

## POLICY PAPER

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NO MORE FUN AND GAMES:

OCT 2022

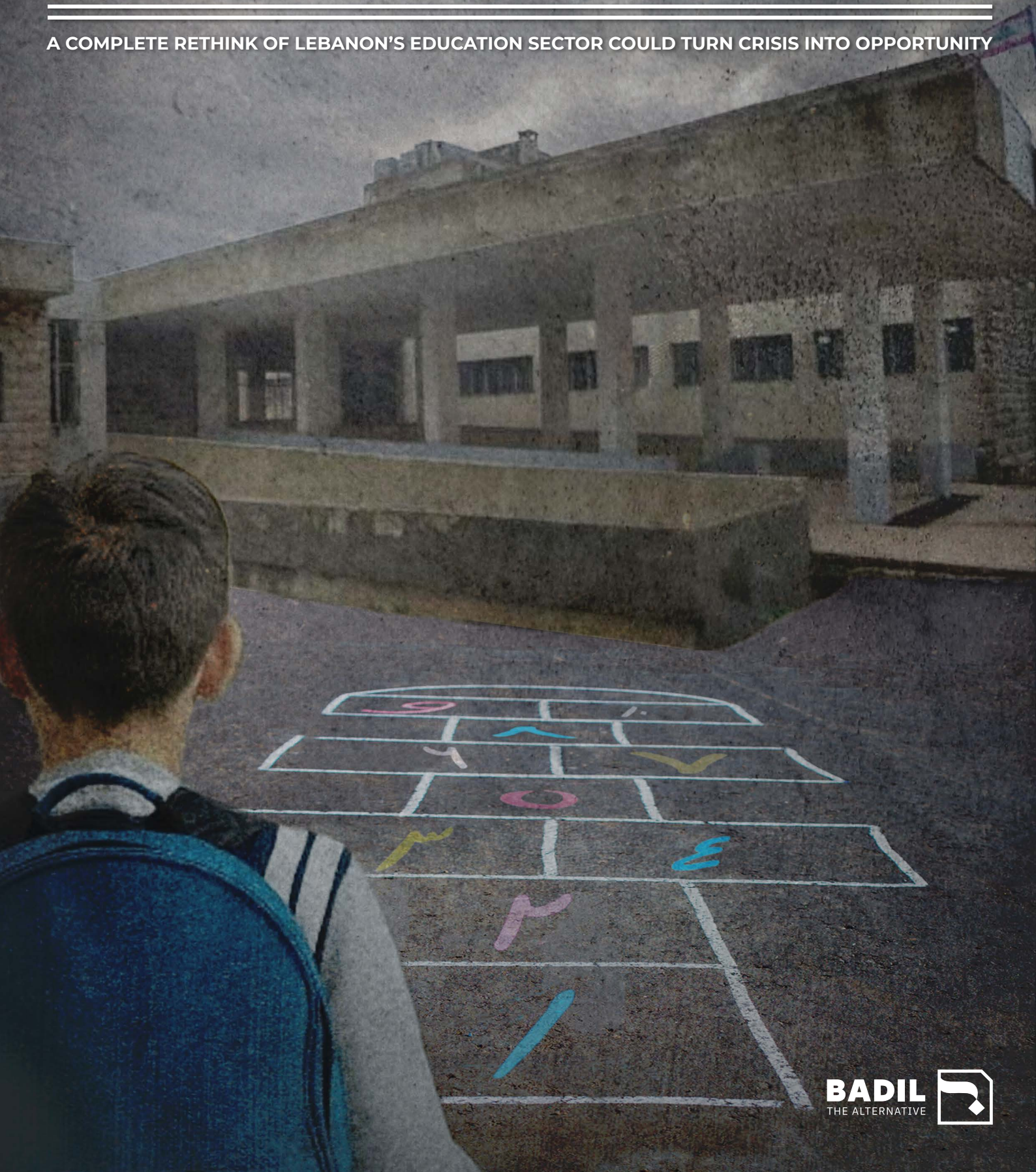
# SAVING LEBANON'S EDUCATION SYSTEM BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE

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ALEX RAY

A COMPLETE RETHINK OF LEBANON'S EDUCATION SECTOR COULD TURN CRISIS INTO OPPORTUNITY





## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Lebanese children, teachers, and parents returned to schools last month – if they could afford it. The country's education system – historically one of the main avenues of social mobility – has all but collapsed under the weight of Lebanon's economic meltdown.

