



Office of the State Comptroller | 2020

The State of Israel Response to the COVID-19 Crisis
Special Interim Report

Infrastructure for Remote Learning and Alternative Learning Spaces During the COVID-19 Crisis

The final report will be published in 2021

Abstract

KEY FIGURES

34%

Percentage of schools for which the Ministry of Education has data on the number of laptop computers they possess (that are available for remote learning purposes)

26.8%

Percentage of pupils who have no internet (online) access, as estimated by the Chief Economist of the Finance Ministry

150,000

Number of computers that the Ministry of Education intends to purchase in the 2020-2021 school year, only 50% will be available by the end of January 2021

**1.82
million**

Pupils in grades 1-12 in the school year of 2020-2021

Key Findings

- ❖ **Mapping the lack of end user devices and internet connections:** at the start of the 2020-2021 school year, the Ministry of Education did not possess updated information about the availability of internet access in the homes of pupils and teachers. Moreover, initial audit findings show that there is no clear target date for obtaining this information.
- ❖ **Lack of end user devices and internet connections:** the Ministry of Education estimates that approximately 135,000 pupils do not have a computer. There are additional estimates from other sources, but they cannot serve as a solid basis for making decisions over how to bridge this gap, since some estimates refer to pupils and others to households (sometimes even without noting whether they include pupils and if so, how many).
- ❖ **Lack of end user devices in specific population groups:** a map prepared by the Chief Economist of the Finance Ministry showed that 42% of pupils in the Haredi community (127,299) do not have a computer, and 72% of Haredi pupils have no internet access. Twenty six percent of pupils in the Non-Jewish community (120,370) do not have a computer, and 38% do not have internet access.
- ❖ **Simultaneous access to end user devices by household members:** almost a quarter of households with a 15-year old who participated in the 2018 PISA test¹ have at most one computer. Considering that the average number of children in an Israeli family (including the Haredi society) was 3.11 in 2016, this indicates that there is a problem of computer availability in families with more than one child of school age.
- ❖ **Computer purchases by the Ministry of Education:** the Ministry of Education target is to purchase 50% of the computers required by the end of January 2021, depending on budget availability. This means that the 2020-2021 school year commenced with many pupils (at least 135,000) without online access to remote learning.
- ❖ **Volunteer organization involvement in the distribution of computers to pupils:** there is no single Government entity, with a complete understanding of the situation, to coordinate initiatives by volunteer organizations to provide computers to pupils or that determines priorities in computer distribution.

The PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) is a test run by the OECD, which examines the level of literacy of pupils aged 15 in three areas: reading, mathematics and science. The test is carried out once every three years, and the last one was in 2018. The test largely excludes Haredi society (and is not a representative sample of that society).

Key Recommendations

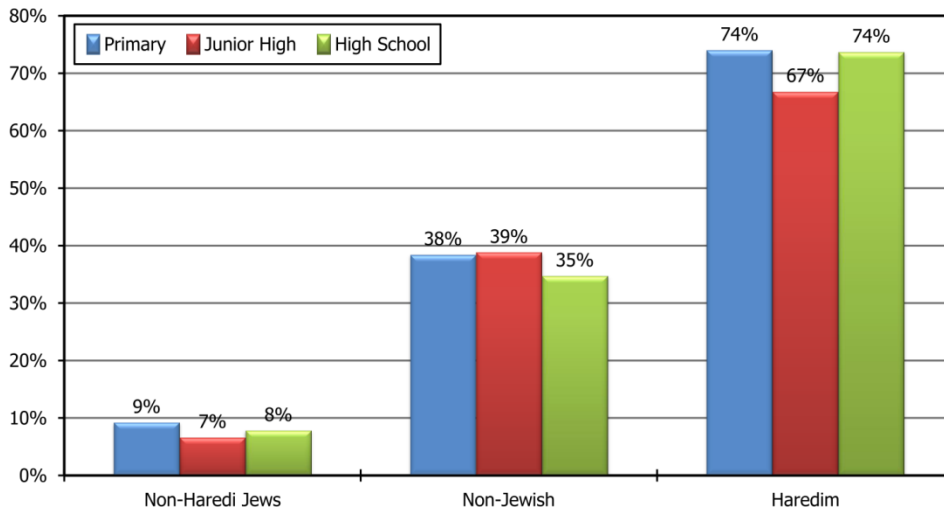
- ❖ **Mapping the lack of end user devices and internet connections:** the Ministry of Education should urgently complete a map of end user devices and internet connections in the homes of pupils and teachers, with special reference to households with more than one pupil needing a device. An action plan should be prepared together with the local authorities, who have the best access to the schools, to prepare a complete picture of the situation. Pupils in Non-Jewish society need special emphasis, as the number of computers per household is particularly low. Pupils in Haredi schools need a special response tailored to their lifestyle. The Ministry of Education should conduct a dialogue with these two groups in order to find an optimal and immediate solution for remote learning.
- ❖ **Immediately supplying end user devices:** a solution must be found for the prompt provision of computers to pupils, whether borrowed or with purchase vouchers, or any other equitable method. The Ministry of Education must examine the option of allocating budget authority for the immediate purchase of computers and other equipment through financial assistance to local authorities or to educational networks and schools.
- ❖ **Distribution of laptop computers already in schools for remote learning purposes:** the Ministry of Education should map the various types of computers available in schools and arrange with the Federation of Local Authorities a mechanism to facilitate, in emergencies, the loan of these computers to teachers and pupils for remote learning purposes.
- ❖ **Regulating the involvement of volunteer organizations in the distribution of computers to pupils in need of them:** the Ministry of Education should appoint someone to coordinate initiatives from volunteer organizations allocating computers to pupils in need. This coordinator must be aware of the activity of other organizations who provide computers to pupils, and should have information about shortages.
- ❖ **Increased use of spaces outside schools:** the Ministry of Education should lead in cooperation with the Finance Ministry, the Ministry of Culture & Sport, the Federation of Local Authorities and the Employment Service in formulating a detailed and practical plan to integrate learning in alternative spaces, suitable for different age groups. The Ministry of Education should define the resources required, and encourage local authorities and schools to implement the program. Simultaneously, it is necessary to examine how to integrate job seekers into the education system and integrate them into this program. This will increase the number of days in which pupils study outside their homes, reduce the number of recipients of unemployment benefits and stimulate the economy in related fields.

The Minister of Education responded to the State Comptroller's Office in October 2020. He stated that since assuming his position, the Ministry's primary objective is the establishment of an optimal remote learning system. It stressed providing the computer

infrastructure required for remote learning, in order to ensure, as much as possible, continuity of study for all pupils. This minimized the damage caused by the closure of educational institutions and its effect on pupils, their families, and teaching staff. The Minister specified the actions taken by the Ministry, some in line with the audit recommendations.

Proportion of pupils with no computer or internet connection, by sector and age group, 2018

No computer



No internet access

