

The Expensive Education Leadership Vacuum

by

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It is good that the government decided to build additional classrooms and to require “equal” budgetary finance for the ultra-orthodox schools. It is much less good that these decisions are made without the education ministry detailing before the public the extent to which there is a lack in equal standards in areas such as content, core curriculum, quality and quality control, class sizes, budgets, etc. This is especially the case in the aptly named ultra-orthodox education stream: “recognized but unofficial” (i.e. the State must foot the bill, but keep its nose out of how the money is spent). In the absence of such leadership, the resultant vacuum enables equalization in rights without equalization of obligations.

A year has passed since the elections. Instead of being content with the Israeli tradition of ad hoc patchwork policies, the education ministry should have utilized the past year to prepare and to implement a structural reform that would provide a sweeping change in the way that the education system operates and is managed. When the education minister evades the accountability that comes with her job, then not only do the ultra-orthodox benefit from the public till with no accompanying obligations. The finance ministry is also entering the vacuum with its own plan for education reform.

On the basis of what has leaked out thus far, in addition to important facets of the plan such as the provision of serious pay increases for teachers in conjunction with a demand for substantial changes in their employment conditions, there are quite a few problematic features in the finance ministry’s plan. While it is very important to measure school achievements, to publicize them and provide incentives based on them, those achievements must be real and not manufactured. Schools cannot be allowed to force underachieving and problematic pupils to drop out – not in small numbers, not with fines and not under any condition. It is crucial to try and deal with society’s difficulties when people are young rather than have to pay the compounded cost of the consequences when they become adults.

Another idea apparently supported by the finance ministry is allowing parents to choose their children’s schools. While at first glance, this option appears quite appealing, it is not obvious that the supporters of this plan have completely thought out its implications. In a true free market, a consumer is willing to pay more for quality. In the case of public education, the issue is not one of additional payments by parents – fortunately – since no one is interested in discriminating against parents with meager means.

On the other hand, when there is no cost associated with any particular decision, then demand exceeds supply and there is a need to set quotas for each good school. This creates a huge incentive for improper behavior, not to mention corruption, in the process of allocating the quotas. It is no coincidence that in the realm of international trade, the route toward trade liberalization always begins with the removal of quotas prior to the elimination of tariffs. A glance at the market for foreign workers in Israel provides a good indication on the type of behavior that can materialize from the existence of quotas. As if this were not enough, does anyone deceive himself that widespread busing of pupils from one end of town to the other in order to satisfy parental tastes represents the most efficient use of taxpayer money?

These types of patchwork policies are simply a substitute for systemic treatment of the system's core problems. Instead of channeling basic managerial concepts, incentives and transparency measures in order to lead the entire system to thoroughly improve the level of education, these principles are currently used to create partial and localized solutions.

Only a first-rate public school system can reduce economic gaps and social chasms. But when the education system is dysfunctional, when both a system-wide perspective and leadership abilities are lacking, then the resultant vacuum leads each individual and each group to find the most convenient personal solutions and these centrifugal forces threaten to terminally tear apart the collective spirit of togetherness and sense of joint purpose that still remain in many of us.