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A Proposal for Structural Reform of Israel's Educational System

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Executive Summary

The educational system in Israel has found it difficult to instill norms of good behavior in its students and to provide them with high quality skills in critical core subjects. While the scholastic achievements of Israeli children are among the lowest in the industrialized world, educational gaps between them are the widest in the west. This report focuses on the functioning of the educational system in Israel and on the implications of educational quality and educational gaps on the socio-economic fabric of the country, and proposes structural reform.

This structural reform focuses on measures aimed at significantly improving achievement in the core subjects, substantially reducing the achievement gaps, introduction of a mandatory core curriculum, fundamental change in the status of teachers – including changes in their rights and obligations – and a redefinition of authority and responsibility within the educational system. Because the problems are profound and their socio-economic implications so severe, it is no longer sufficient to deal only with the symptoms. Hence the need for a comprehensive structural reform of the entire educational system. This report does not attempt to address all of the problems in the system, but concentrates on the central issues. We believe that if our recommendations will be adopted and implemented, they will have a positive impact on the majority of the remaining issues not covered in this report.

The Main Points

Part One: Key issues and problems in Israel's educational system

Chapter 1: Educating for values

Over the course of many years, the school system in Israel has placed less and less emphasis on educating for values – basic behavioral norms that are customary in every enlightened society. As a result, we find growing disrespect for the other, intolerance, impatience – sometimes manifested in verbal and even physical violence – and a failing education in crucial areas such as democracy, citizenship, and Jewish heritage. This has very serious consequences for the foundations of society. Therefore, a mandatory core curriculum must be defined that will enable pupils to internalize in a clear and orderly manner the values to which Israeli society aspires.

Because educating for values includes non-quantitative elements and lacks clearly measurable indicators of success, and in order to ensure that education for values will not remain at the abstract or theoretical level only, it is important that the person who bears responsibility for coordinating this subject and instilling these values be the class educator – with all that this implies concerning the required skills, responsibility, and authority of the educator.

Chapter 2: Socio-economic aspects

The state of Israel is situated on several highly problematic economic and social trajectories (low growth, rising unemployment, poverty, and inequality, and deepening social rifts), which have seriously deteriorated over a period measured not in years, but

in decades. These long-term trends threaten the very existence of the country. The educational system played, and will continue to play, a central role in shaping the character and quality of the country's human capital infrastructure, hence its enormous impact on current socio-economic trends and its ability to alter them in the future. Therefore, the core curriculum must provide a "toolbox" yielding a substantially improved education in the basic subjects.

Chapter 3: Structural problems in the educational system

The level of knowledge attained by children in the basic subjects, as reflected in achievements scores in national and international examinations, is very low in comparison with other countries and also with the past. The multiplicity of de facto separate educational systems (public, public-religious, ultra-orthodox, Arab, etc.) within the country does not contribute to a reduction in the large educational gaps. The primary problem is not a lack of money allocated to education – which is comparable to, and even greater than, educational expenditures in most western countries – but rather the way that this money is spent. As a result, a good deal of private money end up being spent on education, which few Israeli families can afford, and the practice of using private vendors to provide state educational services has become widespread.

Part Two: Proposal for structural reform of the educational system

Chapter 4: Background

The main contributors to the current problems in Israeli education are the rapid turnover of leadership in the Education Ministry, a flawed and anachronistic organizational structure, inadequate teachers, and curricula that do not reflect the needs of Israeli society and economy. These are the key factors behind the "leakage" of resources enroute from the national budget to their target – the student. The comprehensive structural reform proposed here suggests how each of these can be improved.

Chapter 5: A basic "toolbox" for pupils

Despite the great diversity in Israel's population, there must exist a common set of core values, as well as a common set of skills and knowledge required for functioning as citizens in a democratic society and as productive workers in an open, competitive and modern economy. Thus, there is a need for a uniform core curriculum that will provide an identical basic "toolbox" to every pupil throughout the school system and in every town, village, and neighborhood in Israel.

Chapter 6: The proposed structural reform in the educational system

The aim of the structural reform is to significantly upgrade the quality and quantity of resources that reach schoolchildren, and to increase the efficiency of the transmission of these resources to the pupils. A "pyramid" is proposed with the pupil at the apex, with all of the support systems beneath. (The paragraphs below are ordered for ease of reading, which slightly differs from the hierarchical order of the proposed pyramid.)

a. The Pupil

Marked improvements in scholastic achievement and a substantial reduction in the educational gaps are the first steps toward providing equality of opportunity in

Israel – which is critical for improving the country's economic competitiveness and strengthening its security vis-à-vis other countries. Creating an educational system that promotes achievement and the reduction of gaps is part and parcel of the responsibilities of the state toward its citizens. It is the obligation of Israel to provide its children with **free education in practice**. Every child must have the opportunity to attend school in his or her locale from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Children must have longer school hours and better curricula in the core subjects. The quality of education will improve with more qualified teachers who use higher quality curricula.

b. The Teacher

The status of teachers in Israel is lower than it should be. This limits the teachers' authority and impairs their ability to function. It is a problem that must be addressed by the system (which is a primary focus of this report) and also by society at large.

