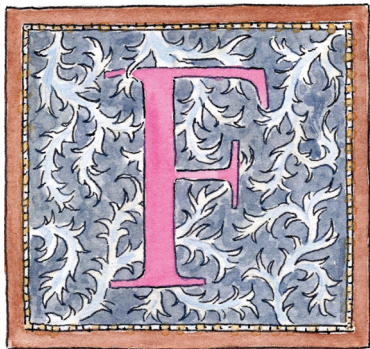


MOSHE BEHAR &
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An Education System Worthy of the Jewish State

Decentralization is the answer



FEW IDEAS run deeper in Jewish life than the conviction that learning sustains us. Wherever Jews settled, they established places of study. Study was not merely a route to livelihood; it was the framework of community and continuity. That reverence for education shaped Jewish history and powered Israel's creation in biblical times and re-creation in modern times.

Because of that legacy, one might expect the Jewish state's schools to be strong—that a nation of scientists, entrepreneurs, and soldiers surely excels at teaching its children. Reality is different. Israel's education system, once a symbol of national confidence, is now one of its weakest institutions. And unless it is rebuilt, the country's economic, civic, and even security foundations will erode.

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The evidence is stark. In the latest international assessments of 15-year-olds, done by the OECD in 2022, Israel ranked near the bottom in the developed world: 31st in mathematics, 30th in science, 25th in reading. In the most recent international assessment of fourth-graders, in 2021, Israel placed last in reading comprehension across the OECD, whose 38 member countries form much of the developed democratic world and collaborate to set international standards. In eighth-grade math and science, last assessed internationally in 2023, Israel recorded the sharpest decline of any developed country, placing second-to-last.

The picture isn't only about rankings. The number of high-achieving students in Israel has nearly halved since the previous international assessments were done, between 2016 and 2019, while weaker students fall further behind, producing the widest achievement gaps in the West. Surveys of adults show the ultimate effects. Israeli adults rank close to last among developed nations in literacy and numeracy, and national productivity per work hour has slipped from roughly 85 percent of the European average two decades ago to 74 percent today.

All this despite record spending: Israel now devotes almost 5 percent of its GDP to education—the highest share in the OECD. Over the past decade and a half, the budget has tripled and per-student spending has doubled. Student achievement however, has declined. The problem is not money. It is the way the system is built.

Israel's education system is one of the most centralized in the developed world. Roughly 70 percent of key decisions—budgets, staffing, curriculum—are made by the Ministry of Education in Jerusalem. No other OECD country, aside from Turkey and Mexico, concentrates as much educational authority in a single office.

That structure was created in the 1950s, when a young and poor state

sought uniformity and control. The goals were understandable: to integrate a massive immigrant population, forge a shared national identity, and prevent the reemergence of old divisions. But what served a new state well has become a liability for a mature one.

Today, centralization functions less as an equalizer and more as a ceiling. Every innovation—new teaching methods, flexible scheduling, creative budgeting—requires the Ministry’s approval. Teachers and principals spend their energy navigating bureaucracy instead of developing ideas. The logic that once aimed to guarantee fairness now blocks excellence.

The rules governing employment illustrate the point. School principals cannot hire or dismiss teachers directly; the Ministry is the formal employer. Even when a teacher consistently underperforms, removal requires multiple inspections, union consultation, and approval from Jerusalem—a process that can take years. In practice, almost no one is dismissed.

The pay scale reinforces the problem. Contrary to popular belief, average teacher salaries in Israel are not particularly low. OECD data show that teachers in Israel earn between 87 and 92 percent of what other academic professionals make—slightly above the OECD average of 81 to 88 percent. Countries with stronger school systems, such as Finland, Estonia, and Denmark, actually pay teachers significantly less relative to other professions. The problem is not the average compensation but the structure of it. Pay is tied almost entirely to seniority rather than merit. A gifted 30-year-old teacher earns less than half the salary of a mediocre 50-year-old. The message is unmistakable: Wait, don’t excel. As a result, veteran teachers, regardless of ability, remain in place, while talented young educators leave. Nearly 1 in 5 new teachers quits within five years.

These structural distortions shape who chooses to teach. Studies show that Israeli teachers score significantly lower on international

measures of literacy and numeracy than teachers in other developed countries. University entrance-exam data reveal that students who plan to become teachers perform well below their peers entering other professions. In countries with a less centralized education authority, such as Finland, Estonia, and Denmark, the opposite is true: Teaching attracts strong candidates because it offers both status and independence.

Curriculum control creates the same pattern. Because programs are written centrally and monitored by inspectors, schools have little room to adapt. A school principal cannot shift hours from one subject to another or design an interdisciplinary track without ministerial approval. Teachers cannot pilot new methods unless a national committee first recognizes them. Even the number of weekly lessons in each subject is fixed. This rigidity explains why Israeli students spend more hours in classrooms than almost any of their peers abroad but learn less.

International comparisons show what happens when systems trust their educators. OECD research in 2019 found a clear link between local decision-making and student performance: Countries where schools control hiring, budgeting, and teaching methods achieve higher scores even after accounting for income levels. The explanation is intuitive. When professionals have authority, they take responsibility; when they have none, they simply comply.

The cultural consequences are as damaging as the administrative ones. A centralized system erodes the sense of ownership that healthy institutions require. Teachers become functionaries, principals become clerks, and parents become bystanders. In the absence of trust, no one feels accountable for outcomes. The Ministry's inspectors can enforce compliance but not motivation. The result is a paradoxical mix of control and chaos — tight regulation at the top, indifference at the bottom.

