

2. Israel's School System

Israel's school system provided education for more than 1,500,000 pupils in the year 2000.

The school system in Israel is structured into four main levels: *pre-primary* education (ages 2-5), *primary* education (grades 1-8), *lower secondary* or *intermediate* education (grades 7-9), *upper secondary* education (grades 9-12). (Table 1)

The lower secondary, or intermediate level provides general education, whereas the upper secondary level is divided into three main streams: academic, technical/vocational, and agricultural.

Israel's school system is based on two fundamental laws which determine the range of compulsory and free education as well as the status of public and private education.

Free, Compulsory, Unified State Controlled Education

The Compulsory Education Law adopted in 1949, which was extended in 1968, 1979 and 1999, to provides *free and compulsory education* for all children between the ages of 5 to 16, from the last year of kindergarten up to 10th grade. In addition, *free education* was introduced for pre-primary education and for 11th and 12th Grades.

The State Education Law (1953) replaced the previous tortuous education system, with a *unified state-controlled* school system. The law institutionalized two systems of education, namely the *state education sector* and the *recognized non-state education sector*, also referred to sometimes as the *independent education sector*

The State Education Sector

The State Education Sector covers around 90% of the whole education system. Its schools and kindergartens are owned *jointly by the state and the local authorities*, while their functioning is financed and supervised by the Ministry of Education, notably with regard to curriculum, textbooks and teacher recruitment.

The State Education Sector comprises three networks: the *general state run (or secular)* network, the *religious state run* network, *the (state) Arab* network. The state religious schools are established at the request of parents in any locality, provided that a minimum number of students are enrolled. The Arab schools are established in localities where the majority of the population speaks Arabic.

The State Education Sector is under the tight control of the Ministry of Education which defines the curriculum, is in charge of the recruitment and training of the teachers, and approves the textbooks to be used. The approved list of schoolbooks is very large since it contains several options for each of the subjects taught.

However it allows a substantial margin of autonomy. Parents, for example, can request the modification of up to 25 % of the existing curriculum, or to add to it, at the request of 75% of the parents of a class, although this option is rarely used.

This autonomy is more real with regard to schoolbooks. In theory, teachers are formally entitled to decide which textbooks will be used for their courses. Few teachers actually use this prerogative, which has been assumed by the pedagogic committees of the various schools and establishments.

Over the years, these pedagogic committees have had a tendency to choose popular and well considered schoolbooks although not included in the Ministry's approved list. Consequently, more than 20% of the schoolbooks actually used in primary classes and 50 % of those used in the upper secondary, do not appear on the Ministry's approved list. (1)

Recently, the Ministry of Education decided to stop the practice of issuing an approved list, since "in a modern country it is not proper to apply censorship" (2). This does not mean that the Ministry has given up its responsibility for disqualifying textbooks containing prejudices and stereotypes. But the disqualification of textbooks will now be triggered by complaints coming from the public, particularly parents, teachers and pupils. "This will be far more effective than censorship exerted by a civil servant". (3)

The Independent Education Sector

The recognized non-state education's institutions *are privately owned and mostly religious*.

They are subsidized by the state and supervised by the Ministry of Education, although they keep their independence with regard to curriculum and teacher recruitment.

The most important ones are those of *Agudat Israel* and *Shas* (El Hamaayan network), which we referred to in our research as "*Ultra-Orthodox*". The others are mainly of *Christian denomination*.

Table 2 gives an overview of the relative importance of the different state run and "Ultra Orthodox" networks..

Table 1
Structure of the Education System, 1997/8

Pre-Primary Education				Primary Education				Secondary Education							
Kindergartens (ages 2-5)				Primary school (Grades 1-8)				Lower secondary schools (Grades 7-9)				Upper secondary schools (Grades 9-12)			
334,000 (90%)				694,000 (95%)				220,000				294,000 (91%)			
Free Education				Free and compulsory education								Free education			
Age 2	Age 3	Age 4	Age 5	Age 6	Age 7	Age 8	Age 9	Age 10	Age 11	Age 12	Age 13	Age 14	Age 15	Age 16	Age 17

Source: Ministry of Education and Culture, Facts and figures about Education and Culture in Israel, Jerusalem 1998, p.45.

Table 2
Relative importance of the various state run and independent education networks for school year 1999

State Run Education (90%)			"Ultra Orthodox" (10%)	
Secular	Religious	Arab	Aguda	Shas
900,000 pupils	260,000 pupils	260,000 pupils	130,000	30,000
54%	18%	18%	8%	2%

Source: Compiled from the Israeli Press.

- (1) State Comptroller, Annual Report No 49, April 1999, pp 209-210.
- (2) Rali Saar, "Education / Next Year the Ministry of Education will stop supervising schoolbooks", Haaretz, May 12. 2000).
- (3) Ibidem