

Educational Reforms

When international education tests were first administered in the 1960s, Israel consistently ranked at or near the top in mathematics and science. Since then, however, there has been a sharp decline in test scores despite a steady trend in educational spending. By 2000, Israel was spending way above average among industrialized nations on per pupil educational expenditures but was ranking near the bottom of its peers in results. Not only does this present a future problem for Israel's competitive position in the global marketplace, but it also means that the educational system is not doing its job. Part of the problem, argued the Author of the "Shoshani Educational Reforms" in Israel, Dr. Shimshon Shoshani, is the degree of uncertainty in the political system and the need to integrate diverse immigrant groups. The average Israeli government lasts only 22 months and as a result, Education Ministers and their administrators are uncertain about what future funding will be and thus don't know how to allocate resources appropriately. Furthermore, students of education often fail to follow through on becoming teachers because they are uncertain as to future job prospects and income. Stabilizing the national government's influence on educational spending by insulating it from political swings is one partial solution to the problem. However, even then the influence of the teacher's unions and their traditional opposition to reform and change will present a major obstacle in far-reaching reform.

According to Washington University Education Professor William Tate, part of the problem with educational achievement, not just in Israel, but throughout the industrialized world, is an inability to identify society's collective goals in educating. When politicians control the educational system, they each want to leave their mark or make their own personal changes. In a politically volatile country like Israel, this can lead to a system of fragmented curriculum and teacher's doing only as much as required—nothing more. Ultimately the children suffer for the lack of consistency and this is often reflected in declining test scores.

As the Jewish homeland, Israel has a unique immigration policy that allows any Jew worldwide to become an Israeli Citizen. During the 1990s this meant a huge influx of highly educated former Soviet residents eager to contribute to the bustling economy. Many of these immigrant's children, however, moved into Israel at various levels of formal education, some having finished primary schools and some needing to begin primary schools. Prof. Shoshani and Washington University's James Wertsch see this pattern of staggered school entry as a possible cause of lowered test scores as well. Indeed, bringing immigrant students into the system with a smooth transition, while not isolating existing students, may be one of the most crucial aspects of educational reform. But most of all, panelists pointed out that simply spending money does not guarantee educational improvements. Political and administrative reform is crucial to Israel's education system's long run success.