- 1) **Teacher training:** The professional training of a teacher in Israel should require a bachelor's degree (at least) from a university or a multi-disciplinary college and also a teaching certificate. The number of teacher training seminars and teacher colleges must be significantly reduced, leaving only a few of the very best. The new – and sole – function of remaining teacher training seminars and teaching colleges should be the certification of teachers (which would also continue at the universities) and training in specialized fields (such as pre-school or special education).
- 2) **Teachers' organizations:** Cooperation among all parts of the educational system is critical for success of the proposed reform. Teachers should have an interest in implementing these changes, because they will be among the main beneficiaries from the transition to work conditions that are the norm in other sectors of the economy – with all this implies.
- 3) **Employment conditions of the teacher:** Teachers today earn a low wage, but also work fewer hours compared to other sectors of the economy. This hurts the public image of many teachers who invest a great deal of time in teaching, often at the expense of their leisure hours. The problem is not the hourly wage, which is not particularly low, but the overall terms and conditions of employment. The number of work hours per day and work weeks per year for full-time teachers be similar to the norm in other sectors of the economy. This will enable the employment of fewer teachers and raise the salary of those already employed. More flexibility should be allowed in the hiring of teachers and in the determination of their salaries to enable a system that provides appropriate financial incentives for achievement.

c. National Education Authority

A National Education Authority should be established that will be professional and non-partisan. It will have the authority to set the credo and core curriculum of the educational system. This Authority will employ a maximum of 20-25 professionals and a small administrative staff.

d. Ministry of Education

The Ministry of Education will be charged with setting policy for the educational system in keeping with the credo and core curriculum set by the National Education Authority. The Ministry will also be responsible for supervision and oversight of the curriculum's implementation – in accordance with clear, transparent, and uniform standards, and with the utilization of scholastic examinations and interschool efficiency indices – until the target level is reached. The school districts should be eliminated and the supervisory functions significantly reduced. The Ministry will maintain a center dedicated to the collection of comparative system-wide data reflecting the achievements of pupils, teachers, and schools in Israel.

In an effort to enhance transparency, the Ministry of Education will publicize the results of the exams and interschool efficiency indices in detail (while protecting the privacy of the individuals involved), as well as the budgets and expenditures for each school, in real time, and accessible on the internet and via other media.

e. The School Board

A School Board will be established in each school with functions parallel to a corporate board. The main tasks of the School Board will be to supervise the work of the principal, approve the school work plan and budgets, and confirm the hiring and firing of teachers. The School Board will be composed of representatives of four groups: the Ministry of Education (40%), parents (30%), teachers (15%), and the local authority (15%). Since the Ministry of Education is designed to be a neutral, professional body responsible for supervision and oversight of policy implementation, it is important that representatives from this body have the greatest weight on the Board. Representatives of the Ministry of Education must be appointed on a professional and apolitical basis. Regarding the authority of the School Board, it is important that a small majority be ensured for the combination of representatives from the Ministry of Education and the teachers. The Board chair, to be elected by the Board, should be one of the parent representatives. Many aspects of the Companies and Nonprofits Law can apply to the School Boards, particularly those concerning adherence to the school goals.

f. The Principal

The school principal will prepare work plans and translate them into budget proposals that will be submitted to the School Board for approval. The principal will be responsible for implementing the work plans, meeting the specified goals, adhering to the budget, and hiring and firing teachers (in keeping with labor agreements). The principal must have professional training in administration and preferably experience as a teacher, though this is not mandatory. The School Board will hire a principal after publicizing the availability of the post and the skills required.

g. Budgets

Each school's budget will be based on a set amount per child, rather than on teaching hours per child or other formulae currently in use today. The education budget allocated by the state (i.e., not including amounts received from the local council, parents, or other sources) must be sufficient to ensure the **provision of free**

education – in practice, and not only in spirit – for every single child to the extent that will enable each pupil to attain the level of knowledge and skills set by the National Education Authority. Supplementary funding will be provided on the basis of clear and transparent socio-economic parameters and also as an incentive for rewarding school achievement. **Any and all public money provided to a school is conditional upon full acceptance and implementation of the core curriculum.**

h. The Local Authority/Municipality

Schools' budgets within a given jurisdiction will be transferred from the Finance Ministry – in coordination with, and the approval of, the Ministry of Education – to the relevant local authority/municipality. This budget will have specific, defined purposes and be disbursed commensurate with the work plans prepared by the school principals. The local authority/municipality can supplement school budgets via relevant legislation or city ordinances.

Conclusion

This report provides a broad perspective of primary and secondary school education in Israel. The problems of the educational system are endemic. They are not rooted solely in the quality of the teachers, nor are they due just to the deficient curricula or to inefficient and wasteful management. Lack of flexibility throughout the system only intensified and expedited its decline. The failure is systemic. It is not possible to continue like this anymore.

Without dramatic improvement in the level of basic education and the provision of equal educational opportunities to its schoolchildren, Israel will have a hard time competing in a modern, competitive global economy. Without serious enhancement of our values education program, we cannot expect fundamental change in behavioral norms that are eroding the foundations of Israel's society and government. Improvement of the "toolbox" that we provide our children can occur only as a result of changing the emphases of the school system, instilling a mandatory, high quality core curriculum, increasing the transparency of expenditures and achievements, implementing differential funding that directs additional resources to children in weaker neighborhoods, and vastly increasing the efficiency of the educational system.

This report proposes a comprehensive structural reform in Israel's educational system. The first step is to determine and define what we want to accomplish, and then to decide how to make the transition. This report specifies the target. We emphasize that it is imperative that the proposed reforms be implemented as a complete package; piecemeal application could yield more negative results than positive ones.

We call upon the government and citizens of Israel to make a combined and concerted effort to rescue the country's educational system which is not fulfilling its national mission. We must dare to lead Israel's educational system and Israeli society to a better future. It is important to emphasize that such a future will not occur on its own. The structural reform proposed here can make it happen.