Historically, Lebanese have generally held their education system in high regard. However, its status was already faltering before the crisis. By 2018, learning outcomes for Lebanese children had slipped to the 35<sup>th</sup> percentile globally. This placed Lebanese students about four years of schooling behind their peers in OECD countries.<sup>1</sup>

The economic crisis has stress-tested the education system to breaking point and worsened class divisions based on who can continue to afford schooling. Across all major indicators such as accessibility, performance, safety, satisfaction, and sustainability, the system is now failing both children and teachers.

Less well-off students are dropping out of private education in their tens of thousands and moving to the chronically underfunded public system. Students' educational outcomes – which were already lower than public perceptions of the education system liked to believe – will now deteriorate even further.

For many students from economically vulnerable households, even getting to public school has become a barely affordable luxury. Instead, many are being put to work to help their families cover basic needs of food, water, and shelter. The number of children experiencing multidimensional poverty in Lebanon doubled from around 900,000 in 2019 to 1.8 million in 2021.<sup>2</sup>

Children and their families are not the only ones suffering. Teachers who once had stable middle-class jobs have seen their incomes become next to worthless or have lost their jobs outright. Many have been forced to take on other work to afford necessities. Their demands for salary increases have been complicated by the implications of a bloated public sector rife with patronage-based employment and a steep devaluation of the Lebanese Lira.

At the root of the education sector's collapse is the deliberate failure of the country's leadership to agree on even the basics of a financial recovery plan, much less prosecute the banking sector executives for illegal confiscation of deposits, including those of schools, teachers and parents. The irony that the Minister of Education Abbas Al Halabi is also the [vice chairman and board member](#) of Bank of Beirut and the Arab Countries (BBAC) should not be lost on anyone. Neither should the fact that the lost years of education will only exacerbate Lebanon's historical waves of brain drain and emigration and will likely dampen future GDP growth.<sup>3</sup>

In the short term, the Lebanese government and international community must intervene as soon as possible to ensure that children and teachers go back to school. Targeted subsidies and social protection programmes should help households overcome the logistical and financial barriers to school attendance.

In the long-term, the government must re-assess the impact of its paltry funding of public education on social mobility, economic productivity, and national identity. The potential decline of private school education is an opportunity to re-balance access to decent quality education for all. A properly funded and standardised public education system can become the basis for a more equitable society and inclusive national identity.

## A HISTORY OF FRAGMENTATION

Lebanon's education system, like many aspects of life in the country, is heavily influenced by the twin forces of privatisation and institutionalised sectarianism. These dynamics – alongside the absence of clear, consistent standards, or effective systems to enforce those standards and monitor and regulate educational institutions – has led to fragmentation in the sector and incoherent schooling approaches.

Since 1926, religious institutions and communities have benefitted from a constitutional right to establish their own schools.<sup>4</sup> Private schools – 41% of which are faith-based<sup>5</sup> – dominate the sector. At the conclusion of the Lebanese Civil War, the negative ramifications of a fragmented education system on social cohesion were acknowledged; access to education was included in the 1989 Taif Agreement as one means of building post-war national unity.<sup>6</sup> The development of a national curriculum was supposed to prevent social tensions and divisions from re-emerging.

But Taif, while looking to education to promote national unity, also re-upped the confessional basis of Lebanon's political, legal, and social institutions. At the same time, neoliberal

economic policies championed by politicians including Rafik Hariri advanced at pace across all areas of Lebanese society.<sup>7</sup> As private schools, which tend to operate at a greater remove from the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE), proliferated, the lack of oversight and common teaching standards and curricula – particularly in subjects such as history – further fragmented education standards, worsening social divisions.<sup>8</sup>

Intensive privatisation also has the potential to create perverse incentives – by making access to services reliant on businesses motivated to prioritise profit over all else<sup>9</sup> – and to erode social justice, by widening the gap between public and private institutions. Where neoliberalism collides with pervasive corruption and entrenched social divisions, the results can be even more devastating.

