Executive Summary

This document proposes a comprehensive national reform in early-childhood education and caregiving, addressing the first few years of a child’s life—from birth to initial enrollment in the structured setting of the school at age six. The growing awareness of the importance of early childhood per se, and its centrality within the full span of socioeconomic processes, accent the need to redesign patterns that have become obsolete, entrenched, and no longer consistent with contemporary realities. Accordingly, a systematic policy that acknowledges the importance of the topic and draws on the latest research findings should be set forth.

A growing accumulation of studies in the past decade points unequivocally to the definitive impact of early-childhood education and caregiving on child development and equal opportunity. The environment in which preschoolers grow and the quality of the stimuli that they receive in this early stage of life have a critical effect on their cognitive and affective development, in a manner that projects onto their functioning in all subsequent stages. The advancement of equal opportunity is one of the main duties of the formal education system; this is one of the principal reasons for the assurance of free compulsory public education from kindergarten to the end of high school. The lack of a similar policy for early childhood, however, is a major precipitant of significant and entrenched disparities in children’s capacities and abilities even at this early stage—gaps that the education system, in its current format, struggles to bridge in later phases.

Israel is exceptional in its high birth rate, by Western and even broader standards, and its very high rate of women’s participation in the labor force. However, it has not pledged to early childhood the resources and the governmental intent that this warrants. The outcomes of this drawback are poor caregiving quality to the detriment of the development of many of Israel’s children, exorbitant expenses foisted on parents, poor access, widening of socioeconomic gaps, and so on. Additionally, these failures are gravely injurious to mothers, contributing decisively to the formation and sustaining of gender gaps in employment and wages.

This explains the need for a thoroughgoing conceptual change, expressed in “upending the pyramid” in the sense of shifting the emphasis to early childhood—the constitutive stage of life that determines the future of the child and the person, a stage that is as important as, if not more important than, later phases of education in constructing the individual’s platform of basic capacities. A policy that places the focus on early childhood may narrow the starting-gate disparities that are now steadily widening, possibly contributing definitively to progress toward substantive equal opportunity, gender equality, and balance between professional self-fulfillment and parenting and family.

►The Proposed Policy

The establishment of the Council for Early Childhood at the Ministry of Education creates a historical opportunity to bring about the requisite change because the law tasks this body with sketching out a comprehensive policy for early childhood, relating to all aspects of the education, health, welfare, and development of children aged 0–6. The Council is also instructed to formulate a five-year plan, backed by a multiannual budget, that will translate the policy into practical and prioritized measures. One of the main dilemmas in making this policy is the tension between quality and quality, i.e., between expanding existing settings (particularly for ages 1–3) and their subsidies, and improving the quality of care with emphasis on personnel training and lowering the child-staff ratio. In view of other countries’ experience and the findings of research studies, we are convinced that the emphasis at the initial stage of the five-year plan should be placed on improving quality, leaving meaningful quantitative expansion to a later phase. This priority should be manifested both in the requisite planning and organizational effort and in the budget. The main directions of action that we propose in this context are:

* **Training early-childhood staff**: Every staff member who deals with any aspect of early childhood, including those who provide services that are considered menial today (minder [“*metapelet*”], preschool aide, etc.) should acquire schooling and training at an academic or equivalent level. To accomplish this, it will be necessary to redefine the early-childhood occupations but also, instead of merely raising threshold requirements at the entry level, to include an ongoing process of in-service and refresher activities. Given the gap that this will create relative to the current situation, paths of advancement for current staff, from basic instruction to full academic degrees, should be offered.
* **Suitable wages and working conditions for early childhood:** Education aside, the requisite professionalization of early-childhood staff should, of course, include improvements in working conditions and wages, in order to attract high-quality candidates who will meet the higher threshold conditions.
* **Ratio of children to caregiving staff:** Many studies show a significant relation between the size of an early-childhood setting and the numerical ratio of children to staff, and setting quality. Caregivers who have fewer children to mind can provide more than basic caregiving actions; they can focus on each child’s personal needs and expose them to meaningful interactions and stimuli that will further their development. Today’s early-childhood personnel standard in Israel, however, is very far from standards that the OECD considers reasonable. Thus, to improve the quality of early-childhood care, it is essential to lower the child/caregiver ratio.

