

Press Release

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During an entire decade, the achievements of Israel's children in international exams were the lowest in the west while its educational gaps were the highest. These are the findings of a new Taub Center study comparing Israel to 25 leading western countries since 1999.

The past and the future are diverging: During the same decade in which Israel garnered more Nobel Prizes per capita in the sciences than any other country, the achievements of its top high school students were near the bottom of the western barrel.

Prof. Dan Ben-David: "For a country whose entire population is barely greater than that of metropolitan Philadelphia, which is sitting in the heart of one of the world's most inhospitable neighborhoods, these findings indicate existential problems in the next generation – unless a comprehensive reform of the educational system is adopted, and soon."

International exams are given by different international bodies every couple of years or so. Since the number of countries taking the exams differs substantially from one exam to the next, a country's up or down movements in the overall rankings mean very little. However, in its upcoming annual report on the state of Israel's society and economy, the Taub Center will present a first of its kind comparison of Israel to the same 25 advanced economies in every exam given over the past decade. To the extent that Israel's future is reflected by the current educational achievements of its children, then the picture is a worrying one – particularly in light of the fact that the country's rates of poverty and income inequality are already among the highest in the western world while its living standards are receding, in relative terms, from the leading countries. Three tables are attached here that highlight the findings:

Table 1 shows the average annual achievement levels of the same 25 countries in reading, math and science exams between 1999 and 2007. Israel participated in five exams over the past ten years. In all but one of these exams, its children had the lowest achievement levels among all of the top 25 Western countries.

Table 2 shows that educational gaps between Israel's children are the highest in the West, bar none. This is true for every single year vis-à-vis every single country.

Table 3: The achievement levels of Israel's top pupils – those in the top 5 percentiles – are close to the bottom of the western world in each of the exams over the same decade in which an earlier Israeli generation picked up more Nobel Prizes in the sciences than nearly every other country in the world.

Prof. Dan Ben-David, Executive Director of the Taub Center and author of the study:

“Within another decade or so, these same children in these same countries will be competing for real in other arenas that will determine their livelihood. The level of the basic toolbox that Israel is providing its children will put them at a severe disadvantage that many will be unable to extricate themselves from. One of the primary goals of a public education system must be the reduction of gaps in opportunities, and this is accomplished by providing as equal an educational toolbox as possible. But Israel’s education system is doing just the opposite. By creating the largest education gaps in the Western world, it is sowing the seeds today of high income gaps tomorrow.”

The Taub Center for Social Policy Studies in Israel is an independent, non-partisan, socio-economic research institute based in Jerusalem funded by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and private donations. The Center provides the country’s leading decision makers and the wider public with a big picture perspective on social and economic issues. The interdisciplinary teams – that include leading researchers from academia and experts from the policy field – and the professional staff of the Center conduct studies and develop policy recommendations on the main social and economic issues that Israel faces.

For details or to arrange an interview, contact the public relations consultant
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Table 1

Education Levels

Average achievement levels in 25 OECD countries and in Israel over the last decade in international exams*

base = Israel = 100

	TIMSS ¹	PISA ²	TIMSS ¹	PISA ²	TIMSS ¹
	1999	2000/02	2003	2006	2007
Israel	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
OECD	113.7	115.8	106.2	113.3	111.7
1 Australia	114.0	120.5	104.9	116.9	108.6
2 Austria		116.8		112.9	
3 Belgium ³	117.0	115.5	107.0	114.8	
4 Canada ⁴	113.9	121.0	108.1	119.0	111.5
5 Czech Rep.	113.4	113.8		112.8	112.0
6 Denmark		113.1		112.7	
7 England ⁵	110.7	120.1	105.9	112.8	113.3
8 Finland	113.0	122.8		124.3	
9 France		115.4		110.8	
10 Germany		110.8		113.5	
11 Hungary	116.1	111.0	108.9	110.7	113.4
12 Iceland		115.0		111.0	
13 Ireland		117.0		114.4	
14 Italy	104.1	107.8	99.1	105.3	104.7
15 Japan	120.9	123.5	114.0	116.3	120.7
16 Korea	121.6	123.1	116.6	121.8	123.5
17 Netherlands			108.9	117.1	
18 New Zealand	107.2	120.8	103.0	117.9	
19 Norway		114.0	97.1	109.5	102.7
20 Portugal		104.9		105.9	
21 Slovak Rep.			104.2	108.4	
22 Spain		110.7		107.1	
23 Sweden	116.2	116.6	104.0	113.4	107.6
24 Switzerland	114.5	115.2		115.4	
25 USA	108.9	113.4	104.8	108.3	110.4

