

Education System*

Introduction and Summary

We believe the education system in the coming decade should be based on several general principles:

1. Assurance of equal access to the system's resources for children from all social sectors. To accomplish this, affirmative action should be applied for children from weaker strata.
2. Fostering a commitment on the part of the young generation to Israeli society as it renews its national life in view of our cultural heritage.
3. Fostering cultural sensitivity and understanding of spiritual developments that typify the current era.
4. Imparting command of basic skills with which young people may continue their studies at the post-primary level and, in a rising proportion, in higher education.

The eleven paragraphs of recommendations in this paper fall into three groups:

The first group includes recommendations concerning central-government policy measures that may not require budget allocations but may affect the performance, social status, and quality of the education system. This group includes Recommendations 1-3 and Recommendation 10.

The second group focuses on resource allocations for measures that may narrow disparities in inputs for the various

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sectors, in consideration of each sector's different needs, in order to narrow gaps in scholastic achievements. Recommendations 5-7 belong to this group.

The third group concentrates on resource allocations for pedagogical measures meant to enhance the educational process and the system's outputs. At issue here are Recommendations 4, 8, 9, and 11.

We do not offer a yardstick for use in prioritizing the recommendations. However, to fulfill three of the recommendations – applying the State system to all children countrywide, paring the executive functions of the Ministry of Education, and aiming for a 50 percent rate of matriculation-certificate eligibility among members of the relevant age group by the end of the incumbent government's tenure – immediate decisions and preparations seem to be necessary.

Recommendations

- 1. A National Education Council should be established to discuss changes and innovations in the education system at the level of principle, before decisions are made, and to launch initiatives for changes and innovations after public debate.**

Israel has hardly any public debate on basic issues in the education system, a system in which almost every household countrywide has an interest. Such a debate – at all levels, from the Ministry of Education administration to municipal authorities to individual schools – is crucial for the continued sound development of Israeli society. Development of the education system is a basic prerequisite for our continued existence as a creative cultural entity and a democratically governed society that can compete in international markets, assure all citizens a high standard of living, and defend itself if

necessary. Therefore, an appropriate organizational framework that can assure and promote the existence of such a debate should be established and institutionalized.

a. National Education Council

For such a council to discuss the issues effectively, and for its debates to lead to the coalescence of policy recommendations and, over time, a multi-annual strategic plan for the development of the education system, several conditions should be assured:

- * The council's existence should be anchored in a government resolution.
- * Its members should be appointed by the Prime Minister.
- * Its composition should accurately represent all social currents and sectors.
- * The council should have a small forum that will assure continuity in its discussions, collect relevant data for the debates, and tend to current management.

Additional participants in the council, by the nature of things, should be representatives of parents, pupils, teachers' organizations, school principals, the State Education Administration, municipal government, and academia (in education and other disciplines).

b. Other Entities

Once the National Education Council is up and running, arrangements for public debate in municipal authorities and education institutions should be encouraged to make sure that the Council's discussions are enriched by the views of the public generally and of parents and pupils particularly. Debates over education issues, especially those in the National Council, should be given lavish coverage in the media, especially the electronic media.

In view of the success of the various White House Conferences in the United States, there is reason to consider

placing certain specific discussions of the Council under the patronage of the Prime Minister.

2. The State school system should be expanded to cover all children in Israel on the basis of mutual willingness to recognize various sectors' educational and ideological differences and singularities and on the basis of willingness to apply uniform and equal funding arrangements throughout the system. The individual sectors, for their part, should comply with the conventional terms of inspection of the quality of their educational personnel and should introduce a common core curriculum. We believe that a consensus on a common core curriculum, as a basis for the change proposed here, is attainable.

The underlying premise of the Israeli statist point of view has been that it is the role of the state and its apparatus to create a common cultural infrastructure for the offspring of the multitudes of immigrants who reached Israel in its formative years. However, since the time statehood was achieved, Israel has acknowledged the need to give certain sectors a defined and limited extent of autonomy in organizational and educational-content terms. An example of this is the State-Religious system. Over the years, additional sectors with their own particular cultural needs and requirements have taken shape in our society. We believe it proper to expand the autonomy given to the sectors that make up the State system today, on the one hand, and to incorporate other sectors into this framework that currently enjoy nearly total autonomy but fall outside the State education orbit, on the other hand. This is said with specific reference to expanding and institutionalizing the autonomy of the Arab system and to incorporating the Independent (Religious) system into the State system.

To carry out this plan, two conditions must be assured:

First, all school systems should have a **shared core curriculum**, beyond which they may be autonomous in choosing the subjects and contents of study.

