

Light and Shadow in the Israeli Education System

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This paper appears as a chapter in the Singer Annual Report Series
State of the Nation Report: Society, Economy and Policy 2023

Policy Paper No. 15.2023

Jerusalem, December 2023

Taub Center for Social Policy Studies in Israel

The Taub Center was established in 1982 under the leadership and vision of Herbert M. Singer, Henry Taub, and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. The Center is funded by a permanent endowment created by the Henry and Marilyn Taub Foundation, the Herbert M. and Nell Singer Foundation, Jane and John Colman, the Kolker-Saxon-Hallock Family Foundation, the Milton A. and Roslyn Z. Wolf Family Foundation, and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

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Introduction

Each year we survey the main developments in the education system in Israel, placing an emphasis on budgetary, demographic, and pedagogic issues. This time, we will touch on these issues more generally, and will focus on three specific areas: two areas reflect success by the education system, changes in class size and achievements in the Druze sector, and one, special education, reflects, in no small way, a failure (despite good intentions).

The budget

Educators tend to downplay the importance of the education system budget and claim that what is important is not the size of the budget but rather how it is used. While this may be true, it must be recognized that, “If there is no flour, there is no Torah,” i.e., without a sufficient budget, there is no possibility of having an optimally functioning education system. Therefore, it is important to examine whether the budget has grown in real terms during this past year, with respect to both the previous year and the number of students in the system, and how it was divided among different parts of the system.

As has been shown in previous reviews, it can, in general, be said that the disparities in budgeting between sectors and between schools with different socioeconomic levels have narrowed. Furthermore, we have shown that at least some of the disparities in budgeting originate in explicit budgeting formulas rather than as the result of covert discrimination (Blass & Bleikh, 2020; Blass & Bleikh, forthcoming).¹ We emphasize this because the claim that there

* Policy Paper No. 15.2023.

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1 It is of course possible to ask whether the budgeting formulas, as determined by the Ministry of Education, conceal discrimination (against the Arab sector or in favor of the Hebrew State-religious system).

is significant discrimination — on a scale of tens of percent — between the various parts of the system is heard periodically in the media and elsewhere, and it is often implied that the education system consciously discriminates against certain population groups. In the last review, we examined the developments in the budget between 2000 and 2019 and showed that both the budget in general and the budget per student had grown in real terms (Blass, 2022). Between 2019 and 2022, the number of students in the schools and preschools grew by about 6% (from 2.318 million to 2.457 million) while the original budget grew by 12% (Table 1). The budget per student has thus clearly grown.²

Table 1. Regular and development budget, 2019–2024

NIS billion

	Current budget			Development budget
	Proposed	Approved	Implemented	
2019	60.5	64.1	60.9	0.9
2020	63.7	66.6	64.0	1.9
2021	67.6	71.8	64.4	2.6
2022	67.8	74.6		2.2
2023	77.8			1.8
2024	82.9			1.9

Source: Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Finance

As can clearly be seen in Table 2, the total education budget for 2024 is 21% larger than in 2022. The main changes are in the following budget items:

- *The reserve budget* — As will be described, this budget item includes coalition funds. It doubled between 2022 and 2023 and increased again between 2023 and 2024. A large part of this addition is designated for

2 The approved budget grew by 16% between 2019 and 2022. In the absence of budget implementation data for 2022, we are unable to calculate the rate of growth in usage. Furthermore, since inflation was very low between 2019 and the beginning of 2023 (when the State Budget was approved), it can be ignored and the budget can be examined in current budgetary terms.

equalizing the budget of the recognized unofficial education system³ (primarily consisting of Haredi [ultra-Orthodox Jewish] schools) and other items that are offset by the reduction in the budget item for support of Jewish studies.

- *The special education budget* — This budget grew by 19% in 2022–2023 and by 24% between 2022 and 2024. The increase in this budget is based on the projected increase in the number of special education students, primarily those with costly disabilities, such as students on the autism spectrum or students with serious behavioral disorders.
- *The primary school and middle school budget* — This budget grew by 29% between 2022 and 2023 and by 35% from 2022 to 2024. Most of the increase is meant to cover the cost of the wage agreement with the Israel Teachers Union (Histadrut Hamorim). It is important to mention that money has not been set aside in the current budget for the wage agreement with the Teachers Organization (Irgun Hamorim), which will apparently also involve several billion shekels.

Between 2022 and 2024, there were particularly large declines in the funding for Jewish studies (49%), construction of new schools and renovation of old ones (14%), and the Teachers Authority that is in charge of training and continuing education of the teaching cadres (10%). The declines in the latter two items are particularly concerning given the Ministry of Education's repeated claims of a shortage of teachers and a shortfall of thousands of classrooms, primarily in special education.⁴

3 The *recognized unofficial education system* refers to schools that are only partially funded by the Ministry of Education, and is effectively private education. Most of these schools serve the Haredi population.

4 Analysis of the proposed State Budget for 2023–2024, which has been tabled in the Knesset, indicates that at least NIS 3.9 billion will be transferred directly to private and semi-private educational frameworks that only partially teach the core subjects, if at all, and to scholarships for yeshiva students, according to the following breakdown: an addition of NIS 1.6 billion for semi-private Haredi educational institutions that partially teach the core subjects (exempt institutions and the recognized unofficial system), without any additional Ministry supervision; and an addition of NIS 2.4 billion for higher yeshivas and *kollels*. In addition, billions of shekels will be transferred to the State-religious education system. See Houminer-Rosenblum et al., 2023. At this point, it does not look like the war that has been forced on Israel has changed the coalition budgetary allocations significantly in education.

Table 2. Budget proposals for 2023 and 2024 and the original budget for 2022

NIS million

Activity area	Original budget for 2022	Proposed budget for 2023	Proposed budget for 2024	Rate of change 2024/2022
2060 – District units	1,898	1,790	1,839	-3%
2061 – Special education	10,603	12,593	13,706	29%
2062 – Preschool	7,817	8,151	8,326	7%
2063 – Primary/middle school	16,713	21,536	22,505	35%
2064 – High school	11,151	12,386	13,311	19%
2065 – Tutoring, transport	4,064	4,150	4,310	6%
2066 – Schools in settlements	4,108	4,408	4,587	12%
2067 – Supplemental activities for advancement	5,428	4,630	5,085	-6%
2068 – Teacher administration	1,885	1,763	1,706	-10%
2069 – Jewish studies support	1,232	649	623	-49%
2070 – Reserves	2,915	5,721	6,940	138%
Total for these areas (20)	67,813	77,776	82,937	22%
6002 – Program for educational advancement	1,701	1,764	1,814	7%
6003 – Building equipment	15	–	–	-100%
6006 – Building renewal	402	–	–	-100%
6008 – Reserves	80	72	74	-7%
Total for these areas (60)	2,198	1,836	1,889	-14%
Total educational budget	70,011	79,612	84,826	21%

Source: *A Look at the Budget*, Knesset, Research and Information Center, April 2023

In the section on the Ministry of Education budget in this review, we focus on the expected changes in the education system as a result of the significant increase in the 2023–2024 budget and the changes in the budget breakdown. Clearly, two of the major changes — one to cover the wage agreement with the Teachers Union and the other to increase funding of special education (which will be discussed further on) — are unavoidable. However, the most significant change, which will have long-term implications that cannot be currently assessed, is the increase in the reserve budget, an issue that was not commented on in the explanations attached to the current budget proposal.

The Ministry of Education budget for 2023–2024 provides particularly large budget increases to the Haredi and Hebrew State-religious systems. This is not surprising nor is it unusual if we bear in mind that education is part and parcel of the political realm. The use of education to achieve political ends

has become common and acceptable, and is generally done on a reasonable scale and within reasonable limits so as not to undermine the fundamental principles of the system (as defined in the State Education Law 1953 and the regulations based on it).

