



THE CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF RETURNING TO SCHOOL:

REFLECTIONS OF
PARENTS, TEACHERS,
AND PRINCIPALS
IN LEBANON

Mohammad Hammoud,
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines school, teacher, parent, and student readiness and challenges for the new school academic year (2021-2022). It aims to probe the challenges and prospects of returning to in-person and online schooling and the possible solutions for a successful return. This study targeted potential respondents in all governorates of Lebanon including 2,442 parents and 819 teachers, for a total of 3,261 participants who completed the survey.

The study addresses parents and teachers from both public and private schools. Additionally, phone interviews were conducted with eight principals from public and private schools distributed across all eight governorates. The findings cover four main themes: the impact of Lebanon's crisis on teachers and parents' socioeconomic status; school readiness and preparedness; the challenges of returning to in-person and online schooling; and finally, potential solutions from parents, teachers, and principals' perspectives.



The Impact of Lebanon's Crisis on Teachers and Parents' Socioeconomic Status

Our study found that the average monthly household income for parents and teachers has dropped to \$130-\$160 dollars today compared to \$1,300-\$1600 in 2018, before the devaluation of the Lebanese Pound. As a result, three-quarters (76%) of public school parents and over half (55%) of the public school teachers reported that they are always struggling to pay their bills. While the crisis had a worse effect on parents and teachers in public schools, it also had a stark effect on the private education sector.

The dire financial crisis and its impact on living standards have left many parents (78%) and teachers (79%) with no choice but to consider leaving the country to seek a better quality of life elsewhere. Interviews with principals also revealed that teachers are leaving Lebanon for more competitive jobs abroad. Furthermore, nearly one-third (31%) of public school parents revealed that they had recently (in the past year) transferred their children to a public school. In comparison, 15% of private school parents indicated that they are considering moving their child to a public school since they can no longer afford private schools' tuition.

Returning to school amid the dire economic and financial crisis that parents and teachers are struggling with presents a significant number of burdens: the cost of tuition fees, transportation (when feasible, considering the fuel shortages), and stationary and online learning being beyond the means of

many Lebanese. In the following section, we examine the impact of Lebanon's crisis on school readiness and preparedness.

The Impact of Lebanon's Crisis on School Readiness and Preparedness

Results indicate that 29% of public school parents believe that their child's school is not ready for the new academic year compared to 13% of private school parents. Similarly, just under half (45%) of surveyed public-school teachers indicated that their school is not ready for the new academic year compared to a quarter (26%) for private school teachers. These responses imply that while a considerable percentage of teachers and parents in both sectors are not ready, the crisis had a more notable effect on parents and teachers in the public sector.

Moreover, most principals reported that their schools were not ready to operate and welcome students. Only a few of them had prepared a re-opening of their schools. Those few also identified the risks primarily related to lack of fuel and power cuts that could hinder the implementation of these plans. Amid this lack of preparedness to start school, this report will delve into in-person and online schooling challenges, which will be discussed in the following two sections.

Challenges of In-Person Schooling

Nearly three-quarters of parents (75%) and two-thirds of teachers (62%) reported that they prefer in-person schooling, arguing that it is more effective and better for students' mental and psychological well-being. However, one-third of parents (32%) and teachers (35%) reported that commuting to school is the number one challenge for returning to in-person schooling amidst the current fuel crisis.

Almost all surveyed parents (97%) and teachers (99%) who use a private car to commute to school reported that they struggle to fill their cars with fuel. In comparison, 91% of parents and 94% of teachers who use public transportation to commute to school reported struggling to cover the tariff. Besides, almost two-thirds of parents (62%) and three-quarters of teachers (76%) reported that public transportation and school bus services are less available now than before the crisis in 2019. The challenge for commuting is accompanied by a financial one that might prevent one-fifth of parents (22%) from covering their children's school expenses (tuition, books, and stationery).

Finally, one-fifth of parents (22%) and teachers (21%) expressed concerns about the COVID-19 virus. The seriousness of this issue is heightened knowing that 98% of students and 40% of teachers have not yet been vaccinated.



Challenges of Online Schooling

Findings in this report revealed that only one-fifth of parents (19%) and one-quarter of teachers (27%) preferred online schooling. However, one-third of parents (34%) and teachers (35%) reported that power cuts and the lack of reliable internet amid the worsening fuel crisis are main concerns for returning to online schooling. This report includes a survey revealing that almost everyone in Lebanon is struggling with power cuts. Over half of the respondents indicated that they have between 9 and 20 hours of power cuts per day. The situation is worse among public school students and teachers, making a return to online learning almost impossible. Besides the power cuts, two-thirds of parents (66%) whose children are enrolled in public schools and over half of the public-school teachers (51%) reported that they have a weak internet connection.

This study's analysis also revealed that the average monthly electricity and internet bill takes up approximately 125% and 97%, respectively, of parents' and teachers' average household income. Therefore, many parents and teachers will suffer if they return to online schooling since they are expected to spend their entire income, and in some cases borrow money, to cover their electricity and internet bills.

Possible Solutions

One-third of parents (34%) and teachers (33%) consider providing students and teachers with financial support to cover the cost of transportation, electricity, and the internet as a primary solution for saving the academic year. Furthermore, 24% of parents and 18% of teachers indicated that students should receive scholarships to cover the increase in prices of books and stationery. In addition, 23% of parents and 17% of teachers reported that the government should implement the social safety net project (ESSN) agreement with the World Bank to save the new academic year. Besides, 16% of parents and 19% of teachers reported that a fund should be established to provide schools with financial support. Furthermore, principals indicated that providing aid for schools, teachers, and parents is crucial for saving the new academic year.



INTRODUCTION

Since 2019, Lebanon has endured one of the worst economic crises in the world (World Bank, 2021). In the absence of a functioning government and required interventions to salvage the economic situation, the consequences of the crisis forcibly infiltrated people's daily routines. The multiple crises have led to a severe deterioration in people's standards of living. Today, Lebanon's population is struggling daily to secure its basic rights while it is denied access to essential goods and services such as food, water, healthcare, education, electricity, internet, and fuel. In March 2021, 78% (3 million people) of the Lebanese population was estimated to be living in poverty (ERP, 2021).

The consequences of Lebanon's financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this year's challenges to return to school. The economic collapse has left many schools unable to pay their teachers, acquire fuel for heating and lighting, purchase supplies, or provide transportation for the upcoming school year. Hence, the crisis has posed additional burdens on schools, teachers, and parents, and it has put students at the risk of losing out on education for a third consecutive year. According to a recent United Nations report, over 1.2 million school-aged children in Lebanon did not receive proper education in 2020 alone, leading to increased dropout rates (ERP, 2021). The situation is even worse among Syrian refugees and the most vulnerable groups. A recent Centre for Lebanese Studies (CLS) study on the impact of COVID-19 on education in Lebanon found that 43% of refugees enrolled in public school's afternoon shift completely stopped matriculating (Hammoud and Shuayb, 2021). According to a UNHCR report, 58% of school-aged refugee children were not attending school in Lebanon in 2019, with forecasts indicating that this rate is expected to increase, considering that 90 percent of refugees live in extreme poverty (VASyR, 2020).

