

# Education pros cast doubts on plan to train newcomers to teach English

TAU official: 'Assumption' about immigrant abilities is a 'recipe for failure'

By Cnaan Liphshiz

Education professionals are divided over a new plan unveiled by the Education Ministry this week to relieve a crippling shortage of English teachers in Israel by training new immigrants from English-speaking countries to teach throughout the country. The main question is whether the program truly trains teachers to survive the Israeli classroom long-term.

According to Zion Shabat, head of the ministry's employment department, the plan calls for providing new immigrants with B.A.'s a full scholarship while undergoing an expedited three-month teachers' training course. Israelis with B.A.'s are required to undergo either a one-year or a two-year training course for a certificate. Shabat said the ministry is currently preparing for the first class of applicants, and that so far 15 new Anglo immigrants expressed interest.

Under the plan, graduates would be certified to teach grades 1-12. Shabat said trainees would be able to start working while studying. "This will help relieve some of the shortage as early as this coming September," he said. He added the program was being run in conjunction with immigrant-assistance organization Nefesh B'Nefesh. Shabat sees the organization as "instrumental in approaching candidates and eliciting their participation."

Dr. Yael Bejarano, former head of the Open University's English Department, said she supported the plan. "One of the main reasons for the ministry's reluctance to teach English in first grade is lack of teachers. This could help. But the new teachers would

have a hard time functioning in higher grades." She added: "Survival in the field is a big concern. Experience from similar projects to train new Anglo immigrants as English teachers has shown that most of them drop out after a year or two in the field, which means a waste of training resources. The ministry needs to find a way to keep them in the field."

Other professionals have limited faith in an abbreviated teacher training program for new immigrants as a solution. "A training course over the semester is not going to prepare these people to the reality of an Israeli classroom," according to Nava Horovitz, chair of the English Teachers Association Israel.

She told Anglo File the shortage in the system, which is in need of hundreds of new teachers, is having a detrimental effect on the quality of education. However, she pointed out that similar projects in the past have proved largely unsuccessful. The Education Ministry's last such initiative was some five years ago, and prior to that one the ministry and the Jewish Agency launched the "Aliyah 2000" project in the late 1990s to bring immigrants from English speaking countries to work as teachers.

"Talpiot College trained whole classes of new immigrants to become teachers, and our experience shows few of them stay in the field for more than a year or two," she says. Horovitz estimates that 70 percent of new immigrants without teaching experience whom Talpiot trained quit the field within five years. According to Horovitz, a short training period would



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The Democratic School in Maagan Michael. Some educators doubt the course will prepare immigrant English teachers for the realities of the Israeli school system, causing them to bail out.

leave the teachers with poor Hebrew skills, which she says are necessary for teaching in Israel. "They need to communicate with the children, their colleagues and the principle - let alone parents," she said.

Dr. Ofra Inbar, coordinator of the Teacher Certificate Program at Tel Aviv University's School of Education, rejects the new plan's "underlying assumption" that new immigrants from English speaking countries require less training to become English teachers. "In Israel and elsewhere, there is a false perception of native speakers as superior to non-native speakers in teaching English, which leads to thinking that native speakers require a much shorter training period," she told Anglo File.

"This approach has turned out to be a recipe for failure."

According to Inbar, who wrote her doctorate on the subject, Israeli-born teachers are actually better equipped to teach than their Anglo counterparts. "Native speakers are sometimes less aware of the needs of people who are acquiring a second language, plus they may encounter greater difficulty in managing a classroom in Israel."

## Important versus urgent

Inbar says dropout rates are higher among immigrant English teachers than among Israeli ones. Her research shows Israeli-born teachers describe themselves as more

ideologically motivated to teach than Anglos. This, she says, could potentially translate into higher resilience as teachers. "Motivation is crucial because working in the school system requires fortitude." She added: "Bringing new teachers into the system without addressing the causes that led to the teacher shortage in the first place seems like a temporary solution." Inbar points to a combination of local constraints and global developments. "The establishment of English as a world-language has increased demand in the school system, where many pupils start studying English as early as first grade," she explains.

But relatively low salaries; competition from private

schools and other professions, overcrowded classrooms and lack of professional support from the Education Ministry mean that the rise in demand is left unmet, according to Inbar. Horovitz adds rising violence rates in schools to the list of ailments deterring Israeli graduates from entering the field of pedagogy.

Horvitz of Talpiot College said the plan might prove counterproductive from an immigrant-absorption point of view. "Managing a class is difficult. Without training and support, new immigrants might feel a sense of failure in the earliest stages of immigration into Israel, and that's never good."

Shabat, from the ministry, retorted, "I, for one, can't afford to sit around and evaluate philosophical theories. I have classes full of pupils and no English teachers. It's my job to make sure that come September 1 there's someone there who can teach them how to speak English."

Horovitz, Inbar and another pedagogic professional who asked to remain unnamed argued for finding solutions for teachers already within the system, thereby making it more appealing to newcomers. "The ministry would do better to invest the money in teacher colleges, to attract locals with good English," says Horovitz, who arrived from the U.K. many years ago. "Or it could give more incentives and scholarships to encourage more Israelis who know the school system" Shabat said the project "does not cost any more than other government-funded teacher training courses." He added his ministry offers several fully-subsidized teacher training programs.