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BACK TO SCHOOL:
A LOOK AT ISRAELI EDUCATION

by Walter I. Ackerman

Over 1,000,000 children, including some 90,000 entering first graders, returned to school throughout Israel on September 2 after a two-month summer vacation. Israel's compulsory education law requires school attendance for all children between the ages of 5-15, from kindergarten through the tenth grade. Intensive efforts over the years have extended the reach of the system downwards to embrace some 90% of the country's four-year olds and a significant percentage of its three-year olds. At the same time there has been a steady increase in the holding power of the school - aided most recently by the abolition of tuition for high school - and if current statistics are an index the percentage of entering first graders who will reach the twelfth grade and gain a high school diploma will compare favorably with retention rates in most Western countries.

The days before the school opening were clouded this year by threats of strikes by municipalities, parent groups, and teachers' organizations. The mayors of many of the country's cities and towns castigated the government for its failure to meet obligations to local school authorities for school construction and teachers' salaries. The Jerusalem Post (Aug. 28) quoted Jerusalem Mayor Teddy Kollek as berating the Ministry of Education because it had "agreed to build 81 classrooms (of over 150 we originally requested) to be ready for 1980/81. But nothing at all has moved...and the classrooms will not be ready in time." Parents in various localities complained of overcrowding, inadequate facilities, and, in several cases, of principals whose ouster they demanded. Teachers' groups charged the government with hedging on its commitment to the revised pay scale which was the central issue of last year's prolonged teachers' strike. Despite the harsh words and the bluster, the first day of school went smoothly and without incident all over the country.

Despite severe financial constraints, the Ministry of Education announced its intention to proceed with the introduction of a number of new programs. The most important of these, and unquestionably the most expensive as well as the most controversial, is the "extended school day." Originally planned for children in 1200 classes, budgetary considerations have reduced the number of participating units for the 1979/80 school year to 600. The program calls for the lengthening of the elementary school day into the afternoon hours and the creation of a framework for the development of a wide variety of informal educational activities, enrichment programs, remedial instruction, and broad-based community involvement. The "extended school day" seeks primarily to provide a warm and supportive setting which will compensate the culturally disadvantaged

children who represent some 30-40% of Israel's school population for the deprivations suffered in poverty-stricken homes and neighborhoods. Critics of the program cite the lack of empirical support for its purported effectiveness, the lack of properly trained personnel and the absence of carefully designed material to guide activity leaders. Despite these criticisms and the strictures of the Minister of the Treasury regarding his estimate of the expected cost, the Minister of Education, Mr. Zevulun Hammer, has remained adamant in his insistence on implementing the program. In an interview published in Ma'ariv on the eve of the start of the school year (Aug. 31) he cited the "extended school day" as not only another example of Israel's wide and rich variety of compensatory educational programs, but also as an instrument of far-reaching change. "I want to change completely the character of the Israeli school. I do not want our schools to be detached from their environment. A school is not simply a place which supplies knowledge. I want a school which educates and is integrated into the neighborhood it serves, a school which provides support and is in turn supported by the community." The same reasoning lies behind the plan to shorten the school week from six to five days and to assign pupils of all ages to community service on the "free" day.

The idea of the school as a beth hinuch, an educational center dedicated to the transmission of values and character formation as opposed to achievement-oriented institutions which concentrate on formal instruction and training, is deeply rooted in the Israeli consciousness. The models are not hard to find: traditional Jewish education with its emphasis on Torah l'shema and the schools created by progressive educators of the labor movement in the early days of the Yishuv. Expressions of dissatisfaction with today's schools, a national pastime second in popularity only to talk about inflation, invariably use the beth hinuch of an earlier day as a measuring rod. The details of comparison and the nuances of debate may vary from issue to issue, but the call on the beth hinuch as the ideal is recurring and constant. A case in point is to be found in the current - actually never-ending - discussion of the matriculation examination (bechinat bagrut), the government-administered examination which qualifies high school graduates for university admission.

