

Education Reform Now

by

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The current minister of education declares that she doesn't believe in reforms. She believes only in budget increases. The previous minister of education excelled in demolishing a reform plan that – while controversial – had the potential of contributing significantly toward saving the situation. When this is what radiates from above, then it is no wonder that the word “reform” is so poorly received by the public.

But in light of the steady multi-year deterioration in the education system, with its bleak social and economic consequences for an entire generation, there is no expression that better captures what the system must undergo than “sweeping reform”. Before asking for additional funds at the expense of health, welfare and defense, there is a need to significantly change the prevailing conceptual and behavioral mindset at the top of the education pyramid, to combine integrity with the leadership abilities needed to face the public and truthfully provide all of the facts regarding the way that education has been, and continues to be, provided in this country: the allocation of huge budgets along murky political lines and different lop-sided standards for each of the four different education streams (national, national-religious, ultra-orthodox and Arab) that comprise the system; crafty ploys stretching the bookkeeping imagination aimed at increasing compensation instead of paying respectable wages in an above-board manner that will also figure into future pension calculations; flooding the education market with huge numbers of teachers by purportedly “academic” institutions with disgracefully low admissions standards and correspondingly abysmal teaching abilities among many of their graduates; course curricula influenced by political considerations and commercial initiatives; the impracticable dichotomy between responsibility and authority; and much more.

A candid public acknowledgment and identification of such problems combined with an honest assessment of their scope, magnitude and implications are just the first necessary steps on the road to recovery. How do we change direction? Some of the main points that need to underpin the essential comprehensive education reform are outlined below.

- Setting uniform criteria for all pupils in each of the four different education streams: for example, the establishment of a state-of-the-art, uniform, core curriculum – and mandating its full implementation – to provide every pupil throughout the school system, from kindergarten through the end of high school, with an identical basic “toolbox”. A political risk for the minister who dares? Definitely. But this personal political risk – to people who ask to represent and lead us – is negligible compared to the existential risk facing the country in another generation if all of Israel's children will not be granted a most basic civil right, the right to receive the tools for building their personal futures in a modern and competitive economy.

Uniform standards need also be applied to classroom size, stipulating that average class sizes be similar in each of the education streams – with no more than 25 students in any given class. Differential budgeting is required at the national level, in order to alleviate dependencies on local abilities. This budgeting should be based on the socio-economic

makeup of schools and must be sufficient for a longer school day that is free – in practice and not just on paper – for every child.

- **Bolstering the status of teachers:** A substantial increase in teachers' salaries is needed alongside a significant improvement in the quality of the teaching workforce. The professional training of a teacher in Israel should require at least an undergraduate academic degree, in addition to a teaching certificate (closing most of the teachers' colleges will release a non-negligible amount of funds). The number of work hours per day and work weeks per year as well as the wages for full-time teachers must be similar to the norm in other sectors of the economy. Every attempt should be made to cooperate with the teachers' unions in introducing greater flexibility in the employment of teachers, in determining their salaries, and in providing financial incentives for promoting and rewarding excellence.
- **Structural changes in the education system:** Following the recommendations of the ELA commission, which preceded the Dovrat commission, a small professional and non-partisan National Education Authority needs to be established. It will have the authority to determine the credo and the core curriculum of the education system. The education ministry's districts will be abolished. The current plethora of supervisors must be considerably reduced, and – following the Dovrat Commission's recommendations – supplemented by an independent (of the Education Ministry) national authority for measurement and assessment. Data from this authority will enable the Ministry of Education alone, without intervention and duplication of responsibilities from any other ministry, to supervise and ensure that each of the schools in each of the education streams throughout the country is fully complying with the core curriculum requirements.

All decisions regarding classroom activity, school maintenance, manpower and financial management will be transferred to the schools. A new system of checks and balances needs to be established between the national government (the main source of budgets), the municipality (the official representative of the local educational interests), and the end users in the school (who will now receive far wider freedom in utilizing money).

These are the general directions that the wide-ranging education reform needs to take. The transition from the current system to the new one will not be cheap. However, outside of defense-related issues, there is no investment more important and more justified for the future of the State of Israel – provided that the Ministry of Education weans itself from its Byzantine budgetary customs and internalizes that there is no alternative to a sweeping and thorough structural reform.

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