

Everyone can do it

Editorial

The first week of the school year is an exciting time for millions of families, a time of renewal and promise. It is also a time of shallow recriminations, generally blaming the lack of budgets for the dismal overall performance of our school system, oversized classes and short school day.

There is little doubt that our classes are too large and the school day, in most places, is too short. But in the past classes have been even larger (our columnist Sarah Honig remembers one remarkable elementary teacher of hers deftly handling a class of 54), with better results despite much smaller budgets. It is also true that fixing many of the system's ailments costs money.

What is less readily acknowledged is that there are vast amounts of waste in the education budget, and that real educational reform could do wonders.

All Israeli governments, but to an egregious degree the current one, have resisted the critical reforms that multiple commissions have recommended. Most recently the Dovrat Commission recommendations were buried by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Education Minister Yuli Tamir.

Dovrat tried to give principals the power to reward good teachers and fire those who don't make the grade. This was shot down by the teachers' unions, which is not just tragic for students, but for the teaching profession.

In 2004, Achva teachers' college head Dr. Shosh Millet said, "If the status of teaching doesn't go up ... then raising salaries, improving classroom conditions and all the other recommendations in Dovrat won't matter." But what would raise the status of teaching more than if it began to reward merit financially and in other ways? What better way to attract quality entrants into this vital profession?

The school year opened on time, for a change, but today the secondary school teachers are striking - a familiar blight. And the essential failings remain: How many of our children enter the system as curious first-graders and emerge, or drop out, without fully knowing how to read, write or do basic arithmetic?

In the US, here and elsewhere, slogans like "no child left behind" have become a mantra honored mainly in the breach. The reality is, according to the Brookdale Institute, that one-fifth of 17-year-olds do not make it to the 12th grade, and 15 percent of all 13- to 17-year-olds are "hidden dropouts" who fail to complete basic graduation requirements. Less than half of all 17-year-olds are eligible for matriculation certificates when they finish high school.

Yet the good news is, as the *Post's* Haviv Rettig reported on Tuesday, that our educational system is not doomed to fail a sizable fraction of its students. A non-governmental organization, working hand-in-glove with the Education Ministry and principals and teachers across the country, has proven that the bottom 25% of students can pass matriculation exams and potentially escape the cycle of undereducation, underemployment, and poverty.

The program, established and operated by the Rashi Foundation and called Tafnit ("turnaround"), has produced incredible results. In one of its initiatives, all of the 9th or 10th graders in a participating school who have failed at least seven subjects are brought through an accelerated learning marathon, giving them the belief and skills that they can pass matriculation exams and qualify for university study. Perhaps most impressively, the program relies entirely on the existing teachers in each school, who are convinced by Tafnit's training that their worst students are capable of success, and that they are capable of producing such seemingly miraculous achievements.

In the 2006-2007 school year, 93% of the 586 kids in 21 schools - all of whom had been written off educationally by themselves and the system - successfully matriculated after going through Tafnit's program. This year, 1,100 students in 40 schools will participate, along with about 19,000 students in 200 schools in similar programs designed to catch failing students on the elementary school level.

It is impossible to argue with success, and mandatory to duplicate it. The Education Ministry should immediately evaluate its myriad programs designed to bring up disadvantaged students, and shift hundreds of millions of shekels from failed programs to those with proven results.

The lives of the children who discover the truth of Tafnit's motto - "everyone can do it" - will never be the same. The same is true on the levels of the teacher, principal and the entire school system.

Educational mediocrity is not written in stone. We know what works and what needs to be done. The money is there, and the students and educational system - even without necessary comprehensive reforms - are ready. What are we waiting for?