

LIFETRACK POLICY BRIEF

# ISRAEL

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## Policy reforms in Israeli secondary education

In the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Israeli secondary education went through a series of reforms that profoundly changed educational tracking. First, a 1968 reform eliminated the national 8<sup>th</sup> grade screening test that served as the main basis for tracking decisions and extended free and compulsory education beyond the age of 14. It also introduced comprehensive middle schools (lower secondary education) into the system. A second reform implemented in the late 1970s and early 1980s replaced the formerly rigid high school tracks with a variety of academic and vocational advanced matriculation subjects from which students were expected to choose. The last reform, implemented during the 1990s, aimed at the academization of vocational education and introduced remedial academic tracks as an alternative to vocational education. These reforms reshaped both the logic and the organizational mechanisms of sorting and tracking. Instead of adhering to the Continental European model of early-stage, top-down sorting into academic or vocational tracks, the system became much more comprehensive and flexible, offering curricular differentiation and prioritizing student choice. While during the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century no major structural reforms were implemented, the age of compulsory education was extended to 18 and the Ministry of Education has focused on raising matriculation eligibility rates especially among underprivileged social groups. In recent years, the structure of the matriculation diploma obtained at the end of high school has been debated with calls from educators, academia, parents, and local education administrators to reduce the number of external compulsory examinations.

## Findings from the project: Ability grouping, tracking, subject choices, and their long-term outcomes

Our first study (Feniger, Bar-Haim, & Blank, 2021) focused on ability grouping in Jewish middle schools. While in most Jewish schools, homeroom classes are heterogeneous and students are sorted according to ability only in English and math, in many Arab schools, students are sorted into different homeroom classes according to their previous achievement, hence, ability grouping in specific subjects is less common. We found that in Jewish schools, ability grouping

in math and English is a crucial link between the undifferentiated primary school and the highly differentiated high school. Our findings indicate that placement in the highest ability group is not just an outcome of better prior achievement. Analysis of both math and English showed parental education predicts placement in ability groups after prior achievement and other variables are controlled for. Since this placement is mainly an outcome of school staff's decisions, we interpret the effect of parental education as reflecting the ability of highly educated parents to negotiate with school staff and affect placement decisions. The study further shows enrollment in the highest-level math and English courses in high school is highly dependent on middle school ability grouping. The statistical models indicate the odds of enrollment in these courses are about 2.5 times higher for students placed in the highest ability group than for other students, after taking into account prior achievement and socio-demographic controls. The study thus underscores the importance of middle school ability grouping to understanding cumulative processes of educational inequality in Jewish secondary education.

The second study (Bar-Haim & Feniger, 2021) provides an overview of high school tracking in the Israeli education system and assesses its effect on two adult outcomes: the attainment of a higher education degree and income at the age of 34. Our analysis of cohorts fully affected by the reforms described above shows that for both Jewish and Arab students, there is a clear link between a track's prestige and selectiveness and the student's social background. We also find the hierarchy of tracks does not correlate with the academic/vocational divide; there are selective and non-selective academic and vocational tracks. Unfortunately, the high proportion of non-matriculation among Arab students in the cohorts we studied limits the ability to further probe the effect of tracking within this group. However, we find that among Jews, track placement is associated with attainment of higher education degrees and with income at the age of 34. Moreover, tracking mediates a large proportion of the association between parental class and these two adult outcomes. We conclude, then, that despite important changes in the ways Israeli high schools place students in different curricular programs, tracking remains a crucial mechanism that turns social class into academic credentials and earnings. Our analysis also suggests that the Basic Academic track, introduced to the system in the 1990s as a remedial academic program suitable for low-achieving

students, has not improved the life chances of its enrollees compared to the older vocational tracks. Students in the Basic Academic track neither have better access to higher education than students in vocational tracks nor enjoy better labor market outcomes at the age of 34, compared to graduates of vocational tracks. These findings require reevaluation of education policies targeted at low-achieving students in Israeli secondary education.

## Publications

Bar-Haim, E., & Feniger, Y. (2021). Tracking in Israeli high schools: social inequality after 50 years of educational reforms. *Longitudinal and Life Course Studies*, 12(3), 423-440.  
<https://doi.org/10.1332/175795921X16113479066488>

Feniger, Y., Bar-Haim, E., & Blank, C. (2021). From social origin to selective high school courses: Ability grouping as a mechanism of securing social advantage in Israeli secondary education. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rssm.2021.100627>

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## Further information

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**NORFACE DIAL programme**

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