On August 23, 2021, the Lebanese Minister of Education announced that the new academic year would start on September 27, 2021, for public and gave private schools the autonomy so long as they can provide proper safety measures and sufficient power to run their schools. Students will receive at least four days of in-person schooling and one day of online schooling per week. According to the Minister of Education, Tarek Al Majzoub: "We have looked at every aspect of the return-to-school plan. Students cannot stay at home anymore." Majzoub argued that almost every country in the region is returning to in-person schooling, and, therefore, Lebanon should follow suit. However, most country in the region is facing economic and social hardships like Lebanon; therefore, his decision was met with large-scale public objection.

Parents and teachers expressed their frustration in being unable to commute to school due to the worsening fuel crisis and their struggle with continuous



power cuts and internet outages (Ramadan, 2021). Furthermore, going back to in-person schooling increases the risk of COVID-19 infection, especially after the recent outbreak of the Delta variant, which, unlike earlier versions, is taking a considerable toll on children who have not yet been vaccinated (Drillinger, 2021).

Besides the shortage of essential needs, limited access to services, and health risks, thousands of newly impoverished parents are transferring their children from private schools to public schools because they can no longer pay their private school's fees. According to the Lebanese Center for Education Research & Development, public school students increased from 32% in 2019 (CRDP, 2020) to 36.5% in 2021 (CRDP, 2021). On the other hand, the percentage of private school students decreased from 64.7% in 2019 to 59.9% in 2021. Therefore, many students have moved from private to public schooling over the past two years. This phenomenon is overwhelming public schools in some governorates where historical and current political interferences have impeded efforts in achieving equitable distribution of public schools across the country (Abdul-Hamid and Yassine, 2020). Therefore, the current number of public schools and teachers in some areas might not be enough to accommodate the vast and sudden influx of students.

In response to these challenges, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) developed an educational plan to facilitate students' return to school. The plan sounds promising on paper; however, in practice, its success is conditional on the successful collaboration between MEHE and the Finance, Telecommunications, Energy, and Economy ministries. Such a collaboration is prone to fail, knowing that in the past years, plans and promises were made by MEHE, which were unfulfilled due to the failed collaboration with other ministries. For instance, the minister was unsuccessful in fulfilling his promise to provide low or no-cost internet last year after failing to collaborate with the Ministry of Telecommunications (MoT). Similarly, the minister's promises to increase teachers' salaries and cover transportation fees this year have also not been fulfilled yet.

Regarding the national textbooks, coordination between the Minister of Education and donors, led by UNICEF, will ensure free textbooks to students in public schools. However, providing books for students in private schools is another challenge since they need to pay for them in dollars, and the Central bank will not provide any dollars to support the purchase of books. Therefore, in the absence of any governmental support and a crippled economy, private schools are left with no alternative but to take matters into their own hands.

Falling back on this harsh reality, this report examines school, teacher, parent, and student readiness and challenges for the new academic year (2021-2022). In addition, this study probes the challenges and prospects of returning to in-person classroom education and online schooling and the possible solutions that may allow for a successful return.

METHODOLOGY

This report employs a mixed-method research approach to assess school, teacher, parent, and student readiness and challenges for the new academic year (2021-2022). The quantitative approach that is used is based on two online surveys administered to teachers and parents residing in Lebanon. On the other hand, the qualitative approach is based on phone interviews conducted with public and private school principals in Lebanon.



Online Survey & Telephone Interviews

Both online surveys were designed by the CLS team and launched on August 19, 2021. The two surveys included several questions that aim to assess the readiness and challenges faced by teachers, parents, and students and their preferred learning approach (online vs. in-person). The survey was advertised on social media (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) and administered through Survey Monkey with a total of 3,261 responses. Researchers reached out to CLS's network of public and private schools, NGOs, and professional organizations. To encourage response rates from the different governorates, researchers reached out to parents, teachers, principals, and schools from all eight governorates. The survey results were analyzed using STATA and Excel, where different cross-tabulations were carried out. All percentages were rounded, so the total may not add up to 100 in some cases.

Furthermore, researchers conducted phone interviews with eight principals from public and private schools distributed across all eight governorates. The phone interviews aim to assess their schools' readiness for the new academic year by understanding the different challenges their schools face and the logistical procedures followed for both online and in-person learning approaches. The following section provides a detailed overview of the research sample.



Research Sample

The online survey was filled by 2,442 parents and 819 teachers, for a total of 3,261 participants. The sample covered all eight Lebanese governorates, as shown in Table 1. Due to data collection limitations, survey data is not entirely representative; however, using the mixed-method approach and reliance on multiple data sources offered valuable insights into the readiness and difficulties faced for returning to school.

**Table 1. Governorate Breakdown**

Governorate	Parent Survey (%)	Teacher Survey (%)
Beqaa	7	12
South Governorate	14	13
North Governorate	11	10
Nabatiyeh Governorate	4	5
Baalbek-Hermel Governorate	2	3
Beirut Governorate	10	10
Mount Lebanon Governorate	51	40
Akkar Governorate	2	7

The table below shows the gender breakdown of the sample. The majority of the survey respondents were females amongst both parents and teachers.

Table 2. Gender Breakdown

Gender	Parent Survey (%)	Teacher Survey (%)
Female	86	92
Male	10	7
I prefer not to answer	4	2

The research sample covers a wide range of age groups for both parents and teachers. The table below shows that most of the sampled parents and teachers are between the ages of 25 and 50.

Table 3. Age Breakdown

Age	Parent Survey (%)	Teacher Survey (%)
18-20 years	1	0
21-25 years	1	5
26-30 years	8	12
31-35 years	22	20
36-40 years	28	24
41-45 years	24	19
46-50 years	11	10
51-55 years	4	7
56-60 years	1	3
More than 60 years	0	1

The following table reveals the distribution of parents and teachers by school type. This study covers both paid and free private schools, as well as both morning and afternoon shifts in public schools. However, due to data collection limitations, this study could not collect a representative sample of parents whose children are enrolled in the public school afternoon shifts. Therefore, the sample mainly covers parents whose children are enrolled in private school and public school morning shifts, while parents of Syrian children remained largely uncovered. Similarly, 70% of teacher respondents teach in private schools, while the remaining 30% teach in public schools.

Table 4. Type of School Attending/Teaching

Type of School	Parent Survey (%)	Teacher Survey (%)
Paid Private school	71	54
Free Private school	12	16
Morning Shift in Lebanese Public School	16	25
Afternoon Shift in Lebanese Public School	1	5

The sample covers all four school levels (Preschool to 12): preschool, primary, intermediate, and secondary. Most parent respondents had children attending the primary and secondary education levels. Similarly, most sampled teachers are teaching either primary or intermediate education levels, as shown in the table below.

Table 5. Educational Level Attending/Teaching

	Parent Survey (%)	Teacher Survey (%)
Preschool	14	20
Primary Education (Grade 1 to 6)	51	35
Intermediate Education (Grade 7 to 9)	21	27
Secondary Education (Grade 10 to 12)	14	17




Limitations

The data for this study was collected in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and an unprecedented fuel crisis. Therefore, it was extremely difficult to travel and conduct face-to-face surveys and interviews. As a result, data collection was limited to online surveys with parents and teachers as well as phone interviews with school principals. Online methods restricted the ability to reach certain people with demographic, socioeconomic characteristics and to reach some geographical locations in a representative manner. The greatest drawback of the online method was the inability to represent people with disabilities, the refugee population, and the most vulnerable groups residing in Lebanon, knowing that these groups often struggle the most and were found to have the worst educational outcomes during the previous academic years (Hammoud and Shuayb, 2021; Abu Moghli and Shuayb, 2020).

