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‘Students lack understanding of democracy due to waning interest in civics’

• By JUDY SIEGEL-ITZKOVICH

and Welfare.

The education budget for 2024 is 21% larger than for the 2022 budget. This growth includes three main components – the reserve budget, which is meant to equalize the budget of the recognized unofficial education system – largely composed of ultra-Orthodox (haredi) schools – to that of the public education system; the haredi educational system will get allocations that are almost two and half times larger in 2024 than in 2022; the special education budget, which increased by 29% due to the growth in the number of pupils, primarily those with disorders that are particularly expensive to treat; and the budget for primary and middle schools, which grew by 35%, largely as a result of the wage agreement with the Teachers Union.

The main part of the increase in the education budget was for special education, which grew from NIS 10.9 billion in 2017 to NIS 16b. in 2022, an increase of 46%. This compares to the budget for the regular education system, which grew

by 23% in the same period. In relative terms, the proportion of special education within the total education budget grew from 18.7% to 21.4%. Similarly, the number of pupils in special education grew faster than the number of those in the regular education system.

Despite the significant increase in the budget, many parents claim that there has not been any improvement in the services provided to their children. On the other hand, the rapid growth in the special education system is creating pressure on the ministry’s budget, and there is concern that this will cut the resources allocated to the regular education system.

THE DRUZE SECTOR has shown the largest achievement gains in the education system, particularly in terms of the matriculation exams. The proportion of Druze students who take the exams and the proportion of those who qualify for a certificate are very high. In the 2020/21 school year, the rate of qualification reached 92.3%. This increase, which

was achieved within only five years, put Druze students well ahead of those in the Hebrew state education system and the other Arabic-speaking sectors. In addition, the Druze sector leads in the proportion of pupils qualifying for a five-unit matriculation in mathematics.

The success of this sector can be attributed to, among other things, the large budgets it allocates to primary schools and high schools and the quality of its teachers, almost half of whom have a master’s degree, Blass said.

Blass writes that there has been a slight but consistent decline in class size in Israeli primary schools, but the opposite situation exists in the middle schools, and it has worsened over the last decade. In 2023, one-third of pupils were still learning in classes of over 32 students, which is the same share as in 2013.

Blass believes that “the lack of improvement in class size in middle schools is highly problematic since the pupils are adolescents – an especially vulnerable age group character-

ized by, among other things, attention deficits.”

The main criticism of the reform in the exams, which mostly involves making it optional to take them in liberal arts and social science subjects, was that it would reduce the value of learning these subjects in the eyes and – perhaps even worse – would lead to their being dropped from the curriculum.

The research shows that only a small minority of pupils choose to take the exams in these subjects at a high level, in contrast to the large number of students who choose to do so in mathematics and English.

Even in Bible studies, which is the only subject that saw an increase in the number of students taking the exam during the past decade, only about 8,000 students took it at the highest level in 2020, in contrast to about 16,000 who took five units in mathematics and almost 50,000 who took five units in English.

As for civics, the situation is even more worrisome, as the proportion of pupils taking the exam at the five-unit level in

that year was only about 0.3%. According to Blass, “the connection is clear between the dismal situation in the liberal arts and social science subjects, and in particular civics, and the general lack of understanding among many of the younger generation about democracy and the definition of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state.”

Each year, Taub surveys the main developments in the education system in Israel, placing an emphasis on budgetary, demographic, and pedagogical issues. This time, however, while the report touched on these issues more generally it focuses on two areas that reflect success by the education system – changes in class size and achievements in the Druze sector and special education, that reflects in no small way on a significant failure – despite good intentions.

“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 without a sufficient

budget, there is no chance of having an optimally functioning education system,” Blass continued. “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 pupils in the system and how it was divided among the different parts of the system.”

Blass noted that the disparities in budgeting among sectors and schools with different socioeconomic levels have narrowed. He also showed that at least some of the budgeting disparities originated in explicit budgeting formulas rather than as the result of covert discrimination.

Between 2019 and 2022, the number of pupils in the schools and preschools grew by about 6% – from 2,318,000 to 2,457,000 – while the original budget grew by 12%.

The budget per student has thus clearly grown. The “reserve budget” that includes coalition funds for the haredi schools doubled between 2022 and 2023 and will increase again between 2023 and 2024.