Second, all schools should comply with basic rules in various respects, such as quality of teaching staff and safety and hygiene in school buildings, to name only two.

Formulating the core curriculum should be one of the first items on the agenda of the National Education Council. In our opinion, the core curriculum should include segments on the **particular cultural heritage** of each national group that lives in Israel and on **civics** (which should be expanded to include education in **peace, self-expression, and listening**).

3. The executive functions of the Ministry of Education and Culture should be downscaled and handed over to municipal authorities and schools. Concurrently, the functions of the ministry in policymaking, implementing the core curriculum, inspecting standards and policy implementation, providing pedagogical guidance and steering services, funding the system, and controlling use of funding sources should be strengthened.

The centralized structure of the education system originated in Israel's formative period, as mass (Jewish) immigration doubled the country's population during the first three years of statehood. The Ministry of Education and Culture was perceived as a major player in shaping the character of the groups of immigrants (many of whom were displaced persons) in educational and schooling terms. Fifty years later, as defined cultural groups have emerged and the executive abilities and strength of municipal authorities have improved (at least in many cases), the organizational system should be adapted to the new conditions.

In the past few years, some municipal authorities have been pressing for a larger role in shaping and developing the education system in their areas of jurisdiction and for greater involvement in relations with parents, who are also taking more interest in the education system. Shifting some powers in managing and developing the education system to municipal authorities might make the system more accountable, since in such a case some decision-makers would be elected by the public. This changeover should be implemented gradually, in view of carefully defined criteria of readiness.

On another level, the possibility of autonomous management of schools is being debated and planning efforts to achieve it are being made. Notably, in many post-primary schools principals and teaching faculty have extensive management powers. Thus, the proposed change pertains more to the primary level and to self-standing junior-high schools. Importantly, as long as functions such as selecting, hiring, and firing teachers; overall management of the school budget and the teaching payroll; or planning teachers' in-service training belong to the purview of the Ministry of Education, the autonomization of schools and principals will remain of limited significance.

4. In the next few years, a major effort should be made to improve scholastic achievements countrywide. The concrete manifestation of this effort should be that the share of pupils eligible for matriculation certificates among the relevant age group should climb to 50 percent in four years.

Israel today is characterized by a sense of dissatisfaction with the scholastic and educational achievements of its education system. Many observers point out that the system's achievements fall short of those of education systems in the countries to which Israel wishes to be compared. The disapprobation pertains to the level and quality of knowledge

that pupils attain at the various levels of schooling, the schools' ability to assure their clients an appropriate social climate and a safe and supportive environment, and the quality of the internal value infrastructure that youngsters take with them when they finish their schooling. To confront these challenges, the education system must take vigorous action in each of the fields mentioned.

In March 1994, in one of the few government discussions that have taken place on education, the Ministry of Education and Culture administration presented a plan – “The Government Believes in Education” – in which the proportion of matriculation-certificate eligibles in the relevant age group was to rise to 44 percent by 1997. At present (1999), the proportion of eligibles is only 39 percent. Therefore, as stated, we recommend aiming for a **50 percent rate of matriculation-certificate eligibility** at the end of four years. To attain this target, the effort should focus on groups of pupils who are missing one or two examinations to qualify.

The past decade was typified by a quest for a matriculation arrangement that, on the one hand, would save the examinations from abolition and sustain their role in setting standards of schooling and culture for young Israelis, and, on the other hand, would lessen their detrimental effect on the educational process at the post-primary level and ease pressure on the student population. The return to a format of eight matriculation exams (or, in the State-Religious system, nine), as the Ministry of Education administration has recently decided, was a regressive step on the ministry's part. Furthermore, in an issue as important as the matriculation exams – an institution that leaves its imprint on the scholastic environment at the senior-high, and, to some extent, the junior-high level – the system should not be jolted every few years by hasty decisions that disregard the

conclusions and recommendations of expert committees that were established by the Ministry of Education itself.

Without obscuring the importance of improving the scholastic achievements of Israeli pupils, it is proper to remark that the efforts being made to provide them with social and affective education, especially at the junior- and senior-high levels, are failing to meet the needs of young people *and* of society and fall seriously short of educational efforts in these fields in Western countries. If we want the educational process of our youth to help bridge social gaps and schisms and to build a civil society grounded in ethics, respect for persons of difference, and democratic life and governance, as opposed to a rising tide of violence, then we must invest time, financial resources, and emphasis in the process of training teachers, both before they begin their careers and in in-service settings.

