



# **Invisible Barriers**

## **Factors Influencing Syrian Refugee Youth in Continuing their Education in Lebanon**

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# Executive Summary

This research probes into the challenges faced by Syrian refugees after finishing the 9th grade, as it is usually a critical turning point for students enrolled in the Lebanese education system. The study follows a mixed-method approach comprising quantitative and qualitative instruments to investigate the factors that support Syrian refugee students' ability to continue their education as well as the factors that might hinder their educational outcome.

The study revealed that most students, while coming from a humble background, valued education and received support from their parents to continue their education. Moreover, most students received remedial and language support from NGOs, which supported them in continuing their education. The vast majority of students prioritized education over marriage and work, and only sought work to gather money for university or pay off their tuition fees.

Some students struggled with official documents to register and were about to quit if they had not received critical support from a sympathizer or an NGO. Furthermore, many find traveling to school to be a daily challenge, especially with increasing transportation costs, a worsening financial crisis, and the struggle to pay school fees. Besides, the vast majority expressed the struggle to learn foreign languages. For many, it affected their ability to understand and perform well at school. Additionally, addressing bullying and providing a supportive school environment is critical for making students feel safe to come to school and learn.

Syrian children had high hopes to continue their higher education either abroad or in Lebanon. In Lebanon, employment restrictions were cited as the biggest future threat facing Syrian refugees as it blocked any hopes they had of building the career they envisioned. In more immediate terms, the current economic crisis and COVID-19 are threatening their chances of realizing their dreams. Thus, it is critical to support Syrian children at these difficult times to further build on their successes.

# Introduction



Ever since the outbreak of the war in Syria and the influx of Syrian refugees into Lebanon, education of refugee children became a prominent issue the country has been coping with. While efforts were made to accommodate refugee children, social, economic, and security issues remain as major burdens to fair, stable, and safe educational experience.

School-aged children comprise 55.3% of all refugees in Lebanon (UNHCR, 2019). Of those children, only 30% are enrolled in some form of education at the primary school level. In comparison, less than 10% make it to secondary school (UNESCO, 2020). Escaping war, adapting to a new environment, socioeconomic challenges, legal and immigration challenges are among the issues Syrians face when entering Lebanon. To many, this makes access to education even more difficult.

Registration in Lebanese public and private schools can be quite difficult, as many refugees have escaped their homes in Syria and do not necessarily have the proper documentation to register. School capacity is also a major challenge. Most Lebanese public schools were not ready to accommodate the high influx of Syrian students. As a response to that, afternoon classes were introduced for Syrian students to attend classes after Lebanese students finished their school day. While this helped to increase access to education among refugees, many challenges remained.



In addition to the challenge of getting a place at a school, Syrian students face several difficulties due to the rigid Lebanese curriculum, of which the language barrier is most prominent. Schools in Lebanon typically teach most classes in English or French. On the other hand, in Syria the language of instruction is Arabic and thus Syrian children struggle with acquiring English or French, which are the official language of instruction in Math and Science in Lebanon. In most cases, Syrian children are enrolled in mainstream schools without prior to any induction or language support. This poses a major problem for students, as not only do they have to learn an entirely new language in a limited amount of time, but they must also learn math and sciences in that new language.

Many organizations and centers have focused on tutoring Syrian students of all ages outside the school since arrival and to date to help them better integrate into the Lebanese education system. They have achieved moderate success in assisting students in breaking the language barrier and adapting to the curriculum.

However, economic hardships remain the main burden facing this community. Due to the restrictions imposed by the Lebanese government on Syrian refugees, which forbids them from working in a plethora of jobs restricted to Lebanese nationals (Bou Khater, 2017), forcing parents to rely on international aid or underpaid jobs in the informal sector, families face grave financial instability (Marouani et al., 2020). This can act as a significant deterrent for Syrian students trying to pay for tuition fees and school supplies and might force them to drop out to support their families financially. The impact of these barriers on school outcomes for Syrian refugees can be traced on several levels. After 9 years of the Syrian crisis, nearly 40% of school-aged children are out of education and only 1% of those enrolled reach grade 9 (MEHE, 2019). Furthermore, Lebanon's current economic crisis, further aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic, disproportionately affected vulnerable communities, including refugees. The devaluation of the Lebanese pound and the increase in prices could leave many families unable to pay for their children's education.

**40%** are out

After 9 years of the Syrian crisis, nearly 40% of school-aged children are out of education and only 1% of those enrolled reach grade 9 (MEHE, 2019)

This research probes into the challenges faced by Syrian refugees after finishing the 9th grade, as it is usually a critical turning point for students enrolled in the Lebanese education system. Many students choose to leave formal education following the 9th grade's official Brevet exam to enroll in vocational education, while others leave for work or marriage (Khawaja, 2016). Students who remain enrolled in schools are often faced with challenges; however, specific individual, institutional, and household characteristics might encourage Syrian students to overcome those challenges to further pursue their education.

The main objective of this study is to investigate the factors that can help Syrian refugee students continue their education. Understanding what factors and types of support contribute to increasing retention amongst Syrian students can help strengthen existing successful initiatives and potentially scale it up. The outcomes of the study can also provide valuable lessons for policymakers and donors to invest in existing good practice that helped Syrian students in continuing their education despite the enormous challenges they face in Lebanon.

The study makes a number of recommendations including providing support for students in transitioning to grade 10 (including support with finding a school and obtaining the official papers required for registration). Establishing a system of mentorship accompanied by remedial and homework support is key to students' academic achievement. Providing cash assistance for families in order to ensure students don't have to give up education in order to work is another method of support. Finally, longer term solutions such as introducing university scholarships and addressing the legal barriers that prohibit refugees from working in Lebanon.

# Methodology

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## Data Collection

In order to investigate the push factors that help Syrian students continue their education despite the myriad of challenges they face in Lebanon, we designed a mixed-method approach comprising quantitative and qualitative instruments. An online survey was prepared and sent to school and center principals, which were then forwarded to students. The survey went over institutional factors, educational experiences, educational performance, social experiences, socioeconomic factors, and living conditions of Syrian refugee students in Lebanon. The survey was administered on Survey Monkey and received 37 participants. 21 telephone interviews were conducted with Syrian refugee students, comprising open-ended questions.

## Limitations

Our research methodology was designed in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Face-to-face methods were not possible. Therefore, we could not conduct focus groups and face-to-face interviews. Furthermore, the pandemic restricted our ability to reach a bigger sample, henceforth our sample size is limited, and it does not necessarily represent the entire Syrian students' population in Lebanon.

## Ethics

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Lebanese American University. Further, all researchers have a certificate from the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative, a research ethics and compliance training program.

# Students' Profile

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In order to better understand the profile of the participants in this study we examined their school characteristics as well as their socio-economic background. Therefore, this section provides a profile summary for Syrian refugee students who were interviewed and surveyed during this study.

## School Background

The average number of lost educational years reported by our interviewed students is two years, with a minimum of 1 year and a maximum of 4 years. Furthermore, 33% of our interviewed students reported that they would switch to a different school next year because their school stops at grade 9. This emphasizes the critical role of NGOs that could assist students during their transition to a new school.

Moreover, 57% of interviewed students are attending school in the morning shift, with 43% attending the afternoon shift. On the other hand, only 17% of surveyed students are attending the morning shift, while the vast majority attend the afternoon shift (Table 1). Since the quantitative survey is anonymous to ensure confidentiality, it was not

possible to know if the same participants who completed the survey were also selected for the interviews. Syrian students are segregated in the afternoon shift classes, and these classes are provided by contract teachers and rely on international aid. Syrian children in the afternoon shift receive physical education or art lessons and have a very short break. Furthermore, afternoon shift classes open when there is a minimum of 20 students in the classroom, thus as the demand in higher grades decreases there is a greater difficulty to find schools that offer classes in the afternoon shift. Research indicates that the quality of teaching and learning in afternoon shifts is much worse than that in the morning shift (Crul et al, 2019, Shuayb, et al, 2014, 2016.).

