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### **A VISION AND SET OF RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE ISRAELI EDUCATION SYSTEM**

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# *A Vision and Set of Recommendations for the Israeli Education System*

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Nachum Blass, Carmel Blank and Yossi Shavit\*

## *Abstract*

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*Following the social protest movement of the summer of 2011, several focus groups came together with the aim of formulating concrete demands and recommendations for socioeconomic policy changes. This chapter relates to "protest documents" that were formulated by four groups and focuses on their recommendations in the area of education. An analysis of these documents reveals important differences between them as well as no small measure of agreement regarding promising policy directions. The goal is to distill policy proposals that are likely to contribute to an improvement in academic achievements while narrowing gaps between ethnic groups and social strata amongst Israeli pupils. In addition, the aim is to articulate an educational vision based on these proposals, to identify the central common recommendations and to estimate the costs of their implementation.*

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In the course of the summer of 2011 in Israel, as in many other countries, a wide protest movement developed calling for social and economic change. The protesters and their leadership demanded social justice and the advancement of the social welfare state. They also called for lower housing costs, an improved education system and a more equitable distribution of social responsibilities. The movement was unable, though, to articulate focused demands and it seemed that there was difficulty in organizing around a definitive plan of action. As the mayor of New York Michael Bloomberg quipped about the Occupy Wall Street demonstrators, “They are not sure what they want, but they want it now.” Following this, a number of working groups organized in an attempt to give real content to the Israeli social protest movement.

The present paper looks at four “protest documents” that have since been published, and focuses on their recommendations in the area of education. The documents, listed in the order of their publication, are: *Education Reform: Making Education Work for All Children*, by Shlomo Swirski and Noga Dagan-Buzaglo of the Adva Center (August 2011); a proposal by the Program Policy Chairs of the Taub Center, entitled *A New Public Agenda for Israel* (August 2011); the report of the Trajtenberg Committee (the Committee for Economic and Social Change), appointed by the Israeli government to formulate concrete policy recommendations informed by a concern for social justice (published in September 2011); and an interim report prepared in the framework of an expert panel on social justice (the Spivak/Yonah panel) headed by Yitzhak Kashti.<sup>1</sup>

The goal in this chapter is to distill from the four documents policy recommendations capable of improving educational achievements among Israeli pupils while narrowing disparities between ethnic groups and social sectors. The teams that prepared these reports included academics, social activists and experienced professionals in the field of education. An in-depth look at their reports reveals important differences between

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<sup>1</sup> The final report of this team has not yet been published.

them; nevertheless, there is considerable agreement regarding several promising policy directions. The aim here is to formulate an educational vision based on these reports, to identify the central common recommendations and to estimate the costs of their implementation. Some of the funding could come from efficiency measures in the system. The intent here is to set the goals while a more detailed discussion of the means of implementation can take place at a later time.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to note that the recommendations in this document in no way diminish the decisive role of parents and family in the education of their children. Research indicates that the main differences in children's achievements lie in differences in their backgrounds; children from affluent backgrounds will, on average, have higher achievements than those from weaker backgrounds, even if the education system gives the same conditions to both. The education system, as progressive and equal as it may be, is no substitute for parents and is unable to erase the social differences in children's backgrounds. Nevertheless, even in the current situation, the Israeli education system does not seem to do enough to narrow gaps between pupils coming from different social backgrounds, because the extent of affirmative action is insufficient to deal with the existing social inequalities. Thus, the education system in Israel continues to give better quality education to those who come from stronger social backgrounds, at a time when children from weaker backgrounds, who do not come with advantages from home, need high-quality education in a progressive and supportive educational environment. The call today is to increase affirmative action particularly in those schools with children from weaker social groups, that is, in schools that are classified as schools with "low expectations," and to

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<sup>2</sup> At the end of the document a short summary is presented that relates to the main points of the recommendations of each report. The appropriate English language links are provided for those who are interested in looking into the reports in more depth.

increase the differences in allocations between schools that serve affluent populations and those that serve children from weaker backgrounds.<sup>3</sup>

### *Recommendations for Action*

**Strengthen public education.** The following recommendations offer a wide variety of tools for improving and strengthening public education. However, the basis for implementation of these recommendations must be through establishing the importance of education as a national priority, from both a budgetary and a societal value standpoint. The government can no longer simply pay lip service to the idea of prioritizing education; it must be reflected in the way in which resources are allocated to education in the state budget. It is therefore recommended that the rate of investment per pupil be linked to GDP per capita, such that as the economy grows and, along with it per capita GDP, education will reap more of the benefits of growth, while in periods of recession, when per capita GDP declines, the priority given to education will be reflected in a smaller reduction in government spending on education.<sup>4</sup>

**Cessation of the privatization process.** The Israeli education system, like those of other countries, has been undergoing a privatization process in recent years. The primary manifestation of this process in Israel is the involvement of non-governmental organizations of various kinds (non-profits, associations, philanthropists, parents, and others) in public education institutions. Non-governmental organizations often bring with them material resources, thereby eliciting the cooperation of principals and parent committees providing them access into their institutions. However, these initiatives are not necessarily aligned with the declared policy of the Ministry of Education. What is more, the processes by which these organizations form their arrangements with schools are not

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<sup>3</sup> Swirski and Dagan-Buzaglo 2011. See the list of reports at the end.