In Lebanon, these policies created disparities among educational institutions and positioned education as one of the key patronage tools at politicians' disposal. In facilitating the enrolment of students at desirable schools and strategically securing teaching positions for constituents, the political class instrumentalised the sector to further its own interests and perpetuate existing divisions.<sup>10</sup> As a result, Lebanon's elite had every reason to prevent the development of an inclusive, nationally coherent public education system.

“***In facilitating the enrolment of students at desirable schools and strategically securing teaching positions for constituents, the political class instrumentalised the sector to further its own interests and perpetuate existing divisions.***”

## PRIVATISATION FAILS TO DELIVER

In contemporary Lebanon, three types of schools exist, each with a distinctive funding structure. These are: private schools (which charge full fees, and which, as of 2018, account for 57% of primary and secondary students); “free-private” schools (private institutions with substantially reduced fees thanks to government subsidies, accounting for 14% of students); and public schools (which are entirely state-funded, and which account for the remaining 29% of students).<sup>11</sup>

***"In 2018 ... two-thirds of Lebanese students did not achieve basic literacy – the worst performance among 70 countries participating in the triennial standardised survey."***

One legacy of the post-war privatisation boom was the government's exceptionally low funding of the sector, at only 1.8% of budget expenditure in 2018. Even this clearly marginal amount of spending is worse than it seems, because only 72% (US\$650 million) of it goes to public education. The remaining 28% (US\$250 million) is spent on private-sector subsidies,<sup>12</sup> which provide education allowances to civil servants and support the free-private schools.<sup>13</sup>

These private-sector subsidies have exacerbated rather than reduced education inequality and failed to improve access to education for low-income households. Household data from 2012 shows that 47% of total education allowances benefitted the wealthiest 20% of households, while only 16% of the state's education expenditure reached the poorest 40%. These funding disparities have resulted in a significant quality gap between public and private schools; that gap is the single most significant factor in the 26 percentage-point difference between public and private students' learning outcomes.<sup>14</sup>

So, while the privatisation of the education sector has shifted the economic burden to households, resulting in a very high level of household spending on education (equivalent to around 2.7% of GDP), it has also disproportionately advantaged wealthier families.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, sending a child to a private school in Lebanon does not automatically guarantee a high-quality education. For several years before the onset of the financial crisis in 2019, learning outcomes and completion rates for students in both public and private schools had dropped below international standards.

In 2018, the Programme for International Student Assessment found that two-thirds of Lebanese students did not achieve basic literacy – the worst performance among 70 countries participating in the triennial standardised survey.<sup>16</sup> Learning outcomes showed that Lebanese students were, on average, four years behind students in the OECD countries; when looking exclusively at private school students, the gap narrowed but remained significant, at two years.

A comprehensive review conducted in 2020 found that, although Lebanon's education sector had sound foundations, most of its constituent elements needed serious improvement. Budgeting, teacher deployment, equity, evidence-based decision making, accountability and quality assurance, and monitoring of overall performance were all found to be in dire need of reform across the sector.<sup>17</sup> Since that review, the situation has deteriorated still further.

## **EDUCATION IN FLUX**

The ongoing economic crisis has convulsed all aspects of life in Lebanon, and education is no exception. In addition to the obvious and lingering impacts of COVID-19 on children's access to learning, the worsening economic situation has strained all educational institutions and severely disrupted Lebanon's privatised educational model.<sup>18</sup>

Capital controls mean schools across the country have only been able to access small amounts of money per month, prohibiting many from investing in new digital technologies for remote learning as well as in small-scale renewable energy

solutions to reduce their reliance on costly private generator fuel.<sup>19</sup> But, while the crisis has constrained all institutions from making key investments, it has had a particularly acute effect on private schools.