Table 1. Student enrollment by shift time

|                      | Morning Shift (8am-1pm) | Afternoon Shift (2pm-6pm) |
|----------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| Interviewed Students | 57.14%                  | 42.86%                    |
| Surveyed Students    | 16.67%                  | 83.33%                    |

Over half of the sampled students are enrolled in public schools, while the remaining are distributed between private and UNRWA schools (Table 2).

Table 2. Enrollment by type of school

|                      | Public | Private | UNRWA  |
|----------------------|--------|---------|--------|
| Interviewed Students | 52.38% | 33.33%  | 14.29% |
| Surveyed Students    | 58.06% | 41.94%  | 0%     |

As for their age, the majority of students are between the age of 15 and 16 years. However, almost 30% are between 17 and 18 years, which indicates that some students have missed some schooling years (Table 3).

Table 3. Students age distribution

|                      | 14 years | 15 years | 16 years | 17 years | 18 years |
|----------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Interviewed Students | 0%       | 23.53%   | 47.06%   | 11.76%   | 17.65%   |
| Surveyed Students    | 10.34%   | 27.59%   | 31.03%   | 27.59%   | 3.45%    |

The vast majority of our sample have been living in Lebanon for over 7 years, thus it is likely they came while they were in their early elementary education (Table 4).

Table 4. Students years of residence

|                      | 3 to 6 years | 7 to 9 years | Over 9 years |
|----------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Interviewed Students | 23.81%       | 76.19%       | 0%           |
| Surveyed Students    | 27.6%        | 58.61%       | 13.80%       |

## Socio-economic background

Less than 4% of our surveyed students reported that their parents are illiterate, on the other hand, over 60% reported that their parents have completed intermediate or secondary education (Table 5). These findings are important because parents' education level is an

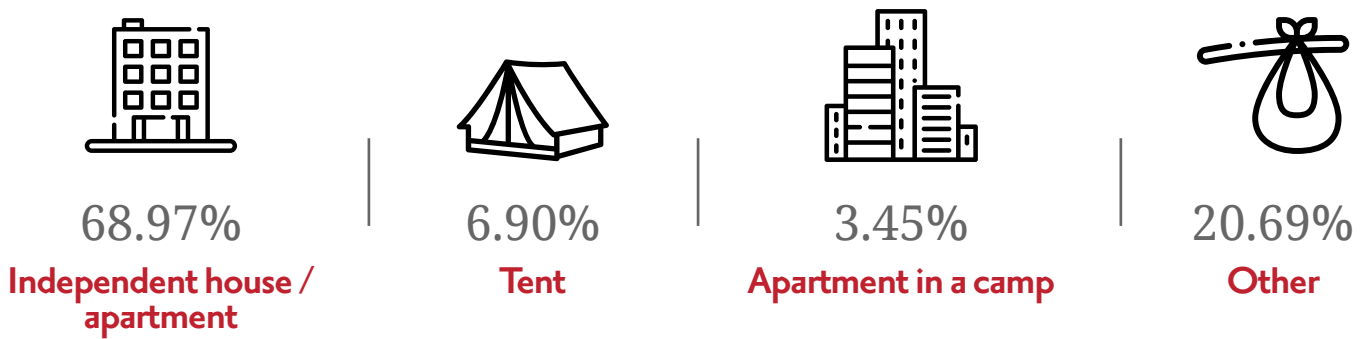
important determinant of children's educational attainment. Whereby, there exists a direct positive relationship between parents' educational attainment and children's academic performance.

Table 5. Parents highest achieved level of education (for surveyed students)

|                            | University | Secondary | Intermediate | Primary | Illiterate | I don't Know |
|----------------------------|------------|-----------|--------------|---------|------------|--------------|
| Father's highest education | 3.57%      | 21.43%    | 42.86%       | 25%     | 3.57%      | 3.57%        |
| Mother's highest education | 3.57%      | 21.43%    | 46.43%       | 21.43%  | 3.57%      | 3.57%        |

As for the housing conditions, which are known for affecting education outcomes, almost two thirds (70%) were living in houses or apartments (Table 6). Unlike tents and apartments in camps, independent houses/apartments provide students with a more stable household environment, which might increase the likelihood of continuing education.

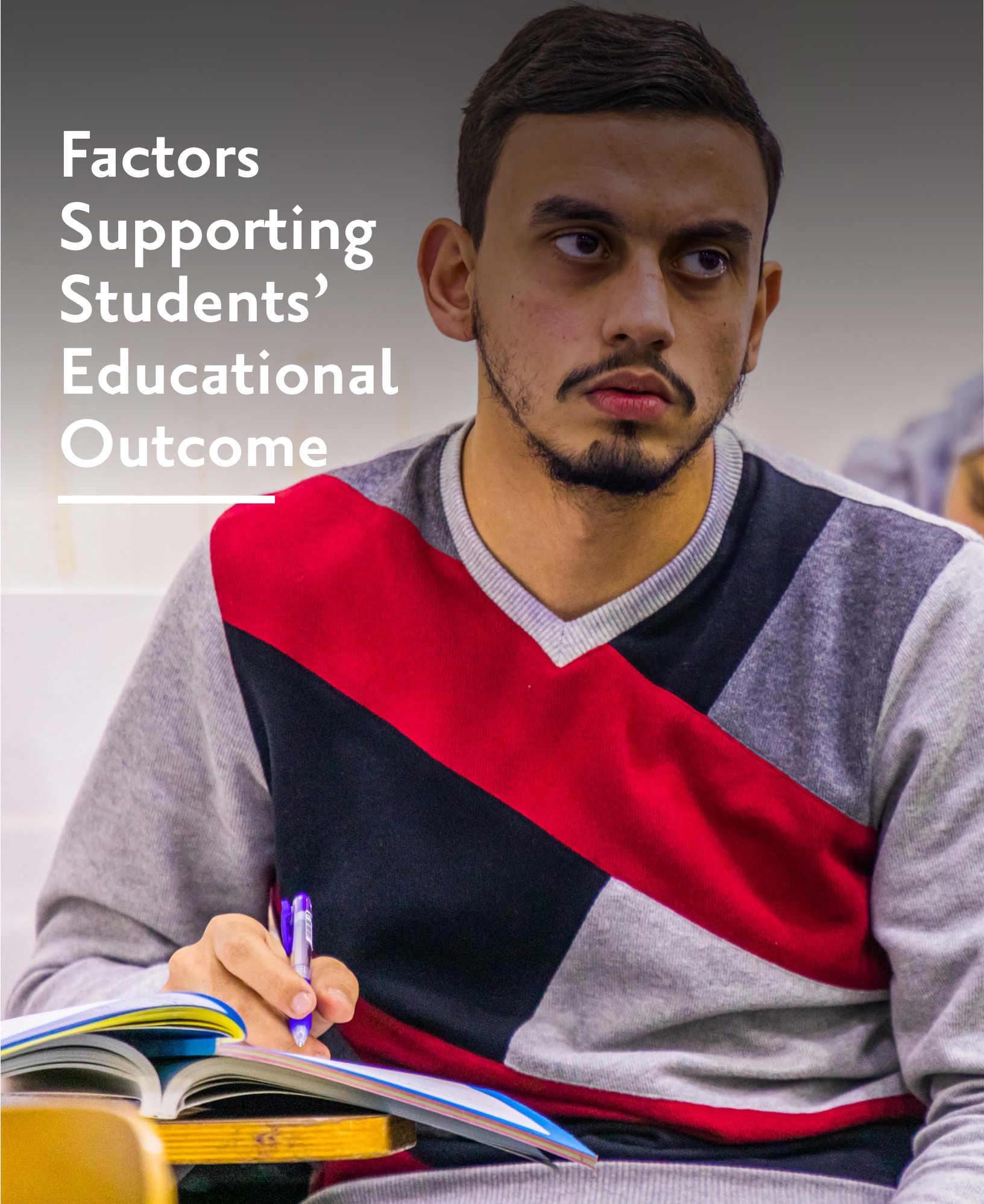
Table 6. Type of dwelling (for surveyed students)



This overview of students' background reveals that the vast majority of our sampled students have a modest background. The majority were living in apartments as opposed to tents. Moreover, over 60 percent of the parents had intermediate or secondary education.

