Part two
Ministry of Education actions to prevent harm to students on the online space

Background

The Ministry of Education (the Ministry) explicitly addresses online space (Internet) abuse and getting involved in risky Internet situations as part of students' violence towards students. Under its authority, according to the law[6], the Ministry of Education is responsible for advancing an optimal educational climate that enables including and accepting others and encourage the creation of an atmosphere that supports learning and the development of personal and social responsibility. The Student's Rights Law 2000 intends to reduce violence between students in and outside educational institutions.[7] A Director-General circular on improving the school climate and coping with incidents of violence[8] (the ACHAM circular) is based on the concept that the school climate is central to develop students' self-confidence, their sense of belonging, and their dignity, alongside social values such as integrity and respect for others, responsibility, protecting the privacy and being alert to dangers and risk situations. However, students' behavior in the online space has unique characteristics: access to extensive information and to diverse content that is unlimited and unclassified, blurring the boundaries between private and public and risk of violating privacy, the possibility of anonymous and independent behavior without the supervision of teachers or parents and monitoring mechanisms. These characteristics pose a new educational challenge to all levels of the education system, which requires planning and preparation exceeding the Ministry of Education's response to physical violence and risk behaviors visible to students.

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6   The State Education Law 1953 and Compulsory Education Law 1949 make it mandatory for the state and for local authorities, which are local education authorities, to maintain educational institutions for every child and for every youth and to report any incident of violence between a teacher and student or between students; and Government Decision no. 1006, on the topic of "the establishment of a framework for preventing violence and crime against children and youth on the internet (Maor framework)", from January 17, 2016, which was updated on November 18, 2018, for establishing a civilian-police framework that will work to create a safe environment for children and youth online – a framework in which the Ministry of Education is a partner and takes an active part in the civilian framework.

7   As for the Ministry of Education's responsibility for the activity of students outside of the educational institution according to the law, see Pupils' Rights Law, 2000, according to which the Ministry is also responsible "for the rules regarding maintaining mutual respect in the community of the educational institution…including regarding preventing violence and addressing it."

8   See Director-General circular "Optimal Educational Climate and Educational Institutions' Coping with Incidents of Violence and Risk" from May 21, 2020: "The updated circular… expands the scope and defines the authority of the educational staff on additional issues that did not appear in previous circulars, such as incidents of violence that take place outside of the educational institution or on school buses… and creating partnership with parents."

Key figures

9% vs. 22%

the level gap of online violence towards students ranges from 9%, according to a violence monitoring survey by the National Authority for Measurement and Evaluation in Education (RAMA), and 22%, according to Bezeq's Internet report

50%

of all schools, principals stated they could rely between a medium level and not at all on the Ministry of Education to provide a quality and professional response protecting minors on the internet

35%

of all schools, principals stated that the current internet programs distributed by the Ministry's headquarters provide students with tools for Internet safe use – both as part of school activity and in leisure hours – at a medium level or below

25%

of parents of students in the Jewish-state education system think they have tools to reduce exposure to problematic content on the internet

50%

of middle school and high school, students do not consider school staff as people they can turn to in case of online violence. Over 60% of students in these age groups do not address the 105 Hotline in case of online violence

70%

of all school principals reported their school does not have programs dealing with students who harm others on the internet; 58% said there are no programs for helping students who have been harmed on the internet

83%

of parents stated they did not participate or were not invited to participate an in safe internet use activity at school

22%

of all schools, principals indicate that their school only slightly uses or not at all the monitoring tools that the Ministry of Education provides them with to build the system-wide school program[9]

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9   In the "principles for preparedness" section, the Acham circular states among other things that each school must develop an ongoing and consistent system-wide program that is a necessary condition for creating a safe environment; the program should be based on monitoring violence, its extent and its nature at the school.

Key findings

![thumbs down icon] **Integrating the issue as a target in the education system's strategic planning** – in May 2020, the Ministry's headquarters formulated a system-wide multi-year plan for promoting optimal behavior by students and preventing harm to them on the Internet. Still, as of October 2021, it had not yet been approved by the Ministry's director-general nor distributed to the districts and educational institutions. It was also found that the Ministry did not set any supervision, monitoring, and reporting tools for its implementation in the plan.