The Lebanese lira's precipitous decline in value has made private education costs prohibitive. With the exodus of between 45,000<sup>20</sup> and 90,000<sup>21</sup> students to public schools as of October 2022, private schools across the country have been pushed to the brink of closure, resulting in huge losses. As a result, the public system – which has been ruinously underfunded for decades – is now in the untenable position of being expected to educate tens of thousands more students.

In addition to changing the face of education in Lebanon, the closure of private schools could potentially alter the country's sectarian geography. Private schools have historically catered primarily to the religious communities in the local area; they are central to community life and drivers of economic activity in small towns. School closures could spur households to relocate to larger settlements, contributing to the decline of rural towns and increased urbanisation. As a result of this movement, geographic divisions along sectarian lines are likely to become more blurred.

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## SCHOOL'S OUT FOR ... EVER?

While children transitioning from private to public education may be facing a decline in learning conditions and outcomes – as the already strained public system struggles to cope with the sudden surge in demand – many families can no longer afford school at all.

Despite the minimal fees required to access public education, the cost of transport, food, learning materials, and clothing is now beyond the reach of many families. In addition, schools are themselves becoming more stressful and dangerous for children to attend. Even before the crisis, teachers' illegal use of corporal punishment in Lebanon's schools was a cause for concern.<sup>22</sup> Bullying also occurs at above OECD averages, with between 30 and 50% of Lebanese students reporting having been victimised at school.<sup>23</sup>

The pandemic, growing financial pressures, and hostile learning environments have combined to create barriers to attendance, which has dropped sharply. As of June 2022, 38% of households reported reducing expenses on education.<sup>24</sup> An estimated 700,000 Lebanese and non-Lebanese students (from a total of around 2 million) were not in school in the 2021–2022 school year.<sup>25</sup> Many of these children face the prospect of being forced to enter the workforce.

Already from 2019 to 2020, rates of child labour among children aged 5 to 17 almost doubled – from 2.6 to 4.4%.<sup>26</sup> Although it is legal for children to work in certain settings from age 14 in Lebanon, around 80% of the labour children engage in across the country is, by nature, hazardous.<sup>27</sup> In many cases, it includes the worst forms of exploitation, including sexual abuse, forced marriage, and trafficking.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, recent studies show that the ongoing children-out-of-school crisis is exposing children to heightened risks of violence at home.<sup>29</sup>

### BOX I: SECOND-SHIFT

Since the start of the Syrian civil war, in 2011, Lebanon's education sector has had to contend with the influx of Syrian refugees. In 2014, a second-shift programme was established, whereby the school day was split into two shifts: one accommodating Syrian students; the other, Lebanese. This enabled the enrolment of Syrian students at public and private schools.

Despite hundreds of millions of dollars in donor funding being allocated to help the MEHE facilitate access to education for Syrian students – amounting to US\$440 million between 2015 and 2019 alone – the second-shift programme has been riddled with controversy.

One of the biggest concerns has been the bureaucratic barriers to the enrolment and qualification of Syrian students, allegedly sometimes raised by schools themselves. For instance, some students have reported that schools barred them from sitting exams unless they held a Lebanese residency permit or passport.<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, investigations have shown that, in 2019–2020, the number of Syrian children actually attending school was 23% lower than the number enrolled.<sup>31</sup> Even before 2019, only 42% of school-age Syrian children in Lebanon attended school, with 29% reporting they could not afford the transport get to school.

There have been allegations of misappropriation of funds intended to support the second-shift programme, as well as avoidable costs related to currency conversion. Donor funds transferred in US dollars – including to pay for second-shift teachers' salaries – were deposited in banks that have disbursed the aid in lira. Given the mismatched official and real exchange rates, this conversion has eaten up most of the value of the donations.<sup>32</sup>

### AN UNTEACHABLE MOMENT

Children are not the only ones dropping out of school due to financial pressures. Public school teachers, like other public servants, have been hit hard by the devaluation of their lira salaries; for many, this income no longer covers the cost of transport to school, let alone their living expenses. The country's nearly 36,000 public school teachers have gone from being paid, on average, US\$1,330 per month before 2019 to less than US\$90 now.