SURVEY FINDINGS

To assess school, parent, student, and teacher readiness for and challenges of the new academic year (2020-2021), this report analyzes the quantitative (survey) and qualitative (interviews) data at four main levels. First, it examines the impact of Lebanon's crisis on parents' and teachers' socioeconomic status. Second, it assesses how ready schools, students, and teachers are for the new school year. Then it probes the challenges of returning to in-person and online schooling. Finally, this study presents possible solutions suggested by parents, teachers, and principals.



The Impact of Lebanon's Crisis on Teachers' and Parents' Socioeconomic Status

Lebanon's current economic crisis is considered one of the world's worst crises in modern times (World Bank, 2021). The Lebanese Pound has lost over 90% of its value on the black market leading to a deterioration of people's purchasing power without any adjustments to their salaries. Consequently, residents in Lebanon are struggling daily to acquire their basic rights and they are denied access to essential goods and services such as food, water, healthcare, education, electricity, internet, and fuel.

The table below reveals the average household monthly income of parents and teachers in private and public schools. The findings mirror the severity of the crisis on people's income and the lack of any salary adjustments following the enormous inflation rates. For instance, according to the table below, the average household monthly income for parents is approximately 2,005,000 LBP, and the average household monthly income for teachers is about 2,468,000 LBP, which is approximately \$130-\$160, according to the Lebanese Pound's current value on the black market. Furthermore, findings revealed that, on average, parents and teachers in public schools have lower average household incomes than parents and teachers in private schools.



Table 6. Average Household Monthly Income

	Public Schools		Private Schools	
	Parents (%)	Teacher (%)	Parents (%)	Teacher (%)
0 LBP-675,000 LBP	27	11	6	2
675,000 LBP-1,500,000 LBP	36	22	20	20
1,500,000 LBP -2,000,000 LBP	19	21	21	19
2,000,000 LBP -3,000,000 LBP	10	23	19	25
3,000,000 LBP -4,000,000 LBP	4	10	13	14
4,000,000 LBP -5,000,000 LBP	1	4	8	7
5,000,000 LBP -6,000,000 LBP	1	7	6	5
More than 6,000,000 LBP	1	2	7	7

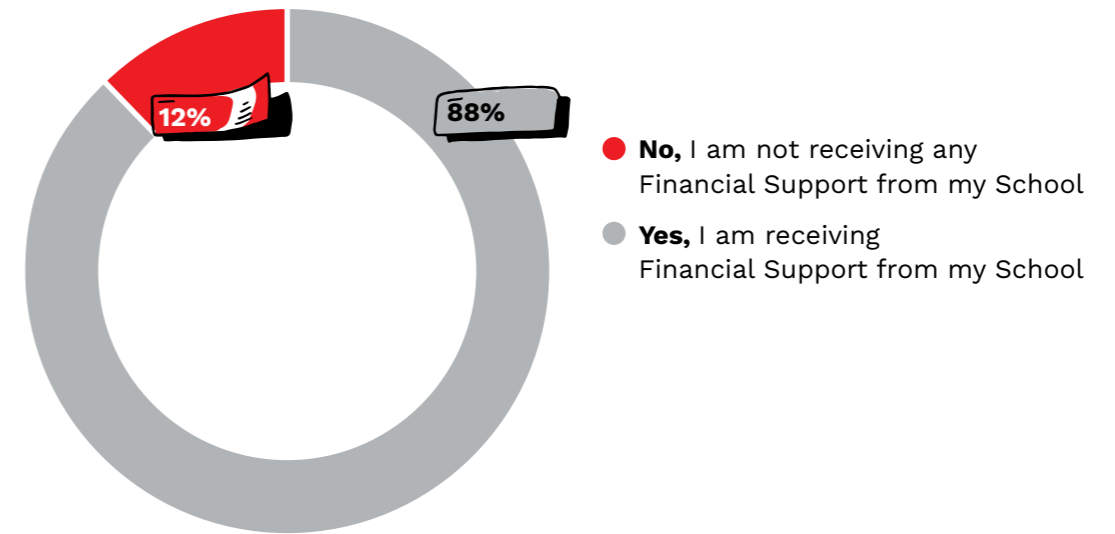
The deterioration in purchasing power was manifested in parents' and teachers' struggle to pay bills, as illustrated in the table below. Three-quarters of parents who send their children to public schools reported that they always struggle to pay their bills compared to over half of the public school teachers. Although parents and teachers in private schools struggle less than their counterparts in public schools, their struggle rates are also considered remarkably high.

Table 7. Struggle to Pay Bills

	Public Schools		Private Schools	
	Parents (%)	Teacher (%)	Parents (%)	Teacher (%)
Always	76	55	45	44
Sometimes	23	43	50	52
Never	1	2	5	4

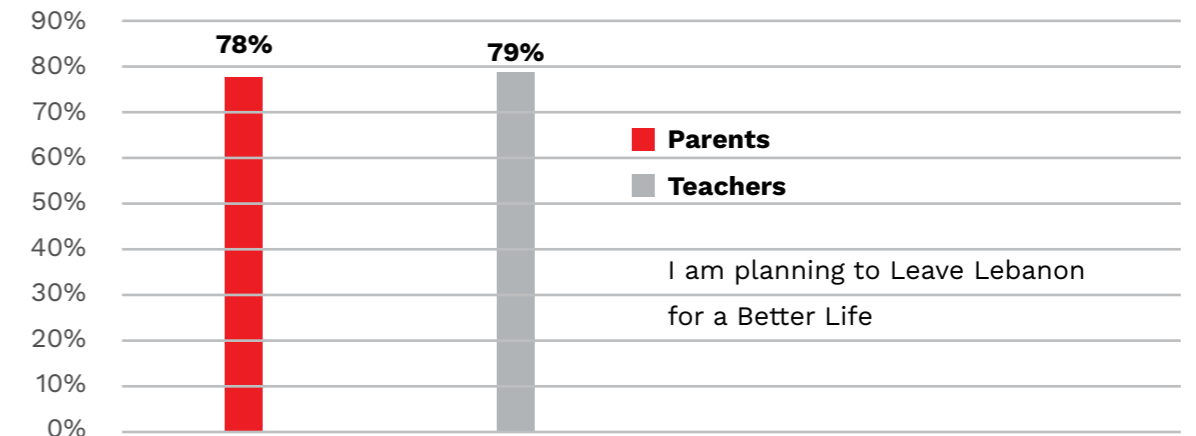
Amidst the reduction in purchasing power and the struggle to pay their bills, only 12% of teacher respondents indicated receiving financial support from their schools.

Figure 1. Percentage of Teachers Receiving Financial Support from Schools (Teacher Survey)



The dire financial crisis and its impact on living standards have left many with no choice but to flee the country seeking a better quality of life elsewhere. The figure below reveals that almost 80% of parents and teachers reported planning to leave Lebanon to improve their living standards. Similarly, principals shared that some teachers are traveling abroad for the sake of receiving higher salaries: “[M]ost of the teachers who left, traveled and got good jobs in competitive schools, international ones...I don’t think anyone will be motivated to work for \$100 a month” (Private School Principal).

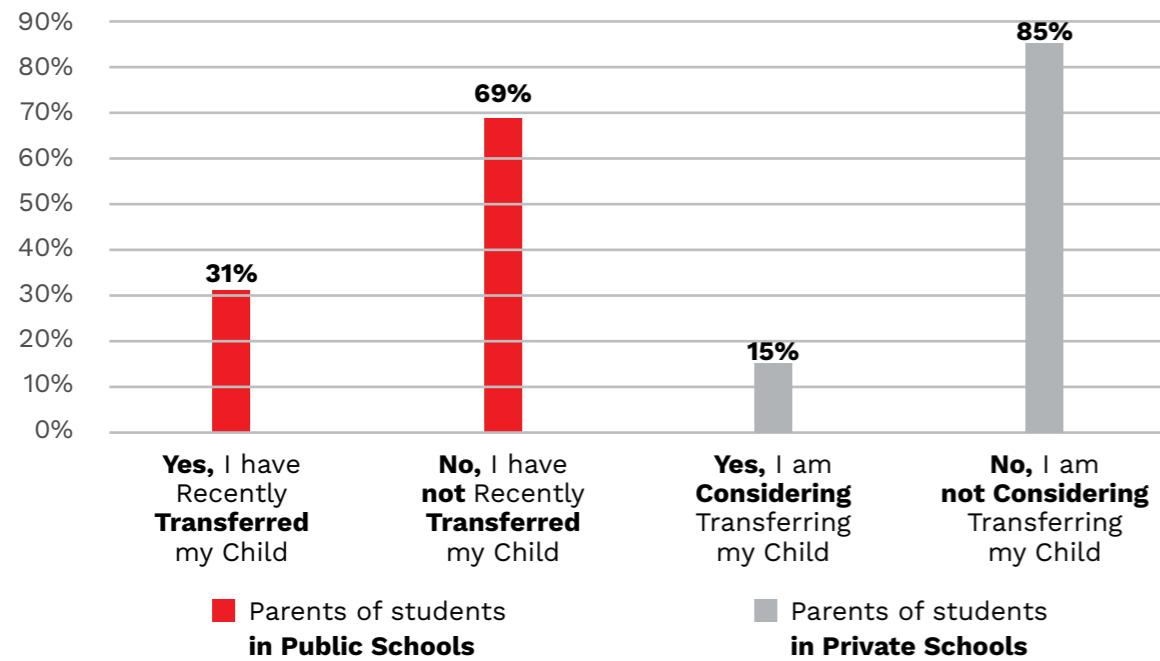
Figure 2. Planning to Leave Lebanon



Many parents were forced to transfer their children from private schools to public schools as they could no longer afford private school tuition. The figure below shows that 31% of parents whose children are currently in public schools reported that they have recently (in the past year) transferred their child to a public school. Moreover, 15% of parents whose children are currently in private

schools reported considering transferring their child to a public school. When asked about the reasons for transferring or planning to transfer their child to a public school, almost 85% indicated that they could no longer afford private school tuition fees. In comparison, 12% reported that the public school is closer to their home, making the commute easier. It is important to note that the vast and sudden influx of students is overwhelming public schools in some governorates, where historical and continual political interferences have impeded efforts in achieving equitable distribution of public schools across the country (Abdul-Hamid and Yassine, 2020).

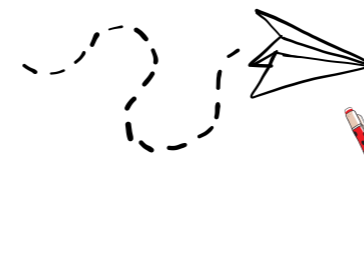
Figure 3. Children Transferring from Private to Public Schooling (Parent Survey)



The implications of Lebanon’s crisis intensified this year’s challenges to return to school. For example, almost all interviewed principals revealed that they are uncertain about the upcoming school year and reflected on the negative effect of the economic crisis on all stakeholders.

One public school principal said, “Imagine one of the mothers didn’t find bread yesterday, so I gave her mine because her kids are more in need than us. The minister doesn’t know anything about our situation as public schools. He’s planning for the safe return, but he is not considering the shortage in the basic needs.”

Furthermore, findings on socioeconomic indicators are greatly reflected in the following sections, where this report probes the impact of Lebanon’s crisis on school readiness and preparedness.



The Impact of Lebanon’s Crisis on School Readiness and Preparedness

To examine the impact of Lebanon’s crisis on school readiness, this report looks at teacher and student readiness to return to school. In addition, this report assesses school readiness based on surveys conducted with parents and teachers as well as interviews conducted with school principals. Results indicate that many private and public schools are not ready for the new school year, with public schools less prepared than private schools. In addition, many students and teachers are not ready for the new schooling year, with students and teachers in public schools being less prepared than their counterparts in private schools.

The table below shows that 29% of parents indicated that their child’s public school is not ready for the new academic year compared to 13% of private schools. Similarly, 45% of public school teachers indicated that their school is not ready for the new academic year compared to 26% of private school teachers. Therefore, according to both parents and teachers, a significant percentage of Lebanese schools are not prepared for a return this year, with public schools being less prepared than private schools.

Table 8. Parent and Teacher Perception on School Readiness for the New Academic Year

	Public Schools		Private Schools	
	Parents (%)	Teacher (%)	Parents (%)	Teacher (%)
Not Ready	29	45	13	26
Somewhat Ready	44	37	44	50
Ready	28	18	43	4

When asked why they think their school is not ready, most parents and teachers indicated that schools could not operate without fuel for electricity, heating, and transportation. In addition, some stated that the increase in prices leaves schools unable to cover their basic operating costs. Others mentioned that schools could not effectively ensure social distancing between students, which poses great risks for in-person schooling. This study later reveals that most students and many teachers have still not been vaccinated. Furthermore, other participants argued that despite all the challenges faced for in-class education, schools are not ready for online learning either, given that the majority of students and teachers do not have reliable access to electricity and internet services.

In addition, most of the interviewed principals reported that their schools are not ready to operate. Few of them mentioned that their plans were ready. However, their implementation is at risk due to the existing multilayered challenges such as fuel shortages, power cuts, and any possible adjustment



in the ministry’s decisions, which may be based on the teachers’ leagues announcements; these factors may halt the progress to return.

One public school principal said, “[W]e are not sure how the school year will start” while another said, “We don’t expect to have an academic year in 2021-2022 here in Akkar based on the parents’ situation and current shortages.”

As for parents’ assessment of their child’s readiness, the table below shows that 25% of public school students are not ready for the new academic year, compared to 13% of private school students. Similarly, teacher readiness is also worse in public schools (46%) compared to private schools (33%).