# Factors Supporting Students' Educational Outcome

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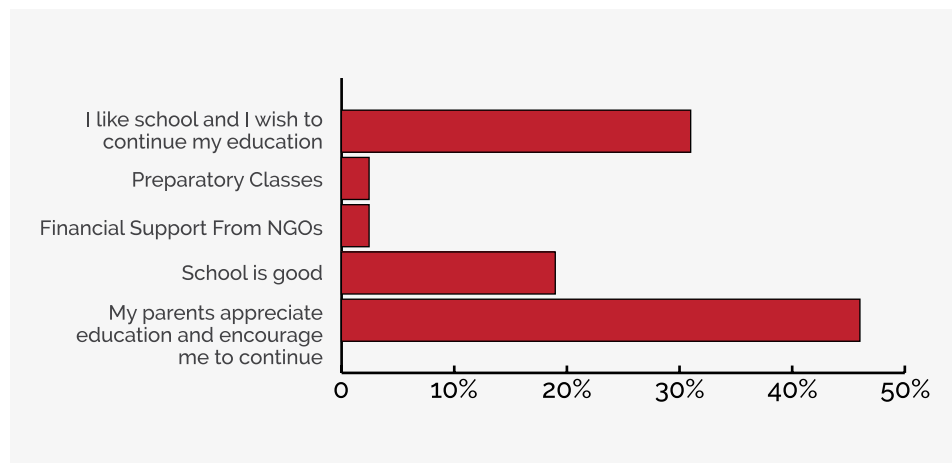




In this section, we probe into the factors that support refugee students' ability to continue their education successfully. To investigate the push factors and validate our findings, we rely on quantitative data based on an online survey and qualitative data based on phone interviews conducted with Syrian refugee students.

Our quantitative findings indicate that parents' support (46%), in addition to students liking school (31%), contributed the most to school retention and progression at school (Figure 1). This highlights the importance of parents' role in supporting their children's education and a positive school environment. Similarly, almost 19% of our surveyed students reported that "school is good", while only 4 % attributed their school progression to preparatory classes and financial support from NGOs.

Figure 1. Reasons that have helped to continue education so far



### Remedial Support

In the following section, we examine in greater detail factors that have contributed to higher retention and completion amongst students.

One of the most commonly cited factors by almost all interviewees, which had affected their schooling experience and supported them in continuing their education, has been their access to remedial (extra-curricular support) education programs. All interviewees in grade 9 stated that at different stages of their education in Lebanon, they either had or currently continue to benefit from access to academic support from NGOs. This support covered Math, Science, and English/French. Some of them also had psychosocial support offered as part of these programs. One student commented that these lessons were critical in enabling her to understand what she was being taught at school.

**Almost all students stated that the centers that provided them with academic support were of great benefit to better learn and understand the subjects.**

One of the students described one of the centers which she receives support from as her actual school and not just a center as she was taught all subjects.

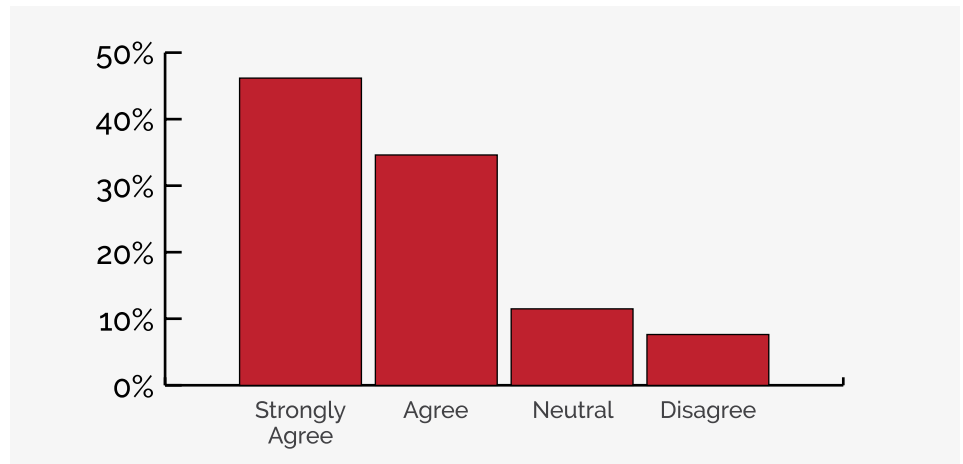
Another student stressed that the center that provided him academic support is the reason for reaching grade 9. He added that they provided them with tools such as an iPad so that he could learn online.

Another student shared that the teachers in the center were extremely helpful. Also, some students were able to register in schools and get their certificates because of the centers. On another note, some students received extra financial support (not from centers) for recharging their internet bundle.

### Supportive School Environment

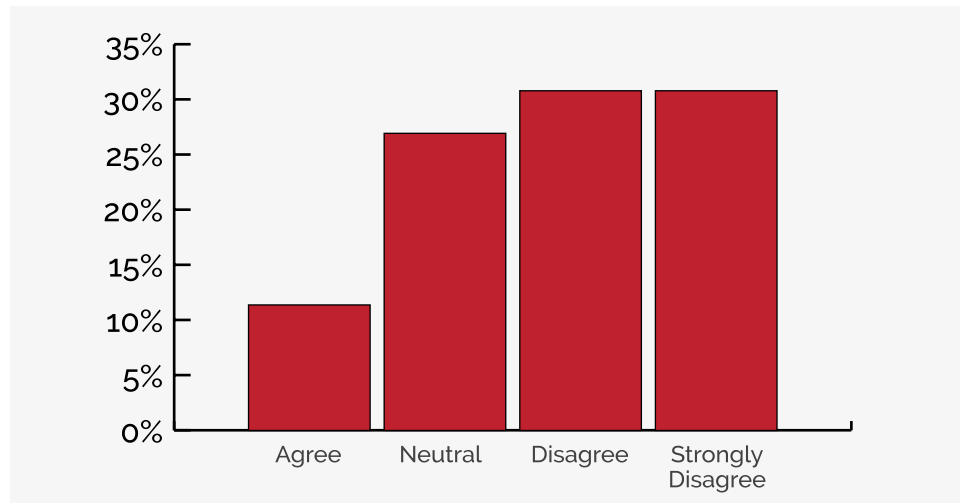
Enjoying a supportive school environment was mentioned by several participants who stated that the welcoming, organized, and disciplined atmosphere in their school played an important role in continuing their education and enjoying coming to school. These findings are consistent with our quantitative findings presented in Figure 2, whereby the majority of our surveyed Syrian students reported that their school respects their families.

Figure 2. Schools respect for family



Furthermore, some students stated that the absence of bullying and racism enhanced their schooling experience and contributed to the continuity of their educational journey. The figure below (Figure 3) validates our qualitative findings by looking in-depth into teachers' in-class practices.