Rooted in European practice and first introduced during the early days of the Mandatory period, the bagrut has, over the years, become a symbol of all the real and imaginary ills of the Israeli educational system. Its primary function as a reliable predictor of success in university studies has been continuously challenged. It has been held responsible for a rigid and overloaded secondary school curriculum which is designed, so claim critics, to meet the demands of the examination rather than the needs of either growing adolescents or a modern technological society. Teachers complain that they cannot exercise imagination or creativity because they must "teach for the test." Pupils charge the bagrut - the ticket to the university - with having turned the high school into a "factory for marks." The image of the school is that of an institution in which moral purpose geared to the nation's good has been subverted by the drive for individual academic achievement.

Those who are committed to the idea of a truly egalitarian society and view the school as an instrument of social policy which creates avenues of mobility picture the bagrut, and by inference the universities who insist on the examination or an equivalent, as one of the major obstacles in the way of children of Asian-African origin into higher education and subsequent entrance into the country's elites. The data currently available indicates that of those who entered the first grade in 1965, 79.4% reached the twelfth grade in 1976. Of that number only 30% successfully passed the bagrut. In other words, approximately one first grader out of four qualified for university admission; and the vast majority of the candidates are of European-American background.

The educational and social implications of the bagrut have led to recurrent demands for either its revision or abolishment. Recent changes in the format of the examination and the pattern of its administration did not deter a subcommittee of the Education Committee of the Knesset from recommending that it be abolished altogether. The country is now awaiting the report of a select committee appointed a year ago by the Minister of Education. Informed circles suggest that the report will recommend the retention of the examination but with significant changes.

Despite a steady increase in the number of university students from families whose origins are in Arab countries - the result of both acculturation and a variety of special programs - their presence in higher education falls short of the proportion of the total population they represent. That datum highlights the central problem and major issue in Israeli education over the last two decades. The cast of schools today, as of the country itself, is conditioned by the waves of migration which inundated the country during the fifties. That period saw the Jewish population increase from 650,000 to 2,000,000; that jump was paralleled in school enrollments which rose from 129,688 in 1948/49 to 595,987 in 1962/63. The logistics of providing for the explosion in student population were more than matched in difficulty by the need to adapt a Western-oriented, elitist system of education to the requirements of children and families from other, and often misunderstood, cultures.

Educational policy over the years has centered on closing the gap between those designated as "culturally disadvantaged" and the better educated and more prosperous sectors of the population. Against a background of debate about cause, definition, purpose, and method - and not a few charges of discrimination - there developed an array of programs and strategies of compensatory education which places Israel in the front ranks of those countries which attempt seriously to grapple with the problems of the poor and underprivileged.

The social tension created by the troubling presence of the underclass of the "Second Israel," composed almost entirely of Jews who fled from Arab countries and which is now at least two generations old, and the deep-seated faith in education as an instrument of social change are most dramatically joined in the "Reform" which changed the structure of the educational system by creating junior high schools which bridge between the neighborhood elementary school and regional comprehensive secondary schools.

The personal achievement of the then Minister of Education, the late Zalman Aranne, the "Reform" sought to create equality of educational opportunity, and thus equality of social opportunity by providing free and compulsory education through the tenth grade and opening secondary educational to all children regardless of the level of prior scholastic achievement and by creating integrated junior high and comprehensive secondary schools which serve all the children of redrawn and enlarged school districts. The impetus provided by the "Reform" was in no small measure a factor in recent legislation which abolished tuition fees for high school students.

The "Reform" has now been in effect for a little more than ten years. The pace of its introduction has been considerably slower than originally intended, both for financial reasons and because of pockets of resistance in municipalities around the country, and the change in structure which it mandates is not yet the norm for the system. Research findings indicate that where the "Reform" has been introduced there has been an accompanying decrease in drop-out rates and an increase in the holding power of the school. While levels of scholastic achievement have not changed significantly - such improvements as have occurred

are attributed to factors other than the change in structure - it is clear that children, as might have been expected, of different cultural background and socio-economic levels have adapted without difficulty to learning and playing together.

The opening of the new school year is the occasion for noting a sometimes forgotten truth: the investments of the educational system in programs of compensatory education have clearly enabled an ever increasing number of young people to move out of the vicious circle of poverty and deprivation; schools alone, however, are incapable of solving the problems of a debilitated underclass.

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