

# Alternative Educational Settings for Haredi Boys

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Abstract



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## ABSTRACT

This study deals with alternative educational settings for haredi boys. For several years now, demand has been growing among various haredi population groups for alternative educational settings for boys aged 14–17, instead of the classic *yeshiva ketana* track. The overt dropout rate among haredi boys is very high: 4.6% (2,485 boys), compared to only 1.4% in the State education system (in 2018).

The alternative educational settings for haredi boys offer various combinations of Torah study and general studies. They range from advanced technological-vocational programs to haredi yeshiva high schools offering academic preparation for a matriculation certificate (for which demand is growing). Altogether 2,220 students attended haredi yeshiva high schools in 2019/20. Some 1,950 attended 23 technological-vocational schools for haredim under the supervision of the Education Ministry in the same year (compared to only 800 in 2012/13). In addition, 674 haredi students attended seven vocational schools under the supervision of the Vocational Training Department in the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, and Social Services in 2018/19 (compared to only 385 students in 2013/14). Despite the impressive increase in enrollment

in the alternative settings overall, their students represent only 16.5% of haredi boys of high-school age (grades 9–12). Most haredi boys in this age group—a decisive, essential stage in determining their adult path in life—attend traditional yeshivas where they study Talmud exclusively, and where the haredi educators impart to their students the fundamentals of the faith and the haredi way of life.

The development of alternative educational settings has several closely interrelated causes: (1) The haredi population is experiencing substantial growth and tremendous diversification of communities and sub-communities. (2) Many parents feel a pressing need to prepare their children optimally for the advanced Israeli labor market without sacrificing high-quality religious studies. This need is influenced by profound social and economic changes in haredi society over the past two decades (Sicherman and Kahaner 2012). (3) With respect to another group of young people, many haredi educational settings are designed for haredi youth at risk or alienated youth. Such youngsters come from all haredi communities. The dimensions and characteristics of the problem have been clarified systematically and comprehensively only in the past five years: thousands of teenagers have been pushed beyond the normative boundaries of this society, to marginal places on the border between the haredi world and general society, and they need special, “gentler” educational settings than the *yeshiva ketana* model offers (Weissblau 2019). This situation is a paramount social challenge for haredi community leaders and for state and local bodies that want to help haredim who attend alternative settings.

At present there is no clear, agreed-upon, comprehensive policy regarding the programs required by haredi boys at risk who do not attend *yeshiva ketana*. The existing programs are not good enough and their eclectic-hybrid administration detracts from their quality, thus harming the boys’ future development prospects. Too many actors are involved, and there is no clear, agreed-upon government office responsible for assisting and

advancing this population. Most haredi academic yeshiva high schools are also deficient in pedagogical and budgetary planning, even though their students tend to come from more affluent haredi populations and have high academic ability. This study is intended to help develop policy tools and practical suggestions for furthering unique alternative educational settings for different—even opposite—extremes of haredi secondary school students: at one extreme, haredi youth at risk or in danger of dropping out, and at the other, some of those at the top of the haredi educational pyramid in high-quality *yeshivot ketanot*.

The study maps and profiles alternative educational settings for haredi boys who do not attend *yeshiva ketana*: academic yeshiva high schools for haredim; technological-vocational schools; residential programs and youth villages for youth at risk. It uses qualitative, interpretive research and secondary quantitative information: based on 38 in-depth personal interviews and the use of existing data, recommendations were drawn up for strengthening and improving the alternative educational settings for haredi boys. Because many of the students in these alternative settings come from the margins of haredi society, space is devoted to describing patterns of dropping out of religious educational frameworks; some of these are unique to haredi society, while others are universal. One major problem identified is the existence of two parallel vocational training systems for youth in general, and for haredi youth in particular. This duplication makes it hard to pool resources and promote optimal vocational training tailored culturally to these young people.

## **Recommendations**

The recommendations address both organizational-structural and pedagogical-community aspects related to the importance that haredi society attributes to religious studies for boys of high-school age. Due to the differences between the populations and the alternative educational

settings discussed in this study, the recommendations are divided into two parts. The first part focuses on academic yeshiva high schools, and the second on settings for marginal youth.