Table 9. Student (according to parents) and Teacher Readiness for the New Academic Year

	Public Schools		Private Schools	
	Parents (%)	Teacher (%)	Parents (%)	Teacher (%)
Not Ready	25	46	13	33
Somewhat Ready	40	31	40	40
Ready	35	23	47	27

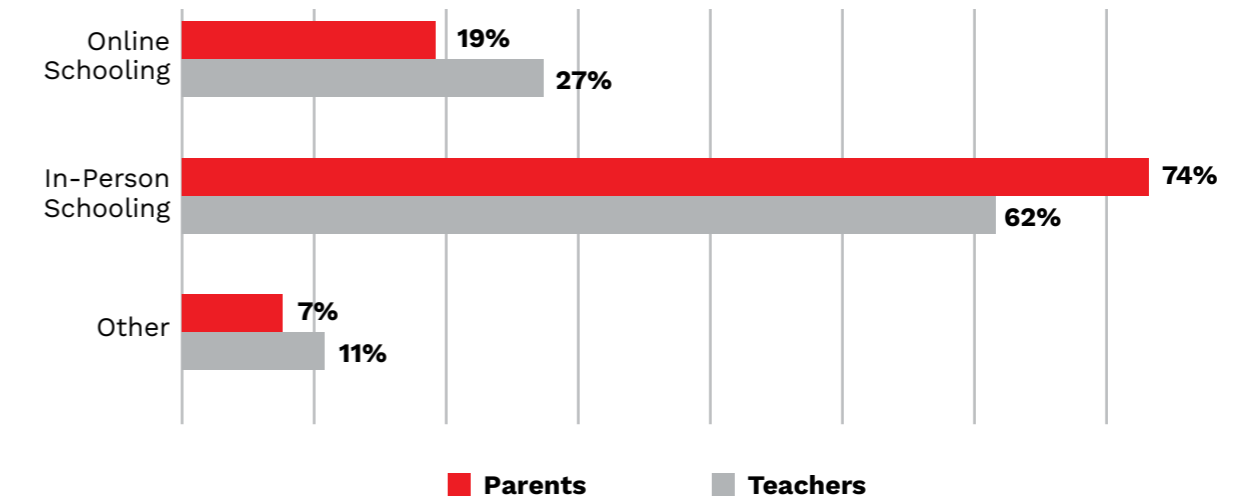
After examining the impact of Lebanon’s crisis on school readiness and preparedness, this study aimed to conduct an in-depth investigation on the challenges of both the return to in-person and online schooling, which will be discussed in the following two sections.

Challenges of In-Person Schooling

According to the MEHE, students returning to school this year will receive at least four days of in-person schooling and one day of online schooling per week. Therefore, this year’s teaching approach will mostly be in the form of in-person classroom learning. This section examines the challenges facing schools, teachers, parents, and students in returning to in-person schooling. Results indicate that although most parents and teachers prefer returning to in-person schooling, the struggle to commute to school, the risk of COVID-19, and parents’ inability to pay for tuition, stationery, and books are significant deterrents to a successful return.

The figure below shows that 74% of parents and 62% of teachers prefer in-person schooling, compared to only 19% of parents and 27% of teachers who prefer online learning. When asked about why they prefer in-person schooling, most parents and teachers indicated that in-person classroom education is more efficient and effective in learning and behavior management. In addition, many indicated that after two years of online learning, students need to interact with classmates and teachers for their mental and psychological well-being.

Figure 4. Parents’ and Teachers’ Preferred Teaching Approach



Although most parents and teachers prefer returning to in-person schooling, the table below shows that this learning approach is met with several challenges that might preclude its success. For instance, parents and teachers reported that the struggle to commute to school amid the worsening fuel crisis is a top concern for returning to in-person schooling. This challenge was followed by parents’ inability to pay for tuition, books, and stationery and the risk of COVID-19. Finally, the struggle to obtain identification documents for registration, which was touched on in our interviews with principals, was seen as the least concern, mainly because schools are accepting older civil extract or student IDs.

Table 10. Challenges of In-Person Classroom Education

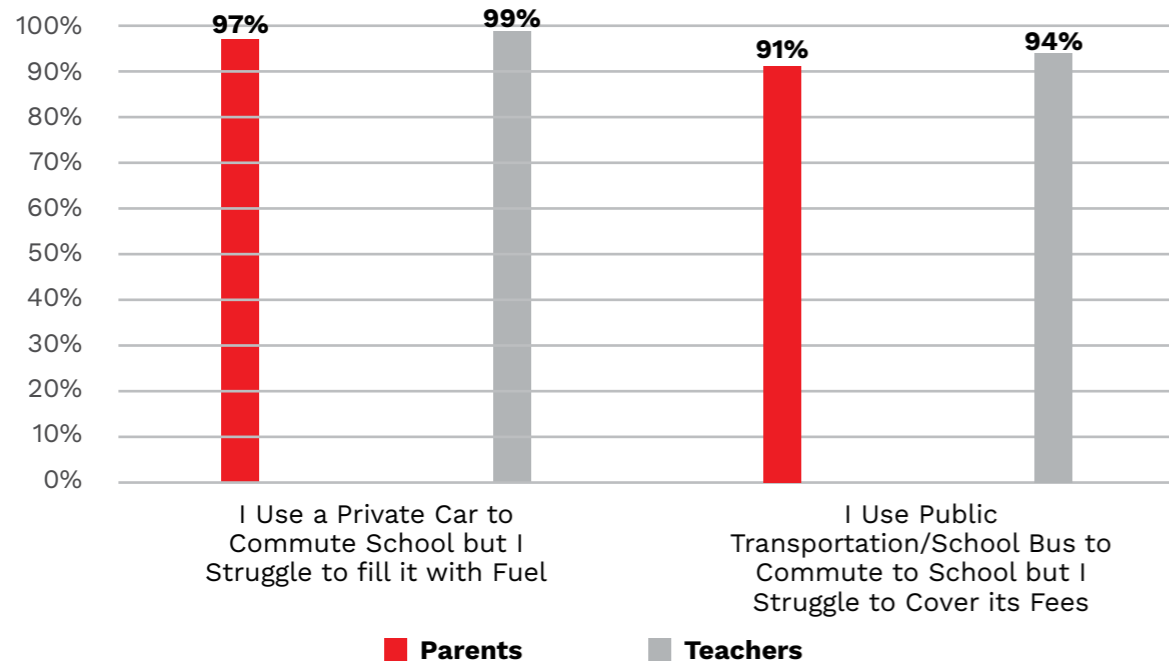
	Parent Survey (%)	Teacher Survey (%)
Commuting to school	32	35
Parents’ inability to pay for school tuition	22	22
The risk of COVID-19	22	21
Parents’ inability to pay for books and stationery	22	21
Obtaining identification documents for registration	2	2

Parents and teachers consider the struggle to commute to school as a top concern for returning to in-person schooling since ramifications of the fuel crisis impacted transportation and the ability to commute to school on multiple levels. First, for those who commute using a private car, fuel shortages have caused never-ending queues at the gas station, forcing car owners to dedicate an entire day to fill up their cars. This is largely reflected in the figure below, whereby almost all parents (97%) and teachers (99%) who use a private car to commute to school reported that they struggle to fill their cars with fuel. Second, the fuel crisis and reduction in fuel subsidies caused



an extreme spike in fuel prices, leading to an increase in public transportation and school bus fees. This is also reflected in the figure below, where 91% of parents reported struggling to cover public transportation/school bus fees, and 94% of teachers reported similarly.

