

Part 4 of 5

## Tackling an existential danger: Israel's neglected education system

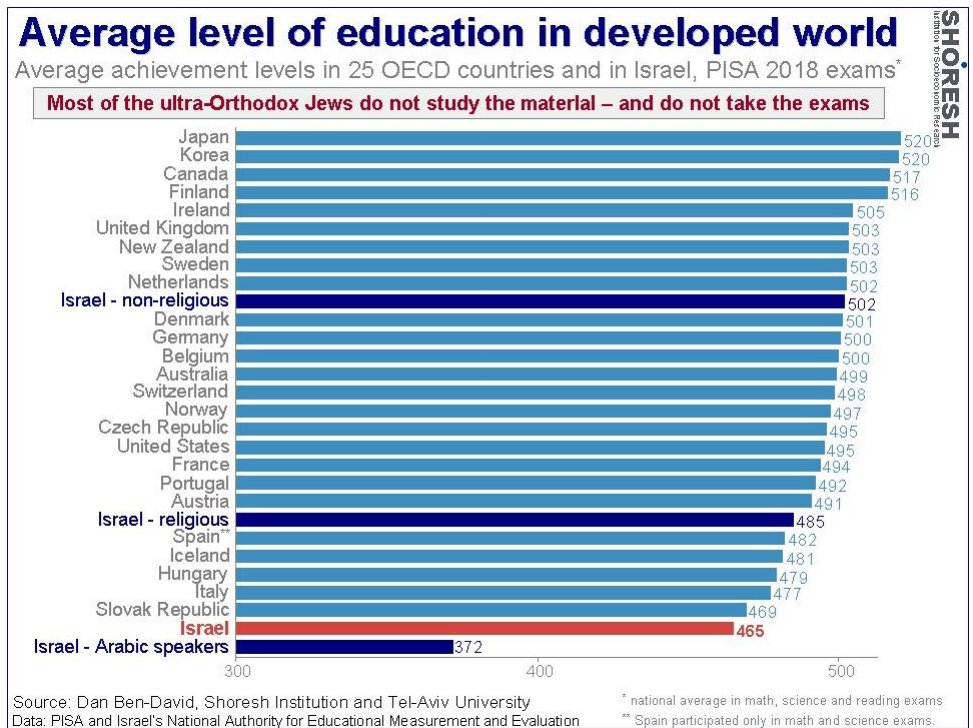
*With half of Israel's children receiving a third-world education – and belonging to the country's fastest-growing population groups – a first-world economy will be unsustainable, a first-world army impossible.*

by

Dan Ben-David

Since no country can – or wants – to produce everything it needs by itself, all developed countries have to compete with one another in the global and competitive marketplace. This competition will only increase in the future, and the graph below reflects how each of the developed countries is preparing its children for that modern labor market.

Even excluding haredi children – most of whom do not study the required material and do not take the international exams – the achievements of Israeli children in the core subjects are below those of all developed countries. The average knowledge of pupils in the state-religious system in mathematics, science and reading places them below 80% of the developed countries.



Below the non-religious and religious Jewish schools are the country's Arabic-speaking schools. Their pupils rank below many third world countries. In fact, Israel's Arabic-speaking

