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Senat 356 for political and social issues:

Heterogeneity in Israeli Education

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בשיתוף:
קן פרידריך אברט

Main Conclusions:

- The structure of Israeli education system is based on the recognition of the heterogeneity of society, so that every major ethnic-cultural sector has its own educational sub-system.
- There are wide disparities in academic achievements between the Jewish and the Arab sectors, and between different cultural and socio-economic groups.
- There is increasing concern about the erosion of common core studies across subgroups, especially between the ultra-orthodox and the rest.
- Attempts to improve the situation include the High Court ruling prohibiting budgetary discrimination between Arabs and Jews, and the Education Ministry's progressive funding allocation, according to a socio-economic index.
- The Ministry has achieved impressive progressivity in funding Jewish elementary education, but more resources should be allocated to Arab elementary schools and to high-schools in both sectors.
- Although the allocation of additional funds will improve the situation, the way they are used is no less important than their amount

In historical perspective the success of Israel in establishing a unified school system is unsurpassed. Serving Jewish immigrants from all parts of the world who came here with very little in common – different languages, diverse cultures and often disparate values, and serving the Arab Israeli community as well, Israel achieved almost universal enrollment up to the 12th grade, and made Hebrew a universal language with flourishing literature, poetry and drama. However, the stories of these endeavors merit separate analyses, starting from the integration of immigrants from Islamic countries, through the recent immigration from the former communist block and that of Ethiopians. The present notes have a far more modest purpose – they are merely to serve as an introduction to the present state of affairs with a focus on the challenge of serving such a diverse population, yet keeping a common ground.

Israeli society is unique not only in its heterogeneity, but also in that each of its main ethnic-cultural divisions constitutes a substantial segment of the population and takes an active part in forming national policies, including educational policies. Thus the main social divisions are reflected in the structure of public education. Early on in the 1950's, it was decided to allow a degree of autonomy to the different divisions within public education – Arabs and Jews, and among the latter - secular, orthodox and ultra-orthodox divisions. Jewish secular and religious schools as well as Arab schools conform to a common core curriculum with minor modifications, but ultra Orthodox schools have their own curriculum and do not undertake matriculation examinations. Until recently this was a minor problem, but not any more.

Let me give an idea of the orders of magnitude: The main divisions in elementary schools are (in parentheses – the 2006 percentage of pupils): Jews (80) and Arabs (20). Within the Jewish community – state secular schools (55 and declining), state religious schools (20), ultra orthodox schools – 25 percent and rising. Because of their growth, one of the main public concerns regarding education is the erosion of a common core curriculum, leading to a decreasing proportion of the population having proper training in mathematics, the sciences, and English, as well as such topics as history, civics and geography. This is a recurring topic of contention, with no near solution in sight.

Arab schools are mostly secular state schools, with some modifications of such topics as language and culture. Curriculum is not a problem here, but funding is. Arab schools have been under-funded for a long time, and though the gaps are narrowing, they are still substantial. A correction of this discrimination was recently subject to a judicial ruling by the Supreme Court, forbidding any form of ethnic discrimination in school funding formulas, but this applies merely to current funding, leaving behind the cumulative funding gap of the past.

Finally, large differences in students' educational attainment exist along socio-economic lines. Some of these coincide with ethnic and religious lines, but they are reinforced by such factors as recency of immigration and country of origin. The Ministry of Education has been taking up this challenge since the early 2000s, primarily as regards Jewish primary education (1-6th grade). Indices of socio-economic status were constructed, and a varying proportion of the budget for primary schools was allocated accordingly (See appendix table 1). In addition, teaching assistants are allocated to state schools in poor attainment areas by the army, and various programs are run by non-profit organizations, and even by private donors. Unfortunately they rarely reach Arab schools. These resources are nominally overseen by the Ministry, but are not fully integrated into the curriculum and sometimes give rise to donations which impose a donor's private agenda. Beyond elementary education there are some programs, but their scale is much smaller and they are not as systematic, and in particular they fail to assist students in intermediary schools.

While the funding of Jewish elementary schools, both by the Ministry's budget and by supplementary funds is reasonably progressive, its effectiveness is questionable. Socio-economic gaps in test scores, as measured by international tests, are substantially wider than in most OECD countries. It is the manner of resource use rather than their overall size that should be the focus of future efforts.

To what extent is the current situation a result of an overall shortage of funding for education? Appendix table 2 shows that per student expenditure in Israel is below that of OECD countries at every level of education. While many studies challenge a simple connection between the size of resources and students' achievements (efficiency in use is the missing link) two obvious facts can hardly be ignored: teachers are underpaid and classes are on average larger than in OECD. Overcoming these impediments requires additional funding. The Ministry has a multi-year program to raise teachers' salaries in exchange for added responsibilities toward their schools, but past adverse selection and impaired motivation will take a long time to correct. Smaller classes require not only resources for construction, but also additional teachers, the recruitment of which is a long-drawn out process.

All this means, that things cannot be improved overnight, and for many problems there are no technical solutions. Political will must be consolidated, along with a realization that improvements will take time.

Table 1: Weekly hours allocated by the ministry of education to an average elementary school class by socio-economic deciles (1,2)

Change 2008/2003	2008	2007	2006	2005	2004	2003	Decile
89.7	38.4	39	37.3	39.4	41.5	42.8	1
92.6	40.1	39.9	39.4	40.9	42.4	43.3	2
93.2	40.9	40.2	39.4	40.7	43	43.9	3
86.5	38.3	38.6	38.6	39.9	44	44.3	4
85.3	39	39.5	38.9	40	45.3	45.7	5
89.6	41.4	41.4	40.9	41.8	45.4	46.2	6
95.7	44.2	43.6	42.4	43.5	46.2	46.2	7
98	47.8	47.9	46.8	47.5	48.6	48.8	8
101.8	51	50.9	50.3	51	50.2	50.1	9
	1.192	1.201	1.188	1.161	1.146	1.127	8th/2nd decile

(1) exclusive of external additions by the army and by NGOs

(2) Interim data, still undergoing review

Table 2: Results of PISA exam in science for 15-year-olds, 2006

	Average	Standard deviation	25 th percentile	75 th percentile	95 th percentile
Israel	454	111	374	535	636
USA	489	106	412	567	662
OECD	500	95	434	568	652
Canada	534	94	472	601	681
Denmark	496	93	432	562	646
Finland	563	86	506	622	700
Korea	522	90	462	586	662
New Zealand	530	107	455	608	699
Spain	488	91	427	552	633