Figure 5. Struggle Commuting to School

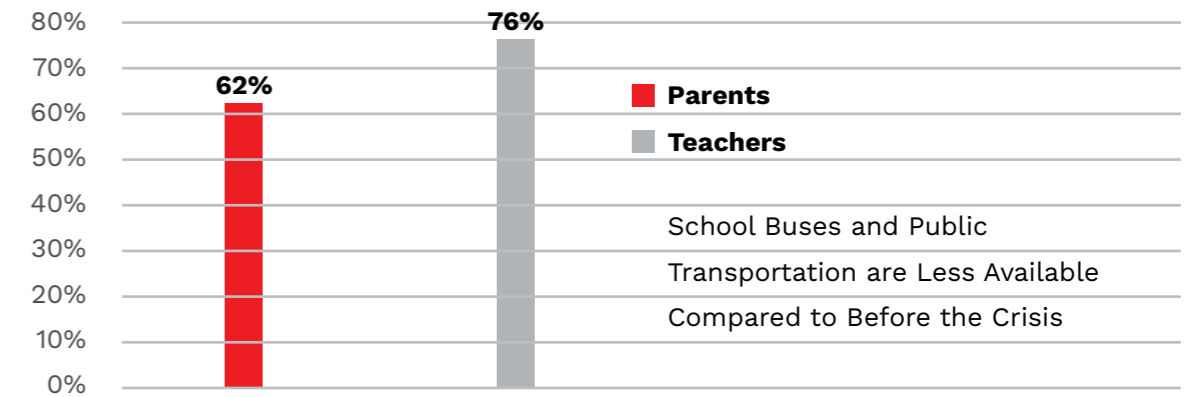


Principals also indicated that transportation is the most prominent challenge for in-person schooling. Whether due to availability of fuel or its price, principals reported that parents and teachers would be unable to cover transportation costs. One public school principal claimed that *“Transportation, as this is essential to focus on securing... is a challenge. Not all parents will accept to have this year start in person.... To secure fuel, teachers won’t be able to pay for a liter to come to the school.”*

A private school principal said, *“No school bus, I can provide them with transportation for one week to receive training for the new schooling year. However, I can’t afford it. Even if I can cover the costs, there is no fuel...if fuel was available, we might ask parents to pay more or ask for aid.”*

The fuel crisis led to increases in public bus fees and impacted the availability of these transportation services. Many bus drivers ran out of business since they could no longer fill their vehicles with fuel and keep up with the increases in not only fuel, but also maintenance costs. Consequently, 62% of parents reported that public transportation and school bus services are less available now than before the crisis. Similarly, 76% of teachers had the same responses, as shown in the figure below.

Figure 6. Availability of School Bus/Public Transportation

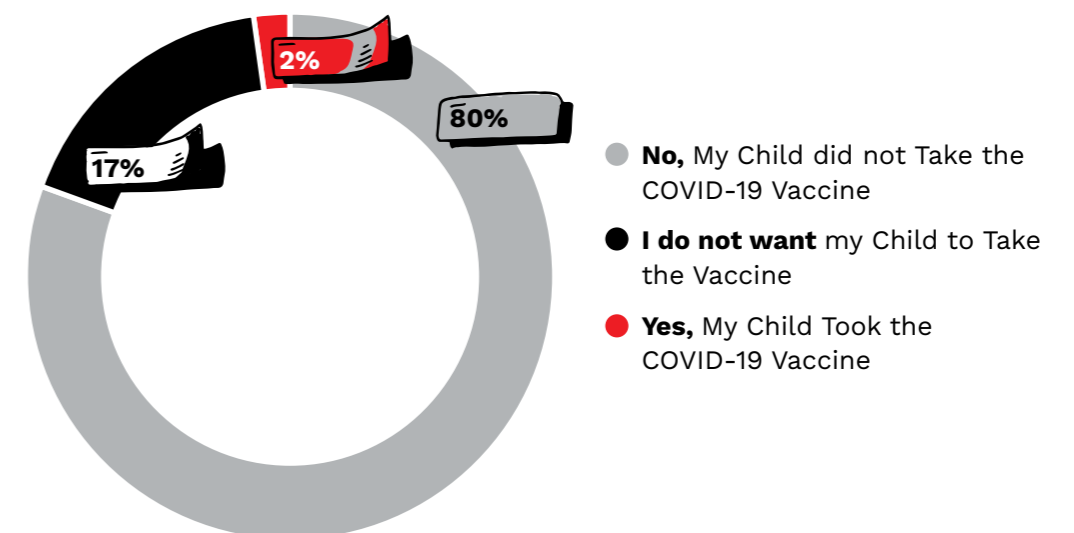


Furthermore, the shortage of fuel affects student and teacher attendance and regular school operations. For instance, according to interviews with school principals, it affects the availability of some schools’ running water since the water delivery truck cannot deliver water to schools, which affects students’ hygiene and safety.

“We can’t do anything as a school. Most of the schools are broke. We need stationery, water, hygiene materials...The tractor needs fuel to reach the school” (Public School Principal).

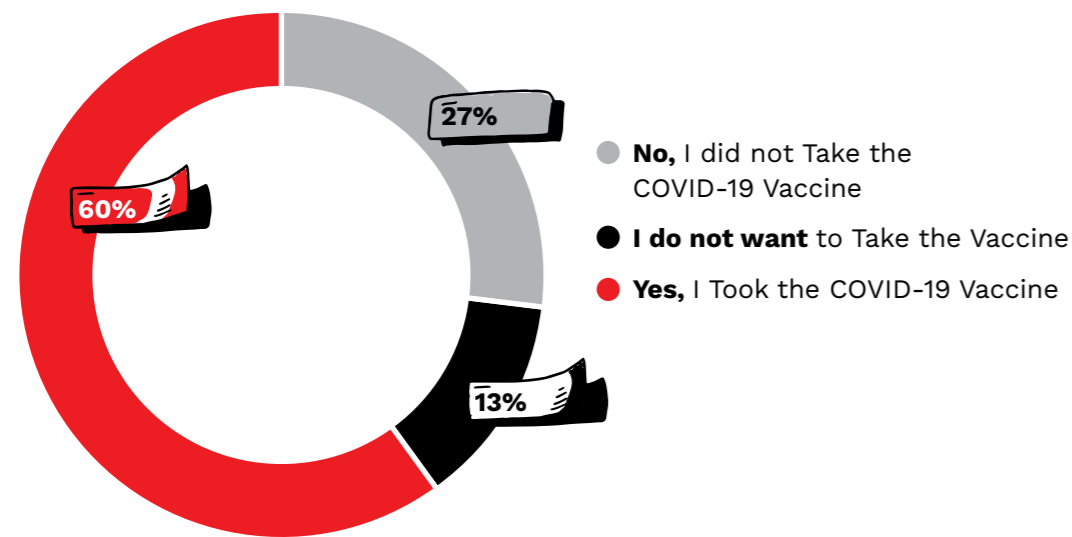
Students and teachers who manage to commute to school will face the risk of COVID-19, especially after the recent outbreak of the Delta variant, which, unlike earlier versions, is taking a considerable toll on children who have not yet been vaccinated (Drillinger, 2021). Having said that, findings revealed that only 2% of parents indicated that their child has been vaccinated. In comparison, 80% reported that their child has not been vaccinated, while 17% indicated that they do not want their child to take the vaccine, as shown in the figure below.

