

Israel

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The National Authority for Measurement and Evaluation in Education

Introduction

Overview of Education System

The education system in Israel is centralized under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, which makes policy decisions, determines national curriculum content, and implements national and international education testing policies. The Kindergarten through twelfth grade education system consists of schools grouped into preprimary education (ages 3 to 6), primary education (Kindergarten to sixth grade for students ages 6 to 12), and secondary education including lower secondary (Grades 7 to 9 for students ages 12 to 15) and upper secondary (Grades 10 to 12 for students ages 15 to 18).¹ Most primary schools educate students for six years, although about 25 percent include eight years of schooling. Education is compulsory for students ages 3 to 18, but this requirement is implemented fully only for ages 5 to 16. Almost all schools are public.

The two main languages of Israel are Hebrew and Arabic. Hebrew is the main spoken language and is used widely in business, government, academia, and the media. Other languages associated with recent waves of immigration, such as Russian and Amharic, also are spoken. In Jewish sector schools, Hebrew is the language of instruction, and English is studied as a second language, usually starting in third or fourth grade. Arabic is studied in lower secondary school as a third language and is an elective in high school. In Arab sector schools, Arabic is the language of instruction, Hebrew is studied as a second language, and English is studied as a foreign language, usually starting in third or fourth grade.

Schools in the Jewish and Arab sectors are divided first by language (Hebrew or Arabic) and then by different supervision frameworks representing the cultural and religious subsectors in Israel. The Jewish sector includes secular, religious, and ultra-Orthodox supervision. There are separate supervisory bodies for the Arab, Bedouin, and Druze populations. Each supervision framework comprises different content and a unique proportion of religious and cultural studies. Hebrew language supervision is centralized. With its own curriculum including a particularly large proportion of religious studies, the ultra-Orthodox supervision in the Jewish sector is the most autonomous. These schools usually are not open to external intervention and evaluation.

In 2009, a national education and professional reform of primary schools and some lower secondary schools called New Horizon (*Ofek Hadash*) was initiated. The original reform aims were revisited and revised in 2016.² The four main interrelated and complementary goals of the reform were to:

- Strengthen the status of teachers and raise their salaries
- Provide equal opportunities for all students, raise student achievement levels, and narrow education gaps
- Improve school climate
- Empower principals by extending their authority in schools

The reform follows the trend of increasing school accountability for improving the quality of instruction and the level of student achievement by, among other things, increasing principals' responsibility for teacher evaluation and improved performance. For the first time in Israel, the New Horizon framework established a scale of professional advancement for teachers and principals that reflects the complexity of their work. The reform also introduced a common language for Ministry personnel and inspectors, principals, teachers, and other academics to use when considering teacher performance in their various roles within the school system. The goal of providing equal opportunities for all students is reflected in the reform by requiring teachers to dedicate time from their daily schedules to help students with learning difficulties and to encourage exceptional students.

Use and Impact of PIRLS

Israel has participated in PIRLS since its inception in 2001. PIRLS results have an impact on the continuous process of consolidating measures of reading achievement of students in Grades 2 to 5. PIRLS provides clear evidence for the necessity of Hebrew and Arabic lingual knowledge. The curriculum for each language contains principles and practical aspects that are relevant to the enhancement of writing processes and for spoken discourse; the majority of these are reflected in the national assessments (previously the *Meitzav*, and starting in 2021, the *Tmunat Matzav* assessment). Although the PIRLS conceptual framework for reading comprehension is in alignment with the Hebrew and Arabic curricula, the Israeli curricula are also focused on writing, vocabulary, speaking, and grammar. In addition, the curricula for both Hebrew and Arabic languages for elementary education encompass texts of original literature and the traditional heritage of each. However, the adoption of national and international assessment standards for reading comprehension contributed to the development of instructional materials that help students gain experience in reading both literary and informational texts. The Ministry of Education also emphasizes verbal expression, developing linguistic meta-knowledge, incorporating literary proficiency in other subject areas, and performing literacy tasks in class and at home. Special instructional materials and assessments have been developed to achieve these goals.

The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades

Israel is known for having many lifelong readers, and one of the country's main education goals is to develop student reading literacy. Separate reading curricula are used for Hebrew-speaking students and Arabic-speaking students. Part of the linguistic education curriculum for native speakers of each language, the reading curricula include similar benchmarks and standards.