Some private schools have managed to continue paying teachers' salaries at least partially in dollars. This has incentivised a rush of teachers away from public schools and struggling private schools, toward more affluent private schools, schools overseas, or other professions in the private sphere, where prices for goods and services are becoming de facto dollarised. In fact, the head of a private secondary school syndicate estimated that up to 30% of teachers at schools in his syndicate had left their positions.

Lebanon's public schools currently lack the material capacity to handle significantly higher numbers of students coming from private schools. However, prior to 2019, teachers should have the capacity to take on more students and teaching hours. At around eight students per teacher in secondary schools, Lebanon's pre-crisis pupil to teacher ratio was one of the lowest in the world. Even with tens of thousands of students incoming from the private sector, this ratio was estimated to be rising toward only around 10 students to every teacher in 2020–2021.<sup>33</sup> That ratio remains significantly lower than that of Jordan, which has an average of 12 students per teacher in secondary schools, and Turkey, which has 17.<sup>34</sup>

Lebanon's apparently excellent ratio of educators to students is misleading, however – the result of a distorted labour market and questionable hiring practices. Teacher



# CHALLENGES STUDENTS ARE FACING

MAINLY IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

## CHILD LABOUR



12%



of families sending at least 1 child to labour (up from 9%)



## BULLYING/CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

3 to 5 students in 10 experience

## SYRIAN CHILDREN

ONLY

42%



OF SYRIAN CHILDREN ATTENDED SCHOOL

BUT REAL ENROLMENT IS 23% LOWER THAN GOVERNMENT FIGURES

AND, IN BOTH PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS

## LEARNING OUTCOMES:

COMPARED TO

 OECD AVERAGE

PUBLIC SCHOOLS

4 years

of learning BEHIND

PRIVATE SCHOOLS

2 years

of learning BEHIND





# CHALLENGES SCHOOLS ARE FACING

PUBLIC SCHOOLS

PRIVATE SCHOOLS

FUNDING:



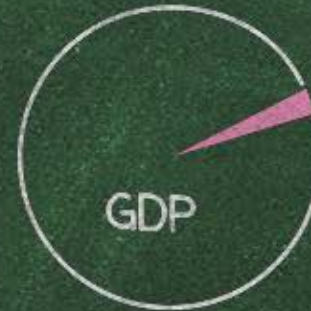
1.9%  
of GDP

when subsidies to private sector are taken into account only 1.3% of GDP



72% is for public school operations

28% is for subsidies to civil servants and private schools



2.8%  
of GDP

LEARNING OUTCOMES:

4 years of learning BEHIND

COMPARED TO



OECD AVERAGE

2 years of learning BEHIND

CURRICULA:



???

NEITHER HAVE MODERN HISTORY CURRICULUM

Private schools also have WEAK STANDARDS MONITORING



FINANCES



MONEY TRAPPED IN BANKS

CANT CHARGE in ~~USD~~ DOLLARS (prohibited)

EXPENDITURE ON IMPORTED ESSENTIALS FOR BOTH PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS in USD

PARENTS CANT AFFORD FEES



CLASS SIZES

Increasing stress at schools

INCREASING ENROLMENTS FROM PRIVATE SCHOOLS over 90,000 so far

Private schools in rural areas STRUGGLING to stay open





# CHALLENGES TEACHERS ARE FACING



**40%** of teachers do not have a university degree or standardised qualifications



**60%** of teachers are contractual, requiring few formal qualifications

## SALARIES

PRE-CRISIS:  
**\$1300**  
average salary



POST-CRISIS:  
**\$90**



ALSO:



30% are leaving the country or the profession





recruitment in Lebanon has been politicised and instrumentalised since the civil war, when security concerns forced teachers to move back to their original areas of residence. This saw teaching contracts handed out on the basis of both the candidates' proximity to the school in question and their loyalty to local political actors and militia.<sup>35</sup> Over-recruitment, due to patronage-based employment and mandatory minimum staffing requirements, remains a systemic problem.