Figure 7. Percentage of Vaccinated Students (Parent Survey)



Students and teachers who manage to commute to school will face the risk of COVID-19, especially after the recent outbreak of the Delta variant, which, unlike earlier versions, is taking a considerable toll on children who have not yet been vaccinated (Drillinger, 2021). Having said that, findings revealed that only 2% of parents indicated that their child has been vaccinated. In comparison, 80% reported that their child has not been vaccinated, while 17% indicated that they do not want their child to take the vaccine, as shown in the figure below.

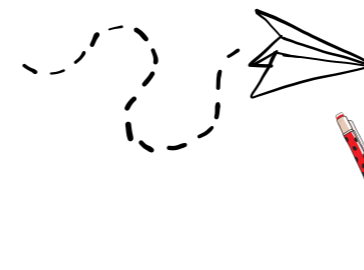
Figure 8. Percentage of Vaccinated Teachers (Teacher Survey)



According to the interviewed school principals, the percentage of vaccinated teachers differs among schools and across regions, ranging between 40% and 95%. While a few mentioned that they do not know the percentage of the vaccinated teachers, they believed that most students have not yet been vaccinated.

One public school principal said, *“I can’t oblige teachers or students to take the vaccine if there is no official decision issued by the ministry.”*

The MEHE ensured that it would strictly follow the World Health Organization’s (WHO) recommendations to guarantee students’ and teachers’ safe return to school. However, some parents still expressed their fear that schools might not effectively ensure social distancing between students, which poses great risks for in-person schooling. As a result, they preferred returning to online schooling to guarantee their children’s safety. These attitudes led to an in-depth investigation of the challenges of returning to online schooling, which will be discussed in the following sections.



Challenges of Online Schooling

According to Figure 4 above, 19% of parents reported that they prefer online schooling, and 27% of teachers reported feeling the same. When asked why they prefer online learning, parents and teachers stated the challenges of in-person learning (mentioned in the section above) rather than stating the benefits of online learning. Therefore, parents and teachers prefer online learning just because they believe in-person learning to be unfeasible. Results revealed that although some parents and teachers prefer returning to online schooling, power cuts, a lack of reliable internet, and parent’s inability to pay for tuition, stationery, and books are significant deterrents for a successful return to online schooling.

The table below shows that this learning approach is met with several challenges that might preclude its success. For instance, almost two-thirds of parents and teachers reported that power cuts and lack of reliable internet amid the worsening fuel crisis are a top concern for returning to online schooling. This challenge is followed by parents’ inability to pay for tuition, books, stationery, and the risk of COVID-19. Finally, the struggle to obtain identification documents for registration was regarded as the least concern, mainly because schools are accepting older civil extract or students’ IDs, as mentioned earlier.

Table 11. Challenges of Online schooling

	Parent Survey (%)	Teacher Survey (%)
Power Cuts	34	35
Lack of Internet	31	33
Parents’ inability to pay for school tuition	19	19
Parents’ inability to pay for books and stationery	15	12
Students’ struggle to obtain identification documents for registration	1	1

Similarly, based on the interviews with principals, the main challenge for online learning in public schools is the lack of internet access for many teachers and students. One public school principal is considering his own solutions for internet connectivity:

I am considering gathering all teachers in school so that they have access to a stable internet connection and to guarantee that students are receiving their learning material. However, the problem is that students won’t have a stable internet because only 30 % of students interacted with us last year. Add to that, this year we have the electricity and fuel problems.



Another challenge, according to the school principals, is the cost of internet and electricity services, which many parents cannot afford.

In addition, a private school principal said, *“The problem with online learning, this year, is related to parents’ ability to charge their phones during electricity cut-offs, and whether they can provide their children with a comfortable learning environment.”*

For years, residents of Lebanon relied on two main sources of electricity, Électricité du Liban and private generators that usually fill in the gap between the limited power supplied by EDL and residents’ demand (Ahmad, 2020). However, the implications of the fuel crisis led to additional shortages in EDL’s power supply and prevented private generator owners from filling in the increasing outages. This situation explains why parents and teachers reported power cuts as a top concern for returning to online schooling.

The table below shows that a majority of people in Lebanon are struggling with power cuts. Over half of our respondents indicated that they have between 9 to 20 hours of electricity cuts. With the situation being worse among public school students and teachers, 25% of parents whose children are enrolled in a public school reported that they face over 20 hours of power cuts and 29% of public-school teachers reported experiencing the same situation. Findings revealed that power cuts in Lebanon significantly increased in July and August 2021 compared to results in another CLS study conducted in June 2021 (Hammoud and Shuayb, 2021).

Table 12. Power Cuts Per Day (Both EDL and Private Generator Services)

Hours of Power Cuts Per Day	Public Schools		Private Schools	
	Parents (%)	Teacher (%)	Parents (%)	Teacher (%)
None	0	0	0	0
1 – 3 hours	4	2	4	3
3 – 9 hours	13	15	27	22
9 – 12 hours	24	20	26	27
12 – 16 hours	18	17	17	18
16 – 20 hours	16	18	13	18
More than 20 hours	25	29	13	12

Furthermore, the increasing power cuts and shortages in fuel have also led to unpredictable patterns of internet outages in some areas where the backup generators have run out of fuel (Sakr, 2021). For instance, two-thirds of parents whose children are enrolled in public schools and over half of the public-school teachers reported that they have a weak internet connection. In addition, 15% of public-school parents reported not having internet access, while 8%

of public-school teachers reported experiencing the same situation. Although these figures are slightly better in private schools, a significant number of students and teachers also struggle with an unreliable internet connection. It is also worth noting that findings revealed that the quality of internet services in Lebanon has significantly deteriorated in July and August 2021 compared to results in another CLS study conducted back in June 2021 (Hammoud and Shuayb, 2021). The current internet situation is detailed in the table below.

Table 13. Home Internet Access

	Public Schools		Private Schools	
	Parents (%)	Teacher (%)	Parents (%)	Teacher (%)
Strong Connection	1	3	3	5
Reasonable Connection	18	38	48	57
Weak Connection	66	51	45	36
No Internet Access	15	8	4	1

The tables below show the monthly internet and electricity bills reported by parent and teacher respondents. Findings revealed that the average internet bill paid by parent respondents is approximately 95,000 LBP, while the average internet bill paid by teacher respondents is approximately 104,000 LBP.

Table 14. Monthly Internet Bill

	Parent Survey (%)	Teacher Survey (%)
0 LBP-50,000 LBP	10	6
50,000 LBP-100,000 LBP	53	49
100,000 LBP-150,000 LBP	25	29
150,000 LBP-200,000 LBP	7	10
200,000 LBP-250,000 LBP	2	2
More than 250,000 LBP	2	3

Similarly, based on the findings below, the average electricity bill paid by parent respondents is approximately 2,410,000 LBP, while the average electricity bill paid by teacher respondents is approximately 2,280,000 LBP.



Table 15. Monthly Electricity Bill (Both EDL and Private Generator Services)

	Parent Survey (%)	Teacher Survey (%)
0 LBP-500,000 LBP	12	10
500,000 LBP-1,000,000 LBP	25	29
1,000,000 LBP-1,500,000 LBP	12	14
1,500,000 LBP-2,000,000 LBP	7	7
2,000,000 LBP-3,000,000 LBP	3	3
3,000,000 LBP-4,000,000 LBP	1	1
4,000,000 LBP-5,000,000 LBP	38	34
More Than 5,000,000 LBP	2	2

Based on the approximated averages calculated above, we can calculate the average electricity and internet bill ratio to the average parent and teacher household incomes presented in Table 6. Our calculations reveal that parents' average monthly electricity and internet bill (2,505,000LBP) comprises approximately 125% of parents' average household income (2,005,000 LBP). In comparison, teachers' average monthly electricity and internet bill (2,384,000LBP) comprises approximately 97% of teachers' average household income (2,468,000LBP).