Figure 3. Teachers disciplining is mostly controlling and punitive



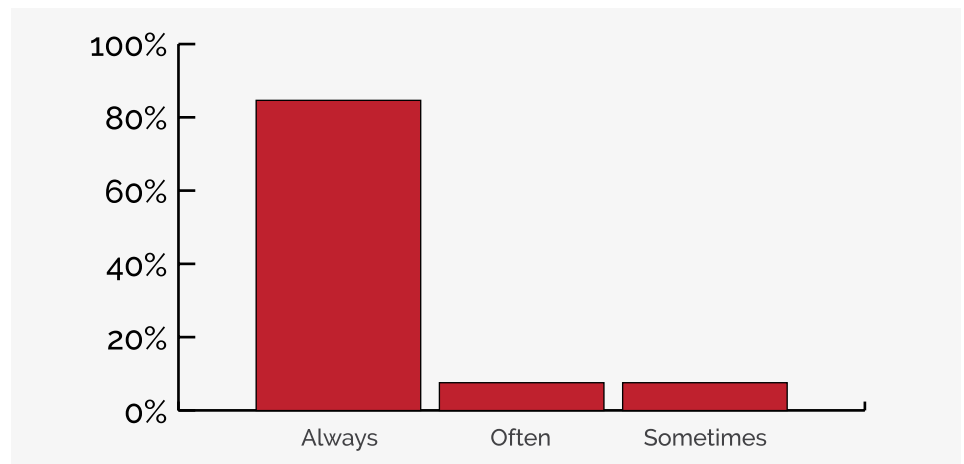
Although some students reported that their teachers' discipline is mostly controlling and punitive, the majority (62%) disagreed with this statement. Controlling and punitive behavior could lead to a poor schooling experience and thereby threaten the desire to continue education.

After looking into the importance of school-level support in improving the likelihood of students' educational success, we now proceed to probe into family and individual factors that are expected to have a similar push effect.

### Parents Support

Some of the interviewed students mentioned family support and encouragement as a factor for succeeding in school as their parents encouraged them to continue their education and did not allow them to leave school for work. The figure below shows that the majority of our surveyed students reported that their parents encouraged them to continue in education.

Figure 4. Parents encourage to continue education



This finding is important since students are less likely to perform well academically in the absence of parental encouragement (Codjoe, 2007).

Other interviewed students stated that their parents and some relatives would support them in their studies.

### Personal Efforts

Many students stated that their perseverance and aspirations to continue their education pushed them to study hard and focus on their education. Several students mentioned that they exerted extra effort to strengthen their English/French. Other students stated that they used YouTube videos for learning English. Perseverance was a common factor shared by many students who stressed how it made them reach grade 9.



**If you finish education, you can properly build your life.”**

*Student in public school (pm shift)*

### Prioritizing Education

Education rather than marriage was the priority for almost all students in our study. Marriage is not seen as a favorable current option by the students. None of the interviewed students said that they were considering it for the next three years. One female student said there was a “20% chance”, saying she wants to focus on her education first. Another female student said that some families proposed marriage to her, but she and her father want her to continue

her education. These findings are consistent with our quantitative findings whereby the majority of our sampled refugee students reported that they will continue studying three years from now and that it’s very unlikely that they will get married in the coming three years (Table 7).

*Table 7. Students expectation for the future*

| Three years from now, how likely are you to: | Very likely | Likely | Neutral | Unlikely | Very Unlikely |
|--|-------------|--------|---------|----------|---------------|
| Work   | 8.70%       | 43.48% | 21.74%  | 21.74%   | 4.35%         |
| Study  | 69.23%      | 15.38% | 11.54%  | 3.85%    | 0.00%         |
| Get married                                  | 0.00%       | 0.00%  | 8.70%   | 21.74%   | 69.57%        |

Working, on the other hand, was a viable option for over 50 percent of students who stated that they are likely to be working in the next 3 years. Several male students already work during their summer break to support their families. When asked about the chances of them working in three years, many male and female students expressed their will to work to support their families. Table 7 echoes our qualitative findings as it shows **over half of the surveyed**

**students responded that it is likely that they will work in the coming three years.** However, it is important to note that many see work as an opportunity to save money for university and not an end in itself. For instance, some of the interviewed students said they would like to work to gather money for university or work while studying at university to pay off their tuition fees.

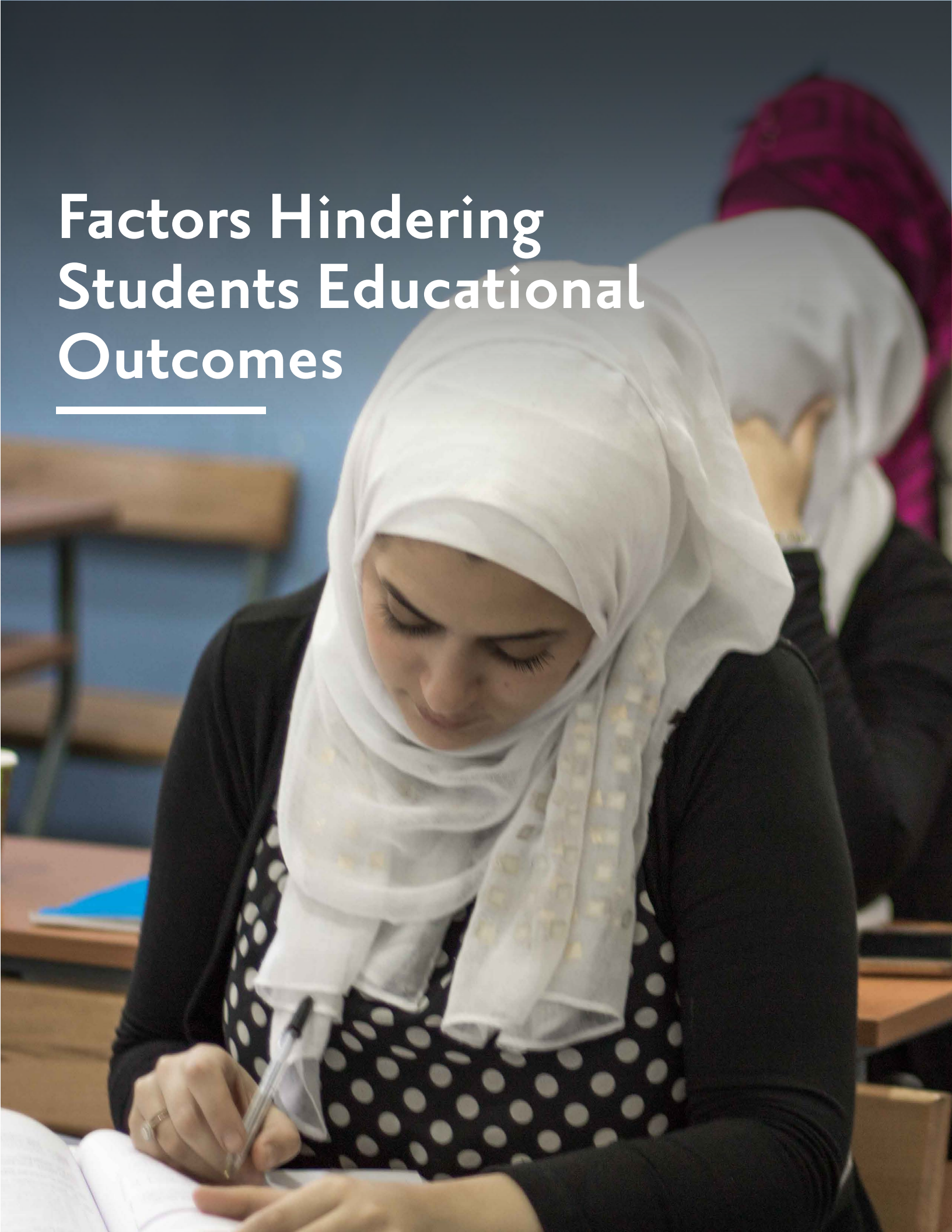


There is no better feeling than reaching university, and to be called ‘doctor’, there is nothing like this feeling.”