5. Action to narrow scholastic-achievement disparities among population groups should continue.

The system should stop tracking underachieving pupils in separate groups or classes for their “fostering and advancement.” Cumulative educational experience shows that youngsters who are classified and sorted into classes of underachievers rarely return to the mainstream of the education system, no matter how good the intentions are. Instead of tracking, educational methods should be adopted that emphasize high and challenging goals and provide pupils who encounter difficulties with personal guidance, reinforcement of basic scholastic skills, and pre-emption (teaching of a study unit, subject, or skill **before** the underachiever experiences failure).

Furthermore, all afternoon programs based on personal tutoring in small and nonformal extramural settings should be encouraged and developed. The possibility of reassigning a large portion of the Long School Day budgets to these programs should be considered.

As for narrowing scholastic gaps, junior-high schools seem to be the context most in need of planning attention and special pedagogical efforts. The policy line stipulated by the Ministry of Education in the past few years – six years of post-primary schooling – should be adopted by all institutions (or all municipal authorities) that offer junior-high education in a separate school. The presumed characteristics of this structure are efforts to keep students from dropping out (and to refrain from de facto expulsion of students) and a comprehensive approach. To prevent dropping out (or to minimize its extent), the administration of the post-primary school must be able to respond to individual needs of youngsters (including adolescents who experience personal, family, or other distress), to uneven paces of personal development, or to the particular interests of certain pupils. The comprehensive approach makes it necessary to cope with socially and intellectually heterogeneous classes, for example, by developing scholastic curricula and programs of study that are not necessarily academic, and under no circumstances by partitioning classes into segregated homogeneous groups.

6. Action to revise the method of budgeting the education system should continue. We recommend the adoption of a per-pupil standard that takes account of pupils' socioeconomic background and indicators of the school instead of the current per-class or per-subject standard.

Although the acute need to narrow disparities by means of affirmative action for disadvantaged groups has been acknowledged, the total budget directly earmarked for this purpose is minimal – only NIS 600 million, 4 percent of the total Ministry of Education and Culture budget, in 1996, and, in our estimation, less than that in 1999. Today, none of the various

budgeting methods used by the education system reflects affirmative action for socioeconomically weak pupils.¹

The “per-pupil standard” method proposed here is based on transferring most resources for hours of study – at least 90 percent – to schools in accordance with the per-pupil standard. Schools with disadvantaged pupils would be entitled to preferential budget treatment that may climb to 100 percent. The allocation should be differential and may include more than one-third of pupils in Israel. An important principle to uphold in the plan is that pupils would be identified not by name but in accordance with the school’s score on the “disadvancement index.”

In any event, each class should be provided with the minimum number of hours needed to assure sound education. One may refine the system further by taking into account the school’s scholastic and educational achievements and various attributes of localities and neighborhoods.

Practically speaking, there is no need to increase the budget to carry out this recommendation; one may implement it by shifting budgets among population groups. However, a step of such administrative and budgetary significance cannot be taken without “bridging” budgets that will compensate schools as the transition is being made. Budgets for monitoring and control of implementation will also be needed. The proposed change will assure a more equitable distribution of any extra funding that the education system is given.

¹ The primary level uses a per-class standard. At junior high, budgeting is based on a uniform per-pupil standard, with supplements by means of a “disadvancement basket.” At the senior-high-level, a per-pupil standard is used with variations corresponding to the curricular program each pupil attends. The budgeting methods in pre-kindergarten and universities are also based on particularistic principles.

7. Total budgets for the Arab, Bedouin, and Druze sector should be aligned with those of the Jewish sector (in terms of teaching hours and in sheqel terms). Investments should be made in these sectors to develop educational personnel, upgrade and expand schools where necessary, and equip schools with computers.

The purpose of this recommendation is to stress the provision in Recommendation 4 concerning success rates on matriculation exams and that in Recommendation 5 concerning narrowing educational disparities, in view of wide gaps between the Jewish and the Arab sectors in both outputs and inputs. We must note that this recommendation is made for one purpose only: to urge the government to implement the recommendations of various committees that have been established in this matter, recommendations already approved by preceding governments (various five-year plans and the Ben-Peretz committee, to give only two examples). It hardly seems necessary to speak at length about this intolerable situation: a democratic country in which inputs for the education of minorities are scantier than those invested in educating members of the majority. It stands to reason that equalizing inputs would also significantly narrow the disparities in scholastic results and achievements.

Some of the process of equalizing resource allocations between the Jewish and the Arab sectors should be manifested in a **markedly disproportionate share**, in favor of the Arab sector relative to its share in the population, in funding for new education laws such as the Special Education Law, the Long School Day Law, and implementation of the Compulsory Education Law for the age 3-4 cohort.

