

The Education Minister and the Facts

by

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In her recent article on Israel's education system, Education Minister Yuli Tamir painted a grim picture in her attempt at making the case for increasing the education budget. But the overall picture emanating from her article is considerably worse than what the minister intended.

Israel is indeed facing unique difficulties that are particularly troublesome in the social and defense realms – and the ministry of education is not alone in its need for extraordinary budgets in order to deal with these problems. But when each ministry requires extraordinary budgets, then these no longer remain extraordinary. In an environment in which the gap between needs and budget constraints is so large, then what are needed are not extraordinary budgets but extraordinary ministers with the ability to see the complete picture and not just the limited world of their ministry.

The primary thrust of a minister's energy cannot be to increase her share of the cake at the expense of other societal needs. But not once did the education minister even acknowledge in her article any of her ministry's shortcomings nor the enormous inefficiency and waste that plague it.

No less problematical is her complete ignorance of the numbers that portray a system that is neither short of instruction hours nor short of teachers – all this at a time when the level of education that it provides is the poorest in the West. Instead of trying to explain how it is possible that Israeli teachers earn so little compared to teachers abroad, though the nation's education budget does not fall below education budgets in other countries, Tamir chose to convey a distorted budgetary picture with respect to other countries and with respect to Israel's past.

There are two possible explanations for this problematic portrayal of the situation, and none of these can be the source of much comfort. Either Israel's minister of education is truly unfamiliar with, or does not understand, her own office's numbers – or she is intentionally distorting them. In my earlier articles, I presented figures based on the same international source that the minister referred to. Our differing numbers reflect the fact that the minister forgot to mention or to justify why her figures were not adjusted to correct for differences in living standards between Israel and other countries.

As if this were not enough, the minister believes that the decline in the primary and secondary education systems is due to billions of shekels that were cut from her ministry's budget. While there were indeed cuts in the ministry's overall budget, the most recent data released by the Central Bureau of Statistics, which focuses on just the primary and secondary education budgets – and not on the other ministry activities – depict a completely different picture than the impression that the minister attempted to impart.

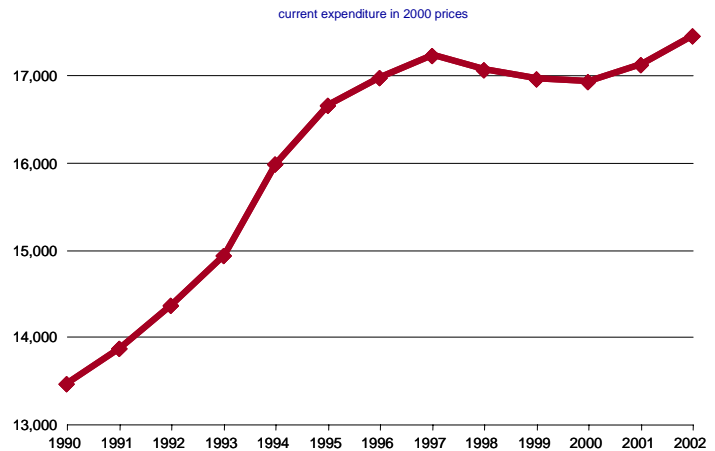
As the graph clearly indicates, the public expenditure (i.e. excluding private expenditure) per pupil in primary and secondary education rose substantially over the years – with a real increase of 30% since 1990. Hence, it is difficult to understand why the minister persists in arguing that her ministry's problems are financial rather than structural and conceptual.

Minister Tamir writes about the different education streams whose existence increases the ministry's operating costs. But she accepts this as part of the facts of life that require budget increases, rather than publicly proclaiming that this is too expensive a luxury for a country with so many severe social and security problems.

The true cost of this luxury is not limited only to the education budget. When more than 80% of the ultra-orthodox men and Arab women do not work, while about half of today's first grade pupils are in either the ultra-orthodox or Arab education streams, then no special prophetic ability is required for understanding what kind of a future for this country is cooking today in its education system.

It is possible that an opportunity for changing the minister's policies is presenting itself from an unexpected direction. The Shas party's attempt at "equalizing" education conditions in one particular area provides Yuli Tamir with just such an opportunity. Instead of threatening to impose equality in all areas as a means for pressuring Shas into retreating from its demands, the preferred option would be for the minister to leverage this issue and to actually go ahead and equalize conditions. Eliminating prevailing inequalities and distortions between education streams is not only the right thing to do, it will also provide a serious contribution towards making the entire education system considerably more efficient.

Public Education Expenditure Per Pupil in Primary and Secondary Schools, 1990-2002



source: Dan Ben-David, Tel-Aviv University
data from the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics