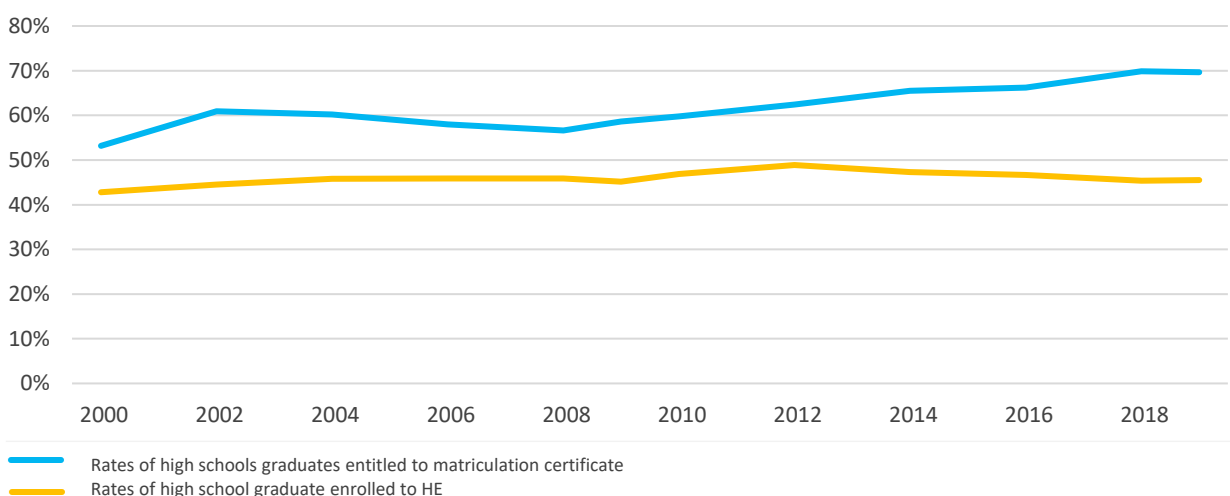# MUNICIPAL AUTHORITIES ARE CONCERNED-DESPITE THE INCREASE IN MATRICULATION ELIGIBILITY THERE IS A DECLINE IN HIGHER EDUCATION ENROLLMENT

THE POLICY CHALLENGE

In recent years, municipal authorities have become central stakeholders with increasing influence on the education system. Contemporary reforms in education policy have granted greater autonomy to local authorities in the areas of pedagogy, teacher and principal appointments, assessment methods, and more. Research reveals that some local authorities have been successful at efficiently allocating local resources according to the community's needs to increase the number of high school graduates. However, low socioeconomic localities reported experiencing a decrease in higher education enrollment despite a significant increase in the number of high school graduates. As Figure 1 shows, there is an evident and growing gap between matriculation diploma rates and higher education (HE) enrollment rates. Thus, the possible number of higher education students is currently not meeting the potential, creating a deep gap in the promise of developing individual human capital and the labor market in Israel.

Figure 1 - Rates of high school graduates entitled to a matriculation certificate compared to rates of high school graduate enrolled in HE (2000-2019) [1]

— Rates of high schools graduates entitled to matriculation certificate
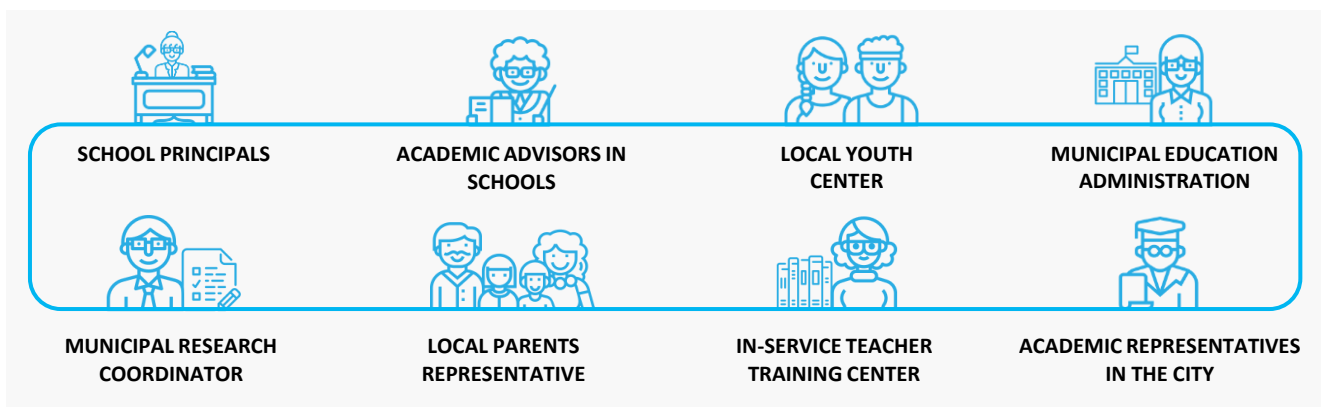— Rates of high school graduate enrolled to HE