Table 2

Education Gaps

Standard deviations within 25 OECD countries and in Israel over the last decade in international exams*

base = Israel = 100

	TIMSS ¹	PISA ²	TIMSS ¹	PISA ²	TIMSS ¹
	1999	2000/02	2003	2006	2007
Israel	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
OECD	80.8	77.6	87.4	85.0	77.5
1 Australia	83.1	78.4	92.4	83.4	79.5
2 Austria		75.6		89.9	
3 Belgium ³	72.6	88.8	82.4	93.4	
4 Canada ⁴	75.1	73.7	73.5	81.7	69.8
5 Czech Rep.	79.1	78.4		92.5	72.5
6 Denmark		78.9		79.0	
7 England ⁵	86.6	79.5	90.6	88.0	84.5
8 Finland	71.1	69.9		73.3	
9 France		77.5		89.0	
10 Germany		86.6		91.9	
11 Hungary	84.1	80.8	91.8	80.9	81.0
12 Iceland		72.6		83.4	
13 Ireland		74.0		79.5	
14 Italy	86.6	76.4	91.2	88.7	77.0
15 Japan	77.6	72.1	88.8	86.8	81.0
16 Korea	81.6	64.4	90.6	80.1	84.0
17 Netherlands			76.5	83.0	
18 New Zealand	90.5	84.4	89.4	90.4	
19 Norway		80.0	82.9	86.6	69.5
20 Portugal		75.9		82.2	
21 Slovak Rep.			92.9	86.6	
22 Spain		74.2		79.3	
23 Sweden	74.6	76.2	85.3	83.4	74.0
24 Switzerland	76.1	82.7		86.0	
25 USA	92.0	83.3	94.7	86.8	79.5

Table 3

Comparison of Top Pupils

Achievement levels of top 5th percentile in 25 OECD countries and in Israel over the last decade*

base = Israel = 100

	TIMSS ¹	PISA ²	TIMSS ¹	PISA ²	TIMSS ¹
	1999	2000/02	2003	2006	2007
Israel	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
OECD	106.2	103.8	102.1	104.5	103.9
1 Australia	106.6	107.6	102.0	106.8	103.0
2 Austria		103.9		105.0	
3 Belgium ³	106.0	104.9	100.2	106.2	
4 Canada ⁴	105.0	106.5	101.0	107.5	102.0
5 Czech Rep.	106.8	103.2		106.6	103.8
6 Denmark		102.3		102.7	
7 England ⁵	106.2	107.9	103.1	105.5	106.5
8 Finland	103.5	106.5		109.3	
9 France		103.6		103.2	
10 Germany		102.8		106.2	
11 Hungary	109.0	102.0	105.5	101.9	105.9
12 Iceland		101.9		102.4	
13 Ireland		103.4		104.1	
14 Italy	100.4	98.2	97.4	99.8	98.2
15 Japan	110.3	106.9	108.5	106.9	111.2
16 Korea	112.3	104.4	110.2	108.9	113.8
17 Netherlands			101.8	106.3	
18 New Zealand	103.5	109.0	100.6	109.5	
19 Norway		103.0	93.7	102.4	94.7
20 Portugal		96.0		98.6	
21 Slovak Rep.			102.1	101.6	
22 Spain		99.4		98.5	
23 Sweden	106.0	104.2	100.1	104.5	100.0
24 Switzerland	106.0	105.0		106.0	
25 USA	105.5	104.4	102.8	102.8	103.6

General notes on the tables:

- Israel serves as the base country in all of these comparisons. In other words, if a given country's average achievement level in 2003 is 117, this means that its children achieved an average score that was 17% higher than Israel's. On the other hand, if the average achievement level is 97, then this implies that the country's average score was 3% below Israel's.
- Israel's national sample has been the least representative of all countries taking the international exams since the 1960s. Israeli Arabs did not take the tests until 1999 and the country's ultra-Orthodox children do not take them to this day. Since the ultra-Orthodox pupils do not study most of the core curriculum subjects, then even today's exams represent a more positive national picture for Israel than is actually the case.

* excluding ultra-orthodox Jews in Israel

¹ national average in math and science exams

² national average in math, science and reading exams

³ Flemish Belgium in TIMSS

⁴ average of Canadian provinces participating in TIMSS 2003 and 2007

⁵ UK rather than England in PISA

source: Dan Ben-David, Taub Center and Tel-Aviv University
data from TIMSS and PISA

Table 4

Comparison of Weakest Pupils

Achievement levels of bottom 5th percentile in 25 OECD countries and in Israel over the last decade*

base = Israel = 100

	TIMSS ¹	PISA ²	TIMSS ¹	PISA ²	TIMSS ¹
	1999	2000/02	2003	2006	2007
Israel	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
OECD	135.1	148.9	113.8	131.4	134.6
1 Australia	133.7	157.9	110.1	139.1	129.2
2 Austria		151.7		125.7	
3 Belgium ³	144.2	132.1	114.0	124.7	
4 Canada ⁴	139.0	163.5	123.0	143.0	139.5
5 Czech Rep.	137.8	144.7		126.0	139.3
6 Denmark		143.6		135.3	
7 England ⁵	128.5	156.4	113.1	129.4	132.0
8 Finland	140.0	169.2		159.5	
9 France		148.6		122.3	
10 Germany		130.2		126.3	
11 Hungary	136.9	139.7	117.0	131.1	136.2
12 Iceland		153.0		128.5	
13 Ireland		154.4		138.2	
14 Italy	116.0	135.7	102.6	115.6	123.5
15 Japan	148.1	166.0	124.0	134.1	146.4
16 Korea	146.7	173.8	126.2	149.0	148.7
17 Netherlands			121.9	138.4	
18 New Zealand	118.4	151.6	108.9	135.4	
19 Norway		143.0	102.4	124.5	124.5
20 Portugal		130.9		121.2	
21 Slovak Rep.			109.5	121.8	
22 Spain		143.3		125.2	
23 Sweden	141.1	151.6	111.5	133.2	129.4
24 Switzerland	139.7	143.4		132.8	
25 USA	121.1	140.0	108.8	124.7	131.7