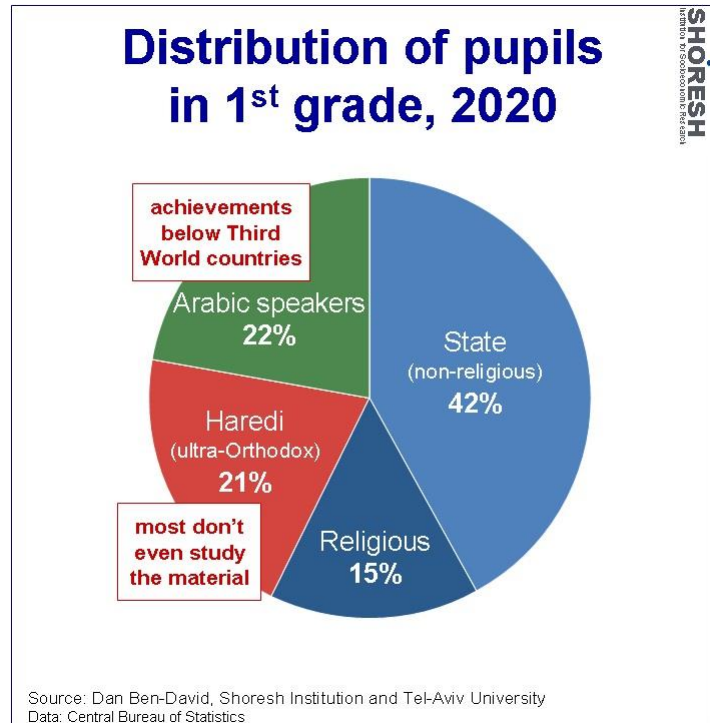
pupils score below nine of the 10 predominantly Muslim countries that participated in the last PISA exam – the OECD’s assessment program. This lack of fundamental knowledge will significantly limit their future economic opportunities.

In addition to the haredi and Arab children (each of these groups alone accounts for over a fifth of the country’s first grade pupils), there are many children living in Israel’s geographic and social peripheries receiving a third world education in the basic fields of study.

The three aforementioned groups together comprise roughly half of Israel’s children – and they belong to the fastest-growing parts of the country’s population. As adults, they will not be able to maintain

a first world economy, only a third world one. But a third world economy will not be able to support a first world healthcare system, or a first world welfare system. Perhaps most importantly for a country located in the most dangerous neighborhood on the planet, a third world economy cannot maintain a first world army. In other words, if we don’t come to our senses in time, Israel will not become a third world country when our grandchildren reach our age. It just won’t be.

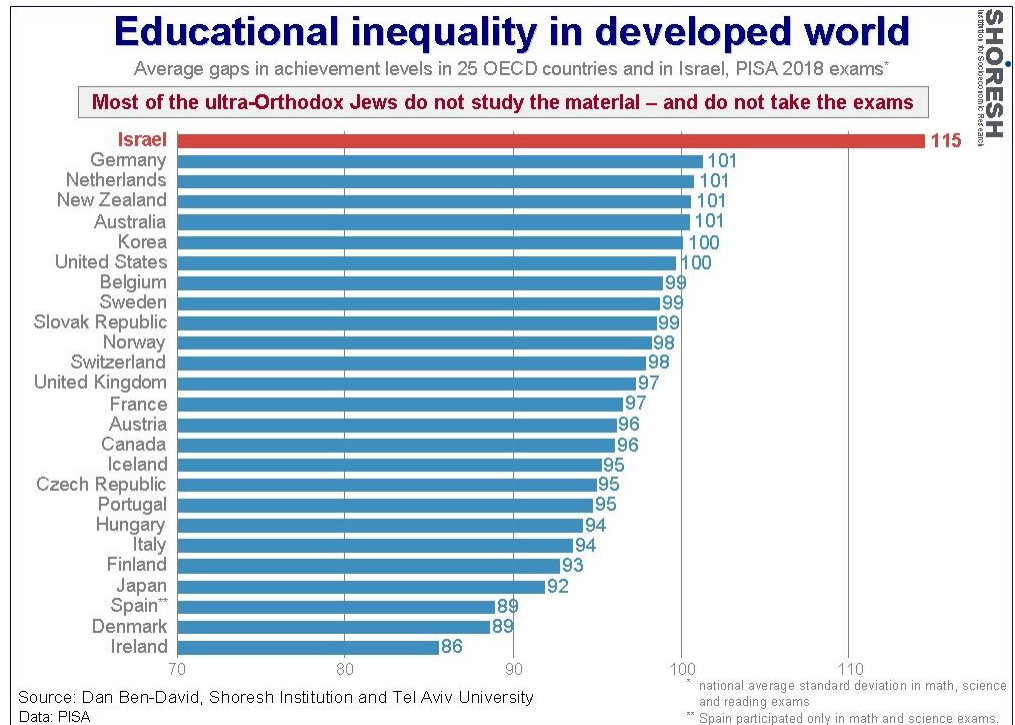
When former president of Israel, Reuven Rivlin, began his presidency, I showed him an earlier version of the above pie graph. Understanding the implications from that briefing, Rivlin and his strategic adviser, Roni Elon, wrote his “four tribes of Israel” speech. That graph came to symbolize the president’s plea for the four tribes to strive for a joint future and overcome self-serving internal pressures. The current governing coalition’s frontal attack on the fundamental underpinnings of democracy suggest just how deaf some tribe leaders are to president Rivlin’s appeal.