If the previous recommendation on revising the budgeting methods is adopted, most of the cost of the current recommendation (equalizing allocations for education in the

Arab sector with those of the Jewish sector) would be absorbed in the cost of budgeting by the “per-pupil standard.” Beyond that, extra resources ought to be allocated to close gaps in building and related services such as psychologists and truant officers.

A dialogue should be held with educators in these sectors in order to make decisions on fostering and advancement of their children. Another issue to resolve is the wish among some members of minority groups to enroll their children in Jewish schools and to assure their distinct religious, cultural, and national identity by other means (family and other). This is probably another example of an issue that deserves thoroughgoing public debate, as proposed in the first part of this paper.

8. Improve the quality of education personnel

Teachers bear the brunt of the education burden. Their quality, professionalism, devotion, and pride are the infrastructure on which the entire education system rests. Consequently, an effort should be made to attain three interlocking goals:

- * Improve teachers’ professional quality.
- * Improve teachers’ working conditions and wages.
- * Improve the status of the teaching profession in Israel.

The underlying assumption is that the fulfillment of these goals will help improve the achievements of the education system at all levels. The way to attain the goals is by transforming the teaching profession into a sought-after and desired vocation, in which applicants outnumber vacancies and come from the finest graduates of secondary schools. To achieve this, ways should be sought to raise the admission threshold to the teaching profession, create additional earning opportunities in it, establish additional paths of promotion, strengthen processes of professionalization, and create working and

remuneration conditions that will encourage and foster excellence in teaching work.

The proposed change is made up of three complementary components:

First, the teaching position should be restructured so that, as a norm, teachers would stay in school throughout the normal work day (typical of other occupations in the economy) and, during these hours, perform all aspects of the job: teaching, preparing lessons, correcting tests, reading pupils' assignments, participating in in-service activities and reading professional literature, meeting with parents, pupils, and colleagues, and special duties. Needless to say, this redefinition of the teacher's job should be accompanied by a change in calculating his/her wages. The significance of the proposed change is a redefinition of the basis of the teacher's job from the number of hours spent in class to the number of hours spent, and worked, at school.

Admittedly, a developing economy such as Israel's presents talented and well educated graduates of secondary schools with many opportunities. If in the past women who fit this description turned to teaching and education as one of their few professional opportunities, today women can take up medicine, law, business administration, entrepreneurship, and communications, to give only a few examples. If we intend to improve the quality of our children's education, we must inspire many talented and well schooled young people to seek teaching and education jobs. To succeed in this effort, *inter alia*, the wage terms in teaching should be competitive with those in some other liberal professions.

Second, to bring about the structural change, teachers should be offered a set of benefits and incentives that will motivate them to increase their workloads.

Third, in tandem with the foregoing measures, there should be an aim to improve teachers' training processes and create a better-equipped and more thorough in-service training system.

We propose that a committee of experts, including representatives of teachers' organizations, present the government with a detailed proposal in this matter by May 2000.

9. Large classes at two levels – junior-high and the lower elementary grades (1 and 2) – should be downsized over the next four years, to a maximum of thirty-nine in the next two years and to thirty-eight two years later.

We believe that after having guaranteed education from earliest childhood up to age eighteen for all Israeli children, we must take action to downsize the units, especially the very large ones, in which studies take place. Most studies that show no correspondence between class size and scholastic achievements were conducted in Western countries where small classes are the norm. In Israel, in contrast, a class is not divided until its size reaches forty!

For the past two decades or so, the largest classes in the system (on average) have been found at the junior-high-level. In 1996/97, for example, the average class size was 26.4 in Jewish primary schools, 27.7 in post-primary schools, and 30.4 at the junior-high-level. The corresponding figures in the Arab system, on average, were 30.3, 30.6, and 34.0, respectively. The fact that junior-high classes are 10-15 percent larger, on average, than primary classes exacerbates the hardships of the transition from the sheltered primary school to the first stage of post-primary education. This reality underlies our recommendation to downsize large classes at the junior-high level.

Our recommendation to reduce class size in first and second grades is based on the perception that the basic skills that are so important for the pupils' future in the education system are

imparted at this phase, at which the pupils, due to their age, still need a great deal of personal attention. Comparative studies also show that reducing large classes is most effective in the early primary grades. An examination by the CSPA found that such a reduction in grades 1 and 2 would require at least 200 new classes (about 100 each year). Lowering the average to thirty-five pupils per class would make nearly 600 new classes necessary. Presumably, the figures for the junior-high-level are similar. The cost of opening a new class in terms of **teaching only** is NIS 160,000 at the primary level and NIS 250,000 at the junior-high level.