Partial decentralization already exists within Israel's system, yet

even where it works, it is tightly constrained. Many high schools operated by semi-independent networks such as ORT and AMIT generally outperform government-run schools, even though they serve similar populations. Their advantage stems from somewhat greater managerial flexibility, not larger budgets. But even these networks remain bound by the Ministry's regulations and by national labor agreements that govern hiring, pay, and work hours. They can innovate at the margins but only within a narrow corridor defined by the central bureaucracy. The evidence for reform, in other words, is visible inside Israel — it simply hasn't been allowed to mature.

At its core, the problem is not policy but trust. The Ministry of Education was built on the belief that only a central authority can guarantee fairness and prevent chaos. After 75 years of statehood, that belief no longer fits reality. The state's role should be to ensure standards and equity, not to script every classroom. Until Israel restores trust in the people closest to its students, it will continue to confuse management with leadership, and compliance with excellence.



Real reform requires shifting power from the Ministry to the schools while keeping education fully public. Schools should control their own budgets, staffing, and teaching methods. Principals must be free to assemble teams and reward excellence. Teachers must be treated as professionals who can innovate and be held accountable for results. Parents should have meaningful choice among a diverse range of schools, all operating within a shared civic framework.

Funding should follow the student through a weighted per-pupil model: Each child brings a base allocation, with additional support for disadvantaged backgrounds. Any school that meets clear public standards — a defined core curriculum, civic and national values, transparency, and

open admissions—would receive full state funding, whether run by government, a municipality, or a nonprofit network.

This is not privatization. The state continues to define goals and ensure equity; it simply stops trying to micromanage every classroom. The focus shifts from inputs to outcomes.

International experience shows this approach works. Across the OECD, countries that grant schools greater autonomy over budgets and staffing consistently record higher student achievement. Nations such as the Netherlands, Denmark, and Sweden, where schools operate independently within clear public rules, perform well above average. The United Kingdom’s “academies” system—publicly funded but self-governing—lifted England’s rankings in math, reading, and science from the middle to the top tier within a decade.

Israel’s own health-care system already follows the same principle. Four competing independent health funds deliver universal coverage under national regulation. Patients choose, quality rises, and the system remains entirely public. The Israeli health-care system is widely considered one of the finest in the world. Education can, and should, work the same way.

What prevents it are entrenched interests. The Ministry of Education is reluctant to relinquish control; its bureaucracy is built on it. The teachers’ unions fear flexibility, equating it with instability. Together they form a durable alliance of inertia—the Ministry writing the rules, the unions defending them, and the students straggling behind their international peers.

We witnessed this pattern from two vantage points within the government. Moshe, during his years at the Ministry of Finance, was responsible for education policy and wage negotiations with the teachers’ unions. There he saw how even modest proposals—such as allowing principals to offer small merit bonuses or introducing limited flexibility in teacher contracts—met resistance. The people across

the table, from both the Ministry of Education and the unions, were sincere, but the system rewarded caution. Avital, serving as deputy director-general of the Ministry of Education, encountered the same dynamic from inside the ministry itself. When she tried to implement reforms such as individual employment contracts and limited parental choice, she faced not just reluctance but active resistance from senior officials whose formal duty was to advance improvement. From both perspectives, we reached the same conclusion: Israel's education system protects itself more effectively than it protects its students. The structure itself resists improvement.

Changing that structure is not only a matter of policy design. It is a question of political will. Every serious reform in the past two decades — differential budgeting, performance-based pay, local management — has failed not because the evidence was weak but because the incentives were wrong. No government has yet chosen to confront the partnership of bureaucracy and union power that keeps the system frozen.

That is why we helped establish Phoenix for Israel Education, a civil-society initiative devoted to creating the conditions that real reform demands. Our premise is simple: Technical solutions exist, but without a political and social coalition behind them, they will never be adopted.

Phoenix for Israel Education works on three fronts. It develops detailed, research-based policy roadmaps showing that decentralization is both practical and fiscally viable. It builds a broad professional and civic coalition — educators, researchers, parents, and local leaders — around a shared vision of public education that is accountable and diverse. And it engages decision-makers directly, changing the cost-benefit calculation so that supporting reform becomes politically advantageous rather than risky.

The timing matters. Israel is approaching another election cycle, and after the national trauma of recent years, the appetite for structural change is growing. Civil-society movements are reimagining governance across sectors; education must be part of that conversation. Our task is to turn awareness into consensus, and consensus into political action. The political climate at the moment clouds the urgency of education reform. Every citizen probably agrees, at least in the abstract, that a healthy education system is crucial for any society to thrive. The more that parents and voters articulate a demand for a less centralized system, the more politically feasible meaningful change becomes.

Resistance from within the education system, from both the bureaucracy and the unions, will be strong, but the alternative is continued decline. The longer Israel delays, the more it will spend on remediation instead of excellence, and on social welfare instead of opportunity. Decentralization will not solve every problem overnight, but it will make improvement possible again. It will allow school principals to lead, teachers to teach, and parents to participate. It will replace control with trust and stagnation with responsibility.

Israel's future—economic, civic, and moral—depends on an education system that matches its ambitions. The country that calls itself the People of the Book should not settle for mediocrity in its classrooms. The path to renewal is clear. What's required is the will to take it. *

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