Reading is presented as the foundation for student learning. The focus is more on teaching the language than on teaching about language, emphasizing personal experience and communication over theoretical knowledge of the language. Both the Hebrew and Arabic curricula focus on the importance of reading a variety of text genres (e.g., expository, descriptive, argumentative, procedural, narrative) to expand the types of written and spoken discourse to which students are exposed in school. Works of classical and contemporary literature as well as traditional texts have been selected to suit the cognitive level of students within each grade and introduce them to their culture. Development of students' literacy and linguistic skills continues throughout primary school within all subject areas.

The Hebrew and Arabic reading curricula include three complementary and interrelated components of linguistic education: linguistic knowledge; reading, speaking, listening, and writing practices; and the spoken and written discourse represented by a variety of text genres. Each component is believed to support the development of a "literate discourse," the discourse required to study different subject areas and communicate appropriately in daily life as active, responsible, and critical participants.

Reading development is an important goal of the preprimary literacy curriculum, and students are expected to master the Hebrew or Arabic orthographic code. Initial reading instruction in support of language development begins in first grade using a phoneme-grapheme correspondence approach in a rich spoken language environment to support the curriculum's goal of providing students with opportunities to experience both written and spoken language. Texts are selected according to their relevance to students' lives in and out of school, and are adapted to their cognitive level in each grade. The learning program uses two interrelated frameworks to classify the types of texts for students: discourse and genre. The curriculum differentiates between five "worlds of discourse," or the knowledge, values, perspectives, and patterns of discourse that are typical of a given discipline: expository or academic; interpersonal; mass media; literature; and traditional heritage resources. The genre framework refers to the following major text genres that students are assigned to read: expository or descriptive texts, argumentative texts (to present arguments or persuade), procedural texts, and narratives. Each of these genres includes subgenres with similar social goals and structural elements.

Classroom lessons are organized around themes, and texts from different genres and worlds of discourse are used to teach particular themes. For example, water is one of the themes that uses expository texts, while the theme of Jewish holidays uses narrative texts. This allows specific themes

that are classified into different worlds of discourse to enhance students’ linguistic knowledge; to practice reciprocal interactions among reading, writing, listening, and speaking; and to increase students’ awareness of different genres.

Summary of National Curriculum

Israel’s national curriculum defines expected competencies of students using selected texts adapted to their cognitive level toward the end of Grades 2, 4, and 6. The curriculum has been in use since 2003, and the implementation of its benchmarks was evaluated in 2007. Schools are encouraged to tailor the curriculum to meet the needs of their student population. The following list gives an overview of the curriculum content and learning objectives for students at the end of fourth grade:

- Listen and speak for different purposes—track the sequence of events; locate ideas; interpret, evaluate, and take a stance about ideas; participate in a discussion; present an established idea in a lecture; choose the correct tone and use appropriate language; give a practical report; tell a story following a personal experience; present an argument and support it with logical structures
- Write texts for different purposes and recipients—write a story presenting reflections; write reports; write descriptions and explanations; write instructions; express a reasoned opinion; write to communicate reflections
- Produce written texts that are linguistically correct and communicably appropriate—use correct spelling and legible writing; write grammatically correct sentences; use proper punctuation; use appropriate vocabulary; create a title and use correct paragraph division; write with a subject focus; organize ideas with appropriate structures; use logical conjunctions
- Read various kinds of texts for different purposes—read continuously, fluently, and accurately and master the alphabetic code; understand overt meaning (understand words in context; understand chronological sequences; identify logical conjunctions, lingual components, modes of organization and design, and link to disciplinary content knowledge); understand hidden meanings (detect the relationship between the structure and content of the text, draw conclusions); interpret, evaluate, and take a stance
- Retrieve information and knowledge from various types of texts and subject domains—retrieve information from textbooks on various subjects, digital information, dictionaries, encyclopedias, and children’s magazines, based on verbal as well as visual information (e.g., illustrations, photographs, maps, charts); retrieve information relevant to the topic being studied from various information sources; evaluate information credibility by type of source, author characteristics, and publication date
- Read literary works from various periods and genres—read 20 books independently (in addition to previous independent reading expected by the end of second grade); become familiar with the works of 10 authors from different periods, and from Hebrew or Arabic as well as translated literature; read aloud fluently, accurately, and accentually a given literary

work that fits the age level; identify characters, recognize their descriptions, and express a personal stance toward the characters; understand the connections among events in a plot; identify the supernatural elements in the plot (e.g., legend, tale, allegory, imaginary story); identify the main characteristics of a poem (e.g., rhyme, rhythm, tonality); express a personal opinion on a literary work