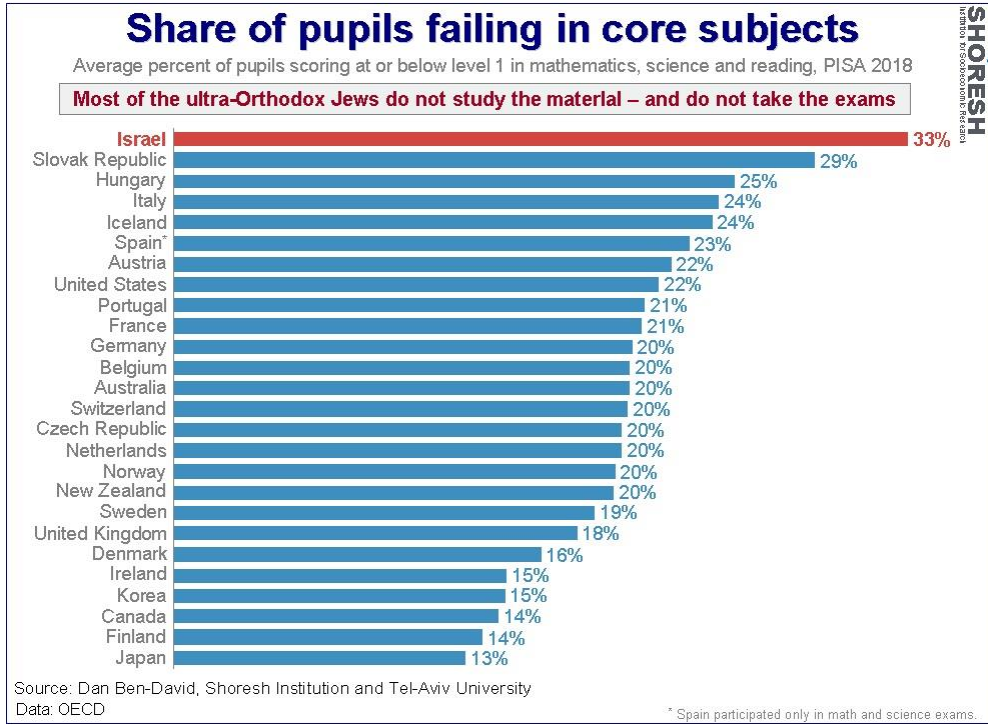


Not only is the average level of core education in Israel at the bottom of the developed world, the educational gaps between its children are also the highest – by far. And this problematic outcome was attained without the haredi children, whose inclusion would have yielded a more accurate, but considerably higher, level of educational inequality than is displayed in the graph.

When these children become adults, the disparity in the educational tools that they have been given will translate into income disparity. In the lonely Middle Eastern outpost that is Israel, social solidarity has been a key to its physical survival. Huge income inequality steadily but surely corrodes this vital shared sense of purpose and willingness to sacrifice that is so indispensable for Israel's continued existence.