<sup>4</sup> The calculation will be based on multi-year averages or five-year averages in order to avoid random fluctuations.

necessarily transparent or equitable and are often temporary and dependent on the funding available to the organization in question. In addition, the involvement of various organizations leads to the creation of selective educational institutions that prevent accessibility to weaker groups by charging high fees or through selective screening for skills and aptitudes that are unevenly distributed across the population. Beyond the widening of disparities between social groups, the privatization of the system harms public education by drawing away high-quality teachers and high-performing pupils. Thus, if the state takes its responsibility for education seriously, it must find ways to reverse the processes of privatization in the education system, and closely supervise the involvement of NGOs in the schools.

**Adequate budgeting.** The budgets of educational institutions should be increased so that they can provide pupils with high-quality educational services without recourse to supplemental budgeting from external entities. Charging parents fees should be prohibited in all public educational institutions; all public school services and activities, including textbooks, should be funded by the state.

In order to reduce school expenditure on textbooks, the Ministry of Education should intensify its supervision in this area so that textbooks can be re-used from year to year. It is also recommended that schools, in cooperation with parents, devise means of limiting parental expenditure on school supplies (e.g., brand-name book-bags, assignment planners, etc.).

**Cost:** Three billion shekels per year.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Some of the costs that are involved in implementation of this recommendation are included in the next section and so the estimate of cost relates only to the cancellation of parents' payments. Today, the Ministry of Education approves parental fees from NIS 250 for preschools to NIS 1,300 for grades 11-12. Assuming that the average permitted is NIS 1,000 per year, and the actual amount collected is NIS 1,500, this represents a sum of about NIS 3 billion.

**Budgeting for equal opportunity.** The State of Israel has an obligation to provide education of equal quality to all of its citizens. As noted in the introduction to this paper, pupils come to school from different starting-points, depending on their socioeconomic background. Moreover, affluent parents provide their children with learning support and material resources that widen the gaps over time. The education system is expected to contend with these disparities; educational equity therefore means differential budgeting in accordance with pupils' socioeconomic levels. Schools and classes should be budgeted according to pupil numbers and some objective, uniform socioeconomic measure (such as the Strauss Index), from kindergarten through secondary school. Uniform criteria such as these should determine per pupil governmental allocation to two resource "baskets": a teaching-hours basket specifying the number of instructional hours that the school receives per pupil; and a services and activities basket. This kind of budgeting should produce a significant differential, of at least 50 percent, between the allocation for pupils from the lowest socioeconomic group and that for pupils from the most privileged strata. This will facilitate a differential reduction in class size, school computerization, etc. The differential budgeting should ensure that every pupil acquires the full array of skills needed to succeed. One must also ensure that a complete range of educational services is available to all pupils, including an adequate selection of study programs, teachers trained to provide instruction in the subject areas they are responsible for, classrooms, teaching aids, etc.

**Cost:** The total budget increase needed to implement this recommendation is estimated at two billion shekels per year,<sup>6</sup> not

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<sup>6</sup> The estimate is based on the premise that implementation of the recommendation will not involve the reduction of budget from more affluent schools, and is based on a model that was formulated within the framework of the Dovrat Commission's work. It will require the addition of 100,000 employee-position hours for primary and post-primary schools (at a maximum cost of half a billion shekels). The differential budgeting in kindergartens will cost an additional NIS 250 million. The financial

including the increase required for classroom construction and teacher training necessary due to the addition of teaching hours required by such affirmative action.

**Making educational institutions open and accessible.** Schools that are publicly funded should be prohibited from rejecting pupils based on financial, ethnic or sectoral criteria, or on the basis of prior scholastic achievement. Screening based on these criteria should be considered sufficient reason for withdrawing public funds from the school in question. School principals should be empowered to expel pupils who are violent or exceptionally defiant of authority, whose presence in school severely harms the welfare of other pupils.

**Equality within educational institutions.** Tracking pupils, whether in the form of grouping by proficiency level or by subject matter studied, greatly influences their ability to earn the matriculation certificates required for admission to institutions of higher education and for entry into key positions in the labor market. Over the years, weak social groups have been channeled by school staff, sometimes with good intentions, into non-academic tracks – and so the economic disparities widened between them and the more privileged groups. In order to provide high-quality equitable education, any form of tracking or grouping that is contrary to the will of the pupil or his parents should be prohibited. At the same time, the education system must provide schools with the tools they need to deal with pupil heterogeneity at the classroom level, in the form of appropriate pedagogical methods.

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magnitude of the basket of services per pupil is some NIS 4.75 billion. The calculation assumed a current cost of some NIS 2,500 per pupil, where the number of pupils in the entire system, including kindergartens, is some 1.9 million. Since most of the services are already given, we are speaking of an additional NIS 1.25 billion to the Ministry of Education budget. The total addition required for employee-position hours and the basket of services stands at NIS 2 billion.