For many years, the education system in Israel has not forced the Haredi system to adhere to the goals set out in the State Education Law. The issue was ignored at first because of the relatively small size of the Haredi education system and later on because of the political power of the Haredi parties. The continuation of this policy, including increased government support for Haredi education, essentially means that the core part of the State Education Law, which is one of the two fundamental laws governing education in Israel, is not enforced.

One of the fundamental values of an education system is the centrality of egalitarian public education. The education system in Israel, like those in other countries, prioritizes public education over private education. The reason for this is obvious: most countries view the education system as an important tool for economic and social development and for the strengthening of social cohesion on the basis of nationally set goals. This is particularly the case in Israel, given its diverse population and the social, cultural, religious, and ideological differences between its various parts. However, the additional budget allocated to the Haredi education system is liable to threaten the very existence of public education.

The equalization of the budget for Haredi schools to that of public schools is not new. It has been widely discussed and has been one of the main demands of the Haredi parties in recent decades. Their demands were partially met in the Budget Foundations Law, 1985, which established equal budgeting of the Independent Education Network and the Ma'ayan HaChinuch HaTorani Education Network (both of which are defined as recognized unofficial education systems that do not teach a large part of the core curriculum), and the Nahari Law (Amendment 7 to the State Education Law), which obligated local authorities to also participate in this budgeting arrangement. These two laws created budgeting guidelines that reduce the budget gaps between the official education system and the recognized unofficial education system and consequently contribute to a large extent to its expansion and strengthening.⁵

5 The equalization of the budget for the Haredi education networks by means of the Budget Foundations Law and the Nahari Law essentially discriminates against the non-Haredi Jewish private schools that do not benefit from the law and the Arab private schools, both of which teach the core curriculum.

The Shoshani Committee, which dealt with the budgeting of primary schools, also examined the financing of Haredi education (as well as the rest of the private institutions). According to its recommendations, which were adopted by Limor Livnat, then the Minister of Education, all students in Israel should be budgeted equally if they attend schools that fulfill three conditions: they teach a core curriculum; they participate in national and international testing; and they do not discriminate in the acceptance of students. With respect to schools that do not fulfill these conditions, the Committee recommended the reduction of their budget (which is meant to be equal to the budget for State schools according to its main recommendations) by various rates in order to prioritize public education. The elimination of these conditions with regard to Haredi schools is liable to sound the death knell for public education and all that this implies for the social and economic future of the country.

In the immediate and short terms, it can be assumed that the cancellation of these conditions will lead to more parent groups creating separate schools for their children, whether on the basis of social separation or ideological and religious isolationism. The first to be harmed will be members of the Arab community, where a large proportion of primary school students are already enrolled in private schools.⁶ Trends toward separation will also intensify in the State-religious education system as a result of increasing religious extremism and their increasing desire for single-gender schools, and in the Hebrew State system, which will see an increasing number of groups leaving the public education system. This will lead to the abandonment of public education by groups of parents with high socioeconomic status or ideologically motivated groups of parents who are not satisfied with the level of the schools that their children attend, their sociodemographic profile, or their educational and ideological approach. The result will be a widening of educational and social gaps, an increase in the national expenditure on education (due to the waste that will be created by the establishment of dozens or even hundreds of small private schools), and the emptying out of the public school system.

In the long term, the weakening of the public education system will contribute to social disintegration, greater national and religious extremism, and an unravelling of frameworks that currently unite Israeli society. This is the real and immediate danger in the current process, which its proponents promote

6 In the Arab sector, 26% of the students in primary schools attend recognized unofficial schools, a large proportion of which are managed by religious institutions.

as a way of stopping what they see as discrimination against the Haredi education system. The first signs of this prediction being realized can be seen in petitions submitted by several Haredi, Arab, and State-religious schools in the recognized unofficial education system to the Jerusalem District Court claiming that the budgeting of the two largest networks (Bnei Yosef and Independent Education) is discriminatory (Dattel, 2023).

Special education

One of the Ministry of Education budget items that has increased most significantly is special education. According to the data presented by the Ministry to a plenary session of the Shapira Committee⁷ (Figures 1 and 2), the special education budget grew from NIS 10.9 billion in 2017 to NIS 16 billion in 2022, an increase of 46%. This is in contrast to an increase of 23% in the regular education budget. Meanwhile, its share of the total budget rose from 18.7% to 21.4%. The number of students eligible for special education services — those in separate classes in the regular education system, those in special education schools, and those who are mainstreamed in regular classes — rose at a much faster rate than the total number of students, although at a somewhat slower rate than budgetary increases.⁸

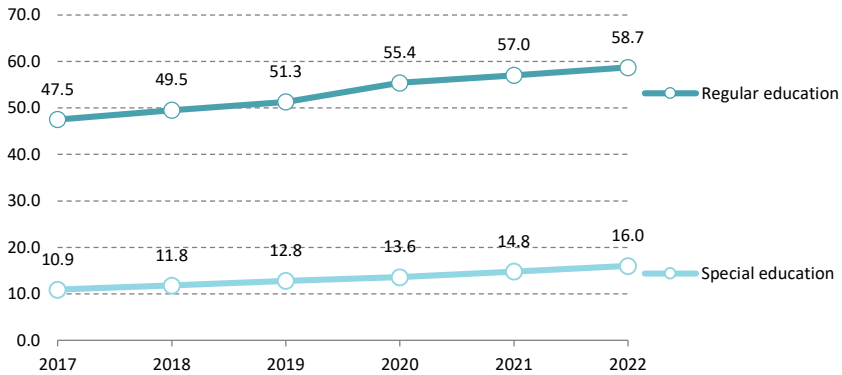
These numbers indicate, at least in theory, that the budget per student in special education has grown, as have the services they are provided. Nonetheless, there is a feeling of dissatisfaction in recent years among parents of special education students. This feeling is expressed in a simple, yet legitimate question: “If there is no real improvement in the service provided to our children, then where has the money gone?” On the other hand, senior officials in the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance are voicing deep concern that the continuation of current trends in the special education system will lead to an untenable situation whereby the budget allocation to special education will lead to less money for the regular education system.

7 The Shapira Committee for Special Education was appointed by the Minister of Education on June 1, 2023, and has not yet submitted its recommendations.

8 The exact number of students with special needs is disputed due to poor monitoring of the number of mainstreamed students in recent years (due to changes in the rules for eligibility). See further discussion of this in this paper.

Figure 1. Regular and special education budgets

NIS billion



Between 2017 and 2022, the growth in the budget for special education (46%), was greater than the growth in the budget for regular education (23%).

Source: Shapira Committee, Education From the Perspective of Special Education 2023

The rest of the discussion of the special education budget will be devoted to the question “Where has the money gone?” Three developments in the special education system have led to more rapid increases in this budget than in the overall budget:

1. A rapid increase in the number of students with special needs, relative to the number of students in the regular education system;⁹
2. An increase in the proportion of students from special needs categories who benefit from a higher budget than the budget allocated to other categories of need under current budgeting rules;
3. The failure of efforts by the Ministry of Education to mainstream a larger share of students with special needs into regular classes.

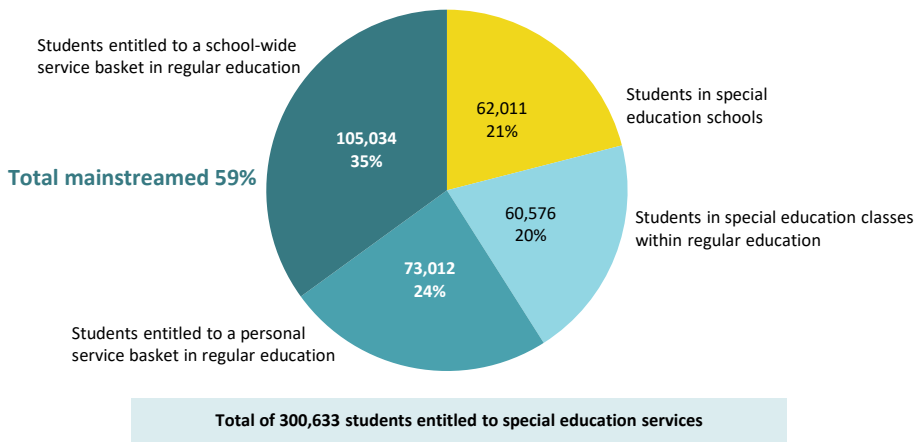
In what follows, we will expand on each of these developments.