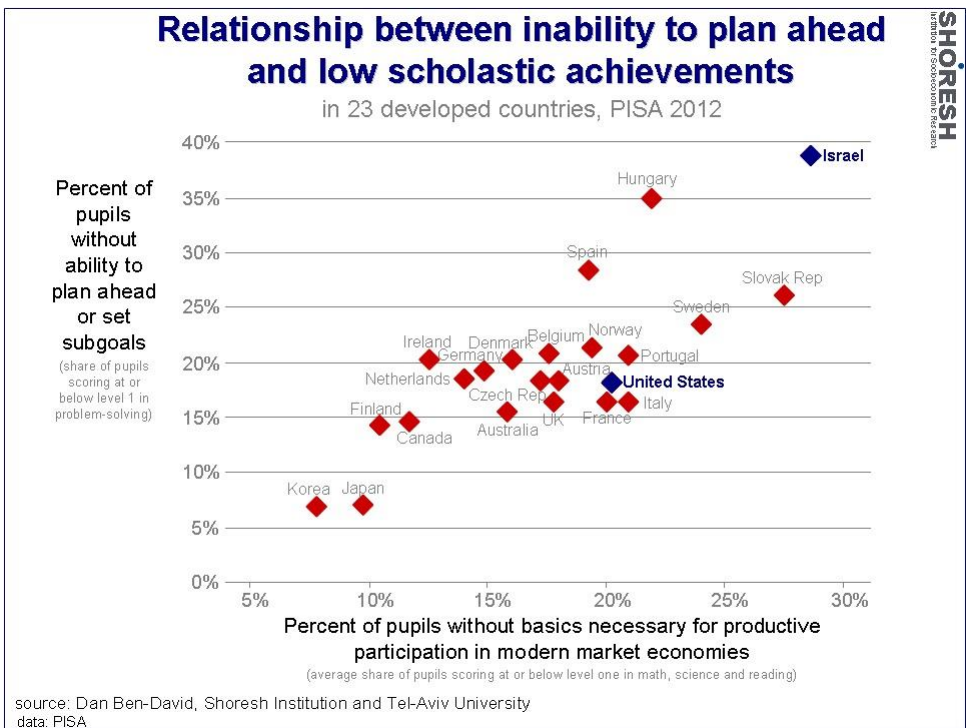
The prime candidates to live in poverty as adults are children who fail in school. Clearly this is not a blanket statement that all such children are doomed to be poor. However, the lower the jumping board into the marketplace, the more difficult it is to jump high. A full third of Israel's children fail in math, science and reading – and that does not even include the haredi children who do not even study the material or participate in the exams. What kind of a future is Israel preparing these children for? What chance do the majority of them have to become a part of the startup nation?





The failure rate in core subjects is highly correlated with another variable that has huge implications for the viability of democracies. The higher the share of children in a country who fail in the basic subjects, the higher the share of pupils unable to plan ahead or set subgoals.

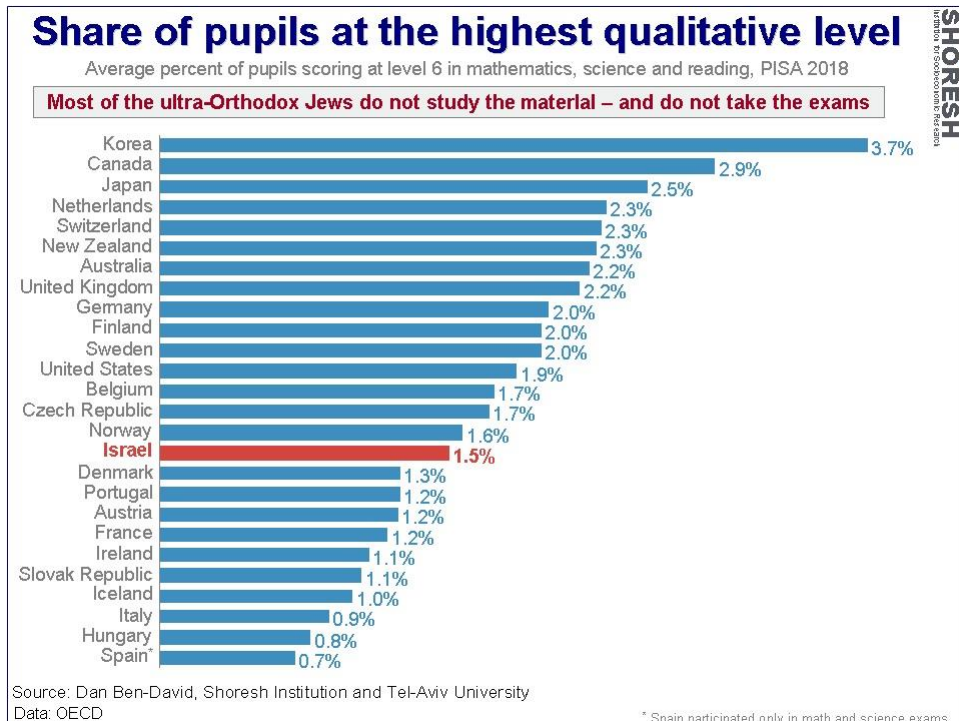
In other words, countries with many children who do not understand basic material will end up with many adults exhibiting similar limitations. These individuals will have a difficult enough time as it is to make ends meet in a modern economy. But in a downturn, they become the hardest-hit group, with little to no safety net to rely on.