- Read texts from Jewish sources (only for Hebrew-speaking students)—read fluently, accurately, and accentually; understand issues, ideas, and messages; master idiomatic phrases, idioms, and expressions
- Recognize and understand the linguistic system—recognize letters (their sounds, names, and order); understand use of vowels; search the dictionary; understand word format; understand extensions for male and female, and for singular and plural; use terms that refer to pronouns; identify and use verbs in different tenses and grammatical persons; use prepositions correctly; recognize conjunctions; perceive the relationships between synonyms and reversals; recognize and use expressions, idioms, and common proverbs

The curriculum points to the importance of initiating “reading communities” at schools to encourage social interaction among readers. Nurturing the social aspect of reading by visiting the library regularly and conducting reading themed events is believed to promote students’ personal growth and enjoyment of reading.

The linguistic education curriculum for Arabic-speaking elementary schools has been in use since 2009. The curriculum employs an approach to reading similar to that of the Hebrew reading curriculum, having adopted similar benchmarks and standards. The curriculum considers the unique characteristics of the Arabic language, especially the fact that native Arabic-speaking children are raised in a unique linguistic situation called diglossia.³ These children grow up using a spoken Arabic vernacular and later learn to read Modern Standard Arabic, which is related linguistically. The curriculum defines expected competencies for elementary school students similar to those in the Hebrew curriculum.

Professional Development Requirements and Programs

Requirements for Ongoing Professional Development in Reading for Teachers

In accordance with the New Horizon reform, all primary school teachers are required to complete at least 60 hours of professional development per school year, with at least half of the time dedicated to their subject domains. Monthly institutional professional development training may take place within a school (30 hours), with the principal and management staff deciding the content and type of training.

The organizational bodies responsible for professional development are at professional development centers for teachers, and also in institutions of higher education, universities, and teacher education colleges. All in-service training courses offer credits that result in salary increases for teachers. Types of professional development include Ministry of Education–initiated group

professional development intended to facilitate policy implementation; task-oriented in-service training that prepares staff for certain positions (e.g., principals, coordinators, leaders); school-based professional development in response to specific school needs; and individualized professional development that provides teachers with personal enrichment and further education.

The Ministry of Education also employs experienced teachers to serve as Hebrew and Arabic reading instructors who provide professional development support to primary school teachers throughout the country. Most schools participate in the program, which provides them with at least seven hours of guidance each month. Among other roles, the reading instructors help teachers stay up-to-date with the latest innovations in reading and writing instruction.

Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

Reading assessment is carried out using school-based and external tests. School-based assessments consist of specific formative and summative tasks chosen by teachers from a constantly growing selection of materials developed and made available to aid teachers in conducting assessment. External examinations of a national sample of students are conducted regularly to test different subject areas of the curriculum in depth. The National Authority for Measurement and Evaluation in Education (known by its Hebrew acronym, RAMA) addresses the need for professional measurement, evaluation, and assessment in the education system.⁴ In 2019,^a RAMA designed a new format of Israel’s national assessment (*Tmunat Matzav*, which can be translated as “situation snapshot”) in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, school principals, and teachers.⁵ The new format integrates internal and external assessment, and uses measurement techniques intended to support ongoing improvement of learning by aligning learning goals with school vision. This stems from the understanding that tests are not a goal in and of themselves, but rather an instrument for learning. The new format is designed to measure students against the standards set forth in the national curriculum, and includes student achievement tests and questionnaires administered to principals, teachers, and students regarding school climate and the pedagogical setting. It includes four components: (1) internal assessment, with an emphasis on developing new tools and making existing tools more readily available; (2) external assessment: Language literacy is assessed annually in the entire fourth grade cohort, and each school also is assessed annually in a different class grade and in different domains (a rotating combination of class grade and domain)—with regard to reading assessment, the external rotating assessment includes language assessment in Grades 5, 6, or 9; (3) educational climate surveys; and (4) school context: additional indices that shed light on the challenges, resources, and unique characteristics of each school.