9 In this chapter, we have used the term *regular* to describe students who do not have a disability that would make them eligible to attend a separate educational framework or for additional budget or other benefits, either for them or for the institution they attend.

The increase in the number of students with special needs in the education system

Students with special needs can be divided into two main groups: students attending separate frameworks (special education schools or separate classes in regular schools) and students who are mainstreamed into regular classes in regular schools.¹⁰ Students in regular classes with one of the conditions defined in the amendment to the Special Education Law (borderline IQ, learning disability, behavior/emotional disorders, delayed development, or delayed functioning) are eligible for a personal service basket subject to the decision of an eligibility and classification committee, while other special needs students are eligible for an institutional basket.¹¹ Figure 2 presents the breakdown of students with special needs in the 2022/2023 school year according to the various frameworks.

Figure 2. Students entitled to special education basket of services, 2022



Source: Shapira Committee, Education From the Perspective of Special Education 2023

10 The discussion in this section is based on data published by Weisblau, 2023, except where the Ministry of Education has published more up-to-date data.

11 For more on this, see [Guidelines for Use of the Integration and Inclusion Basket in Primary and Middle Schools](#), letter from the Senior Assistant Director and Director of the Pedagogic Authority to district managers, supervisors, and principals, June 6, 2023.

The budget and services provided to students in separate frameworks are greater than those available to students who are mainstreamed. The explanation is that students in the former group most probably suffer from more serious conditions, and are characterized by lower levels of functioning. The same logic applies to the budgets for students eligible for a personal service basket relative to those who are eligible for an institutional basket.

Following the approval of Amendment 11 of the Special Education Law in 2018, the name of the *integration basket* was changed to the *integration and inclusion basket*, and the addition of 5.2% of all standard hours allocated to schools was increased to an addition of 7.7%. To these two groups (those who are eligible for a personal basket and those eligible for an institutional basket) another group was added: regular students with difficulties that do not make them eligible for special education services but do make them eligible — under very specific conditions — for assistance from the institutional basket. Due to these changes, which were accompanied by changes in the rules for allocating assistance hours to the school, some schools stopped reporting the number of mainstreamed students who are not eligible for a personal basket. As a result, the Ministry of Education knows the number of students learning in separate classes and the number who receive a personal basket, but does not know the number who receive services through an institutional basket. Due to a lack of such data, the Ministry sometimes reports the recipients of the personal basket only or assumes that the number of integrated students is equal to the standard hours allocation percentage, i.e., 7.7% of all students. Clearly, this figure is not precise since the number of students integrated in each school can be higher or lower than 7.7%, depending on the decisions made by the school's teaching staff.

Given the problematic nature of the data, in 2023 the number of students defined in one way or another as having special needs was roughly about 300,000 — about 178,000 students who are mainstreamed within regular classes (73,000 of whom are eligible for a personal basket) and about 122,000 in separate classes or in special education schools.

Table 3 shows that, between 2017 and 2022, the number of students in special education grew by 18%, while the number of students in regular education, which includes integrated students who are eligible for only the institutional basket, grew by only 7%. Clearly, the large disparity in the rates of growth has

also led to an increase in the proportion of special education students within the total number of students in the education system (from 11% to 12%).

Table 3. The number of special education students and students in regular education, 2017–2022

	2017	2022	Change in the number of students	Rate of change
Regular education	2,018,301	2,156,485	138,184	6.8%
Special education	253,703	300,633	46,930	18.5%
Share of special education students out of all students in the system	11.17%	12.24%		

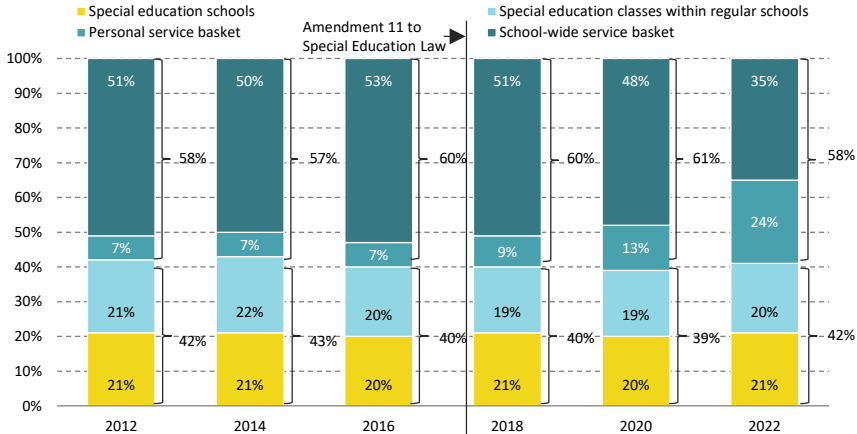
Source: Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

Changes in the shares of the various frameworks within the special education system

One of the characteristics of special education is budget per student, which varies according to the type of disability, level of functioning, educational level, and organizational framework. To illustrate, the budgeting of separate frameworks can range from NIS 42,000 to NIS 113,000 per year per student in separate frameworks and from NIS 20,000 to NIS 65,000 per student receiving a personal budget (and less for a student receiving an institutional basket only).¹² Thus, it is important to examine both the changes in the share of each framework within special education and the changes in the breakdown of students by disability within each framework. Figure 3 describes the extent to which the breakdown of students in special education has changed in cost terms.

12 Data presented by the Economics and Budget Authority to the Shapira Committee.

Figure 3. Distribution of students entitled to special education services, by framework



Between 2018 and 2022, there is a decrease in the share of students entitled to a school-wide service basket, from 51% to 34%, and concurrently a rise in the share of students entitled to a personal service basket from 9% to 24%

Source: Shapira Committee, Education From the Perspective of Special Education 2023

The second major trend, which has also had a substantial effect on the budget, involves the variation in rates of growth across disabilities. As seen in Table 4, the shares of most of the disabilities within the total population have remained fairly stable. There are some disabilities whose share in the population has increased considerably, though, and in most cases these are disabilities with high costs of care, such as emotional disorders and autism, versus a decline in disabilities requiring less intensive care, such as borderline intellectual disability.