## **Haredi Yeshiva High Schools**

An examination of the obstacles and difficulties indicates that the attempt to establish and strengthen such yeshivas is a major challenge both for the haredi community itself and for government authorities—especially the Haredi District in the Ministry of Education, which is in charge of budgets and inspection. Below is a series of recommendations that, if applied, are expected to increase enrollment in these institutions, enhance the quality of the studies offered there, and improve the socio-educational solution that the schools provide.

### **1. Structural-organizational recommendations**

#### **a. Reinforcing and improving administrative and teaching skills**

Many of the principals and yeshiva heads in haredi academic yeshiva high schools lack professional management knowledge. The Ministry of Education should take responsibility for providing the principals of these institutions with academic training in administration and advising them in their work from the very first stage of establishing the schools. This will also help create a high-caliber group of administrators for these institutions, made up of high-caliber, professional haredi educators with knowledge, understanding, concepts, and essential pedagogical and administrative tools that are sorely lacking among the people in charge of academic yeshiva high schools. Specific resources should be

earmarked for such training both for the principals and yeshiva heads and for the teachers in these institutions. Improving the quality of the existing yeshivas will help strengthen their reputations in haredi society.

### **b. Setting quantitative and qualitative targets**

The Ministry of Education should take responsibility for setting annual targets regarding the number of students in haredi yeshiva high schools with the aim of boosting enrollment in the existing yeshivas and providing resources and administrative tools for opening new ones. These targets would include qualitative indicators regarding the number of students taking the matriculation exams and the pass rate.

### **c. Budgets and infrastructure for buildings**

There is a major shortage of buildings and high-quality infrastructure for haredi yeshiva high schools. Yeshiva buildings require extensive resources for both construction and maintenance. Because local authorities are not required to provide buildings for secondary education, there is a severe shortage in this regard. It is important to promote cooperation between local authorities and the Education Ministry for the purpose of allocating budgets for the establishment and development of haredi yeshiva high schools and improving the existing infrastructure. Preferably, yeshiva high schools should be regional institutions serving populations from a specific area in order to save on the high cost of maintaining dormitories.



## **2. Community-related recommendations for school principals**

### **a. Developing high-caliber feeder schools for yeshiva high schools**

At present there is a shortage of elementary schools and *talmudei Torah* that feed into the yeshiva high schools. It is important to create lines of communication with *talmudei Torah* and make sure they prepare their students well for an education that includes high-level secular and religious studies. This preparation is essential if the graduates of the high school programs are to reach high levels of achievement both in their religious studies and in their general academic studies. The principals of yeshiva high schools should, at their own initiative, contact *talmudei Torah* that can serve as feeder schools directing suitable students to the yeshiva high schools. The Education Ministry should help the principals of the yeshiva high schools in this regard.

### **b. Legitimacy and image**

The image obstacle is a fundamental one preventing the strengthening of yeshiva high schools, but the ability to influence it by means of policy appears to be limited. Therefore it is important to set measurable educational and social targets, based on an understanding of the community's needs and traits and consideration for them. In order to obtain a favorable attitude toward these settings and a certain degree of recognition from haredi communities, they must offer high-level religious studies. Direct ties with elementary schools (as mentioned above) can help these institutions gain acceptance from leaders of haredi communities. These schools should be marketed in the (relatively) open haredi media, such as social media networks and the Internet, with success stories of graduates of haredi yeshiva high schools being showcased there.

## **Settings for Marginal Youth**

The purpose of this policy paper is to create unique, comprehensive platforms for developing innovative solutions with respect to alternative educational settings for haredi youth. These solutions should address the problems identified and described and should be based on mapping the needs and characteristics of all the settings and populations discussed in this paper. Some of the recommendations and proposals described are organizational and structural measures concerning elements of government, their powers, and the structure of the relationship among them (macro level); others are educational measures related to civil society and the haredi community (micro level). Apparently, there is no one solution to all the problems, so we have to consider the possibility of implementing the recommendations presented here concurrently, with cooperation between sectors of the population.