When a recession becomes truly severe, these individuals look for any ray of hope that they can find, becoming fertile ground for populists, demagogues and charlatans. In democratic countries where a large share of individuals are unable to understand the implications or veracity of what they are being promised, but with an identical vote to individuals who do understand, the danger to democracies should be readily apparent. It has already reared its head in a number of developed countries following the Great Recession that they underwent over a decade ago.

Israel, with the highest share of children who do not understand the material, and the highest share of children who do not understand the implications of what they are being told, is in the most precarious position among the developed countries. As such, it should not come as a surprise that four of the six people heading the political parties comprising Israel's current governing coalition have criminal records, have been arrested or are currently on trial for corruption – and are now waging a frontal assault on Israel's key democratic institutions.

Those children who excel in the core subjects will disproportionately emerge as Israel's future tech, business and academic leaders. In Israel, these pupils account for 1.5% of all those who took the exam, a percentage that is below most developed countries. The actual Israeli percentage of excelling pupils is lower than this because the denominator in the graph does not include the haredi kids who do not study the material and do not take the exam.

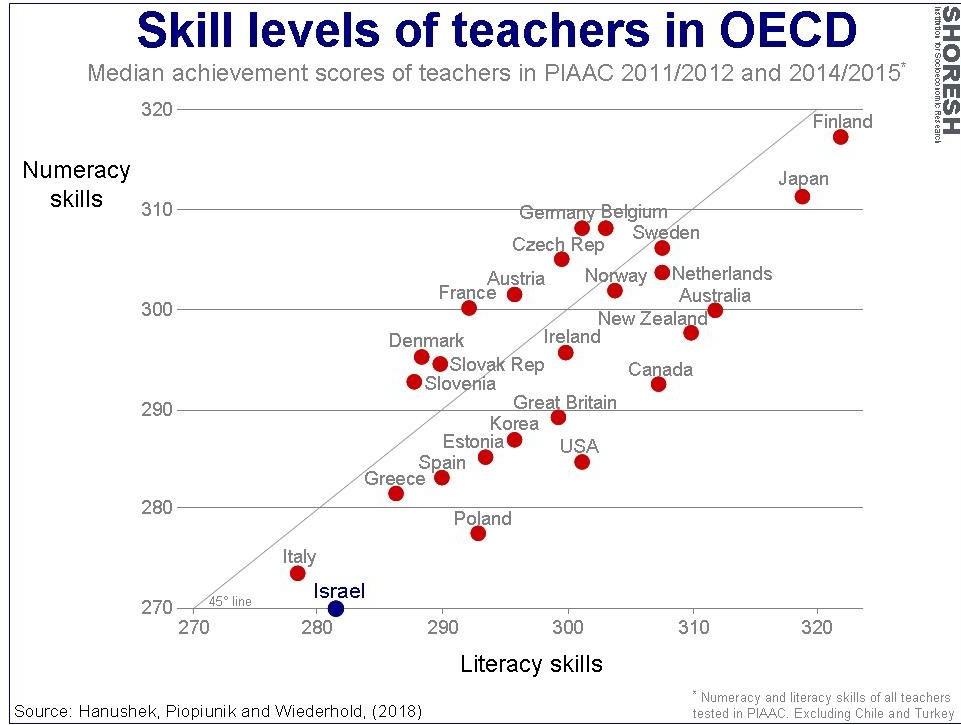


The quality of education that Israel gives its children has had a very negative impact on large swaths of its economy. As the country's recent elections have shown, it has also brought the country's democratic institutions to their knees. An Israel seeking a viable future needs to gain control of its schools – all of them. Specifically, Israel needs to implement a systemic, comprehensive and thorough reform of the country's education system. This education reform should be based on three cornerstones.

1. A significant upgrade of the core curriculum for all Israeli children. This means raising the overall level of study in the basic subjects in grades 1 to 12 – and making this core curriculum uniform and compulsory in all of the schools in each of Israel's education streams, including all of the religious and haredi schools.
  - While there are many different lifestyles in Israel – and it is fine that schools also teach values consistent with the lifestyles of the parents – there is only one global marketplace common to us and all the other countries. It is inconceivable that we deny any Israeli child the opportunity to work and succeed in that modern economy. A strong basic education will be good for them – and for us all.
  - Similarly with regard for the need to introduce into the core curriculum basic democratic principles such as civil and human rights, the need for checks and balances between government branches, and the concept that having a majority does not confer tyranny of the majority.

Absolutely no public funds may be given to schools that do not teach the full core curriculum.

2. Fundamentally changing the way that teachers are chosen, trained and compensated needs to be addressed. The basic knowledge level of Israeli teachers is at the bottom of teachers in the developed world.