![thumbs down icon] **Performance planning and regulation – director-general circulars and curricula for promoting optimal behavior by students on the Internet and preventing harm to them** – it was found that the psychological counseling service in the Ministry of Education's pedagogical administration (SHEFI) has not updated the director-general circular on life skills from December 2010 (the Life Skills Circular). In the director-general circular, there is no explicit reference to the Life on the Internet Program – the designated operative program for ensuring optimal behavior on the Internet by students and preventing harm to them on the Internet (the Life on the Internet Program). In the Life Skills Circular, there is no reference to components of the system-wide multi-year program for promoting optimal behavior on the Internet that SHEFI developed as a response to the set objective for promoting it in the strategic plan for the 2020–2021 school year. It was also found that the Ministry of Education's headquarters units are not tracking the implementation of the Life on the Internet Program and do not periodically assess it and update it as needed.

![thumbs down icon] **Implementing the ACHAM circular,[10] the Life on the Internet Programs, and the Life Skills Program at schools** – most principals (85%) are familiar with the current internet documents the Ministry's headquarters has distributed. However, a large portion of them (over 40%) believe that the tools and programs they are running provide students with a medium or lower level of effective tools for coping with harmful incidents on the internet. In addition, only half of all school principals believe they can rely, to a great or very great extent, on the Ministry of Education to provide a quality and professional response to protect minors online, and about half (46%) stated they only use the monitoring tools the Ministry of Education provides them with between a medium extent and not at all. It was also found that from the 2018–2019 school year until the 2020–2021 school year, the number of schools that filled out and used the Acham questionnaire declined from 505 to 372 (255 Hebrew-speaking schools and 117 Arabic-speaking schools). In the 2020–2021 school year, 7.5% of all schools used the Acham questionnaire (372 out of 5,011).

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10   See Acham circular.

👎 **Data collection by schools and compiling them at the district level** – the Ministry of Education's districts collect data on internet abuse from all schools in various ways and to varying extents. This data is kept at the district level, and the districts are not obligated, according to the Acham circular, to transfer it to the headquarters. As a result, the Ministry's headquarters does not have information compiled on incidents of online harm reported to school educational staff. It was also found that a third of all school principals stated that in the last school year, 2020–2021, they did not collect data on internet abuse; 21% of all school principals said this year there were no online violence, and 43% of all school principals stated that there were students who harmed other students on the internet in this school year.

👎 **Underreporting by students on Internet abuse and being in risk situations** – according to a digital violence monitoring survey by RAMA[11], 93% of students reported that they would turn to someone (not necessarily a school figure) if they experienced harm on the Internet. In contrast, turning to a school staff member stood at 57%: 70% of students in grades 4–6 would turn to a school staff member, compared to 44% of students in grades 10–11. If harmed, the percentage of students who would turn to the 105 Hotline (39%) was the lowest, especially as the student's ages increased. As for differences between Hebrew-speaking and Arabic-speaking students – 94% of Hebrew-speaking students, compared to 89% of Arabic-speaking students, reported that they would turn to someone (not necessarily a school staff member) if they experienced harm on the internet. In contrast, turning to a school staff member stood at 54% among Hebrew-speaking students compared to 65% of Arabic-speaking students. Moreover, 37% of Hebrew-speaking students and 45% of Arabic-speaking students stated they would turn to the 105 Hotline. In a meeting held by the audit team with representatives of the National Council of Students and Youth in August 2021, the students attributed the underreporting to the lack of entity that can address their complaints– inside or outside schools.

👎 **Coping with harmful incidents on the Internet towards students and by students** – according to principals' reports, about 70% of schools do not have programs for dealing with students who harm others on the Internet, and 58% of schools do not have programs for helping students who are harmed on the Internet. Half of all school principals reported they do not have adequate programs for dealing with students who harmed others or were harmed, and a third of all principals estimated that the treatment provided to students who were harmed or harmed others on the Internet was at a medium level or below.

👎 **The professional development of teachers** – only a third of all principals believe to a great extent or a very great extent that teachers have sufficient digital skills to help students use the Internet optimally and cope with incidents of harm, and the majority (76%) prefer that professionals with specific expertise teach the students in class.

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11   RAMA, "Digital Violence at Schools According to Student Reports," September 2020.

Parent positions regarding guidance for parents – the Life on the Internet Programs, the knowledge extraction document initiated by SHEFI[12], and the National Child Online Protection Bureau raised the need for schools to cooperate with students' parents, guide them, and involve them in the issue. However, only about, a quarter (27%) of parents believe to a great or very great extent their children are exposed to inappropriate content or to harm on the Internet. As the age of children increases, parents are less involved in their Internet activity; 83% of parents stated that they had not participated in or were not invited to participate in an activity on safe Internet use at school. Hence, only about 17% of parents participated in activities on safe Internet use[13].

