

The State of Israel's Education

by

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This country has learned the term “spin” very well. Determined acts of intentional disorientation and the deliberate inundation of the public with unrelated and misleading details have ascended to an advanced art-form. In this country, there are no such things as facts, just opinions. So why should it surprise anyone when policy-makers do not feel at all obligated to provide relevant answers to real problems in lieu of any public agreement as to what is real and what isn't? This is how we operate in the realm of – among other things – education.

There are two primary facts that characterize the educational system: (1) Israel provides the worst primary and lower-secondary education in the western world, and (2) the system does not lack money, when compared to average educational expenditures in other countries. From the naive assumption that the first fact is by now common knowledge, I allowed myself to focus my article “Where Did the Money Go” (*Haaretz*, June 1, 2006) on highlighting the second fact. Big mistake.

The title of an article written in response to mine by Dr. Ami Volansky, among the educational system's leaders until a few years ago, reflects the thinking of many of those affiliated with the system: “After the budget cut, the downward slide” (*Haaretz*, June 7, 2006). He is referring to the budget cuts that the system experienced after I presented a comprehensive picture of it for the first time – as part of the Ben-Shahar team – before Prime Minister Barak and his cabinet in the year 2000.

However, there is one small problem with Volansky's observation. It is completely disconnected from the facts. In the 1990's, Israel's education budget was actually rising steadily. During this period, the scholastic achievements of Israel's 8th graders had already deteriorated to 39th place out of the countries that participated in the TIMSS mathematics and science exams (based on the average math and science scores in the years 1995 and 1999). We ranked below all of the western countries and below additional countries such as Malaysia, Thailand and Romania who provide us – still, though apparently not forever – with cheap textiles and labor.

As if a low level of education were not enough, educational gaps within Israel are considerably higher than in all western countries, and in general, higher than in 49 of the 53 participating countries. These results are not due only to the “weak” segments of our population as many people prefer to think. In fact, Israel's highest achievers, those students in the top 5th percentile, were ranked in only 35th place.

All this took place during years with relatively abundant budgets, compared with the budgets in countries that overtook us in achievements. It is important to note that despite the extremely problematic implication of these rankings, they actually depict a rosier picture than reality since Israel did not include in the test the many pupils studying in its ultraorthodox education system.

Reading comprehension among 4th graders was examined in PIRLS tests that were given in 2001. Israel was ranked in 23rd place out of 35 countries while education gaps within the country were higher than in 30 other countries.

In another article written in response to mine, Yogeve, Livne and Feniger (*Haaretz* in Hebrew, June 8, 2006) focused on the PISA exam administered to 15 year-olds in 2002. In their attempt at minimizing the gravity of the situation, the writers forgot to mention the bottom line – the results. Israel's average grade in all three of the subjects, mathematics, science and reading comprehension, placed it 31st out of 41 countries – once again, below all western countries and additional nations with living standards well below ours. As if this were not enough, education gaps within Israel were higher than in all 41 participating countries.

The quality of education, as measured in the international exams, has a significant impact on living standards and their growth rates. Findings by Hanushek and Kimko published in the *American Economic Review*, one of the leading research journals in economics, indicate that an improvement in the average level of education by one standard deviation increases economic growth by about 1.5 percentage points. Even if we assume that the growth improvement is only half of what Hanushek and Kimko find, this means an annual addition to GDP beginning at NIS 4 billion and increasing each year. In addition, the researchers found that an increase in education spending does not significantly affect growth.

In short, the time has come for those who demand higher education budgets to distinguish between facts and opinions and to provide a detailed explanation of what exactly causes the lethal combination of low achievements and large budgets in the country of the People of the Book. In light of the speed that the surrounding global environment is changing, it should be clear that this is an existential requirement.