



# Formal Secondary School Education During the War – October to December 2023

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The war which erupted on the seventh of October led to the evacuation of roughly 250,000 residents from Israel's north and south. In the initial weeks of fighting, the education system was forced to cope with over 40,000 uprooted students and staff, alongside the devastating news about tens of teachers and students who were murdered or kidnapped. Learning at the different levels of education across the entire country was disrupted when 184 principals and more than 3,000 teachers were drafted to reserve duty, and the entire system was coping with bereavement, trauma of varying degrees, sirens, and rocket fire.

We approached journalist Oren Majar to document what occurred in the secondary education system between the Simchat Torah holiday (October 7<sup>th</sup>) and Hannukah (December). Majar's documentation is based on conversations with a wide range of education professionals, including volunteers, principals and teachers, heads of municipal education departments, subject coordinators, and third sector professionals, as well as on government and Knesset publications, social media posts, and media articles.

## Main findings

1. During the first three months of the war, two parallel education systems of differing quality were created. Evacuated students studied mostly three to four hours a day in temporary schools, with about half of this time devoted to strengthening resilience and alleviating stress. In parallel, students across the country who were not evacuated from their homes, gradually returned to nearly normal school routines.
2. The impact on students who were displaced from their homes has been severe, whether they missed a few months of studies, or even a full academic year, or their matriculation certificate was negatively impacted. Some educators expressed concern over a loss of meaning which could lead the young people to a sense of alienation and leaving the country. Notably, dropout rates and absenteeism were more prevalent in *Mabar* and *Ometz* classes (for lower achieving and motivated students) and less so in excellence classes.
3. Thanks to the spirit of volunteerism, the educators' ethos and professional knowledge, the evacuated students received a fitting educational response. Directors of evacuation centers emphasized that the freedom of action the Ministry of Education granted them allowed them to show flexibility and create solutions tailored to the immediate needs in the field.
4. Schools acted as a social anchor and provided students with solutions that went beyond the field of learning. Initially, the education system emphasized non-formal activities and emotional responses, with the "learning" component being secondary. In many cases, the students were those who expressed a desire and need to learn, and teaching staff in many schools found that a main source of resilience for the students came from routines that imparted meaning and a sense of normalcy.

5. Noticeably absent was a database with information about the evacuated students, which would have facilitated management of student registration and attendance by both evacuated and hosting local authorities. Another difficulty stemmed from the multiple parties involved in absorption and creation of education solutions for the evacuated students.
6. In cases where motivation was high, technological infrastructure allowed for creative solutions to complex situations, such as heterogeneous classes and a shortage of teachers.
7. The government saw itself as obligated to provide educational solutions and frameworks to residents who left their homes due to the fighting. The Ministry of Education established field administrations and temporary schools with record rapidity, recruited and moved manpower, and funded education initiatives within a short time. It granted autonomy to the local government, though some local authorities claimed that the Ministry left them to manage the challenge alone, with late and delayed support.
8. Considering the difficult situation of most of the evacuated students (burnout, huge learning gaps, low attendance rates, at-risk status, violence, alienation, and absence of parental authority), the report's authors suggest dedicating budgets and administrative attention, and to provide the evacuated students and teachers with an emotional and academic basket of assistance. The students and teaching staff need a remedial experience of excellent teaching, advanced facilities, personal attention and emotional therapy that will help them narrow the academic and emotional gaps. It is fitting and right that these resources will be at the disposal of the evacuated students even after their military service since it is reasonable to assume that they will not manage to close all the gaps by the end of high school.