Including the issue as an objective in the Ministry of Education's strategic planning – at the end of August 2021, before the 2021–2022 school year, the Ministry published a policy document titled "Milestones for the 2021–2022 School Year", which was for all position holders in the education system, designated to plan this school year. The document was published on the education institutions portal and includes five goals. The second goal is "strengthening resilience and sense of belonging through emotional and social learning", and one of its goals is "advancing protection, preventing violence and bullying in educational institutions and the online space".

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the extent of schools engaging in education on optimal behavior on the Internet – it was found that 63% of all principals estimate that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, their school was more engaged in educating students on optimal behavior on the internet. According to the principals, 70% of state-religious schools and 69% of elementary schools increased their involvement in the issue.

Updating teacher-training plans – the new teacher-training plan, approved by the Council for Higher Education in February 2021, includes eight core elements. It was found that two of them refer to protecting minors online and implementing learning technologies in online space[14]. Regarding the protection of minors, the work of the teacher and educator includes behavior on the internet and sex education. Learning and teaching technologies are included in entrepreneurship and innovation in learning information-intensive environments with diverse technologies.

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12 Irit Aizik, Zohar Sharvit, Shakked Lubotzky-Gete and Dana Brender, "Promoting Safe Behavior on the Internet among Students – Literature Review and Extraction of Knowledge from School Programs," Myers-JDC-Brookdale, June 2020. Document developed with the help of SHEFI.

13 A third of parents stated that they had received an invitation to participate in activity at school, half of whom stated that they had participated in activities – that is, 17%.

14 Page 9 of the plan, "Expert Committee Report on Examining the Structure and Outline of Teacher Training in Institutes of Higher Education in Israel", April 2020.

Key recommendations

💡 It is recommended that the Ministry of Education validate and approve the multi-year plan for promoting students' optimal behavior on the Internet and preventing harm to them on the Internet developed in May 2020, distribute it to the districts and schools, and clarify the strategic direction and what the individual tasks and targets are for achieving it.

💡 It is recommended that the Ministry of Education discuss the significant gaps in the data received from the various monitoring tools regarding digital violence and risk situations on the Internet for children and youth, assess the reliability of the monitoring tools as a basis for formulating intervention programs for the variety of student ages and populations, and consider to update and validate them.

💡 To create a system-wide situation assessment including both the data from the National Child Online Protection Bureau and from the Ministry of Education's districts, it is recommended that the Ministry of Education regulate data collection from the districts in the Acham circular to uniform and reflect the data from the field, and that the circular obligate the districts to periodically report the data it has on Internet abuse to the Ministry's headquarters. In addition, it is appropriate that the Ministry of Education formulate a director-general circular on the information transfer about students, among other things, to determine clear rules regarding the confidentiality of information about students involved in online abuse, as well as ensure the continuity of dealing with them and preventing harmful behavior by them in the future. It should be noted that such a recommendation was included in the State Comptroller assessment submitted to the Knesset on "the implementation of the Prevention of Sexual Harassment Law, 1998"[15].

💡 To improve the response to students harmed or who have harmed others on the Internet, it is recommended that the Ministry of Education examine the scope of programs in schools for dealing with these students and adapt the response to their needs, and increase its cooperation with external groups – parents, local authorities and informal frameworks of student activities staff.

💡 By the responses from ultra-orthodox sector school principals, only about half a percent of students reported having been harmed on the Internet; it is recommended that the Ministry develop tools for principals and the educational staff to identify and help students harmed on the Internet compatible with the lifestyle of ultra-orthodox society inside and outside of schools.

💡 To expand the teachers' professional development, it is recommended that the Ministry of Education, in cooperation with the Centers for the Development of Teaching Staffs

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15   State Comptroller, Annual Report 70b (May 2020) p. 111.

and representatives of teachers and principals, consider improving the professional development of teachers for teaching safe behavior on the Internet and closing the gap between them and students in this field.

Given the great importance of the involvement and enlistment of parents to ensure optimal behavior of their children on the Internet, it is recommended that the Ministry of Education examine the quality use of tools by schools it provided for that end. It is also recommended that the Ministry make tools developed in this field accessible to parents and identify the barriers to the involvement of parents of students of various ages and from different population groups.
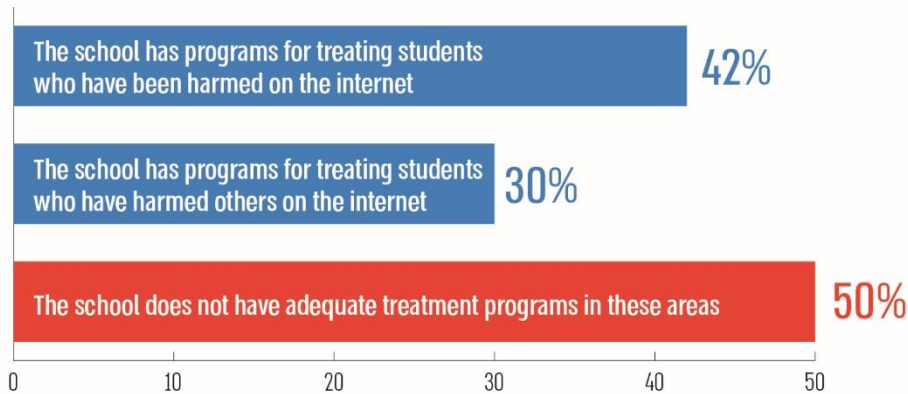
Statements from dialogue with Council of Students and Youth representatives regarding dealing with harm to students on the Internet