The matriculation examination (*Bagrut*) is the official test to measure the results of the 13 years of compulsory schooling in Israel.⁶ Administered by the Ministry of Education, this high-stakes

^a Implementation of the new format was postponed until 2021 because of the COVID-19 pandemic; see the Response to COVID-19 Pandemic section for more information.

examination serves as a standard measure of students' knowledge throughout the country. All high school students have the option of taking the *Bagrut* test in three stages from Grades 10 to 12. The test covers all subject areas taught in secondary school and often is used to determine acceptance into higher education programs.

Special Reading Initiatives

Over the past few years, the learning environment in elementary schools has been modified to incorporate a variety of digital tools. This has influenced teaching and learning processes—including the acquisition of reading strategies—to the point that reading in digital environments has become integral to routine classroom activities in elementary schools. Additionally, teaching models have been developed and implemented within the framework of Hebrew and Arabic lessons to promote the integration of reading and linguistic skills with digital skills. Teacher education workshops guide teachers in the implementation of digital environments for reading. This process was accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic, when new materials were developed and made available to teachers and students. Another special reading initiative that is being implemented throughout primary school focuses on reading fluency. This initiative, called *Kol Ko're* (“reading voice”), offers a three-stage intervention that includes mapping students' reading fluency, 10 intervention practices, and formative assessment.⁷

Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Three periods of school closures occurred in Israel between March 2020 and May 2021 as part of the effort to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The length of school closures varied depending on grade; the following dates refer to primary school, specifically Grades 1 to 4.

- March 13, 2020, to May 17, 2020. (Grades 1 to 3 returned to school to receive face-to-face instruction on May 5, 2020.)
- September 16, 2020, to November 11, 2020. (Classes in Grades 1 to 4 were divided into small groups dubbed “capsules” that consisted of up to 17 students.)
- January 8, 2021, to February 11, 2021. (The exception was for schools located in areas of high COVID-19 morbidity that continued to provide remote instruction.)

In total, students in Grades 1 to 3 (the fourth grade students in the 2021–2022 academic year from which the current PIRLS cohort is drawn in Israel) lost 4.5 weeks of face-to-face instruction during the 2019–2020 academic year, and 9 weeks during the 2020–2021 academic year (the numbers vary slightly in Arab sector schools, as their vacation schedule is a little different). Special education classes and schools were exempt from the second and third closures and thus did not miss any face-to-face instruction in the 2020–2021 academic year.⁸

Between March 2020 and May 2021, the Ministry of Education operated a system of remote instruction, both during school closures and as part of hybrid learning. Remote instruction was conducted mostly in a format of online classes; during the first closure (March to May 2020), the Ministry of Education also operated a National Broadcast Studio, which broadcast classes on various subjects in Hebrew and Arabic. Teachers were provided with guidelines for remote instruction and resources such as access to synchronous learning environments (e.g., Zoom). Asynchronous environments (Moodle, Google Cloud, Microsoft Cloud) also were made available. In addition to providing pedagogical resources and support, the Ministry of Education aimed to support schools and students that lacked the required infrastructure and hardware for effective digital and remote learning. Eligible schools could join the Ministry's Information and Communications Technology (ICT) program, as well as receive computer equipment upgrades and purchase remote learning equipment for students in need. The Ministry of Education also appointed ICT coordinators in over 4,000 schools, provided remote instruction training in approximately 3,950 schools, and funded the purchase of digital educational materials (e.g., access to educational websites) in approximately 4,300 schools.

Impact of the Pandemic on Student Learning

While the Ministry of Education made resources for internal assessment available to schools and teachers, no national assessment has been conducted yet to evaluate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning for fourth grade students.

Policy and Practice Changes

The COVID-19 pandemic led the Ministry of Education to consider changes in teachers' ongoing education, especially in expanding the available options and offering more national online trainings and workshops alongside local, face-to-face options. The pandemic also underscored the need for differentiated instruction and the importance of teaching independent learning skills, but no concrete pedagogical changes have been planned yet.

Impact of the Pandemic on PIRLS 2021

The outbreak of the pandemic coincided with the planned beginning of the field trial in Israel. Therefore, the field trial was postponed and later canceled; Israel conducted data collection in May–June 2022 as part of the third wave of data collection.

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