

Developments in the Education System in the Last Decade

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Developments in the education system need to be examined from a long-term perspective (of at least a decade), because the fruits of the efforts and resources that are invested in the system are often visible only after a period of many years. The last decade as a whole is replete with positive trends, but there remain many areas, primarily in terms of educational and social gaps that have not narrowed, which the education system must work hard to improve.

Pupils

In the last ten years (between 2005 and 2015) the number of pupils in the education system grew by 25 percent. This growth was not uniform across the system's different segments or over the course of time. While the growth rate of the Arab Israeli education system declined over the period, that of the Jewish education system increased although differentially across the different supervisory authorities (e.g., state, state-religious, Haredi). At the beginning of the period, the average growth rate of state education was essentially zero, while at the end of the period it had attained growth of about 3 percent per year. The growth rate of state-religious education stood at about 0.5 percent per year at the start of the period, reaching about 3.5 percent per year at its end. The growth rate of Haredi education dropped from 7 percent per year to about 3 percent per year. These differences mean that the forecasts that Arab Israeli and Haredi pupils' share of the education system would rise to 50 percent and above have failed to materialize, and these pupils now comprise about 45 percent of the formal education system (from preschool to grade 12).

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Budget

Since 2005, the Ministry of Education budget has risen in real terms (adjusted to consumer price index) by 86 percent. This increase in the budget should be viewed against the backdrop of an increase of only 25 percent in the number of pupils. Their budget increase came as a response to several changes: the rise in teachers' pay; implementation of the Compulsory Education Law for ages 3-4; increases in the number of learning hours per class and per pupil; reductions in the number of pupils per class (especially in the middle schools); and other steps to improve the education system.

Teachers

The most prominent and dramatic change in the education system in the last decade is the transition of most of the teachers to an employment framework determined by the "Ofek Hadash" (with the Teachers Histadrut) and "Oz LeTmura" (with the Teachers Association) pay agreements. These agreements are much more than just pay agreements: they represent an essential change in the employment and promotion patterns of teachers. They have contributed to a rise in teachers' pay in real terms and relative to other occupations in the Israeli economy and to teachers in OECD countries. A small share of teachers — those in recognized institutions that are unofficial and in the exempt institutions (e.g., the teachers in ultra-Orthodox schools and some of the teachers in secondary education) — are not included in the pay agreements, and the work in this area has yet to be completed.

Achievements

Pupil educational achievements are measured by three different tests in Israel: the Meitzav exams, in which all of Israel's pupils are tested in grades 2, 5 and 8; matriculation exams (bagrut); and international tests. The chapter on the consequences of the Dovrat Committee's work (in this volume) indicates that in each of the Meitzav tests improvement is apparent in all the age groups and in all the subject areas examined.¹ Although the improvement is not uniform across all subjects, age groups and sectors, it is significant. The change for the better is also striking in the bagrut exams. Many critics of the education system in Israel like to say that 50 percent of the pupils in each cohort are not eligible for a matriculation certificate. This assertion

1 The Meitzav exams calibrated, so it is possible to compare scores between years.

has long been incorrect. Since 2005, the rate of those taking matriculation exams from each cohort has risen from 74 percent to 77 percent, and the rate of those eligible for matriculation from each age cohort has increased from 46 percent to 56 percent. These numbers also need to be viewed in the context of the large rise (from 12 percent to 19 percent) during this period in the share of the Haredi and Arab Israeli population from East Jerusalem – two groups who choose not to participate in matriculation exams, each group for its own reason. On the other hand, in the international tests, average pupil scores have risen slightly in the last decade in Israel, although Israel's relative standing among developed countries remains as low as ever.

The education system's primary failure lies in its continued lack of success in contending with the problem of large achievement gaps between pupils from different population groups. These gaps often stem from difficult and lower socioeconomic backgrounds of pupils and especially those from the Arab Israeli and Haredi sector; they are exacerbated by a hesitant and inconsistent affirmative action policy. The welcome implementation of the Compulsory Education Law for preschool children, for example, was not accompanied by a parallel step of affirmative action: increasing the number of learning hours in preschool where the law was implemented; the addition of a second preschool teaching assistant was not differential according to socioeconomic background conditions; and the reduction of the number of pupils per class in the first and second grades was widely implemented, with no affirmative action on behalf of weak populations. Two years after the reintroduction of the differential budget standard per pupil in primary and middle schools, whereby a larger budget is allocated for pupils from weaker socioeconomic backgrounds, it has not yet yielded any real results in narrowing the budgetary gaps, as shown in the following table:

Table 1. Allocation per pupil according to the Nurture Index and relative change

NIS thousand

School year	Nurture Index					Ratio of achievements
	Weak	Medium-weak	Medium	Medium-strong	Strong	
2011	16.069	16.416	15.170	14.506	13.4081	1.20
2013	17.176	17.356	16.599	15.398	14.614	1.18
2014	17.908	17.891	17.206	16.057	15.095	1.19
Change from 2011 to 2013	1.07	1.06	1.09	1.06	1.09	
Change from 2013 to 2014	1.04	1.03	1.04	1.04	1.03	
Change from 2011 to 2014	1.11	1.09	1.13	1.11	1.13	

Source: Ministry of Education, Budgetary Transparency site (accessed 6 Nov. 2016).

Calculations: Nachum Blass, Taub Center.

Other topics that should keep all those who value the education system awake at night are the expressions of racism and intolerance toward the “other” (i.e., those who hold different nationalist, religious or ideological perspectives or backgrounds). The education system has not succeeded in curtailing these phenomena, which are influenced by the atmosphere in adult society. It seems, then, that the education system has taken significant steps forward, and much remains to be done.