

## Independence from benefits – to education

by

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Israel's Day of Independence – for thinking outside the box, for escaping fixed mindsets and letting imagination spread its wings. Two and a half months have elapsed since elections that could herald the beginning of the first significant turnaround in national priorities since the last huge turnaround that we experienced, in the 1970s. A small case in point is used here to illustrate what might be accomplished if we only allow ourselves the independence to think and the courage to change.

Child benefits were introduced in Israel to achieve two primary objectives: encouraging the birth of more babies and assisting children living in poverty. Seven billion shekels (close to 2 billion dollars) are distributed each year as child benefits towards attaining these goals – though research studies have shown that the fertility incentives are effective primarily among poor Bedouin families in the south and poor Ultra-Orthodox Jewish families. Is this the soliloquy that this policy's composers had in mind when they wrote it?

What about the goal of aiding poor children? It is not obvious how much the 175 or 263 shekels (depending on the number of children) that a family receives per child each month (6 or 9 shekels a day) actually contributes. It is possible to think of alternatives to this mode of assistance – which, by the way, also reflects a negative work incentive.

The time has come to give independence to the 7 billion shekels that are currently being spent on child benefits. If the budgetary hole is so deep that the Finance Minister needs 2 billion shekels to help reduce the deficit – let him take the money. But the rest should not be left as diluted child benefits and should be directed in an entirely different direction.

The Finance Minister should give the remaining 5 billion shekels to the Education Minister so that this money could be transformed into daily hot lunches for children living in poor neighborhoods, within schools that provide education for a few more hours beyond noon each day, in schools that need to have actual lunchrooms like in normal countries – and under the specific immutable condition that these schools teach a full core curriculum with no rounding of corners or shortcuts.

This is how we will be able to ensure that children living in poverty will receive at least one normal hot meal per day – which is considerably more than what their parents could have bought them with the 6-9 shekels a day that they currently receive as child benefits. As a side benefit, Israel will have begun its first steps toward giving these children a ladder for climbing above the poverty line as adults. This is a core treatment of poverty that is not just for the children. A longer school day would also enable many of their parents to find a job.

This is not rocket science. The same astronomical amounts that we pay annually as benefits will be directed from this point forward towards those who really need it – support for the present that will be accompanied by the provision of tools and hope for the future.

So best wishes to all of us for a happy Independence Day, independence from benefits – to education.