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## The Education Threat

by

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In a country above which hovers an economic and social threat – a multi-decade decline in Israel's living standards relative to that of the leading western countries, and a steady increase, since the seventies, in levels of poverty and inequality to international peaks – not to mention the constant security threat, the time has come to provide core solutions. One of the primary causes, though clearly not the sole reason, for Israel's continuous socio-economic deterioration is the collapse of its educational system.

After having been one of the best in the world during the sixties, Israel's educational system has degenerated into the worst in the developed world and below a large number of developing countries. According to TIMSS exams given to eighth grade students during the nineties, Israel was ranked in 39th place out of 53 countries in core curriculum subjects such as mathematics and science – which gives a hint of the nation's future ability to absorb, utilize and develop new technologies that are the primary ingredients underlying the ability of an economy to grow, and of its future ability to operate and invent the advanced weapons and intelligence systems necessary for maintaining the existence of a country with our national security problems.

The educational gaps within Israel are larger than the gaps within 49 of the other 52 countries, which provides an indication of the magnitude of the income gaps that await our children when they grow up. As if this were not enough, those who will lead the country in another generation, our top students, came in 35th place when compared to the top 5 percentile of the other countries. The outcomes of other international exams such as PISA and PIRLS corroborate the TIMSS results as do the reading comprehension exams given by the IDF to native-born draftees which reflect a dramatic decline in the percentage of those meeting the minimum requirement – 60% in the eighties, 40% six years ago, and only 32% in 2003.

This is the cold, clear, piercing truth about our educational system and its dire implications, and this is the reason that we need to implement a wide-ranging and thorough structural reform in Israel's public education. This is the need that led to the creation of the independent ELA commission, to which we belonged, that conducted a two and a half year examination of the system in its entirety and drafted a first-of-its-kind (in Israel) proposal for wide-ranging systemic educational reform. Two months before we submitted our final report to the education minister and presented it before the Knesset's education committee, the official education task force headed by Shlomo Dovrat was commissioned by the government and given an directive identical to ELA stated objectives: do a comprehensive investigation of Israel's educational system and provide solutions.

In light of what appears to be an erosion process of the Dovrat recommendations to a point that may lead to its eventual abandonment, it is important to recall what this is all about. The Dovrat report provides serious core solutions to the system's ills. No longer will excellent teachers, and there are many of these, have to devote long hours of their own time in the afternoons, evenings and during vacations without receiving compensation. No longer will they and their less devoted colleagues receive equal compensation. The huge and wasteful beurocracy of the education ministry will be drastically cut, releasing many resources and budgets that will finally be able to make their way to the students. School principles will be

given extended authority to run their schools, together with extended responsibility and accountability for the subsequent outcomes. Instead of the extremely low and sub-standard admissions requirements for teaching colleges, all future teachers will be required to master their subject matter at the university or general college level and graduate with at least a B.A. or B.Sc. (instead of a B.Ed) and a teaching certificate. The longer school day will allow children to receive assistance from their own teachers in the afternoon instead of having to pay for private tutors, and it will enable many more parents to participate in the labor force.

Even if there are a number of differences in the structure, there is nonetheless considerable similarity in the concept underlying the model proposed by the Dovrat task force and the solution suggested by the ELA commission, and it stands to reason that any serious commission that may be created in the future will also reach similar conclusions. Therefore, it is imperative that the Dovrat recommendations be implemented immediately and that an accelerated process begin to resolve the main problems posed by the report (there are quite a few of these). We have an extremely rare opportunity – the existence of a very important plan on the table together with a rare agreement between the three main persons responsible for its implementation and budgeting, the prime minister, the education minister, and the finance minister – for serious root canal treatment in one of the main areas determining the social, economic, and security viability of the state of Israel. The time has come to turn our increasingly barren hourglass around before it completely runneth empty.