Table 4. The number of special education students, 2011, 2019, and 2023**a. Separate frameworks**

Type of disability	Number of students in:			Percentage change	
	2011	2019	2023	2019/2011	2023/2019
Borderline intellectual disability, complex	2,954	864	733	-71%	-15%
Language disorders	3,677	7,167	6,278	95%	-12%
Moderate intellectual disability	2,871	2,277	2,035	-21%	-11%
Visual impairment/blindness	215	158	145	-27%	-8%
Severe disability/nursing care	2,141	2,058	1,981	-4%	-4%
Hearing impairment/deafness	1,620	1,688	1,722	4%	2%
Mild intellectual disability	2,386	3,162	3,330	33%	5%
Cerebral palsy, severe physical disability	1,530	1,930	2,047	26%	6%
Learning disability	5,193	6,510	7,010	25%	8%
Moderate, complex disability	25,993	28,572	32,162	10%	13%
Developmental disorders	6,069	9,267	10,950	53%	18%
Behavioral disorders/severe emotional disorders	6,003	18,870	25,026	214%	33%
Severe emotional disorders	1,419	2,719	3,772	92%	39%
Autism spectrum	4,404	12,795	25,334	191%	98%
Total	68,486	100,056	24,548	46%	24%

b. Integrated frameworks

Type of disability	Number of students in:			Percentage change	
	2011	2019	2023	2019/2011	2023/2019
Visual impairment/blindness	1,407	1,920	2,044	36%	6%
Paralysis/severe physical disability	1,628	1,891	2,031	16%	7%
Hearing impairment/deafness	2,615	4,169	5,608	59%	35%
Autism/PDD	2,090	6,424	11,331	207%	76%
Illness/Rate disorder	886	1,957	3,620	121%	85%
Emotional disorder	666	6,107	12,459	817%	104%
Moderate intellectual disability	178	94	333	-47%	254%
Moderate intellectual disability, complex		22	96		336%
Exceptional disability		110	0		
Borderline IQ			2,245		
Learning disability/AD(H)D			9,115		
Behavioral/emotional disorders/AD(H)D			3,748		
Language disorders			5,528		
Developmental/language disorders			5,757		
Total	9,470	22,694	63,915	140%	182%

Note: Since the passing of Amendment 11 to the Special Education Law, students with one of the five last disabilities (in Figure 4b) are entitled to a personal service basket.

Source: Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

As noted, the declared policy of the Ministry of Education over the years has been to increase the share of students with special needs who are mainstreamed. This policy has an educational and ethical justification, and, also, substantial budgeting justification.¹³ However, the share of integrated students (with either a personal or institutional budget) remained almost unchanged at about 60%, as shown in Figure 3. What has changed is the share of students eligible for a personal basket within all integrated students, which grew from about 10% in 2011 to 41% in 2023.

The three processes described above — the stability in the share of students with special needs attending an integrated framework, the increase in the share of students receiving a personal basket out of the total integrated students, and the increase in the number of students defined as having a costly disability in budget terms — has led to a large increase in the share of the special education budget within the total education budget between 2017 and 2022 (from 18.7% to 21.4%). This leads to two important questions.

The first question is whether all of these processes were the result of an objective increase in the number of students with special needs and changes in their breakdown by disability type, level of functioning, and educational framework. In our estimation, the answer is unambiguously no. Part of the change is without a doubt connected to an objective increase, which resulted from a change in diagnostic definitions that led to an increase in the share of students classified with certain disabilities. The best example is the large increase in the number of students defined as being on the autism spectrum. Another part is due to changes in societal attitudes toward students with special needs, the feeling of duty toward them, as well as the weakening of the stigma attached to special needs. However, the main reason, in our estimation, involves the large differences in services provided to students in separate frameworks relative to those provided to mainstreamed students. Students in separate frameworks are entitled to smaller classes, afternoon teaching hours, 60 additional days of school during the summer vacation, school meals, transportation, and various benefits that students with special needs in integrated frameworks (those who receive an institutional basket) do not receive. It seems likely that some of these services were enacted to enable parents to work and are not due to specific educational needs.

13 Apparently, budgeting considerations played a major role in the Ministry of Education's motivation to initiate Amendment 11 to the Special Education Law.

These advantages create a large incentive for parents to request that their children attend separate frameworks rather than integrated ones and even to fight for such a decision. Parents quickly learned how to provide their children — and themselves — with the most generous benefits and they have used this opportunity — justifiably from their perspective — to the maximum. Therefore, as long as such preferential treatments exist and as long as a negative answer to a parent's request is not regarded as final in Israeli society, the number of students classified as having special needs who are eligible for larger budgets will inevitably grow. Unfortunately, the ones who suffer are those students with special needs who could have been mainstreamed and reaped the benefits from learning in an inclusive atmosphere, and regular students who were forced to manage with decreased budgets.

The second question is whether the significant increase in the special education budget was accompanied by an improvement in the services provided to students with special needs. The answer to this question is more complicated. On the one hand, the increase in the number of students defined as having special needs can be considered a positive, since the number of beneficiaries of special education services has been expanded. The situation of at least one group improved considerably, namely integrated students who are included within the five previously noted disability categories (borderline IQ, learning disability, behavioral/emotional disorders, delayed development, and delayed functioning) who were recognized as eligible for a personal basket after Amendment 11 was passed. This group is not small and cannot be ignored. On the other hand, the situation of students who were in special education in the past and whose classification remained unchanged has not improved and in some cases has worsened. Most of the students in special education are currently in classes that are somewhat larger than in the past and there is now a shortage of special education teachers. Thus, the average number of students per teacher in special education grew from 6.7 to 7.7 between 2011 and 2023 (CBS, 2023). Furthermore, teachers are younger and have less experience on the one hand, but they have higher levels of education on the other hand. An analysis of the average cost per student shows that controlling for inflation, the budget per student for all disabilities has even declined since 2011.

What are the implications for the future? The most important one from our perspective is a need to equalize educational conditions and budgeting for special education students across all frameworks, while drastically narrowing the disparities in learning conditions between special education students and other students. We will expand upon this in the conclusion.

Class size

The increase in the Ministry of Education budget has led to a variety of outcomes. We focus on one of the most widely accepted indicators for the quality of the education system, namely class size. Both parents and teachers attribute a great deal of importance to this parameter and view reduction in class size as an important objective that can improve achievements, the learning atmosphere, and teachers' working conditions. Members of the Education Authority and education researchers are less enthusiastic about the stress put on class size, primarily due to the high costs involved. In recent years, the Taub Center has published two policy papers (Blass, 2020; Blass, et al., 2023) that show that it is possible to reduce class size without any major increase in the number of teachers or in the budget. This can be achieved by reducing the number of teacher work hours per class, which would make it possible to increase the number of classes while maintaining the same number of teachers and reducing class size.

There continues to be public discourse surrounding the claim that it is difficult to teach a class of 40 students. This is, of course, true, but is this the reality in schools in Israel? In order to answer this question, we looked at the size of regular classes in primary schools, in middle schools, and in high schools in the regular education system.¹⁴

Primary schools

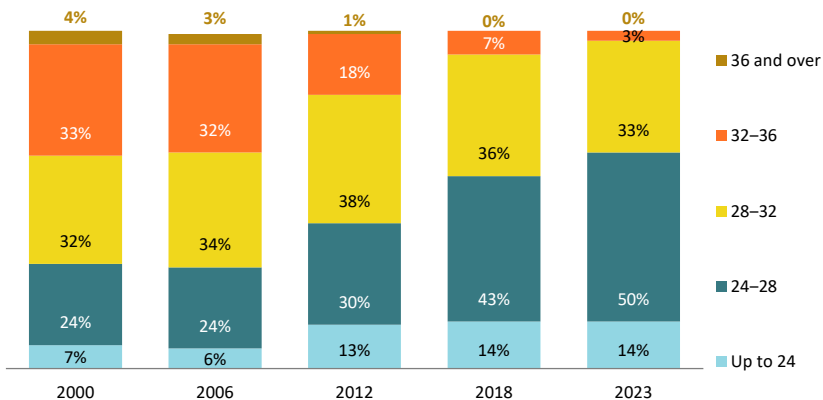
In 2023, there were almost no classes in primary education with more than 36 students, and only 3% of the classes had between 32 and 36 students (Figure 5). The vast majority of students are in classes of between 24 and 32

14 In the case of high schools, we looked at regular classes and smaller classes that are usually designated for low-achieving students with low socioeconomic status, such as Mabar, Lev (academic/technological), Tov (technicians and matriculation), Hachvein classes, etc., as well as classes for gifted students, which are usually smaller.

(83% of classes): in the Hebrew State system — 91% of classes; in the State-religious system — 85%; in the Haredi system — 71%; in the Arab system — 76%; and in the Bedouin system — 83%. In the Druze system, there are no classes with more than 28 students.

