

Close down the four education streams, build one education system for all

by

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Over the past two decades, the average score of Israel's children on the PISA exams in mathematics, science and reading has placed them at the bottom of the developed world. This is not due to the Haredi boys, who do not study the material and do not participate in the exams. Had they taken the exams, the picture would have been even bleaker. The achievements of the secular Hebrew-speaking education stream place it below the majority (57%) of OECD countries. The religious Hebrew-speaking (non-Haredi) stream is below 80% of OECD countries, and the scores of Israel's Arabic-speaking students are below those in Third World countries – including three of the six Arab countries that participated in the most recent exam.

This past school year, 25% of first-grade students were Haredi, 23% were Arabic speakers, and the rest were in the Hebrew secular and religious streams, which include many students from Israel's geographic and social peripheries. In other words, roughly half of Israel's students are currently receiving a Third World-level education, and they belong to the fastest-growing segments of the population. When they become half of the adult population, and eventually the majority, they will not be able to maintain a First World economy – which is essential if Israel is to have First World health and welfare systems, as well as a First World military. In other words, the danger is not that Israel will become a Third World country. The danger is that Israel will not be able to defend itself when our children grow up – with all the existential implications that this entails.

Education at levels below those in Third World countries, provided to the fastest-growing segments of the population, has brought us to where Israel is today. The key propellant in this context is the Haredim, who insist on denying their children the knowledge needed to work in a competitive global economy and an understanding of basic democratic principles, while refusing to risk their lives in defense of their own homes. This is a group that doubles its share of the population every 25 years. That is, they account for only 6% of those aged 50-54 – whose grandchildren, aged 0-4, already account for 26% of all children in their age group. Now consider what this means 25 years from now for the share of Haredim among 0-4 year-olds, if their education does not fundamentally change.

There exists a demographic-democratic point of no return, after which it will no longer be possible to pass laws that already today seem impossible to many – making the coming elections the most important in Israel's history. The past few years, the most terrible since the country's establishment, have created an unprecedented opportunity to bring together right and left, religious and secular, Arabs and Jews, in creating a new national agenda that will lead Israel onto a sustainable trajectory.

At the top of that new agenda: shutting down the four education streams and opening one new education system for all, including a significant upgrade of the core curriculum for all children and making it uniform and compulsory in every school (the rest

of the curriculum will reflect local parental preferences). This requires a complete termination of funding to institutions that do not meet all the requirements; an absolute prohibition on the involvement of political parties in the content taught in schools; and fundamental reform in the way teachers are selected, trained and compensated. On the latter point, new research by Dr. Yael Melzer, a colleague of mine at the Shores Institution, finds that the average knowledge level of teachers in Israel in mathematics, reading and problem solving is below the level in most developed countries.

The coming elections, and what is done after them, may provide us with our last opportunity to come to our senses and save our children's future.