*Student in private school*

# Factors Hindering Students Educational Outcomes

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In this section, we probe into the factors that hinder refugee students' ability to continue their education successfully. To investigate the pull factors and validate our findings, we rely on both quantitative data that is based on an online survey and qualitative data based on telephone interviews conducted with Syrian refugee students.

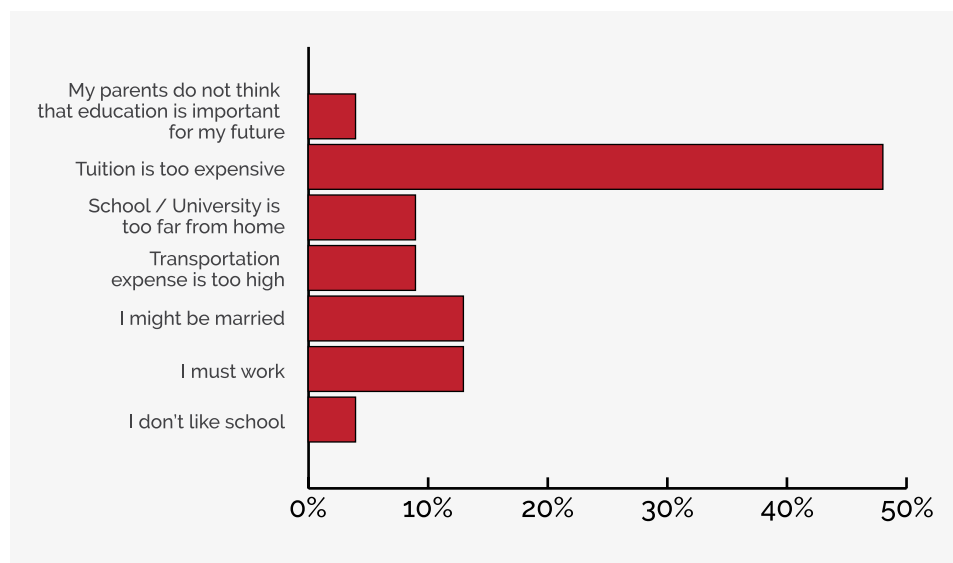
Our quantitative findings indicate that most sampled refugee students attribute the difficulty in continuing education to expensive tuition (Figure 5). Therefore,

**educational expenses are posing additional financial burdens and acting as a barrier to education, especially in the presence of a worsening economic crisis in Lebanon,**

as seen in figures 7 and 9 below.

The following qualitative findings mirror the quantitative results presented in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Reasons that justify the difficulty in pursuing education in the coming three years



In the following section we examine the challenges faced by students as discussed during the telephone interviews.

## Registration

Despite the huge support allocated to the education of refugee children by international donors, **finding a place and registering at a school in Lebanon poses a challenge for many Syrian refugees primarily due to official documents and papers required by MEHE and the school.** Several students who were enrolled in public schools' morning shift (Table 1) revealed that it was hard to register in this shift. One stated that he was able to register with the help of a neighbor. He was keen on not joining the afternoon shift as he wanted to work after school. Another student stated that she and her family had issues with their IDs/residencies, which caused them some difficulties in registering in school, but eventually, it worked out for them with support from a sponsor. Few students reported facing difficulties with the school entrance exam, which they failed. As a result, they had to choose any school that accepted them, even when it was not their preferred choice of school, or they are unhappy at school. Due to the entrance exam and selection process, some students were unable to enroll in the school closest to where they live, which has financial consequences regarding the cost of transport.

A student in the afternoon shift stated that she had to obtain official family records from Syria to register in the school as she didn't have a UN card. Some students shared previous challenges in registering in their schools. For example, a student struggled to register in a school as his family arrived in Lebanon after the registration period was over. Another student struggled due to missing school certificates documents that prove the level of schooling achieved in Syria and the lack of residency documents in Lebanon. This student added that the requested papers posed yet again an obstacle when she wanted to register in grade 10, but her teachers in the supporting centers helped her register.

Students in private schools shared that documentation issues were a major challenge in registration and continuing education. For example, a student shared that he repeated grade 9 because he did not have the papers required for doing the official exam. Also, a student had to repeat the grade 9 again since the official exams were not announced for a long period, so she decided to repeat grade 9 for the third time. Another student stated that he wanted to drop out because he could not register in a public school. However, he then came across a private school, which helped him register in grade 9.

After overcoming the challenges to register and reserve a class seat in either the morning or afternoon shift, refugee students were faced with a new challenge, finding the means to travel to school daily.



## Transportation

Traveling to school was one of the main challenges that students faced. One of the students in the afternoon shift shared that the bus that picks her up to and from the center where she receives extra support arrives late sometimes, but this did not affect her perseverance to learn and attend the center. Another student faced challenges with transportation, and her mother used to ride the bus with her to take her from school in the dark after attending her afternoon shift classes.

Transportation was an issue for another student as he was working and thus could not commit to the school bus schedule, but eventually, he started to use public transportation. Another student shared that he lives far from school, so he used to go in a taxi, but his family will not be able to afford the payment anymore. In addition, a student in a private school shared that due to the costly transportation, she had to either walk in hot weather back home or would have to wait for an hour for her dad, who had to leave his job to pick her and her siblings up from school. Another student shared that while she usually goes to school by bus, sometimes she would walk as the bus fees are expensive.

These findings are consistent with our quantitative results presented in Figure 5, whereby 17% of our survey respondents reported difficulties in going to school due to high transportation costs or living far away from school.

## Language

Language, in particular having to learn math and science in a foreign language (French or English), presents an issue not only for Syrian children but also for Lebanese too. However, Syrians struggle more as they lack the support needed to learn an advanced level of math and science while they do not have a good command of the language of instruction. Almost all the interviewed students shared that they struggle to learn the foreign language, English, or French, and for many, it affected their ability to understand and get passing grades in other subjects taught in English/French. Some shared their struggle in previous years and commented that they are getting better with time. For example, some of the students mentioned that

they were used to learning the subjects in Arabic in Syria, and this change to English was challenging but they eventually adapted. As a result, many students mentioned that they were facing difficulties in math, biology, physics and chemistry. Few students shared that they failed in grade 8 because they faced difficulties learning subjects in English. Students reported facing difficulties in Arabic as a subject not as a language of instruction. In other words, they are more comfortable studying science courses in Arabic, but Arabic as a subject on its own (Arabic literature, Arabic grammar etc.) is difficult as well.

These findings are consistent with our quantitative findings presented in Table 8, whereby 23% of our respondents reported always facing difficulties in foreign language classes. Similarly, around 8% of students reported always facing difficulties in understanding the language of instruction in math and science classes.

Table 8. Difficulties understanding the language of instruction

| Do you face difficulties understanding the language of instruction in: | Always | Often  | Sometimes | Rarely | Never  |
|--|--------|--------|-----------|--------|--------|
| Foreign language classes   | 23.08% | 19.23% | 53.85%    | 3.85%  | 0.00%  |
| Math classes   | 7.69%  | 34.62% | 38.46%    | 0.00%  | 19.23% |
| Science classes  | 7.69%  | 15.38% | 53.85%    | 15.38% | 7.69%  |

This indicates that language of instruction could be a significant barrier for education, especially for refugee students who often struggle with lessons that are taught in English and French after years of learning in Arabic in Syria.

Upon arrival, most countries welcome refugee students with preparatory classes and psychosocial support that would help children overcome language challenges and bring them back to ordinary life and normality. However, such support remains shy and underfunded in Lebanon, where most refugee students reported not receiving enough academic support to study in a foreign language.