It is important to remember that only about a decade ago, 19% of classes had over 32 students, and twenty years ago, that figure was 37%. This improvement was achieved during the term of Naftali Bennett as Minister of Education with his decision to gradually reduce class size to under 32 students by the end of the process. Contributing to the reduction in class size were the steep drop in the fertility rate in the Arab sector, which led to an almost complete halt in growth in the number of students per grade in this sector, as well as the massive construction of classrooms.¹⁵

Figure 4. Distribution of primary school classes (Grades 1–6), by number of students per class



Source: Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

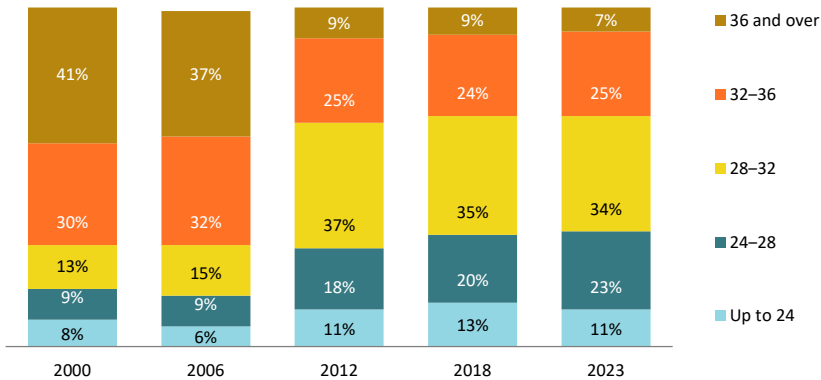
15 When the number of children in a geographic area declines and the education system does not react by changing the registration areas (for whatever reason), average class size also declines in that area.

Middle schools

Relative to primary schools, the Achilles heel of the education system with regard to class size is the middle schools.¹⁶ During the past decade, there has been no improvement in class size in middle schools (Figure 5). In 2023, one-third of students were still in classes of more than 32 students — the same number of students per class as in 2013. Nonetheless, it is important to note that, in 2000, this figure was 71%. The lack of improvement in class size in middle schools is particularly problematic since this involves adolescents, who are especially vulnerable and often display issues with concentration and attention spans.

As in primary education, the situation of middle schools is worst in the Hebrew State system, where 59% of classes have over 32 students, in contrast to only 14% in the State-religious system, 14% in the Haredi system, and 15% in the Arab system. In the Bedouin and Druze education systems, there are almost no classes with more than 32 students (Figure 6). Over the last decade, there have been almost no classes with more than 36 students in the Arab, Druze, and Bedouin education systems.

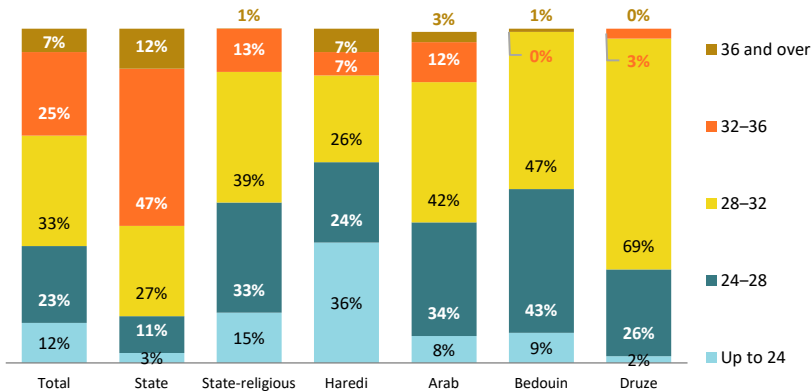
Figure 5. Distribution of middle school classes (Grades 7–9), by number of students per class



Source: Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

16 This is very surprising since in middle school the number of standard class hours is quite high (more than 60 hours per class). This undoubtedly makes it possible to lower the number of students per class by simultaneously reducing the number of hours that are standard.

Figure 6. Distribution of classes in middle schools (Grades 7–9), by sector and supervisory authority, 2023



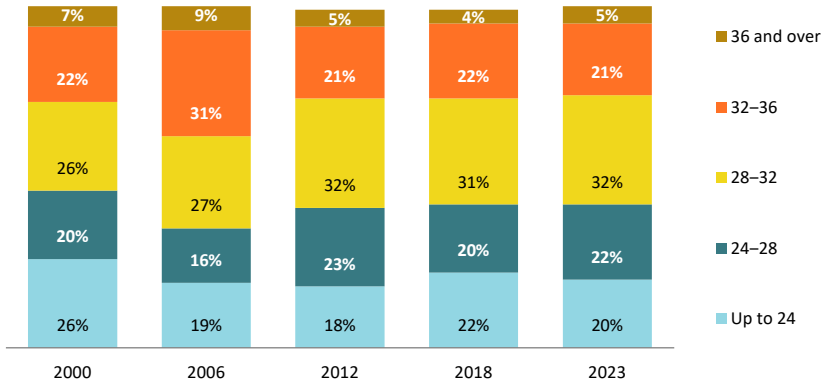
Source: Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

High schools

The picture is more complicated in high schools since small classes are not usually for special education students but are intended as a way of addressing the needs of low-achieving students who are often from weaker socioeconomic backgrounds (special remedial programs like *Mabar*, *Lev*, and *Tov*). Reducing class size is the main way the Ministry of Education has implemented a policy of affirmative action. Therefore, we chose to distinguish between changes in the size of these small classes (Figures 7 and 8), and changes in the number of students in the overall system (Figure 9).

The data indicate that between 2000 and 2023, the proportion of large classes (over 32 students) in total regular classes (where affirmative action is not implemented) fell only slightly (from 29% in 2000, to 26% in 2023; Figure 7).

Figure 7. Distribution of high school classes (Grades 10–12), by number of students per class in the regular education system

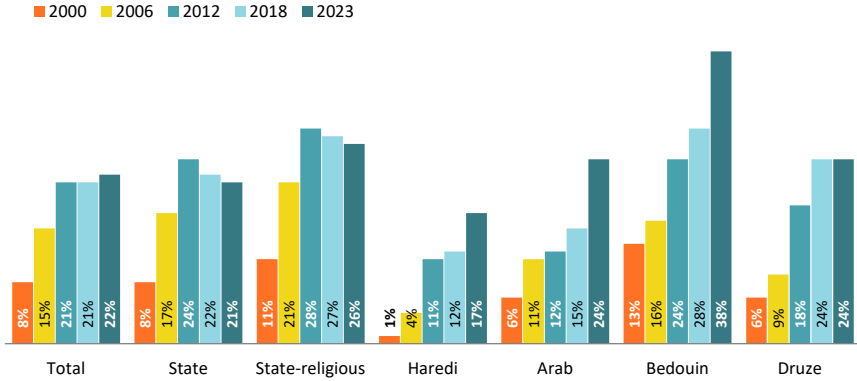


Source: Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

Figure 8 shows that in contrast to regular classes, the share of students in small classes (Mabar, Lev, Tov, and others where affirmative action is applied) rose during the past twenty years from 8% to 22%. There is a significant difference between the Hebrew and Arab sectors in this regard. In the former, the change in affirmative action policy occurred primarily between 2000 and 2012, while in the Arab sector it occurred throughout the period (2000–2023). Affirmative action is applied on a particularly large scale in the Bedouin sector.

A look at the breakdown of high school classes in the entire education system by size shows that for more than two decades the situation has changed only slightly (Figure 9). The share of small classes (up to 24 students) rose from 29% in 2000 to 31% in 2023, while the share of large classes (36 students or more) fell from 5% to 3%. The inevitable conclusion is that a policy of affirmative action has not significantly changed the distribution of classes by size. It is particularly notable that, during the past decade, the share of small classes in the Hebrew education sector has declined while in the Arab sector as a whole it has risen considerably.

