

Learning the Education Basics

by

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What Jewish heritage and custom have passed along from generation to generation, science began to prove during the last century, and the organization of leading industrialized countries – the OECD – began to internalize and assimilate in recent decades: education has the ability not only to lift up the individual, it can also uplift an entire society. Over the years, Israeli society “progressed”, and what we progressively forgot, the OECD is teaching us anew – the hard way.

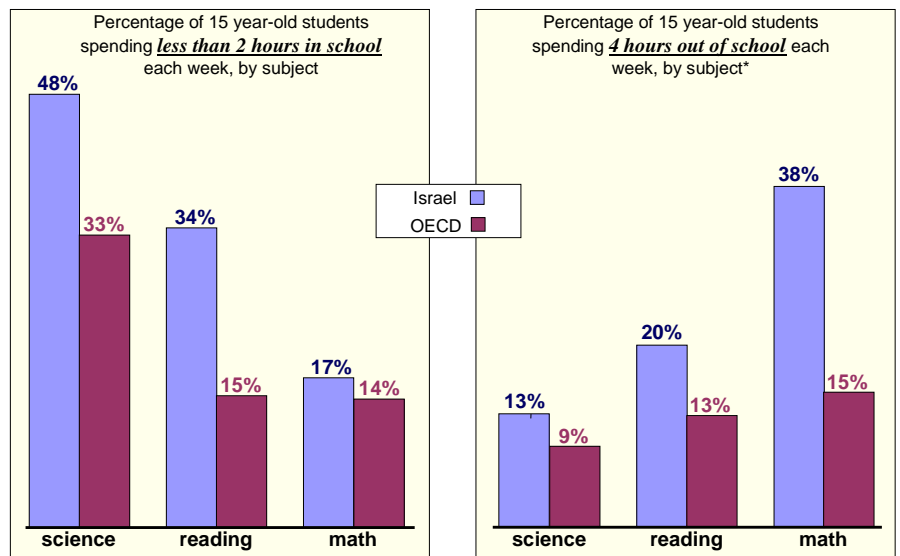
Several years ago, the OECD began to examine how much its kids knew in some of the educational fields so basic for a modern society and economy. In the most recent such examination – PISA tests administered to 15 year-olds in science, mathematics and reading – the Israeli students were ranked below 28 of the 30 OECD member-countries. As if this were not enough, gaps in educational achievement in Israel were the highest among all of the countries taking part in the exam. The question is why? What do the other countries do that is so absent here?

In contrast with the conventional wisdom, OECD data published a few days ago show that the average number of hours per year of total compulsory instruction time for 15 year-old Israeli pupils is not low. Actually, the State of Israel budgets more instruction hours than 19 of the 22 OECD countries for which there is data. So why don't the children of Israel know the material?

One reason, though not the only one, is related to the utilization of the instruction time. As indicated in the figure, nearly half (48 percent) of Israel's 15 year-olds receive less than two hours of science in school per week. This compares with just one-third of the children studying less than two hours of science in OECD schools. In reading, the share of Israelis studying under two hours in school (34 percent) is more than double the OECD share (15 percent). The mathematics numbers are also unfavorable to the children of Israel: 17 percent of the country's pupils study less than two hours of math in school versus 14 percent in OECD schools.

Amount of Learning – In and Out of School

Israel and the OECD, 2006



* Out-of-school lessons, self-study or homework

source: Dan Ben-David, Tel-Aviv University. Data from the OECD.

What's going on here? On the one hand, we pay for much more compulsory instructional time than is common in the West. On the other hand, our children receive much fewer instruction hours in the basic fields. Where does the remaining instruction time go? What exactly are we paying for?

In fact, the number of pupils per science teacher in the OECD is 13.4 as opposed to just 12.7 in Israel. In other words, we are not only financing more instruction hours but are also paying for more science teachers than the average OECD taxpayer. It appears that a great deal of what enters the budget pipe on one end appears to perform an inexplicable disappearing act on its way to the children who require it at the other end.

What the kids don't receive in school must ultimately be paid for, again, privately – though not every parent is fully aware of education's importance nor does everyone have the means to pay for it. Instead of receiving instruction on the basic subjects in school, Israel's children are forced to attain the missing knowledge on their own.

The share of Israeli pupils that devote four hours a week on out-of-school lessons, self-study or homework is 50 percent higher than it is in the OECD in science and in reading (13 percent of Israel's children versus 9 percent in the OECD study 4 hours of science a week outside their schools while 20 percent of the pupils in Israel versus 13 percent in the OECD do so in reading) and more than twice the OECD rate in math (38 percent of the Israeli children versus 15 percent of the OECD kids study four hours a week outside school).

In light of all this, it should come as no surprise when our children perform so abysmally in the international exams. What the future holds in store should also not surprise when today's pupils in Israel and abroad grow up and begin competing with one another in the global marketplace. This may be the holy land, but miracles happen only to those who take control of their own destinies.