the following principles:

1 - The schools are small—no more than 120 students. The small framework enables the system to get to know each of the students individually and gives them a sense of security. Every student has a multi-year individual program that is designed on the basis of an intimate understanding of his/her unique situation as a student, emotional needs, family environment, and life in general.

2- The schools employ unconventional teaching methods to help their students register appropriate achievements. A student needs and wants to see herself as an equal among equals. Setting high standards for them means believing in their abilities. The children come to realize that the system has not given up on them and expects them not to give up on themselves. They are given an opportunity to be “like everyone else” and presented with a challenge that reinforces their self-esteem. Therefore, the schools do not do away with clear boundaries and obligations, academic coursework, completion of a matriculation certificate, and service in the IDF or National Service.

3- However, the scholastic program in the Branco Weiss schools is modular and flexible: Every student has a schedule tailored to his or her individual needs and that employs appropriate didactic methods. In keeping with the concept of multiple intelligences, students who are stronger on spatial intelligence are taught using visual aids, students whose strength is in musical intelligence learn with the help of music, and so on. Teachers individualize the content of lessons, approaches to learning, and teaching materials for each student. The school is flexible in the days and times when classes are held: during vacations, pre-exam marathons, etc.

4- Learning is seen as part of the totality of life. A hungry student cannot learn; a child who is experiencing a violent crisis at home will have trouble staying within clear boundaries. Therefore, the faculty sees itself as responsible for every aspect of the child’s life.



If a student does not show up in the morning, his/her homeroom teacher calls the parents; if need be, the teacher goes to children’s house to help them get ready for school. Teachers get to know the members of their students’ families

and are aware of the conflicts and problems at home. School personnel assist students who get in trouble with the law. They accompany them through the process of conscription in the IDF and fight for their right to be conscripted in cases where the IDF is ready to give up on them.

All students of these schools are entitled to one hot meal a day. Other basic needs—notebooks, pencils, clothes, etc—are also met.



5- In order for every student to be given all of these things, teachers have to show excellence and professionalism in various aspects of their work. Accordingly, **vast resources are invested in training teachers and improving the quality of their teaching**. Every faculty member learns and develops on the job, in their teaching as well as in psychological and other domains. The courses are offered in the schools and for peer groups from the entire network. School principals and department chairs are mentored by a specialist. The advantage of a network is its ability to share local successes and publicize them in all the other schools, so that every school can implement the best pedagogical and professional practices. The educational excellence is also expressed in the meticulous selection of a staff whose members are young in spirit, imbued with a sense of calling, devoted and committed to their work.

Results, Achievements, Success

- ✓ According to data from the evaluations conducted in the schools every year, **82%** of students are present every day of the year. The dropout rate is zero. There are almost no outbreaks of violence
- ✓ The rate of eligibility for matriculation certificates in Branco Weiss schools is on average **34%** - more than half of that of the national rate even though these are students who were absent from the school system for at least 3-4 years.
- ✓ **85%** of students achieve at least a partial matriculation certificate (8–19 units).
- ✓ The rate of conscription in the IDF is **92%**.

Data from a national survey conducted in May 2015 by the Ministry of Education- An Example from Our school in Ramle:

	Branco Weiss Ramla	All Schools	Hebrew Speaking Schools
Generally positive feeling about the school among students	81%	69%	70%
School efforts to promote a sense of being protected	84%	53%	48%
A close relationship and a sense of mutual concern between students and teachers	78%	42%	38%
Positive relationships between students and their classmates	72%	65%	64%

	Branco Weiss Ramla	All Schools	Hebrew Speaking Schools
Appropriate behavior among students in class	27%	38%	35%
Support and encouragement by teachers for students studying for matriculation exams	89%	76%	74%
Self-learning strategies	71%	55%	50%
The school trains us to life itself	84%	59%	54%