

## A Lesson in Spin

by

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Each Fall, the beginning of the school year is accompanied by articles and interviews in the media which point at the budget cuts of recent years as the source of the country's educational freefall. According to the spin approach to rewriting history, everything began with a report presented in 2000 before Prime Minister Ehud Barak and his cabinet by an academic team – of which I was a member – headed by Professor Haim Ben-Shahar. We presented Israel's socio-economic big picture, its problematic long-run trajectories, their sources, their bleak implications for the country's future, and pointed out the fundamental policy changes that needed to be made.

If there was one central overarching theme in the report, it was that the trends that had developed here since the 1970s were not a result of too little public spending but rather from the national priorities underlying how the money was spent.

One of the areas of focus was education. We found that during the 1990s, educational expenditure per pupil in Israel was high in comparison with other western countries (after correcting for differences in living standards across countries) while the knowledge level of the children of Israel in math and science (as reflected in international exams) was very low in comparison with those same developed countries – with all that this implies regarding the future ability of Israeli children to successfully adapt to a modern and competitive economy. Under the circumstances, we recommended that the government of Israel not cut its educational spending to a level reflecting the poor education being provided here. Instead, we suggested that it implement a comprehensive reform of the education system that will raise its output to a level justifying the large budgets.

A short while after we appeared before Barak's cabinet, I published some additional findings on Israel's very high placement in the international exams during the 1960s, a fact that indicates a sharp deterioration in the education level over the subsequent decades. But why let such difficult facts get in the way of an otherwise intuitive story when it is possible to rewrite history and claim that the decline was an outcome of the budget cuts?

Data on education spending published by Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) goes all the way back to the mid-1970s. They show that between 1975 and the early 1990s, the ratio of education spending to national income was relatively stable. OECD data indicate that this level of spending was very high in comparison with the other countries in the world.

When the focus narrows down to public expenditure per primary and secondary school students only, the graph shows that the Rabin government increased education expenditures by a huge amount during the 1990s – but in a diffuse manner and not as part of a systemic reform.

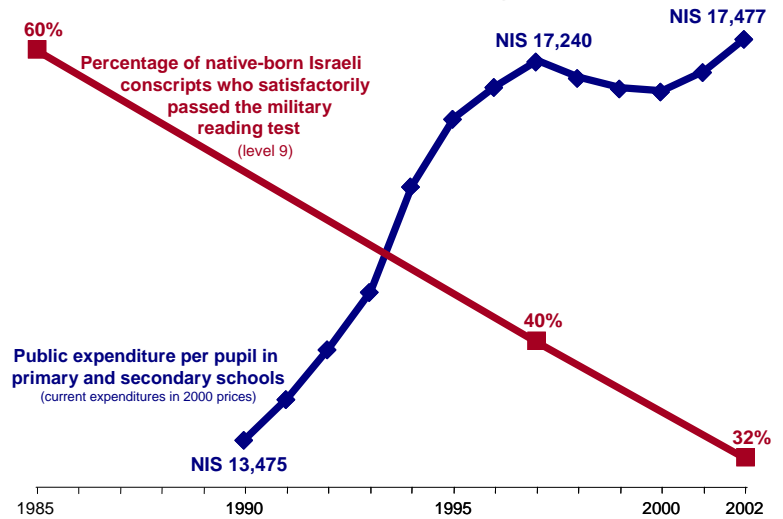
Hence, the level of education continued to fall, not just in relation with other countries but also in relation with ourselves. During those years of large and increasing education budgets, the reading comprehension level among native-born military conscripts fell by almost 50%.

In an age in which spin replaces facts as an educational value, who spends time trying to cure the illness when it is possible to throw money at it and instill a false sense of hope that the

symptoms will disappear on their own? Leading those who thrive on denial as an education policy is the education minister, who has no qualms in boasting about her success in receiving a huge budget increase – at the expense of welfare and health – of 5 billion shekels as an alternative for a comprehensive reform of her ministry.

Today's education minister, Yuli Tamir, was the absorption minister during that April 2000 cabinet meeting in which we showed the ministers how a similar (to today's) budget increase during the 1990s did not prevent the precipitous educational decline – as is evident in the graph. All of which suggests an Israeli corollary to the famous adage about leading a horse to water: it is possible to lead our cabinet ministers to money, but it is extremely difficult to make them use it wisely.

### Relationship between spending and achievements in Israel's education system



source: Dan Ben-David, Tel-Aviv University  
data from the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics and Shlomo Dovrat