## Need for Academic Support

Some students shared some challenges in not receiving academic support, especially in previous years. Although this lack of support starts from previous years, it might affect the students' performance in a critical year, such as the Brevet in grade 9. For example, a student mentioned that there are many incidents in grade 7 when teachers would say "you learned this in grade 4," "you learned this in grade 3," but she stated that these topics had not been covered in class. She relied on resources from the internet to learn by herself. Also, a student registered in a private school shared that in her previous school years, the teachers in public schools were not supportive and this caused her

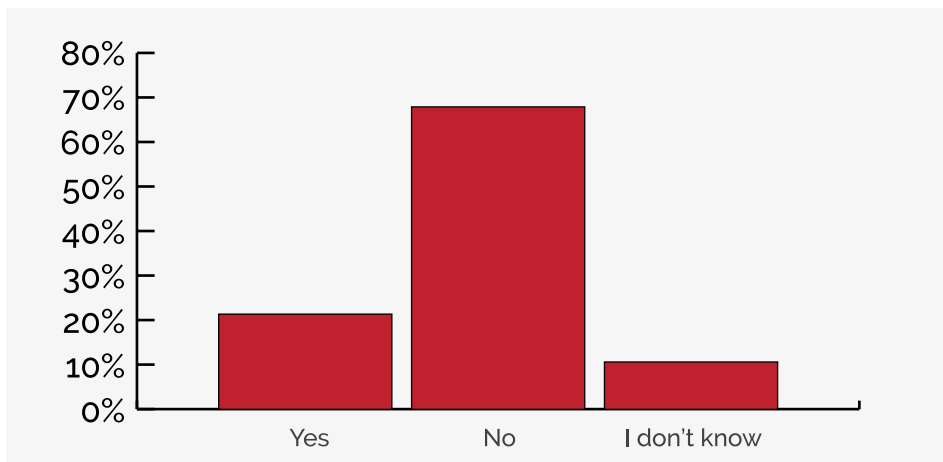
to fail in addition to facing difficulty in the English language. Two students shared that they could not afford to register for extra academic support classes such as English and Math in a certain center. These findings are consistent with our quantitative findings presented in Figure 6 whereby, although preparatory classes could play a crucial role in improving students' academic performance and increase the likelihood of continuing education, the majority of our surveyed students (68%) did not receive any preparatory classes.



Okay, first half of the year there were protests and we missed part of the program, and now with corona I mean, we didn't take anything in the brevet."

*Student in public school (PM shift)*

Figure 6. Percentage of students who attended preparatory classes in Lebanon before enrolling in school



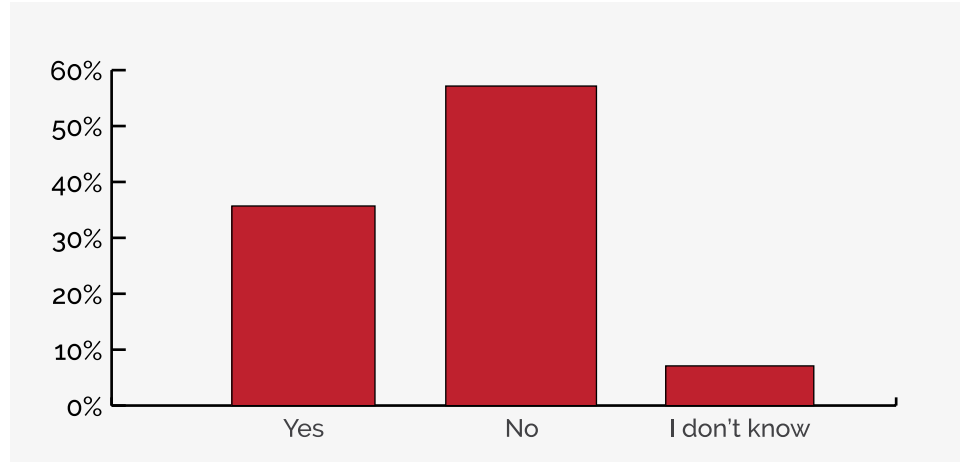
In addition, a student attending the morning shift in a public school, mentioned that he would continue in vocational education as he is scared of failing the tenth grade as no one can help him at home, and he thinks that the additional classes he attends will not be enough to help him through school. One of the students in the afternoon shift

shared that some teachers in her school made her dislike the school due to what she saw as favoritism. The student added that the quality of teaching in the school is not satisfactory and she was not acquiring the information she needed to progress academically, which poorly affected her confidence.

## Financial Challenges

Almost all of the interviewed students expressed how the financial crisis in Lebanon made their families' financial situation worse. Many expressed how the economic crisis affected their parents' work/ salaries, and others expressed how unlikely it is for their father to find work. This finding is also mirrored in the survey conducted, whereby over 50% of students reported that their fathers are unemployed (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Father's employment status



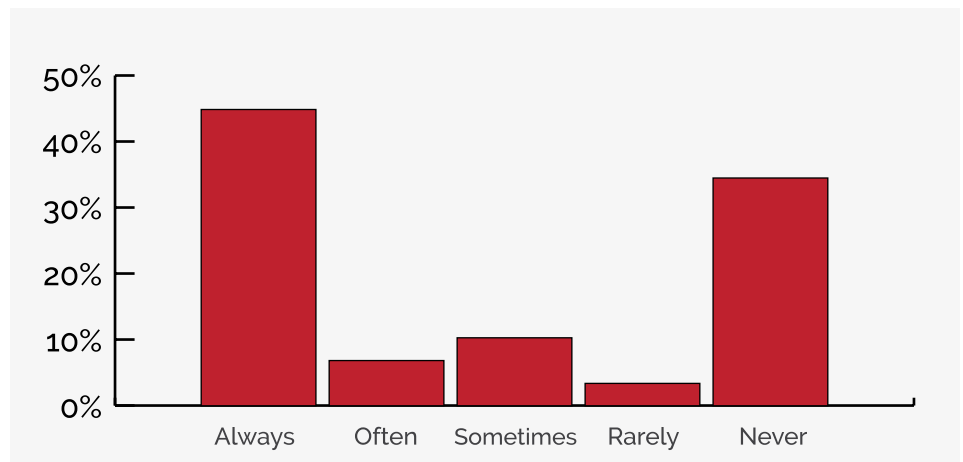
**If someone wants to work, his salary is less than the things he wants to buy.”**

*Student in private school*

This is indicative of the worsening economic situation in Lebanon, which all students expressed belief that it's creating significant challenges to being able to continue their education. A few students reported that they are likely to drop out to find a job and support their families. Some students expressed that they are worried they may not be able to continue their high school education although they would like to. Other students believe that even if their family is struggling financially, they will

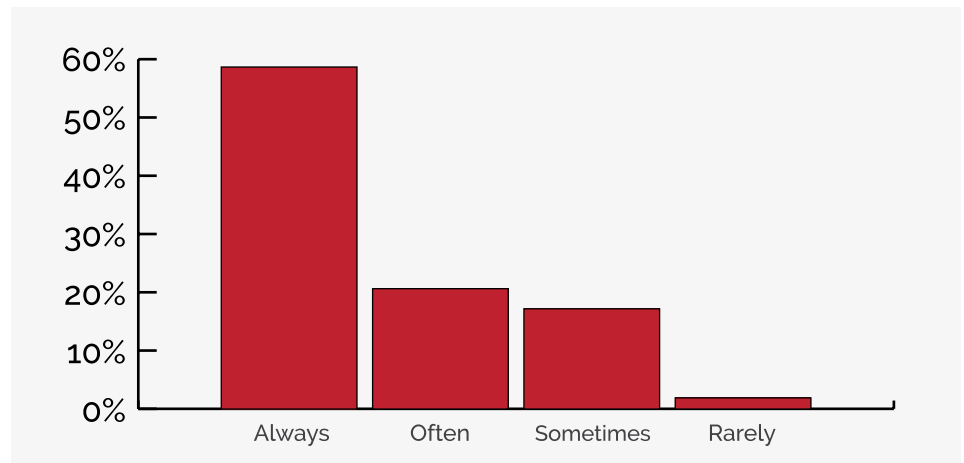
never stop their education. Therefore, financial challenges could deter refugee students' ability to continue their education. These findings are echoed in our quantitative findings, whereby more than half of our surveyed respondents reported that they feel pressured to contribute to their family's income (Figure 8). This might negatively affect students' academic performance and, in worst cases, lead to higher rates of dropout.