As stated, the plan in its subsequent stages includes the quantitative improvement of available settings, particularly for ages 1–3, and gradual lowering of their cost to parents, concurrent with the main effort of qualitative improvement. The process that will bring the two together—an important element of the proposed policy—is:

* **Establishment of “early-childhood campuses”**: multipurpose centers for ages 1–6, offering a full spectrum of educational and caregiving functions that children and parents need in these stages of life. Each such campus should be set up in one location, have a multistory multipurpose building at its core, and serve as a unified organizational setting that operates on an en-bloc basis, with a central administration and shared support and operating services. The campus should offer parents a “one-stop shop” and offer children a stable structure. It will also have important advantages in economic management by affording scale economies in every respect. It should be anchored in regular educational settings based on children’s age (1 through kindergarten) and should also deliver a matrix of services (commensurate with specific local needs) that are provided separately today, e.g., well-baby centers (which should be upgraded) and child-development centers. In addition, the campuses should serve as extensions of teachers’ colleges for pre-service training, student teaching, and in-service activities for the campus staff, should serve as a repository of education and caregiving information, and should give parents counseling, stewarding, and support. Several municipal authorities are promoting this idea today and the intent is to instill it as standard operating procedure in every new residential quarter countrywide. Concurrently, existing settings in longstanding localities should be converted into campuses in a gradual process.

►Medium- and Long-Term Objectives

* **Transfer all functions to the Ministry of Education:** Our point of departure is that early-childhood care is essentially an educational matter in the broad sense of the term and that the other aspects should be treated as supplemental. This suggests the need for a long-term program that would transfer responsibility for all functions related to early childhood to the Council for Early Childhood, i.e., daycare and family-based centers from the Ministry of Labor and Social Services, and well-baby and child-development centers from the Ministry of Health. By centralizing all functions under one roof, it will be possible to treat early childhood as an unbroken, continuous whole and thus place the child in the center as an indivisible being. To attain this integration and improvement, however, the organizational and managerial abilities of the Ministry of Education itself will have to be developed in a specific way:
* **Restructure the Ministry of Education itself:** To enable the Ministry to manage early childhood in all respects, its Early Childhood Division should be upgraded to an Early Childhood Administration tasked with managing and operating all settings. Thus, two entities in charge of early childhood will operate under the Ministry’s umbrella: the Council for Early childhood for policymaking, strategy, and budgeting, and the Early Childhood Administration for the operational side. Both bodies should function as part of an Early Childhood Division, presided over by a junior minister. This plan should be formulated promptly and implemented on the basis of a schedule known in advance, even one of several years’ duration.

►Estimated Budget Expenditure

The proposed program entails planning and organizational measures and considerable budget expenditure. The total cost of the proposed policy measures is estimated at ILS 5.7 billion. Since this sum cannot be obtained in one go, the Council will have to present, as an objective in its multiannual program, an ILS 1 billion increase to its budget base each year for five years. As the budget scheme is implemented gradually, the organizational, managerial, and practical outcomes of the policy measures should be tested. Within this multiannual budget framework, the priorities described above and, particularly, the initial emphasis on qualitative improvement, will find expression.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Area of activity** | **Budget year in multiannual program** |
| **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** |
| Quality upgrade | 250 | 300 | 450 | 500 | 500 |
| Reducing class size | 250 | 300 | 450 | 500 | 500 |
| Expanding supply, campuses, and Council | 170 | 170 | 170 | 170 | 170 |
| Easing the burden on parents | 330 | 1,230 | 1,930 | 2,830 | 3,830 |
| Total budget increase over base | 1,000 | 2,000 | 3,000 | 4,000 | 5,000 |

Notably, whereas the Ministry of Education budget is allowed to run on “autopilot,” i.e., is increased at a specified rate each year in order to fund increases in activity warranted by natural growth of enrollment, the other functions—well-baby clinics, daycares, and so on—are not treated this way. This creates structural erosion because the year-groups are growing not only from age 3 onward but also, of course, from birth. Therefore, some of the requisite budget increases should be obtained by applying the “autopilot” principles to all aspects of early childhood. Thus the concept of “upending the pyramid” will be more than metaphorical from here on because early childhood will receive budgetary and other preference within the entirety of education.