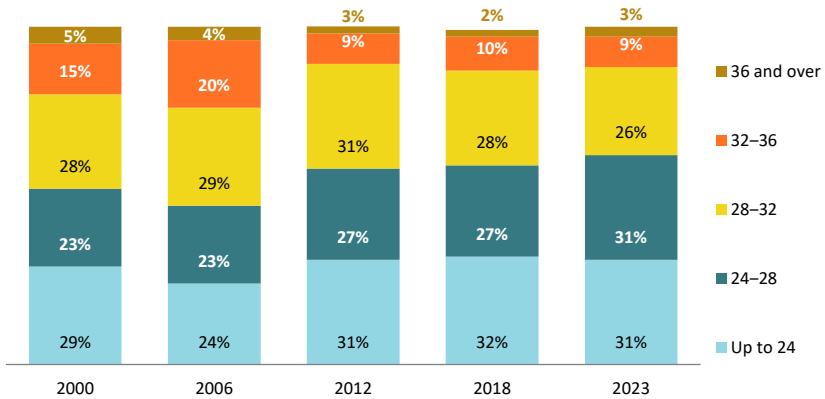
Figure 8. Portion of students (Grades 10–12) in small classes, by sector and supervisory authority



Note: Small classes are programs such as Mabar, Lev, and Tov.

Source: Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

Figure 9. Distribution of high school classes (Grades 10–12), by number of students per class in the entire education system



Source: Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

Academic achievements

Achievements on international exams

Since our last publication (Blass, 2022), the results of two international exams have been published — the PIRLS exam, which examines achievements of students in Grade 4 in reading literacy, and the PISA exam, where 15-year-old students, the majority of whom are in Grade 10, are tested in mathematics, science, and reading. The results of these exams should be treated with caution since they were conducted during the COVID-19 crisis that affected the education system in most countries in the world as well as in Israel.

According to the research of RAMA (National Authority for Measurement and Evaluation in Education) that analyzed the PISA exam results, there was an average sharp decline in achievement scores of Israel's students relative to the exam results in 2016. The decline was among both stronger and weaker students. The gap between the Hebrew speaking sector and the Arabic speaking sector narrowed. This was the result of the sharp drop in scores for the Hebrew speaking sector alongside relative stability in the scores of the Arabic speaking student population, so this should not be interpreted as a net improvement. An international comparison shows that the decline in student achievements in reading is common to most of the countries, though the drop was of particular note in Israel (RAMA, 2021). In contrast, on the PISA exam, Israeli student achievement scores were more stable while in most countries there were considerable decreases in achievements. This resulted in Israel's improved ranking among participating countries relative to 2018. This is a particularly interesting finding considering that, in Israel, the number of days that the education system did not operate during COVID was among the highest. It was also found that the gaps between students of different socioeconomic rankings widened relative to 2018, especially in mathematics. The sector gaps, in contrast, narrowed slightly, and are still quite large in favor of Hebrew speakers, particularly in reading. With regard to gender differences, the decline in achievements in all three subjects tested, alongside an improvement among boys, narrowed the existing gender gap and even upended it in favor of boys in mathematics. Another interesting finding is that Haredi girls had the highest achievements in reading; in mathematics, their exam scores were similar to those of girls in the State-religious education system (RAMA, 2022).

The discussion of student achievements in Israel compared to those of students in other countries in the period following the COVID crisis is important and interesting, and will no doubt continue to keep the research community busy for many years. In the coming year, the results of the TIMSS exam will also be published. This exam tests students in Grade 8 in mathematics and science and was conducted this year. These results will allow an assessment of the degree of damage experienced by Israeli students due to COVID from another angle. Expect to see more on this in next year's review.

The achievements in the Druze sector on the bagrut exams

Academic achievements in the Druze education system are a particularly interesting phenomenon, especially since it is not a one-time outcome in a single school but rather it is characteristic of the entire sector. In previous studies, we described the progress in preventing drop outs in the Druze sector (Yanay et al., 2019). The Druze education system has managed to reduce their dropout rate far more than other sectors, and by 2017, the rate approached the dropout levels in the Jewish sector (and is apparently even lower today). A survey carried out by the Western Galilee College published in 2022, showed that the dropout rate in the Druze sector is far lower than in the Arab Muslim sector and is only slightly higher than in the Christian sector (The Druze Society and Culture Academic Research Center, 2022). Another qualitative characteristic of the Druze secondary education system is the share of students, particularly girls, who are studying in the most prestigious technological track (Fuchs et al., 2018). It is difficult not to be impressed by the fact that the proportion of Druze girls studying in this track has more than tripled within two decades, and that in 2017 it was even higher than the rate among boys in the Hebrew State education system (even the proportion of Druze boys in the technological track is higher than that in the Hebrew system).

The Druze sector also excels in the bagrut exams (Table 5). In our opinion, the most important achievement is the increase in the share of students taking the bagrut exams, an indicator of the success in dealing with dropouts and the willingness of all students who reach Grade 12 to take the bagrut exams.¹⁷

17 Since the general dropout rates are very low in this sector, as we have already shown, the high proportion of students taking the bagrut exams cannot be attributed to a policy of encouraging dropouts.

The proportion of students in the Druze education system who take the bagrut exams is higher than in any other sector (although the Hebrew sector includes Haredi students, which lowers the proportion who take the bagrut exams). The students in the Druze sector also have a high rate of qualification for a bagrut certificate. In the 2020/2021 school year, 92.3% of the Druze students who took the bagrut exams qualified for a full bagrut certificate, which is well above the rates in the Hebrew State education system and in the other Arabic-speaking sectors. The rapid increase in the rates of qualification occurred within a span of only five years.

Table 5. Average bagrut qualification rate, 2020/2021 vs 2015/2016, difference and rate of change

Sector/Supervisory authority	2015/2016	2020/2021	Difference (percentage points)	Percentage change
Druze	75.6	92.3	16.7	22.0%
Bedouin	48.6	61.6	13.0	26.7%
Haredi	57.4	70.1	12.7	22.1%
Arab	61.8	72.4	10.6	17.1%
Hebrew State	71.6	81.3	9.7	13.5%
State-religious	78.4	87.1	8.6	11.0%
Total	69.5	79.2	9.7	14.0%

Source: Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

Finally, note the changes in the share of students qualifying for bagrut with 5-unit level of mathematics (the highest level in mathematics), presented in Table 6. Here again, the Druze sector has the highest rates.

Table 6. Average qualification rate for a bagrut at the 5-unit level in mathematics, 2020/2021 vs 2015/2016, difference and rate of change

Sector/Supervisory authority	2015/2016	2020/2021	Difference (percentage points)	Percentage change
Druze	15.2%	20.8%	5.6	36.8%
State-religious	12.4%	20.0%	7.6	61.3%
Hebrew State	12.6%	18.4%	5.8	46.0%
Arab	8.7%	11.6%	2.9	33.3%
Haredi	1.5%	6.1%	4.6	306.7%
Bedouin	3.8%	3.7%	-0.1	-2.63%
Overall total	10.3%	15.5%	5.2	50.5%

Source: Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

Claims are sometimes made that the high rates of bagrut qualification in the Druze sector are the result of high rates of cheating on the exams. This claim can be evaluated using Ministry of Education data, which provides both the proportion of tests where the internal school score is substantially higher (by more than 20%) than the external test score and the share of disqualified tests. In the Druze sector, the proportion of disqualified tests has been about 1% in recent years and the average share of tests in which the internal school score was significantly higher than the external test score is about 3%, which is similar to that in other sectors and types of supervision. These data show that the role of cheating or exaggerated school scores does not explain the impressive edge in the bagrut qualification rate of the Druze sector relative to the other educational sectors.