Figure 8. The pressure to contribute to the family's income



Students complained about facing difficulties coping with the increase in prices of essential products due to inflation, covering the cost of school transport, struggling to pay the remaining school fees, and many were worried they might not be able to pay for their high school fees. These findings are consistent with our quantitative finding, whereby over 50% of our surveyed students reported that they struggle to pay bills (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Family's struggle to pay bills



Some students also stated that repatriating to Syria could be a solution if the difficult financial situation persists. Another student compared the difference in living costs between Syria and Lebanon and shared how living with nine people in one room in Lebanon makes it difficult for a grade 9 student to focus. A student registered in a private school shared that her father does

not support her family at all and that her mother's income is the only thing supporting them. They are only able to cover extremely basic needs. Although she tried to work at a hair salon for a while to support her family and would only get paid 50,000 Lebanese Liras (around 7 USD) per week, she stopped working after the Beirut port explosion for security and safety reasons.

## Distance Learning

The COVID-19 pandemic and the government-imposed lockdown resulted in schools having to resort to distance learning. **All students shared that they faced challenges in online learning due to power cuts, internet connection problems, high cost of mobile data subscriptions and having to share the phone with siblings/parents.**

These difficulties have all led to them missing some lessons. The means online lessons carried out or sent by their teachers on platforms such as Microsoft teams, Zoom, Facebook, WhatsApp groups (images and videos), and sending videos. All students preferred attending school in person instead of online learning.

Many students shared their concern that if school were to continue only via online learning, they would be worried about the quality of teaching and learning, which could affect school performance and university education.



**Why don't we have the means to get a phone for myself? Why can't we have good internet? Why can't I study comfortably?"**

*Student in public school (pm shift)*

## Bullying

The majority of interviewed students stated that they were bullied. A few experienced bullying for being Syrians, which was inflicted mainly by students in the morning shift. The reactions to the bullying differed, with some ignoring the incidents, while others would stay at home to avoid being exposed to such acts in the neighborhood. Teachers, too, practiced harassment as one would wear a face mask, long before COVID-19, whenever she taught Syrian afternoon students.

A few students mentioned that they would fight back. Two students were affected psychologically where one would go back home and cry while the other started to feel unsafe and vulnerable to further bullying and

harassment on the street.

A more specific example is as follows: A student in the afternoon shift shared that whenever she would enter her afternoon class, she would find very inappropriate words written by the morning students on seats, and when they complained about this to the administration, it turned out that the Lebanese morning teachers would encourage students attending the morning shift to do this. However, when the principal learned about this, he scolded the morning students and the bullying stopped. She added that she became ashamed that she lives in a camp due to the harassment of students.

## Safety and Security

Besides educational and financial factors that hinder students' success, Lebanon's lack of security reawakens the traumas experienced by the children during the Syrian war. One of the students attending public school in the morning shift stated that the security issues caused her to stay at home at times, affecting the student's psychology and level of concentration when learning from home. Also, a student attending private school shared that she didn't feel safe in the area where she previously lived as there were shootings and bombings, then when she moved to another region she felt safer.

After the Beirut port explosion, the students who were interviewed shared what they experienced and where they were. They all were relatively safe. Some of them expressed that they don't feel safe anymore to be in Lebanon and that it brought back memories from the war in Syria. Others stated that this explosion didn't affect their feeling of being safe in Lebanon.



**Did we escape death in Syria to die here?"**

*Student in public school (pm shift)*

# Students' Aspirations

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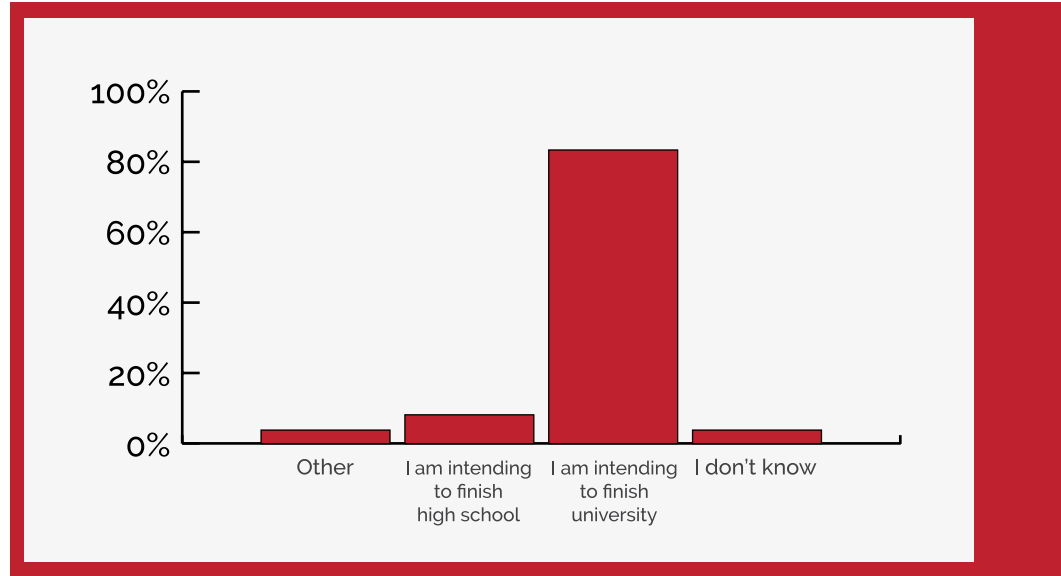


## Education Goals

The majority of interviewed students said they want to pursue higher education through university (Figure 10).

This is consistent with our qualitative and those in Table 7, where most respondents reported that they will continue studying three years from now. There is a clear preference for STEM degrees among the interviewees, as ten of the 21 students are considering studying medicine. One student said she would like to become an air hostess; another said he wants to study economics and sociology.

Figure 10. Level of education students would like to achieve



## Continuing Education Abroad

While several students said they like Lebanon and got used to it, most would prefer studying outside the country. European countries are the most popular choice among the students interviewed. One student mentioned the expensive university tuition fees as a burden to studying here, while others spoke of the difficult economic and security situation and the ambiguity regarding the country's future.

In contrast, some students said they feel familiar with Lebanon and believe it has a good quality of education, which is why they would prefer to study here. One student said she would like to study abroad but have a future in Lebanon, as she loves the country and grew up there. At least 13 students said they or their families are not considering going back to Syria. At least four of them had their homes destroyed there.

