

## The Educational Tower of PISA

by

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The face of our education – at home and in school – is our society’s real face. What the kids see and receive at home determines, more than anything else, their behavioral norms, their attitude toward education and their desire and ability to succeed. When the gaps among adults are among the largest in the Western world, it is not too difficult to guess what kinds of differences accompany the children as they cross the kindergarten threshold. This is the door through which a normative society must enter together with the students, to help, to strengthen, to encourage and to enable them soar to personal heights that would otherwise be unattainable for most.

The public education system is society’s primary tool for reducing gaps from home, for understanding and trying to find what is common with other parts of society that are not exactly favored at home, for improving and upgrading innate abilities, for providing basic tools that will enable the future adults to make it in a modern world and in a competitive market.

Years of neglect, failed management and lack of leadership have become an Israeli default that invites myriad localized solutions, a sort of informal privatization beckoning outside parties with money to enter the abandoned sovereign realm and do what they want with the children. This is not a way to close gaps. This is a way to ruin a country.

One of the important PISA findings published in recent days did not receive any media attention. The exam covered 89% of the 15 year-olds in the OECD countries. In Israel, a country trying to gain acceptance to the OECD, only 76% were covered. 11% of all 15 year-old Israelis are simply not in school, compared to 4% in the OECD. In addition, the entire ultra-orthodox population is excluded from the sample, and possibly others as well. This does not prevent us from claiming that 97% of the nationally “desired” population took the test. The difference between 76% and 97% implies that the State of Israel has lost its sovereignty in determining the educational content in a very large portion of its schools. In addition, the true sovereigns do not allow the State to step inside those schools in order to examine what is really being taught there.

Even when the focus shifts to those remaining children for whom the State admits accountability, average achievement levels among Israel’s children in the three subjects tested (science, math and reading) places them in 39th place among all 57 countries, with larger internal education gaps than in every one of the other countries. When the sample focuses just on native-born children, Israel remains in 39th place.

Israel’s weakest pupils, those in the bottom 5th percentile, came in 48th place when ranked with the weakest pupils in the other countries. What kind of a future are we preparing for them?

Where will the future hi-tech wonders, the doctors and the professors that provide Israel with a bridge to the far reaches of the human knowledge envelope come from? Most will come from the best students who are in the top 5th percentile – those who are ranked by PISA in only 32nd place compared with the top students in the other countries. Actually, they may not come from the ranks of the excellent and they may not come at all. It turns out that the children of

Israel are ranked in 41st place when it comes to the importance that they attach to these three fields of study. So go the People of the Book.

Large classes are a common excuse for the poor performances. But why are classes so crowded when the number of pupils per teacher in Israeli science classes (12.7) is lower than the OECD average (13.4)?

It is possible that children here don't know science since many simply do not learn science. Even after deleting from the sample one-fourth of the kids who did not take the PISA exams, only 75% of those remaining took any science course at all (compared to 87% in the OECD). Of those who do study science, the PISA results indicate that Israeli children spend fewer weekly hours in science classes within school than the OECD average while spending more time taking science lessons outside school than in nearly all of the 57 PISA participating countries. This is what happens when public education is abandoned and the rules of the jungle become the rules of the land. It is no coincidence that education gaps are so high and the level is so low in Israel.

Like the original leaning Tower of Pisa in Italy, Israel's education system is becoming more and more out of whack each year. In contrast to that famous tower, which recently underwent substantial structural reinforcement in order to prevent its collapse, those responsible for the tower of education in Israel concentrate only on fixing the plaster – each time in a different part of the tower. Who here understands that it is imperative to fix the entire structure before it collapses on us all?