Preface

The social protests that erupted in summer 2011 quickly evolved into one of Israeli society’s most formative events ever. At their peak, half a million people poured into the streets, most of them young adults who belonged to the social mainstream, under the innocuous but telling slogan “The nation demands social justice.” These young people merely demanded something that should have been self-evident: a roof over their heads and a dignified standard of living in return for their having done everything expected of them—army service, studies, hard work, and starting families. Spiraling housing prices and the exorbitant expense of preschool childcare, however, transformed what should have been taken for granted into a mission impossible.

A centerpiece of the 2011 social action was the “stroller protest.” Here, mothers (yes, largely mothers, not fathers) gave collective expression to the dire distress that each felt as they confronted the mission impossible of “having it both ways”—caring for their children, holding down a meaningful job, and laying out enormous sums for inaccessible and unsupervised childcare settings. They realized that this distress reflected not personal weakness but a system failure on the part of the state, which continued to ballyhoo natality (“Children are a blessing”) but shirked responsibility for the implications of its cheering for young households and, particularly, for the onerous burden that this imposed on them.

When I was placed at the helm of the Committee for Socioeconomic Change that was formed pursuant to the protests, it was clear to me that the need for a powerful response to early childhood would be central in the committee’s work. For good reason I insisted that the late Professor Penina Klein be named to the panel as a member. Penina was an unchallenged authority and a key figure in academia in all matters pertaining to early childhood, and her weight made a decisive contribution to the advancement of the cause and the drafting of the committee’s main recommendation, which was indeed approved and implemented: extending the Free Education Law to the 3–4 age group. Early childhood, however, resonated far beyond this: it occupied a central place in the first chapter of the committee’s report, that which focused on ideas and outlooks. Furthermore, additional recommendations concerning early childhood covered a broad array of measures that the state should take in order to give the distress a real response and not just momentary relief.

A personal note: In the years since the protests, I have become more intensively involved in the cause of early childhood, seeing it as one of the greatest challenges that Israeli society is facing. When my wife and I started a family and raised three daughters while attempting to climb highly demanding career ladders, we often felt helpless if not on the verge of utter despair. We were convinced, however, that our daughters would avoid this fate when their turn would come; surely, what had been impossible for us would become reasonable and endurable, at the very least, for them. Happily, today we have four grandchildren in early childhood. The hope that nestled in us several decades ago, however, has proven false: it is no less difficult for our daughters and their husbands than it had been for us back then. I consider this a colossal failure on the part of the State of Israel and, within this generality, of my generation.

Ultimately, as they say, “everything is personal.” Yes, I take it personally that we have not found it in us, thus far, to impress decision-makers with the importance of early childhood and bring about the warranted change in worldview, one that would manifest itself in the major reprioritization of early childhood. I take it personally that true equal opportunity does not exist in twenty-first-century Israel because children’s fate is sealed in their first critical years and it is precisely then that the disparities in quality of care are widest. I take it personally that, despite massive progress in women’s advancement, Israel’s gender wage gap still sits at 35 percent and traces above all to childraising. Since I take it personally, I am personally committed to sustaining the effort to shape the vision and to translate it into practical policy.

This document is accompanied by another (it, too, part of the Samuel Neeman Institute’s “Hundred-Day Project”) that proposes far-reaching reform in parental leave and state support of children (foremost in respect of child allowances). The two documents form a whole because the requisite attention to the way a family copes with the birth of a child takes place along a structural continuum that begins before birth and continues progressively until the child begins primary school. Furthermore, what happens in the first few months after childbirth among young families has a definitive impact on what happens later, particularly where women’s employment status is concerned.