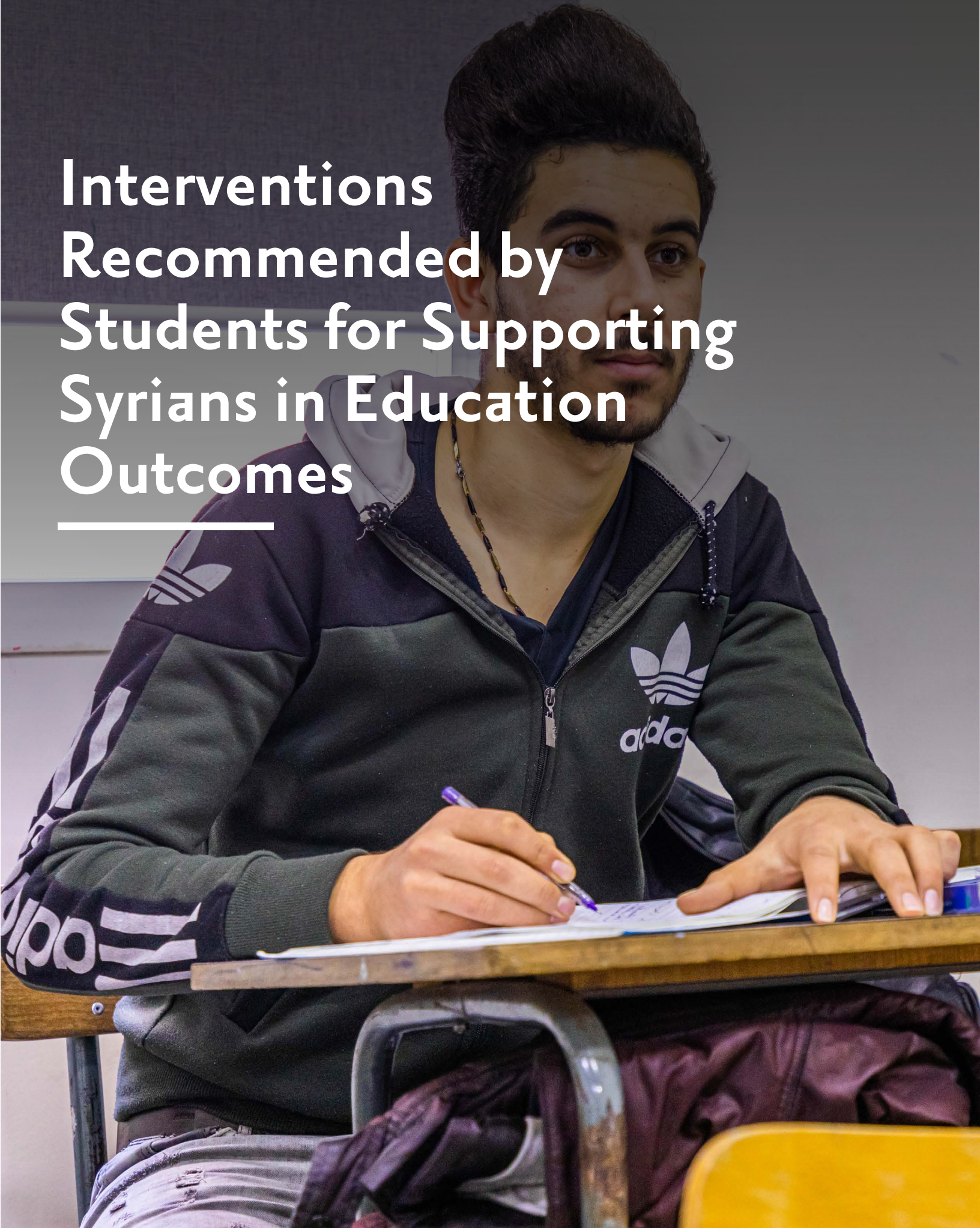


**There is nothing for us to go back to. We have no home, nothing.”**

*Student in public school (pm shift)*

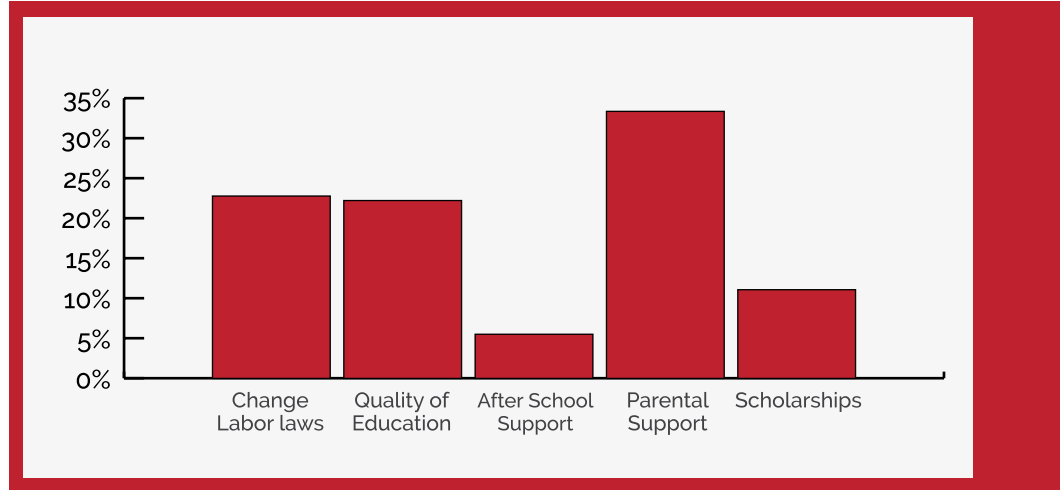
# Interventions Recommended by Students for Supporting Syrians in Education Outcomes

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Students were asked to rank five sentences, each one regarding things that can be done to ameliorate Syrian refugee students' status in Lebanon. The following graph shows the distribution of the reported priorities according to students.

Figure 11. Students' intervention priorities



Based on Figure 11, students prioritized parental support and change of labor laws interventions, as several students said this would mean their parents would have more job opportunities and, therefore, would be able to support their education financially. Surprisingly, very few prioritized scholarships, knowing that most sampled refugee students attribute the difficulty in continuing education to expensive tuition (see Figure 1). One possible explanation could be that students prefer the change in labor laws that allows them to work and pay tuition over receiving unguaranteed scholarships. Furthermore, less than 6% ranked "after school" support as a priority compared to the quality of education (22%). Students explained that if the school's education were of good quality on its own, they would not need after school support.

One student said she would need support to reach university. Another said he thinks that Syrian students leave school after Brevet due to financial reasons, and therefore could use financial support to continue. One boy said there needs to be detailed education support for students, where those helping see where exactly those students are struggling. He also believes support in English or French can help keep them in school.

# Conclusion and Recommendations

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Nearly 40% of school-age Syrian children are out of education and only 1% of those enrolled in formal schooling are in grade 9 (MEHE, 2019). These figures give a glimpse of the outcome awaiting hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugee children in Lebanon. This study attempted to identify the factors that can help students prevail in education despite these challenges. Our study, which comprised both a quantitative and a qualitative survey of Syrian students in grade 9, aimed to unpack the key factors that helped them continue their education despite all the adversities they encountered. The study revealed that most students while coming from a humble background, valued education,

and received support from their parents to continue their education. Moreover, most of them received remedial and language support from NGOs. Some of them struggled with official documents to register and were about to quit if they had not received critical support from a sympathizer or an NGO. Addressing bullying and providing a supportive school environment is key for making students feel safe to come to school and learn. Finally, supporting transportation is essential for students' continuing their education.

Syrian children had high hopes to continue their higher education either abroad or in Lebanon. Employment

restrictions in Lebanon were seen as the biggest future threat facing Syrian refugees as it blocked any hopes they had of building the career they envisioned. In more immediate terms, the current economic crisis and COVID-19 are threatening their chances of realizing their dreams. Thus, it is critical at this time to support Syrian children at these difficult times to further build on their successes. Our recommendations for supporting refugee children in further pursuing their education are as follows:

1. Support students in finding school places in grade 10, as many are struggling to find places within close proximity to their homes;
2. Provide cash support for families to elevate the pressure on children who are pushed to work instead of attending school. This cash should be conditional to students attending school;
3. Cover all schooling costs, including transport, books, stationery, and internet cost due to distance learning;
4. Continue to provide remedial support and homework clubs for students to help them make up what they missed in grade 9 due to the lockdown and poor quality of distance learning;
5. Address issues of bullying as well as diversity in the school environment;
6. Develop a mentorship program to support students in their education but also to help them when facing any challenge in their school and in continuing further education;
7. Provide scholarship opportunities to increase students' incentives to continue their education.

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