The result of corruption and mismanagement, Lebanon's low student-teacher ratio also fails to translate into high-quality staff and service delivery. Around 40% of teachers have poor (or no) qualifications in the field of education and lack university degrees.<sup>36</sup> And, while permanent teachers must complete between 3 and 18 months of pre-service training, contractual teachers – those on short-term or part-time contracts, who make up 60% of all teaching staff – can start work with zero prior training.<sup>37</sup> Lebanese teachers also work significantly less than their counterparts in the OECD, at just 431 hours per year on average (compared to the OECD's 771-hour average).<sup>38</sup>

## SLIPPING STANDARDS

Lebanon's relative dearth of skilled, well-trained, highly motivated teachers is, in part, another outcome of the country's post-Taif neoliberalisation. Before the civil war, Lebanon's teachers were trained by Dar al-Mualemeen – a network of teacher-training colleges dating back to 1931. The colleges were gradually dismantled through reforms implemented by the MEHE's Centre for Educational Research and Development (CERD)<sup>39</sup> from the 1970s, as teacher contracting became more prevalent.

As teacher training became less rigorous and consistent, and the number of contractual teachers grew, the bloated education workforce became a significant drain on the

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government's education budget. Before 2019, it is true that many teachers – most particularly those in kindergarten and primary schools – received lower than average salaries, disincentivising skilled applicants.<sup>40</sup> But, at the same time, average salaries for secondary-school teachers were inflated out of proportion to the skill level of the workforce.

Corrupt hiring practices have not gone unnoticed by teaching staff, contributing to professional dissatisfaction and poor performance. The MEHE itself has acknowledged that there is significant mistrust among teachers, many of whom believe that positions are not secured on merit but instead on politics.<sup>41</sup> The MEHE has also acknowledged that the existing recruitment approach “results in difficulties in the recruitment of teachers with the appropriate expertise, language [skills], and/or content [knowledge].”<sup>42</sup> Now, both teacher recruitment and retention are urgent issues.

## GOVERNANCE LIMBO

The Lebanese government's 2021–2025 General Education Plan contains a detailed description of the challenges that faced the education system pre-2019 and lays out strategies to overcome these challenges and improve the quality, consistency, and sustainability of the education system.

This is no easy feat. The plan identifies four key hurdles to ad-



*“Although the [Lebanese government’s 2021–2025 General Education] plan goes on to suggest methods of remediation, that second hurdle, funding, remains a gaping hole in the document. Most sections related to budgeting are left blank...”*

addressing the current crisis in the sector: “The capacity of the educational administration at all levels; the available funding; the coordination among the different actors; and the uncertainties that are inherent to the present context.”<sup>43</sup>

Although the plan goes on to suggest methods of remediation, that second hurdle, funding, remains a gaping hole in the document. Most sections related to budgeting are left blank, reflecting the binding of the MEHE’s fate to that of the broader economic and governance crisis facing the country. Estimates of pre-crisis funding for the plan show that US\$300 million per year was needed to achieve its targets. Under the MEHE’s pre-crisis budget, only US\$200 million was available.<sup>44</sup>

In terms of government financing, then, this five-year plan remains simply words on paper. It seems unlikely that the state will find a way to resource all, or even some, of its suggested initiatives. What, then, of other potential funding streams?

During the 2021–2022 school year, the World Bank supported the MEHE with a monthly US\$90 incentive for teachers to return to school, which was designed to help cover their transport and other logistical costs.<sup>45</sup> This funding did not, however, extend to the 2022–2023 school year. As yet, there are few indications of how the donor community intends to respond to the collapsing education system going forward.

The growing lack of trust in the government’s intention or ability to resolve the economic crisis – in addition to calls to no longer channel aid through the government following the

Beirut Port explosion – have made donors of all stripes more circumspect in their support.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**The Lebanese government should increase national expenditure on education to 4–6% of GDP, in line with international benchmarks.** The foundational nature of education for social, economic, health, and other outcomes requires that Lebanon make rescuing and reforming the education sector a high priority. Government expenditure on education is considered among the best fiscal stimuli to support a recovery from shocks like COVID-19, as it aims at limiting lost opportunities for long-term economic growth.<sup>46</sup>

The current disruption to the education system has exposed the vulnerabilities inherent in relying on private education and chronically underfunding public education. Responses to this crisis should be designed to achieve the long-term goal of strengthening public education as a cornerstone of civil life in Lebanon, with curricula that encourage social cohesion, critical thinking, and human development.