Therefore, instead of studying for a teaching or education degree – as is customary today – and along the way, a bit of math, English, physics, and so on, all individuals considering the possibility of becoming a teacher in Israel should be required to first get accepted to academic programs in math, English, physics, etc. and obtain a degree in those disciplines. Afterward, they should study towards a teaching certificate.

Consequently, those who go through this route do not have to become teachers. If the State of Israel wants them as teachers, it will have to pay them accordingly – but it will also then be able to demand that they work accordingly, from morning to evening, every day, all year round, with work and vacation times similar to their alternative possibilities in the workforce. This will enable the hiring of fewer teachers, with much greater compensation for each – while gaining a much higher level of knowledge from them to pass along to our children.

3. The Education Ministry must undergo a structural transformation. It is not possible to manage a grocery store the way the largest governmental budget is currently being run. The ministry determines the contents of the teaching materials, it is responsible for their implementation in the classrooms, and it is the body that checks whether it has fulfilled what it determined that it should do – in other words, complete conflicts of interest. The ministry acts as if issues such as measurement and evaluation are beyond its realm of concerns. For example, matriculation (*bagrut*) exams have been administered for decades, but it never occurred to the ministry to perform even the minimal step of calibrating the exams from year to year and between schools throughout the country. As a result, the Education Ministry has no idea whether the level of knowledge of Israeli children has improved or declined over the decades, nor how it compares across schools.

School management must be transferred to the schools themselves – combining accountability with the provision of the necessary authority to the principals, who will be subject to a board of directors comprising individuals from the Education Ministry, the local municipality, parents and teachers (with a majority for the Education Ministry). The ministry will establish a formula for the determination and distribution of budgets to the schools while the school principals will have to present their strategic plans to their board of directors showing how they plan to allocate their budgets to achieve the national goals (such as core curriculum) as well as those objectives reflecting local lifestyles (in such areas as culture, art, religion, and so on). Principals should be given full discretion to decide who their teachers will be and their salaries, with the school board of directors having the ability to hire and fire principals on the basis of their accomplishments or failures.



Children must be raised with a clear understanding of the dos and don'ts of a liberal society – regardless of their choices along the religious-secular spectrum. Children with a firm grasp of the basic skills will have opportunities to thrive and personally develop in a modern economy, reducing their dependency on others. Better educated adults will also understand the incumbent requirements of parenthood and will be more judicious in their fertility decisions.