1 The data pertains to high school graduates enrolled in higher education in the 8 years following graduation.
2 The ● data were provided through the Council for Higher Education

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A NEW APPROACH TO RESEARCH-PRACTICE PARTNERSHIP

This is a pioneering study that offers a new approach to Research-Practice Partnerships to overcome obstacles and improve access to higher education in low-income urban areas. Researchers studied the barriers to access of higher education in a case study of one large, low socioeconomic city in central Israel, .conducted between November 2019 and May 2020.

While identifying the challenges and opportunities to improving access to higher education, the study pointed to the need to broaden the dialogue and involve a larger number of stakeholders. Through in-depth interviews and focus groups, researchers collected perspectives from all the main relevant stakeholders in the city, including:

| SCHOOL PRINCIPALS | ACADEMIC ADVISORS IN SCHOOLS | LOCAL YOUTH CENTER | MUNICIPAL EDUCATION ADMINISTRATION |
| MUNICIPAL RESEARCH COORDINATOR | LOCAL PARENTS REPRESENTATIVE | IN-SERVICE TEACHER TRAINING CENTER | ACADEMIC REPRESENTATIVES IN THE CITY |

The dialogue created between stakeholders, while identifying mutual interests, helped reduce concerns about the partnership and assisted in overcoming obstacles in the data collection process.

KEY FINDINGS

The researchers identified the following challenges and opportunities in improving access to higher education:

The dynamic mapping process of challenges and opportunities, and derived suggestions for action plans

CHALLENGES:	→	OPPORTUNITIES:
Limited outreach to students in order to encourage enrollment in higher education	→	Identifying target groups among high school students with potential to access higher education
Low exposure to a variety of institutions	→	Greater exposure to a variety of institutions
Limited use of data for advancing practices to encourage students to enroll in higher education and to help them recognize the value of education	→	Advancing research-based learning among school staff members to used data
Unclear locality policy regarding higher education	→	Developing a clear academic ethos in the municipal level
Lack of regular communication channels and connections between stakeholders	→	Adopting an ecological approach that engages relevant and diverse stakeholders in the locality

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ACTION STEPS

Researchers discussed the research findings with the local authority that led to the development of possible actions that may push forward the realization of opportunities for students to enroll in higher education:

01   Creating opportunities for students to become exposed to diverse higher education institutions (within and outside of the local region) through site visits and meetings with admissions counselors;

02   Developing teachers' training to use data to promote data-based decisions making within schools;

03   Implementing systematic surveys and data collection to examine trends of high school enrollment and the implementation of local policy regarding access to higher education;

04   Establishing a forum of relevant local stakeholders and academia to discuss and share ideas that can assist in formulating policy toward higher education and developing applicable action plans.

NEXT STEPS TO SUPPORT ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

- Future research should continue to reveal the barriers to enrolling in higher education from the perspectives of students, parents, and educators, including school principals and teachers. Being attentive to diverse voices in the community and locality can contribute to the formation of authentic and relevant policies that addresses the needs of the local education system.

- To increase enrollment of higher education graduates from low-socioeconomic localities, the ties between academia and schools must be strengthened by finding paths and linkages that will ensure a transition from high school to higher education. This is an acute and complex challenge in the Israeli context, as high school graduates are recruited to compulsory army service which creates a disconnect between these two education systems. This requires comprehensive planning that involves partners from academia (e.g. academic city project of Tel-Aviv university), the local authority, schools, and the larger community in the locality (e.g. parents and other stakeholders).

LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT RESEARCH-PRACTICE PARTNERSHIPS

- Reaching partnership is a process of cultural transformation and a change in mindset regarding the relations between the university and policymakers/practitioners, and other stakeholders.

- There is a need to build and develop common interests between academia and local educational policymakers/practitioners based on on-going communication and trust.