The question of school size deserves thought. Some Israeli schools have thousands of pupils, and no one seems to dispute the educational damage caused by such large settings. Recently, much has been said about violence among youth and in schools. The alienation that is typical of very large schools, the isolation that besets many of their students, and the lack of intimacy in teacher-student and, evidently, student-student relations are seriously detrimental to the education and learning process. Thus, action should be taken to reduce the size of these schools and to prevent others from attaining such magnitudes.

Although large schools have an advantage in the range of subjects and the scholastic resources they can offer students, this advantage can be realized without placing the entire student body in one building or on a congested campus. One can divide large schools into semi-autonomous subunits and mitigate the harmful effects of alienation and, perhaps, violence that flow from the size factor (in what the British call "houses"). Thus one may continue to utilize the large enrollment to diversify curricula and respond to the students' growing and diverse needs while creating smaller school units or relatively small "houses" within a large school campus.

10. Education services offered to Diaspora communities should be tailored to the cultural norms and order in the Diaspora countries, especially in terms of Jewish life. Therefore, action should be taken to avoid presenting our old-new culture mainly by educators who derive all or most of their inspiration from, and base all or most of their educational work on, the Orthodox religious tradition and heritage.

The increasing involvement of the Israeli education system in Jewish life – and especially in Jewish education – in the Diaspora is a welcome development and, possibly, one of the most pronounced manifestations of Israel's *raison d'être*. It is surely a good basis for the fostering of dialogue between young Israelis and educated young Jews worldwide. The modern State of Israel and the new Hebrew culture that has developed here, amidst an industrial and democratic culture, undoubtedly project a new Jewish message of relevance in the lives of many Diaspora communities.

However, the Israel-Diaspora relationship should be grounded – definitely in the sensitive domain of educating the young generation – in mutual respect and acknowledgment of the right of Diaspora communities to build their lives by and for themselves and to develop their special patterns of Jewishness. The paternalistic attitude that once typified the activities of Palestinian/Israeli educators and emissaries for Diaspora pupils and young people is no longer accepted and is detrimental to the intent of shaping a genuine dialogue. It is especially important to emphasize the insensitivity of a large share of the Israeli educators who operate in Diaspora communities (most of which are non-Orthodox) and strive to instill a way and style of life that is alien to them.

11. We recommend giving matriculation-certificate eligibles greater access to ongoing studies in institutes of higher education. The screening processes in the transition to higher-education institutes should be eased and students in need should be offered long-term loans to cover tuition and (modest) living expenses.

In the past decade, the higher education system has expanded and its enrollment has grown impressively. Higher education has become the cutting edge of the education system, meaning that a rising proportion of adults will need an academic degree (or, at the very least, post-secondary schooling) to make a respectable living and lessen the danger of becoming unemployed. Israel's sophisticated economy will be based on a growing share of workers with higher (or, at the very least, post-secondary) education. Presumably, most children of affluent groups who are capable of advancing to higher studies are doing so. This means that action should be taken to eliminate or minimize the barriers that greet young people in weaker social strata who wish to acquire an academic degree or attend a post-secondary institution. Needless to say, this broadening of access to higher studies should not prejudice the high quality of academic research institutes and the high standards of higher-education institutions.

As stated, the recommendation is to create a loan system in which payback begins when the graduates start their regular professional work and follows a schedule tailored to their income. As for higher-education tuition, it is important to state that abolishing it outright would lessen the burden mainly for the population group from which students have been coming to begin with. It is true that such a measure would enable more disadvantaged young people to enroll in higher studies but this remedy (like most sweeping corrective and facilitating measures

in these fields) would probably also widen disparities among sectors and strata.

Notably, there seems to be no correspondence between the soaring demand for higher education and the availability of places in institutions accredited by the Council for Higher Education. This has led to an unprecedented efflorescence of private institutions and extensions of foreign universities. In the 1980s, this disequilibrium was manifested mainly at the transition from high school to the first year of higher studies, but in the 1990s, with the proliferation of colleges that award undergraduate degrees, it has been reflected chiefly in the demand for a master's degree. Since most of the local extensions of foreign universities demand less scholastic effort for their degrees than Israeli institutions normally require, they may impair the quality of the professions in which they provide training.

The situation at hand is an example of an issue of the highest national importance that deserves a systematic and thorough public debate. What the future holds in store, apparently, is an array of institutions of various kinds that have different admission thresholds and enable their best graduates to advance to "superior" institutions for higher degrees.