### **1. Structural-organizational solutions**

#### **a. A haredi youth administration**

A haredi youth administration should be established as a permanent staff unit in the Ministry of Education. This interministry team, charged with multisystemic treatment of the issue of haredi marginal youth, would draft a mission statement that specifies immediate objectives and overarching goals (macro objectives), methods of operation, and practical tools for developing a uniform pedagogical discourse. The administration would pool resources and be in charge of integration of the ramified activity currently taking place in the Education Ministry and in other government ministries such as the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, and Social Services and the Ministry of Public Security. Significantly, this administration and its accompanying committee would be in charge of

setting policy in this regard and would allocate budgets and advise local governments in accordance with the needs and unique characteristics of each locality where optimal alternative settings are established and developed.

### **b. Local government**

Local authorities have a substantial advantage in dealing with haredi teenage dropouts due to their proximity to them; therefore the local authority and its representatives should be in charge of treatment, support, advice, and assistance. For this reason, it is appropriate to offer incentives to the heads of local authorities who help establish and develop alternative settings. Budget transfers to the relevant authorities must be carried out transparently, uniformly, under supervision, and according to criteria determined by the administration rather than a political key or coalition agreements.

## **2. An educational-pedagogical guidance center**

The aim of the guidance center would be to provide students, parents, educators, local authorities, and therapists with precise, up-to-date information about the obstacles, traits, and needs of teens who are struggling in school. The educational-pedagogical guidance center would help with placement and referral of teens with certain traits and needs to the appropriate educational setting, strictly supervise the quality and level of studies in these institutions, and budget and incentivize them in accordance with their educational offerings and the quality of the teaching staff. This center would have to be thoroughly familiar with all of the alternative educational settings suitable for haredi youth. In addition, it would have to be neutral—not biased toward sending boys to a particular educational institution or system. The government (Education Ministry)

and a nonprofit organization with proven pedagogical experience that is recognized and respected by a wide variety of haredi communities should be in charge of the center. The Education Ministry should develop a well-organized plan for establishing this center and should find an entity with professional knowledge—preferably a haredi nonprofit or other organization—to actually establish and operate it.

### **3. Establishing an organization of professional haredi educational associations**

Governmental support should be provided, together with budgets raised from foundations and donors in the business sector and the Third Sector, to an organization uniting a wide, diverse spectrum of professional communities that help marginal youth, parent communities, nonprofit and other organizations, educational institutions, counselors, and professionals. This organization should strive to develop an agreed-upon, coherent educational worldview and uniform, clear professional language. It should help the interministry team establishing a haredi youth administration (assuming one is established and functions) to develop policy and set measurable objectives for success, identify and quantify target populations, set goals and define required outputs, and develop tools for optimal and practical operation.

### **4. Establishing training and remedial systems for haredi educators, teachers, and parents**

The Ministry of Education should establish nonformal training programs for every interested institution or educational entity. Knowledge and practice should be improved as soon as possible in all areas relevant to

struggling youth: emotional therapy and psychotherapy, professional advice, and professional assessments. The number of authorized, high-caliber professionals in haredi society who can help with early identification of youngsters struggling scholastically and behaviorally should be increased. In addition, parental support systems must be established to prevent and minimize the dropout problem, alienation, and risk. Giving parents pedagogical, social, and emotional tools can help many teens retain their place and status within the immediate family and in the broader community in a way that suits their abilities and skills.

## **5. Community support and social legitimacy**

It is essential for haredi professionals within the community to win the trust of struggling youth and to offer them emotional, social, and educational support. The community is the most basic framework from which the students come, and in it they are raised to follow the haredi way of life, which varies from community to community. The possibility of achieving (relatively) broad social legitimacy and the expectation of change in this regard depend on creating trust between the members and leaders of the community on the one hand and innovative rabbis and institution heads on the other. Socio-educational and religious-spiritual approval can emerge from the community itself in a protracted, sensitive, and cautious process. It is both possible and necessary to support this process on the micro level—and not on the macro level—mostly by means of endorsements by spiritual leaders on the local/neighborhood or regional level. To accomplish this, it is necessary to encourage discourse among educators and social activists, young people and adults, from a variety of communities—in accordance with the specific characteristics and needs of each community and haredi court.

This set of recommendations can, in my estimation, boost overt and covert approval of high-quality alternative educational settings for haredi youth who are having difficulty finding their way in the world of *yeshivot ketanot* and are interested in broadening their abilities and skills within and outside haredi society.

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