

## Education Minister in Denial

by

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In a society whose agenda is determined by polls, instincts and gut-feelings, there is a continuous search for “experts” who are willing to provide professional ratification for the conventional wisdom. Such a world presents many economists with a problem. One of the leading, and most original, economists in the world, Steven Levitt describes this problem well in a unique book, *Freakonomics*, that he recently wrote together with the reporter Stephen Dubner: “It is well and good to opine or theorize about a subject, as humankind is wont to do, but when moral posturing is replaced by an honest assessment of the data, the result is often a new, surprising insight.”

The problem with conventional wisdom is not just that it is frequently based on partial information that is often incorrect, but that conventional wisdom repeatedly becomes the cornerstone for setting policies. The field of education in Israel provides one of the more prominent examples of how opinions and beliefs dominate facts.

Education minister Yuli Tamir claims that the abysmal state of Israel’s educational system is due to three main problems: too many pupils per class; cuts in the number of instruction hours; and low teachers’ salaries. The common denominator that created all three problems, according to Tamir, are the many budget cuts which are reflected in an expenditure per pupil that is lower than in most western countries. This leads the minister to demand a massive budget increase of NIS 7 – but not for implementing significant changes in the priorities and operating procedures of her office. After all, the minister declares on every possible pulpit that she does not believe in reforms.

From this set of opinions and beliefs, upon which Israel’s education policy is based, we move to the facts. The deterioration process in the system was well underway in the 1990s, while the country’s education budget spiraled up to levels uncommon in the west. If, as claimed, the source of the problem is budget scarcity and not the system itself, then how is it possible to explain what transpired here during those years of budget increases?

Even after the budget cuts of the past few years, expenditure per pupil – after accounting for differences in standards of living – in Israel’s secondary education is equal to the OECD (the organization of developed countries) average. In primary education, expenditures per pupil in Israel are still 23% higher than the OECD average.

Although the country’s education budget does not fall below the western average, teachers’ salaries in Israel (here too, after accounting for differences in standards of living) are only ½ to ⅔ the average OECD salaries. Where does our education money go? In an environment that tolerates denial of facts – in this case, regarding the budget – then there is no need to provide the public with real explanations regarding problematic policy outcomes.

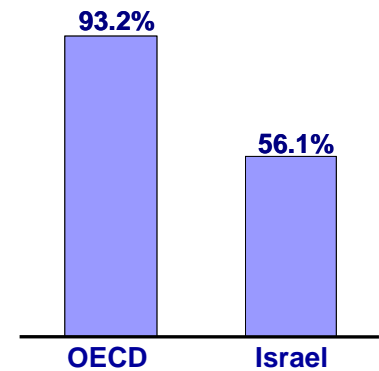
Hours of instruction were also cut. But in spite of this, the total numbers of teaching hours provided to Israeli pupils aged 7-14 is 13.5% higher than the OECD average. As the OECD figures indicate, the number of instruction hours in Israel is greater than in 22 of the 26 countries. So how is it possible that in the international tests, the achievement level of Israeli pupils in these ages scrapes the bottom of the western barrel in core subjects such as

mathematics, science and reading? What do our schools teach with all these extra hours that we finance? In the case of pupils 9-11 years old, for example, part of the explanation comes from the fact that OECD countries devote 93% of the instruction time to core subjects, compared to just 56% in Israeli schools. This is not an issue of inadequate funds but rather one of inadequate policy.

Israeli classes are indeed congested: 27 pupils in primary school classes versus an average of just 21 in the OECD. The lower secondary picture is even worse: there are 32 pupils per class in Israel while there are only 24 in the OECD. But the problem is not one of a lack of teachers. The number of pupils per teacher in Israel is identical to the OECD average: 17 pupils per teacher in primary schools and 13 in secondary schools. In other words, the education minister need only ask herself and her ministry's workers why Israel's classes are bursting at the seams, because neither funds nor teachers nor instruction hours are lacking here.

The education system played a major role – though it was not alone – in causing the serious, steady and dangerous deterioration of Israeli society. All the while, this system has been in a state of complete denial. A comprehensive reform will cost considerably more than current budgets. In light of the implications of not changing course, it is important that this increase be funded – provided that the minister demanding the additional resources, at the expense of other societal needs, internalize the fact that good intentions with a heavy price tag do not constitute an alternative for true reform in the thinking and in the operation of the education system.

**Instruction in Core Subjects\***  
as a percent of total instruction hours, 2004  
ages 9-11



\* core curriculum: reading, writing, literature, mathematics, science, social studies, foreign languages, etc.

source: Dan Ben-David, Tel-Aviv University  
data from the OECD