In order to understand the factors underlying the high level of achievement in the Druze education system, a comprehensive study is required. Nonetheless, it is worth noting a number of facts that may be having a positive effect:

- *Demography:* According to the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) data, about one-quarter (24.2%) of the Druze population were aged 0–14 at the end of 2021.¹⁸ The total fertility rate per Druze woman has been on a downward trend since the mid-1960s. In 1964, it was 7.92 children per woman, while in 2022, it was 1.85 (see the section on demography in this book). This is the lowest rate among the various population groups in Israel (apart from Others and Christian Arabs). It is reasonable to assume that the fall in the number of children per family has a positive effect on parental investment in their children, and, in turn, on student achievements.
- *Budget:* The Ministry of Education data indicate that the Druze education system benefits from higher budgets than those provided to other education systems.¹⁹ In the primary education system, this was true between 2011/2012 and 2020/2021, when the disparity between the budget per student in the Druze system and in the Hebrew State system was more than NIS 3,000.²⁰ The Druze education system is the only one in Israel that has always enjoyed a long school day, which gives it a significant

18 The Druze population in Israel: Compendium of data marking the Nabi Shu'ayb holiday 2023, April 23, 2023.

19 See Chapter 3: [Transparency in Education to Narrow Gaps in the Education System](#).

20 It is of course worth mentioning the gaps in socioeconomic background, as well as the fact that the Jewish sector includes the Haredi education system, which has a lower budget.

advantage over other education systems. The average budget per student in the Druze high schools — which was in the past consistently lower than in the Hebrew State education system — rose significantly in the 2020/2021 school year and was the highest among the education systems in Israel.

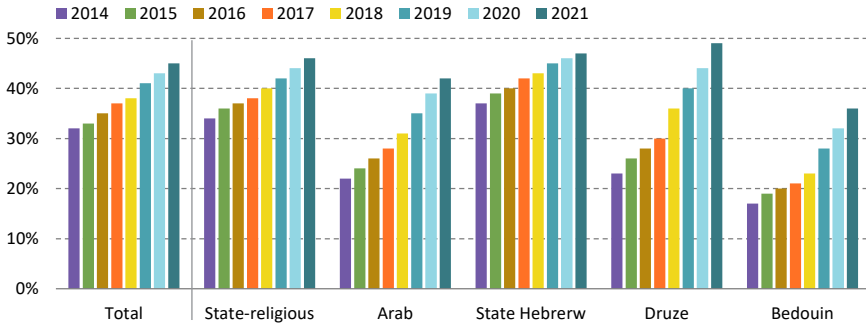
- *Class size:* As mentioned, the claim that class size affects achievement is not accepted by all researchers; nonetheless, there is no doubt that it affects the quality of life and performance of teachers. Since 2016, class size in Druze primary schools has been the lowest in the Israeli education system. In the case of middle schools, between 2000 and 2010, class size was higher than the national average; however, since 2015, it has been somewhat lower.

In the case of high schools, class size in the regular classes²¹ was the highest in 2000; however, since 2015, it is lower than the national average and higher than only the State-religious education system. In the case of special small classes, the proportion of classes in the Druze education system in which affirmative action is applied within all high school classes in that system was lower than the national average at the beginning of the sample period (2000–2023) but was higher at the end.

- *Teachers:* Two accepted indicators of teacher quality are level of education (Figure 10) and seniority (Figure 11). In 2020–2021, the average seniority of Druze teachers was 17.3 years, which is the highest among all sectors and supervisory authorities, and the proportion with a master's degree was 49%, which is also the highest.

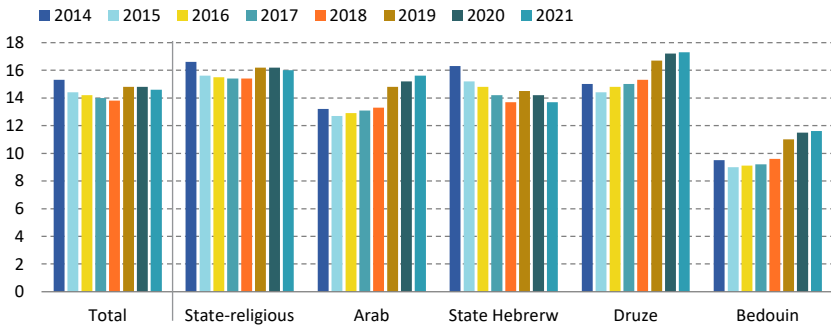
21 Classes that are not Mabar, Lev, Tov, etc.

Figure 10. Share of teachers with a second degree, by sector



Source: Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

Figure 11. Teaching seniority in the education system, by sector



Source: Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

In summary, a variety of factors — some related to demographic and socioeconomic developments in Druze society and others related to Ministry of Education policy — have enabled the Druze education system to develop and improve at a faster rate than the education systems in other sectors.

SPOTLIGHT

The Most Recent Proposals to Reform the Bagrut Exams

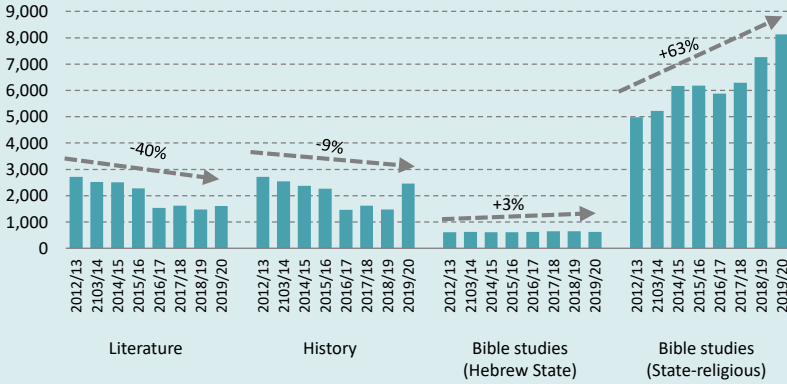
At the start of his term and, in fact, at his swearing-in ceremony, the new Minister of Education, MK Yoav Kish, announced the cancellation of the bagrut exam reform that had been decided on by the outgoing Minister of Education, Dr. Yifat Shasha-Biton. The main component of the reform was the elimination of the requirement to take bagrut exams in liberal arts and social science subjects (such as Bible, literature, and history). The incoming minister reinstated that requirement.²² The main criticism voiced by critics of the previous minister's reform was that the elimination of the requirement to take exams in liberal arts and social science subjects would lower the status of these subjects, and even worse, would lead to their elimination from the curriculum. Whether or not this was a desirable move on the part of the new minister, it is important to note that the low status of these subjects and their dire situation existed well before the initiation of the reform by Minister Shasha-Biton. The reason for this, in my opinion, is a moral and educational failure on the part of the education system, which repeatedly conveyed the message that these subjects are not important and that it is only subjects that can contribute to prospects for employment, high income, and social status that are important.

22 It is important to emphasize that this was elimination of the exam requirement and not dropping the requirement to study these subjects.

Figures 12 and 13 show the low number of students who choose to take the exams in the liberal arts and social science subjects at a high level, in contrast with the large number of students who choose to take bagrut exams of 5 units (the highest level) in mathematics and English (as a second language). Even in the case of Bible studies, the only subject where the number of students taking the exam has increased over the past decade (in the State-religious system it is of course attributed particular importance), only about 8,000 students took the exam at the highest level, in contrast to about 16,000 who took the exam in mathematics and almost 50,000 who took the exam in English.²³ In civics, the situation is particularly concerning since the proportion of students taking 5 units in that subject was only about 0.3% in that year. This may explain the lack of understanding among the younger generation in Israel about the nature of democracy and the basic principles of the separation of powers, the relations between the majority and the minority, and other concepts.

