



EXCELLENCE AS A MEANS FOR REDUCING SOCIAL GAPS

Finding significant unrealized potential for science excellence in Israel's social periphery, in an attempt to learn the lessons of past experience and identify essential conditions for success.

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The traditional approach to reducing gaps in Israel has been to invest in low-achieving students and help them reach a basic level of competency. Therefore, the main thrust of efforts in recent decades has been aimed at reducing non-academic high school programs (e.g. welding, auto mechanics, etc.) in the geographical periphery of Israel, and focusing on ensuring eligibility for matriculation certificates and access to higher education. These efforts have borne fruit but have had no real effect on the gap. Flooded with new academics, the workplace simply gives preference to high school graduates with matriculation certificates in the tougher subjects and graduates of the tougher university departments. The name of the game has changed from “eligibility” to “excellence.”

To date, the Trump Foundation’s activity to promote excellence has been colorblind. The foundation’s strategic outline begins with the assumption that the potential for excellence is not inherent to any one geographical area, population segment, or sex. The foundation therefore makes excellent teaching available to all students – girls and boys, Jews and Muslims, secular and religious, in the center of the country and in the periphery. Hard data indicate that in recent years excellence has increased all over Israel, and the average final grade of graduates has not slipped.

We hear optimistic voices from towns and schools in the periphery. For years, they neglected to offer high school students five-unit tracks in mathematics, physics, or chemistry. They tell us that they did not think there would be a demand and that students would not be able to handle the challenge. They focused instead on ensuring matriculation certificate eligibility, and found it very difficult to recruit teachers. Some feel that let themselves and their students down. Now that the students have proved their capability, they find their appetite for excellence whetted, and are opening excellence tracks in other disciplines as well.

However, this is not the full picture. There is significant – and worrisome – correlation between the level of mathematics (three, four, or five units) children study and their parents’ educational level and socioeconomic status. The correlation is even stronger because of the vast difference in the students’ starting points between the center and the periphery. We are therefore also hearing other voices saying that success in five-unit tracks damages other subjects, encourages migration out of the periphery, and inadvertently causes further weakening of population centers far from the country’s center.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Considering the national goal, does Israel's geographical periphery have significant human potential for excellence that has not yet been realized? Where specifically? What evidence do we have? Would investing in its growth be justified in cost-benefit terms compared to the alternative of investing in the country's center?
2. How can we know if there is potential for excellence? Should we be looking at the rate of students who excel in four-unit classes or at the Meitzav exam? Or do we need a more complex model that would take into account innate talent, the home environment, the level of education at the school, and the student's own motivation?
3. Over the years, excellent programs and many resources have been devoted to close the gap between the periphery and the center, but the relative placement of the periphery has not changed. Does the foundation have a reasonable chance of succeeding where others have failed, and under what conditions?
4. Previous programs found themselves having to make up for profound gaps in knowledge, and therefore aimed at younger children, basic skills, and informal education, thus scattering their efforts and losing focus. Can the foundation maintain its focus when working in the periphery?
5. What would be the measure of success in the periphery? Is striving for and reaching excellence rates at the national average a sufficient goal and index? What are the educational infrastructures needed to ensure success over time?

As **background** to the discussion, we recommend reading the following:

A. [Potential for Excellence in the Periphery - Data and Trends](#)

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