

Local Authorities that Promote Excellence in Middle School

Abstract based on a study conducted by Revital Heimann

Currently, only a handful of middle schools students are offered the opportunity to study mathematics and the science at an excellence level. There are, however, a number of local authorities in Israel in which schools have begun to move towards expanding the circle of excellence. They are gradually opening additional excellence classes, beyond the typical one class per grade level. The Trump Foundation wishes to encourage additional municipalities to do the same. Therefore, at this point it would be desirable to provide them with access to the knowhow and lesson learned by those municipalities who already opened the new classes. A study by Revital Heimann aims to tell the story and highlight the best practices of five such municipalities – Ashdod, Holon, Modi'in, Rishon LeZion, and Sakhnin.

Main findings

1. In these cities, the local authority is very involved in the decision to open an additional excellence class. It allocates the required teaching hours, encourages the principals and conducts a detailed tracking of progress data. The municipality leads the professional development for teachers and in some cases even appoints a municipal official responsible for promoting and managing the area of excellence, leveraging supplemental and enrichment activities around it.
2. Schools in these cities set high level of expectations from teachers and students. They communicate effectively with the primary school and with the parents and convene preparatory workshops and entrance examinations for the candidate students. Nevertheless, they constantly encourage students to register even when in later years during middle school. They run a system of support and mentoring for students in order to ensure their perseverance and hold up excellence for praise through ceremonies, prizes and competitions.
3. The middle school teachers work together with the high school teachers. In many cases, the same teachers teach in both levels and specialize in teaching excellence-level students (alongside those who specialize in teaching students in low ability groups). The teachers are active participants in professional communities; they mentor and guide one another, regularly learn from practice and keep a strong focus on providing each student with what they need.
4. It should be noted that the driver that motivates municipalities to open additional excellence classes, is rooted in their goal to expand the pool of candidates to the five-unit track in high school. Some cities report that during the COVID-19 crisis, students of the excellence classes arrived better prepared and more resilient to the challenges of learning, due to their higher motivation and self-regulation.