

The Digital Challenge

in Arab Education:

Lessons from COVID-19 Crisis

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This is a short summary, for the full paper (in Hebrew) see <https://www.idc.ac.il/he/research/aiep/pages/policy-papers.aspx>.

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The Center for Economic Policy of the Israeli Arab Population

The Aaron Institute has established The Center for Economic Policy of the Israeli Arab Population with a vision of advancing the manufacturing and business economy in Israeli-Arab population, and enhancing its integration in the Israeli economy. The center's advisory committee is headed by former Supreme Court Justice Salim Joubran, and comprises several key figures from various fields in the Arab population. Every year, the advisory committee assembles to decide on the center's research plan, based on outcomes and accumulated knowledge.

The activity of this center is part of Aaron Institute's comprehensive economic strategy for the Israeli economy, which aims to achieve sustained growth in GDP and labor productivity, along with reduced poverty and inequality. The center's activity focuses on presenting government decision-makers with recommendations for implementation of long-term economic policies for Israel's Arab population, and promoting their enactment in practice. In accordance with the center's vision, activity revolves around designing strategies and devising policies in the fields of education, employment, and infrastructure, through collaboration with various government offices, and particularly the Ministry of Finance. Policy recommendations include proposals for detailed programs which are based on up-to-date data regarding the Arab population in Israel, as well as economic knowledge acquired nationally and internationally, while taking into consideration existing customs and cultural norms in Israel, including political limitations. Research findings and recommendations are presented at public roundtable discussions held in Arab localities, with participants including Arab and Jewish professionals such as researchers, decision-makers, and senior figures from the business and public sectors. Our collaboration with government offices, especially the Ministry of Finance, enables us to enhance the center's impact and to translate its proposals into government decisions with allocated funds, which engender the implementation of long-term policies in various fields.

The Digital Challenge in Arab Education: Lessons from COVID-19 Crisis

Digital tools play an increasing role in various domains of daily life, as well as the labor market, and consequently also in higher education and vocational training. Therefore, an increasingly high level of digital proficiencies (proficiencies such as operating a computer, executing actions, and solving problems in digital environments) is essential for successful integration into the labor market, as well as higher education and vocational training, and also for performing daily activities. In this policy paper, we examine the capacity of the Arab education system to equip its students with digital proficiencies, and the disparities which exist in relation to the Hebrew education system.

The COVID-19 crisis had forced the education system to shift immediately to remote learning, through the use of digital tools, and exposed the low level of Arab education in regard to digital proficiencies, teaching and learning through digital tools. Reviewing the data reveals that the level of digital proficiencies in Arab society, among students and their parents as well as teachers, is lower in comparison to the proficiency levels in Jewish society.¹ Furthermore, there are disparities in the availability of digital infrastructure in Arab households, as well as the quality of this infrastructure in terms of network speed and stability. These disparities, which during COVID-19 crisis hindered the successful implementation of remote teaching and learning, are also expected to hinder the routine acquisition of digital proficiencies, which in the wake of COVID-19 crisis are more necessary than before, due to the mass shift to remote work and remote learning, which extends to higher education as well.

¹ Throughout this paper, any reference to Jewish population does not include Jewish Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) society, due to the unique features of the Haredi education system, unless explicitly stated otherwise.

Along with the difficulties encountered by the education system, the COVID-19 crisis also provided a breadth of opportunities to expand the use of digital means in the framework of the curriculum, both to maintain study routine and to impart digital skills; to integrate information and communication technologies (ICT) such as databases and learning aids which can be accessed remotely; and to reduce gaps in the availability of specialized teachers and the diversity of study tracks (in high schools for example). The remote teaching and learning platform was expanded, and was even utilized again when schools were shut down during the security emergency situation in 2021, as opposed to previous periods of security emergency, during which studies were halted completely in frontier areas. Hence, successful application of teaching and learning through digital tools, remote or otherwise, is crucial to prevent the exacerbation of disparities between Arab and Hebrew education, both in times of routine as part of imparting essential basic proficiencies, and in times of emergency when the education system is shut down.

In light of the data presented in this study, our recommendation for reducing the digital divide between Arab and Hebrew education is to create a comprehensive support structure, which would include: (1) establishing digital learning centers to address the gap in home infrastructure; (2) enhancing the ICT support mechanism provided in schools, so that it would address the needs of students and parents as well; (3) improving the digital skills of teachers, and their proficiency in teaching through digital tools; (4) incorporating contents which impart computer skills in the framework of the regular curriculum, both through dedicated lessons and as part of lesson plans in all subjects of study; (5) incorporating mixed-mode (hybrid) learning; (6) extracurricular courses on technological and digital subjects in the framework of informal education; (7) improving the basic digital proficiencies of parents through school-mediated initiatives; and (8) improving teaching quality and diversifying study subjects through integration of online contents and remote learning. In addition, we recommend vocational training courses for young graduates who have just completed their schooling in the education system and lack the basic digital tools.

Implementing these recommendations requires allocation of resources to reduce the gaps in digital and remote learning skills in Arab society, both to facilitate remote learning in the short term and to prepare students for adult life in the long term. This allocation can be done through additional budgets dedicated to this objective, or alternately through more efficient budget distribution within existing budgets.