This document focuses by nature on policy, i.e., the need for the state to assume responsibility, behave proactively, and offer a response to that “mission impossible” of childraising in 2020 Israel. It bears emphasis, however, that this does not mean parenting can be “outsourced.” All the more does it not imply that parents should be able to devote greater attention to work at the expense of caring for children because the state will look out for the youngsters. Only the contrary: there is no substitute, now or in the future, for the critical role of parents in providing their children with the utmost in devoted, warm, intimate, and sensitive care in the initial stages above all. The idea is not to replace parents but to enable them to discharge this responsibility successfully and in a way that will be less burdensome to them.

We are living in a competitive society that focuses increasingly on individuals and their material success. Amazingly, even though standards of living are rising and technological progress is inundating us with tools that should make our lives easier, our work hours are growing (particularly in human-capital-intensive professional vocations), we increasingly take work home (facilitated by the smartphone and its craving for 24/7 attention), and show additional symptoms of the worsening of the rat race. In Israel, the syndrome is exacerbated by the country’s champion performance in fertility (3.1 children per woman on average), one of the highest rates of women’s employment in the West, and its ongoing situation as a “mobilized society” due to its geopolitical surroundings. Perhaps for this very reason, however, we have a golden opportunity to plot a new course not only for Israeli society but also as a role model for the rest of the world. In most of developed countries, people “solve” the mission impossible of “having it both ways” by not having children; this, of course, is a surrender and not a solution. I hope we will treat the creation of a new path for early childhood as a national mission of the highest order, proving that one really can have it both ways but under different conditions in terms of the state’s role and in terms of finding smarter and healthier ways to balance the triad of work, family, and meaning in life.

Structure of This Document

This document is composed of two parts. Part I concerns itself with the present state of affairs, the socioeconomic aspects that typify Israel in the context of early childhood, the scientific underpinnings of the reform, and the importance of early childhood for personal development and equal opportunity. Part II presents an inclusive and comprehensive policy roadmap that aims to induce profound changes in this domain in both the short and the long terms; it also describes how the roadmap should be implemented and estimates the requisite budget expenditure for each measure. We note with emphasis that the state has a broad purview to administer by means of guided and intelligent policies such as the one that we propose.

Section I.1 is an introduction that reviews the background of the reform and presents its two main goals—material equal opportunity and gender equality coupled with an appropriate balance among professional fulfillment, parenting, and family.

Subsection I.1.1 presents insights of academic research about the relation of early childhood to brain development.

Subsection I.1.2 concerns itself with the implications of the quality of early childhood care for later stages of life. The discussion is based mainly on the comprehensive and trailblazing work of Professor Jim Heckman, Nobel laureate in economics, who has pledged most of his research efforts in recent years to early childhood.

Subsection I.1.3 explains the connection between early childhood and equal opportunity and the effect of a child’s economic-class origin on the richness of stimuli that she or he receives from early life onward.

Section I.2 investigates the extraordinary combination of Israel’s high rates of birth and women’s employment and discusses its implications.

Section I.3 elaborates on early childhood as a gateway to gender gaps and on the lengthy cessation of employment occasioned by giving birth, impairing women’s ability to re-integrate into the labor force and develop meaningful careers.

Section II.1 describes the current situation in Israel, typified by fragmentation of responsibility among government offices and decentralization of authority in respect of early childhood, to the detriment of coherence of care and ability to construct a lucid and comprehensive worldview.

Section II.2 explains the importance of the Council for Early Childhood for the correction of many of today’s failures and describes the challenges that the Council will face.

Section II.3 elaborates on the need to improve the quality of today’s early-childhood settings and their terms of employment, with emphasis on the tradeoff of quality and quantity that needs to be weighed in policymaking.

Section II.4 introduces the idea of establishing early childhood campuses—multipurpose buildings that host a broad spectrum of early-childhood caregiving functions.

Section II.5 sets forth the main courses of action that, in our opinion, should be included in the first multiannual program of the Council for Early Childhood.

Section II.6 discusses medium- and long-term objectives, including reapportioning responsibilities among government offices and restructuring the Ministry of Education itself.