**A core curriculum that is compulsory for all pupils.** One of the education system's primary duties is to ensure that all of its graduates have acquired the skills they need for optimal integration into a technologically, culturally and socially complex society. The education system must also provide the social values and cultural foundation necessary to foster social cohesion. One basic condition essential to the fulfillment of these tasks is the existence of a core curriculum that is compulsory for all Israeli pupils. In addition to the core studies, schools should offer programs that address the specific needs, aspirations and values of different groups and sectors within Israeli society. This, however, should supplement, rather than substitute for the core curriculum. Budgeting should be withdrawn from schools that do not teach the core curriculum.

**Improving the quality of teaching.** Measures to encourage and develop teachers in the public education system should be maintained and intensified. These measures should focus on improving the teacher recruitment process, pre- and on-the-job training, employment conditions, salaries, and enhancing the prestige of the teaching profession. At the same time, appropriate steps should be taken to encourage good teachers to stay in the profession, and to facilitate the retirement of teachers unsuited to the field. Special emphasis should be placed on the professional development of school principals and the administrative staff, and on creating occupational mobility avenues for teachers.

**Expanding educational services.** As part of the effort to strengthen public education, educational services should be expanded and made accessible to the public at large. In accordance with this view that early childhood education lays a basic and crucial foundation for the educational process as a whole, the authors support the government decisions of early January 2012 adopting the Trajtenberg Committee's recommendations in the education sphere: implementing the Compulsory Education Law for ages 3-4, subsidizing afternoon programs for the children of working parents, increasing the number of day care centers

for ages 0-3, and extending the school day for children ages 5-9. However, there are reservations about the plan to fund these decisions through an across-the-board cutback in all government ministry budgets.

**Attention to higher education.** The educational process does not end with secondary school. For many of the jobs available in the labor market, an academic degree is required. Moreover, economic and cultural development can be achieved only if broad swathes of the public enjoy access to higher education. One way of providing this access is through undergraduate student loans that cover tuition and living expenses, with repayment after studies have been completed and based on the post-studies income level (per the Australian model). In light of existing criticism of this model,<sup>7</sup> the authors encourage the consideration of additional options.

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<sup>7</sup> There are two major criticisms of the Australian model. One contends that collecting on loans involves a great deal of administrative difficulties since it includes gathering information on the loan recipients' income after their studies are completed. The answer to this is a mechanism linked to income tax. The second criticism is that students without means will be concerned about taking loans based on their repayment in the future. The response to this is better publicity and linking the payment schedule to income level.

### *The Reports that Are the Basis for the Recommendations (in order of their publication)*

- **The report issued by the Adva Center (Swirski and Dagan-Buzaglo, 2011)**<sup>8</sup> focuses primarily on scholastic inequality among Israeli pupils and on low achievement. It also addresses the need to institute a uniform core curriculum alongside studies that reflect the values of the myriad communities that make up the Israeli social mosaic. The report's recommendations focus on how to improve the scholastic achievements of two-thirds of Israeli pupils studying in what are referred to as "low-expectation" schools – pupils who do not meet the normative levels of achievement set by the Ministry of Education and international exams.

- **The report issued by the Taub Center (proposal by the Program Policy Chairs of the Taub Center)**<sup>9</sup> identifies several major problems with the Israeli education system: low pupil achievement levels on international exams, large disparities between pupils, the lack of a core curriculum in a growing portion of Israeli schools, resource disparities between schools (particularly relating to class size), inadequate quality of teaching manpower, and teacher dissatisfaction with employment conditions. The report also addresses various failings of Israel's system of higher education.

- **The report issued by the Committee for Economic and Social Change (the Trajtenberg Report)**<sup>10</sup> devotes most of its attention to the 0-9 age group, and focuses on lowering educational costs for working parents. Its main recommendations relate to implementing free

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<sup>8</sup> [adva.org/uploaded/edu-eng-2011-2.pdf](http://adva.org/uploaded/edu-eng-2011-2.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> [taubcenter.org.il/tauborgilwp/wp-content/uploads/Eng-A-New-Public-Agenda-for-Israel-Dec.pdf](http://taubcenter.org.il/tauborgilwp/wp-content/uploads/Eng-A-New-Public-Agenda-for-Israel-Dec.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> [yadhanadiv.org.il/sites/default/files/downloads/resources/Trajtenberg%20Report%20Summary%20-%20English.pdf](http://yadhanadiv.org.il/sites/default/files/downloads/resources/Trajtenberg%20Report%20Summary%20-%20English.pdf).

compulsory education for three- and four-year-olds, to centralizing administration of early childhood education within the Ministry of Education, and to subsidizing early childhood expenses. The report also recommends implementing an extended school day for children ages 3-9.

- **The social justice movement's expert panel**<sup>11</sup> identifies the erosion of Israeli public education as a major problem. The report recommends defining and regulating public education as education that is accessible, equitable and free from the age of six months through the completion of undergraduate higher education.

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<sup>11</sup> [j14.orgt.il/spivak/?p=610](http://j14.orgt.il/spivak/?p=610).