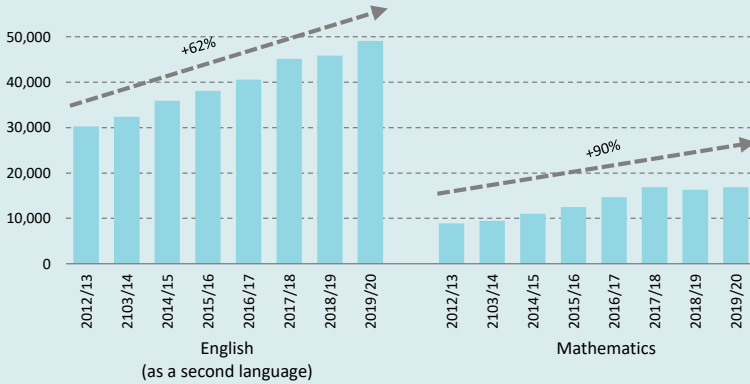
23 The rise in the number of students taking the Bible studies exam at the 5-unit level in the State-religious education system is interesting and exceptional and it would be worth examining whether there have been changes in the conditions for the test in this subject.

Figure 12. Number of students taking bagrut exams at the 5-unit level in Bible studies, history, and literature



Source: Nachum Blass and Sarit Silverman, Taub Center | Data: CBS; The Movement for Freedom of Information

Figure 13. Number of students taking bagrut exams at the 5-unit level in mathematics and English (as a second language)



Source: Nachum Blass and Sarit Silverman, Taub Center | Data: CBS; The Movement for Freedom of Information

The choice to study a subject at a level higher than the required number of units is a good indicator of the interest and importance which students — and to a large extent also their parents — attribute to it along with a probability that they will continue to study it even without a mandatory exam in the subject. Therefore, if the goal is to eliminate the requirement to take the exam in a particular subject without harming the study of that subject, the depth of study, and the number of students who choose the subject, then it might be worthwhile cancelling the exam in subjects that are in high demand rather than ones for which the demand is low.

What is needed, however, is not necessarily to restore the requirement of bagrut exams in liberal arts and social science subjects, but rather to examine whether there is a need for bagrut exams at all, together with a comprehensive review of the material being taught and the teaching methods in the liberal arts and social science subjects, so that students in Israel will want to study them. The rapid increase in the proportion of students taking high level bagrut exams in mathematics and English during the term of Naftali Bennett as Minister of Education, which did not occur because of a change in the minimum requirements but rather as a result of a determined effort and perseverance, demonstrates that this is feasible. Rather than focusing on ways to measure our students, it is possible to nurture the basic values they hold, values that are in line with the goals of education as defined in the State Education Law. This should be accompanied by an effort to increase motivation and nurture curiosity, interest, and a love of learning — attributes that will serve students well in the future and will help them become involved and contributing members of society.

Teaching manpower

The discourse surrounding the development of the education system in Israel cannot be separated from the stormy debate on the issue of a teacher shortage that accompanies the start of every school year. Since we dealt with this issue at length in a previous policy paper (Blass, 2022), suffice it to say that the CBS data published after the start of the 2022/2023 school year confirmed our previous assessments that, at least for now, there is no shortage of teachers — not at the national level and not even at any particular educational level, in any sector, or in any supervisory authority.²⁴ Having said this, it cannot be denied that localized shortages exist. Prior to the start of the current school year (2023/2024), the Minister of Education, in an attempt to downplay any teacher shortage, explained that, based on the raw data, the student-teacher ratio remains stable and has even fallen from 12 to 10.6. He reported that there is a shortage of about 1,000 teachers in a system of about 250,000.²⁵ The school year opened on-time (no small success in Israel) and no real shocks are expected in the number of teachers or in their abilities.

It is also difficult to separate the claims of a teacher shortage from the fact that they are voiced in parallel with discussions of wage negotiations — last year in the negotiation with the Teachers Union and this year in negotiations with the Teachers Organization.²⁶ The extent to which the new wage agreements affect the teacher shortage issue will only become known in coming years. At this stage, it does not appear that the wage agreement with the teachers in primary education and in the middle schools, which was signed last year, had any real effect, although it is still too early to say for certain.

24 The 2023/2024 school year began, in the words of the Minister of Education, “without incident.” Of course, the definition of that term does not deny the possibility that in some cases teachers were hired who did not have the proper training for the subjects they were teaching, that certain subject areas have been cut back, or that some teacher advisors are responsible for two classes. This can only be determined after the release of CBS data in the Media Release on Teaching Manpower in 2023/2024, which will be published several months after the start of the school year.

25 See the Ministry of Education site, [An Announcement Regarding the Teacher Shortage in Israel](#).

26 In this context, we would note that the existence of two separate unions creates implicit competition over the benefits achieved in negotiations with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance, which creates tension in the system and hinders the achievement of stable agreements.

The article in the agreement with the Teachers Organization (high school teachers) that ultimately led to a breakthrough and prevented a strike stated that teachers will add one hour of frontal teaching in exchange for a reduction of three hours of individual tutoring hours. The Minister of Education declared that with this, they “gained” thousands of teachers. It is our opinion, though, that this claim is incorrect. The practical outcome is not an addition of teaching hours but rather a net reduction of about 5% in the work hours required of teachers (two hours out of 40). A far better agreement would have given principals the ability to offer teachers a bonus for every additional hour worked beyond full-time, or even better, to encourage teachers to move to full-time positions (since the majority work less than full-time).

However, this was not the main harm caused by this item in the agreement. Giving up three individual hours in exchange for an hour of frontal teaching involves an undermining of the teacher’s status and the quality of the education system. In theory, this is a minor administrative change in a teacher’s hours. In practice, it is a withdrawal from one of the main achievements of the Oz Le’Temura agreement, which was signed between the Teachers Organization and the government in 2011, and which established that “individual tutoring hours [in which the teacher works with small groups of up to five students] will be used to provide educational reinforcement, a broadening and deepening of teaching for a variety of students, and the expansion of meaningful dialogue between teacher and student” (Ministry of Education, 2013). These hours were a huge achievement that was meant to improve the quality of teaching, increase support for struggling students, and narrow disparities among students. At the same time, these hours were also to improve the situation of teachers and to reduce burnout since at least part of a teacher’s work day would not be spent in the classroom setting and dealing with discipline issues. The inclusion of individual hours and preparation hours as an integral part of a teacher’s job also strengthened the main claim made by teachers that their work involves many hours beyond those spent in frontal teaching. The idea that one frontal hour is equivalent to three individual hours undermines the claim by teachers that they work many hours beyond those spent in frontal teaching. Like any reform, it took the system years and a substantial investment of resources to implement the addition of individual hours. The new agreement dials back by one-half the result achieved by the Oz Le’Temura agreement, and has an adverse effect on the weakest students and on the teachers themselves. This has set the education system back by several years.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have touched on various points that illuminate the four foci of the previous reviews of the education system: resources and budget; learning material and achievements; demographics; and manpower. This time, we concentrated on each of these issues from a specific angle. With respect to budgeting, we examined the changes made to the budget this past year and class size; with respect to demographics, we focused on the special education system; with respect to teaching material and achievement, we described the recent changes in the bagrut exams and the developments in the Druze education system; and, with respect to manpower, we briefly discussed the wage agreement signed with the Teachers Organization.

We also examined some of the system's successes and failures. The successes include less crowding in primary schools and the achievements of the Druze sector, while the failures include the current trends in special education and the changes recently implemented in the bagrut exams.

With respect to the crisis in special education, it is worth considering the possibility of equalizing the conditions of students with special needs who learn in integrated frameworks to those of students in separate frameworks. This involves smaller class size, a voluntary lengthening of the school day, teaching during the summer vacation, and school meals for all students. This will eliminate the incentive for parents to send their children with special needs to separate frameworks. This would, of course, be a strategic change in direction for the education system, which would require a considerable amount of thought and a measure of caution; however, an initial investigation that we carried out indicates that it is possible with the manpower and budget resources available to the system.

The conclusion is that the adoption of appropriate policy, alongside the investment of effort and determination, can bear fruit. However, in some cases, and despite the best of intentions, the changes made do not bring about the hoped-for results.

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