Given the urgent challenges facing the sector and in the absence of government action, **nongovernmental actors and the international community must now consider reorienting their education responses from development initiatives to emergency programming.**

## EMERGENCY INTERVENTIONS

**International donors must find ways to continue support for teacher-incentive payments without reducing pressure on the Lebanese government to quickly and comprehensively address the ongoing financial crisis.** The donor community must negotiate a funding position that does not allow the Lebanese government to continue abrogating its responsibility. Any funding needs to be accompanied by strict, independent monitoring protocols to ensure payments are efficiently and equitably delivered to teachers across the school system, in US dollars.

**Emergency cash-transfer programmes should be expanded to include parents with children enrolled at primary schools, to relieve economic pressures that might compel them to pull children from school.**

These transfers should also include strict monitoring protocols to ensure attendance at schools and be sufficient to cover transport, learning materials, and food. Monitoring protocols involved with these cash transfers should include expanded powers for social workers and health advisors at schools to monitor child-protection concerns.

**BDL must direct commercial banks to distribute funds from donors and those held in school savings**

**accounts in the currency in which they were deposited, or risk prosecution.** BDL must also direct banks to grant public schools access to their accounts. Banks failing to do so should be held liable for blocking emergency aid and for violations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

**The donor community must consider conflict-sensitive and transparent modalities to support private schools to stay open.** Given the current crisis, particularly in public schools, and the fact that most students are still outside the public system, private schools must stay open to maintain access to education. Means-tested cash-transfer programmes to cover essential costs, such as fuel, for families with children attending private schools could avoid funding private entities directly and should be expanded. Private schools in areas where there are no nearby public schools should be prioritised.

**The international community and Lebanese government must prepare contingency plans should a significant number of private schools close and public schools be faced with an unmanageable number of transfer students.** This planning should be oriented to a longer-term view of merging more private

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schools – particularly nondenominational schools and independent free-private schools – into the public system. **Lebanon’s national child-protection and referral systems must be supported to rapidly scale-up labour inspections at schools and expand social-protection programmes.** The MEHE and its child-protection and education partners should simultaneously enhance the collection and exchange of data on out-of-school children and other gaps in the sector, to adequately inform current and future plans and interventions.

#### MEDIUM-TO-LONG-TERM INTERVENTIONS

**Addressing Lebanon’s distorted teacher-student ratio should come as a part of overhauling school governance and management.** Teaching modalities that necessitate overstaffing at small regional schools should be reformed to enable teachers to teach multiple classes and subjects. Teachers should be trained and certified as teachers via a formal accreditation process. The overhaul of teaching staff will necessitate the dismissal of many contractual teachers, while those who remain will have to undergo training and recertification. Teacher pay scales should also be revised to better incentivise balanced distribution of high-quality teachers across kindergarten, primary, and secondary schools.

**The MEHE must develop an education inspection framework with graded criteria to monitor private**

**and public schools.** This will help to monitor schools’ curricula and teaching quality and pave the way for school improvement plans, with the prospect of delivering greater equity of education across the country. This inspection of schools should be carried out by a body independent from the MEHE. Teachers’ working hours and students’ outcomes should also be monitored as a part of standard assessments across all schools.

**The government’s subsidies to free-private schools must be redirected to parents who qualify for assistance based on comprehensive means testing.** This should involve vouchers to poorer households to incentivise access to public or private schools. Further, all private schools that wish to continue operating must pass rigorous performance evaluations and financial auditing, and implement a quota of enrolment slots that are accessible to economically vulnerable households.

**Lebanon must update its curricula to meet the needs of the modern workforce and to standardise and strengthen the monitoring of teacher and student performance.** Monitoring school performance requires a standard measure against which student performance can be tracked. This means school teaching outcomes and curricula must be standardised, which also would serve as a further step in ensuring children receive equal-quality education. Gaps in curricula – for instance, those in the history curriculum – must be filled. This process can be seen and implemented as an opportunity for national dialogue and reconciliation.

#### EDITOR’S NOTE

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