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There is No Home Without Distress; There is No Family That is Not at Risk" | column

According to the State Comptroller's report, in 2021, the average dropout rate from Israeli education institutions was 0.5%. According to ELEM, the numbers are even higher. "Studies are important," says ELEM-Israel's Executive Director, "but we need to look at the kids first, what they are really dealing with. Maybe that's how we'll decrease the numbers."

Written by Tali Erez

Time goes by, but the distress of at-risk youth always remains. Beginnings are exciting, but not for everyone. As a mother of three teenagers who wants a good and valuable educational experience for my children, I can share the great excitement before the beginning of the school year - the bookbag, the pencilcase, the new school shirt, and the joy of meeting friends. Sounds good, right? But that's the thing; it's not.

For many children and teenagers, reality hits the second the year begins. With the onset of the school year come thoughts, concerns, and fears. In the best-case scenario, the concerns are - what if they don't like me? What if they ignore me? Worse concerns would be - who can even go to school when there is such pressure at home? Who cares about me when everyone is self-absorbed anyway? Who cares about studying when I have so much to deal with? And then, along comes the decision. "I'm done with school." After all, "no framework fits me."

Then, the holiday season starts (High Holidays – ELEM USA), and while for many children and teenagers, these are days of beginnings, family time, meals, trips, and togetherness, there are those for whom the holidays are a difficult, confusing time, and sometimes, simply a nightmare.

For at-risk populations, the holiday season raises concerns of a different kind. This is a time of confusion, of distress. "Will I celebrate the holiday?" "Will we even have a holiday meal?" There are boys and girls for whom home is a painful, violent, lonely place where family and the holiday spirit never exist. And the post-holidays period is looming around the corner - a period of routine and going back to school.

As recently published in the State Comptroller's report, the average dropout rate in Israel in the 2019-2020 school year was 0.5% (8,540 out of 1,754,686 students in grades 1st-12th), with the highest dropout rate being among male high school students (1.2%). And this is data that concern only known dropouts, which is included in the data of the education system, and not

covert dropout (boys and girls who, over time, attend fewer and fewer classes and eventually stop coming to school).

On the other hand, from the data we collected from youth served by ELEM, in 2021 alone, 9% dropped out of school (1,385 boys and girls), both known and covert dropouts. If we examine our reality candidly, we will realize that dropout rates are even greater in practice than we report.

There are school dropouts; that's not news. But what does this mean for at-risk youth? Consider the education system, which is full of good people but is collapsing and beaten down. Take the welfare system, which also has good people, but the workload is exhausting, and the endless bureaucracy is draining. Take the cost of living and think about the simple, ordinary people who pay more for mortgage and electricity.

And now multiply and triple these numbers, and take into account those youth who have already experienced two and a half years of instability and periods of detachment, of worsening and deepening hardships and of increasing the circle of risk - and suddenly, a school year begins. Even if COVID disappeared from our lives, the difficulties experienced by youth will remain. The youth continue to pay a heavy price. A school year begins and ends, but the hardships remain. And the result of all these is a ticking time bomb, part of it has already exploded, and part of it is on the way.

There is a verse in Exodus that says: "And Pharaoh arose in the night, with all his slaves and all the Egyptians—because there was a loud cry in Egypt; for there was no house where there was not someone dead." Meaning there is a dead person in every house.

If I simplify it, then maybe there isn't a home that doesn't experience distress. There is no family without risk. One is depressed, another has difficulties at school, one rebels against her parents, and another has an eating disorder. Studies are important, no doubt, but first and foremost, it is important to see each student as an individual. What are they dealing with at home, with their friends, in the neighborhood, in the youth movement, in the basketball team, and in their hip-hop group on an emotional, mental, and social level? We may not completely prevent dropouts, but at least we will work together to reduce the numbers.

Only through the integrated work of all systems - education, health, and welfare - can we provide them with the best response. The price or the value of the profession I chose for myself is that I don't have the privilege to close my eyes. So, if you ask me where I fit in this story, I and we are here to be the voice of those who are busy dealing with survival, and we are here to change reality together. And to those thousands of children and teenagers, don't stop dreaming because you are our successful next generation.