I think that school staff does not understand there is harassment on the internet... Parents who do not know how to cope with the phenomenon get stressed immediately and turn to the police, and the police do nothing... The youth who wants to complain has to be exposed, and there is **nothing the parents or school counselor can do, and they do not have tools for coping with it •** I think the school counselor does not have the means to synchronize with all those who are supposed to deal with it • I feel uncomfortable approaching the counselor of the grade, responsible for about 450 students • I want the possibility of turning to someone who will keep it between us • Everyone refers to everyone and leaves the youth to cope with it alone • **Therefore, everything ends with "learn to cope" •** I think the most important thing is for the harmed **person to have the possibility of speaking with someone** • You need someone trained to talk with those harmed at school or outside • Currently, **there is no clear address to turn** to stop the abuse reported by the youth.

Source: the audit team's meeting with representatives of the National Council of Students and Youth on August 2, 2021.

Treatment programs for students who have harmed others and for students who have been harmed on the schools' internet

The school has programs for treating students who have been harmed on the internet	42%
The school has programs for treating students who have harmed others on the internet	30%
The school does not have adequate treatment programs in these areas	50%

0   10   20   30   40   50

Summary

The behavior of children and youth online has posed one of the most significant education system problems for over a decade. Alongside the education system obligation to instill its graduates with knowledge, tools, and skills preparing them to be "digital citizens," enabling them to integrate into life circles and the changing labor market, it should address the many risks inherent in students' intensive use of the Internet – a space that has become very central in their lives – at school and outside of it. Moreover, the Ministry of Education has a significant role in educating children and youth, preventing them from getting into risky situations on the Internet and treating those harmed. The Ministry of Education should advance these aspects in the pedagogical, emotional, moral, and organizational spheres.

In its response to the State Comptroller Office, the Ministry of Education presented a series of actions it has carried out over the years to advance optimal behavior on the Internet and prevent harm to students, including coordinating on the inter-ministry level until the establishment of the National Child Online Protection Bureau; active participation in the 105 Hotline; addressing various aspects, such as educational lectures at the 105 Hotline for about 3,000 school principals in the 2020−2021 school year; collaborations with various bodies (such as the State Attorney's Office and the police) to hold activities in the education system; and carrying youth leadership activities as part of the Peers Influencing Peers program that about 8,000 youth participate in. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education developed professional training for the educational staff, supervisors, and instructors, promoting optimal behavior on the Internet and increasing awareness of risk situations and harm at schools.

By the report's findings, the Ministry of Education has not created educational infrastructure at the level of the headquarters and the schools sufficiently addressing various aspects of optimal behavior on the Internet. Regarding the headquarters, several deficiencies were found regarding enacting the prioritized strategic status of the issue; enlisting all of the Ministry's headquarters units responsible for developing and implementing it; updating the procedures and programs and tracking their implementation; the insufficient professional development of teachers was also found; and failure to address gaps in monitoring and collecting the data on online abuse. The preparation and implementation of director-general circulars and plans are insufficient at schools, in contrast with the online space's dominance among students.

It is recommended that the Ministry of Education promote optimal behavior on the Internet to prevent harm to students by conveying its importance to all bodies involved in the education of students. Hence, it is recommended that the Ministry of Education expand the cooperation between the headquarters units and the field, clarify and update procedures and programs for building the infrastructure addressing the issue at schools, and increase the tracking of their implementation and the evaluation of their contribution. In addition, it is recommended the Ministry increase the involvement of parents to make it built-in. It should enhance the skills of teachers from the training stage to the development stage throughout their careers, adapt processes with teaching patterns changes at schools or in distance teaching; on the inter-ministry level, it is recommended that the Ministry improve its partnerships with other bodies at the National Child Online Protection Bureau and apply the insights of the National Bureau's insights.

Abstract | **Part two - Ministry of Education actions to prevent harm to students on the online space**