These figures depict the struggles that many parents and teachers will face if they return to online schooling, as they are expected to spend more than their entire income just to cover the bills of poor electricity supply and unreliable internet services. The following section presents possible solutions from a parent's, teacher's, and principal's perspective.

Possible Solutions

This section provides possible solutions based on reflections from parents, teachers, and principals. The table below presents possible solutions from a parent's and teacher's point of views. Findings revealed that one-third of parents and teachers consider providing students and teachers with financial support to cover the cost of transportation, electricity, and the internet as the best solution for saving the academic year. This finding is expected because it provides solutions for the top two concerns expressed by parents and teachers in previous sections.

Furthermore, 24% of parents and 18% of teachers indicated that students should receive scholarships to cover the increase in prices of books and stationery. In addition, 23% of parents and 17% of teachers reported that the government should implement the social safety net project (ESSN) agreement signed with the World Bank to save the 2021-2022 academic year. This study aims at supporting children between the ages of 13 and 18 by providing cash transfers and access to social services (World Bank, 2021), which could elevate

some of the financial burdens currently faced by most families. Besides, 16% of parents and 19% of teachers reported that a fund should be established to provide schools with financial support to save the 2021-2022 academic year. Such a solution will assist schools in covering some of their operating and maintenance costs, along with the ability to provide teachers with financial support. Finally, only 3% of parents and 13% of teachers suggested shortening the academic year as a solution. These low percentages are possibly because students have already missed many school weeks over the past two years and because the new academic year must not be saved by sacrificing any additional learning opportunities.

Table 16. Solutions for Saving the New Academic Year

	Parent Survey (%)	Teacher Survey (%)
Provide Teachers and Students with Financial Support to Cover the Cost of Transportation, Electricity, and Internet	34	33
Provide Students with Scholarships to Cover the Increase in the Prices of Books and Stationery	24	18
Implement the Social Safety Net Project (ESSN) agreement signed with the World Bank, which provides financial assistance to families with children in schools.	23	17
Establish a Fund to Provide Schools with Financial Support	16	19
Shorten the Academic Year	3	13

Furthermore, principals suggested short-term and long-term solutions to save the new school year. One of the common short-term solutions is providing aid for schools, teachers, and parents. Some reported that the government is responsible for covering fuel costs. Others believed that the government should secure electricity and internet in case in-person schooling is not possible. One public school principal claimed that "the government should subsidize fuel costs and provide it to all schools so that they can start in-person schooling."

Another public school principal said, "There might be news about having a lockdown due to COVID, so the government should provide electricity and internet to save the year." And yet another principal, this time of a private school said, "He [the minister] should have the power to get funds for student transportation to help them escape their negative home environments..."



Some principals also suggested that collaboration between stakeholders such as the parents' council and the MoT is necessary to cover internet costs and to facilitate access to reliable internet services.

As for the long-term solutions, a few principals suggested that curriculum reforms are needed to compensate for the lessons and skills students lost in the past two years due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

One private school principal said, *"It's about time that the center for research [CERD] starts working on the curriculum...it needs adjustments as students have lost two years of learning."*

Another private school principal said, *"The MEHE should give principals the freedom of choice to decide what's best for the students and teachers."*

Henceforth, in the short term, providing solutions for the transportation, electricity and internet problems is crucial for any successful attempt to return to school this year. At the beginning of this report, an overview portrays the intensity of Lebanon's financial crisis, its crippled economy, and the continuous failure of ministerial collaborations. Therefore, implementing any strategy for durable solutions is highly unlikely in the absence of foreign aid.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examines school, teacher, parent, and student readiness and challenges for the new academic year (2021-2022). In addition, it probes the challenges and prospects of returning to in-person classroom education and online schooling as well as the possible solutions for a successful return. The study is based on a total number of 3,261 survey participants, including 2,442 parents and 819 teachers as well as eight phone interviews with principals from public and private schools distributed across all eight governorates.

Using a mixed-method research approach reveals that Lebanon's current financial crisis poses numerous barriers to having a successful return to school this year. Therefore, both public and private schools, students, parents, and teachers, are not ready to return to in-person or online schooling this year. Furthermore, the findings indicate that the implications of the financial crisis are more prominent among public school students and teachers, irrespective of the learning approach.

The crisis has caused a significant reduction in parents and teachers' purchasing power, leaving them with no choice but to consider leaving the country. Besides, many were forced to move their children from private to public school since they could no longer afford private school tuition.

While most parents, teachers, and principals prefer in-person classroom education because it is more educationally and psychologically effective for students, numerous challenges hinder this possibility. Among the top barriers to returning to in-person schooling is the struggle to commute to school, which is a direct result of the ongoing fuel crisis. Parents and teachers who use private cars to commute to school have no access to fuel. At the same time, those who rely on public transportation are either struggling to cover its increasing expense or its unavailability. Furthermore, many parents cannot cover the education expenses (tuition, books, stationery) for this year. The MEHE ensured that it would strictly follow the World Health Organization's (WHO) recommendations to guarantee students' and teachers' safe return to school. However, parents and teachers still expressed concerns about COVID-19; findings from this study mainly reveal that almost all students and many teachers have not yet been vaccinated.

On the other hand, some participants favored online schooling because they consider in-person schooling unfeasible. However, all participants suffer from power cuts and a weak internet connection, with parents and teachers in public schools struggling more than their counterparts in the private sector. Besides, average electricity and internet bills exceeded the average household income; hence, adopting online learning is also a financial challenge amid this crisis.



Findings in this report also show possible solutions suggested by parents, teachers, and principals. For instance, providing students and teachers with financial support to cover the cost of transportation and electricity is the most preferred solution for parents and teachers to save the academic year. Principals also spoke of short-term and long-term solutions to save the new academic year. In the short term, they suggested increasing teachers' salaries and requested various stakeholders to collaborate and provide solutions for students' return to in-person and online schooling. As for the long-term, principals called for curriculum reforms to compensate for the missed parts of the educational curriculum during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Based on this report's data analysis and inspired by solutions provided by the participants, below are some recommendations:

- The successful return to in-person schooling requires the implementation of a nationwide plan that guarantees students' and teachers' ability to commute to school. This could be achieved through a voucher system or a school transport scheme for both students and teachers.
- The successful return to online schooling necessitates access to affordable and reliable electricity and internet services
- Adjust teachers' salaries to adapt for the current inflation and devaluation in the value of the Lebanese Lira.
- Monitor and limit the increase in tuition fees that could be imposed by private schools.
- Subsidize the cost of books and stationery as its cost is beyond the financial means of most of the surveyed sample.
- Effective implementation of WHO's recommendations across all schools including teacher and student vaccination.
- With continuous shortage in resources, school principals should be granted the autonomy to decide on which teaching and learning approach suits their students and teachers amid the crises.
- Adjusting the national curriculum to compensate for the lessons and skills students missed due to COVID-19.

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