

POLICY BRIEF

Lebanon's Education Crisis: Pre-existing Challenges Before the Escalation of Israeli Aggressions

The Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crisis (ERICC) Research Programme Consortium is a global research and learning partnership that strives to transform education policy and practice in conflict and protracted crisis around the world — ultimately to help improve holistic outcomes for children — through building a global hub for a rigorous, context-relevant and actionable evidence base.

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ERICC is led by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) with Academic Lead IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society, and expert partners include Centre for Lebanese Studies, Common Heritage Foundation, Forcier Consulting, ODI, Osman Consulting, Oxford Policy Management and Queen Rania Foundation. During ERICC's inception period, NYU-TIES provided research leadership, developed the original ERICC Conceptual Framework and contributed to early research agenda development. ERICC is supported by UK Aid.

Countries in focus include Bangladesh (Cox's Bazar), Jordan, Lebanon, Myanmar, Nigeria, South Sudan and Syria.

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Executive summary

This policy brief provides an overview of the educational sector in Lebanon immediately prior to the escalation of Israel's aggression in the autumn of 2024. Establishing a baseline for the conditions in the sector is essential for assessing the expected significant impacts on education in Lebanon. By evaluating the educational landscape just before the escalation of Israel's aggression, this brief will help in formulating strategic and targeted interventions in educational policy and practice for both the immediate crisis and its protracted impacts while also considering the pre-existing challenges in Lebanon's education sector.

The policy brief outlines necessary actions for educational recovery and strategies to prevent further school disruptions in light of recent events. The challenges outlined are primarily based on insights from two online surveys conducted by the Centre for Lebanese Studies between June and August 2024. The first survey targeted 406¹ grade 12 students, with 48% attending private schools and 52% attending public schools, spanning all eight Lebanese governorates. The second survey targeted 2,075 parents from across all eight Lebanese governorates, encompassing a diverse range of educational levels: 9% with children in preschool, 47% in primary school, 28% in middle school, and 16% in high school. Together the findings from both surveys offer a comprehensive view of the issues from both student and parental perspectives. They reveal the extensive impact on education of prolonged disruptions and financial hardships, compounded by ongoing Israeli aggression, all of which are threatening the future of education in Lebanon and are expected to increase significantly.

A. Background

Since 2019, Lebanon has faced severe financial, economic, and social crises that have placed significant pressure on the education system. The financial and economic challenges, characterised by hyperinflation and a drastic devaluation of the local currency, have resulted in rising poverty and unemployment rates. Consequently, many families have not been able to meet basic living and educational expenses, forcing children to drop out of school to support their families financially, thereby increasing the number of children out of school. The World Bank highlights the critical state of Lebanon's education system, emphasising a significant deterioration in learning quality due to the compounded crises, and urgently calls for actions to decelerate the worsening of the educational situation and reduce school dropout rates (World Bank, 2021).

The compounded crises have resulted in roughly 700,000 students being out of school and experiencing significant learning setbacks (UNICEF, 2023). Research by the Center for Lebanese Studies indicates that since 2016, public school students have missed a total of 765 teaching days (Nehme, 2023). Many of these teaching days were lost due to a combination of factors: the social and political instability in Lebanon, including frequent protests, teacher strikes, and roadblocks, have disrupted the school calendar since 2019, resulting in inconsistent and inadequate learning opportunities. Additionally, the pandemic contributed to extended school closures and a shift to online learning, further exacerbating educational disparities for those without the necessary technology and internet access (Hammoud & Shuayb, 2021).

¹ It is important to note that surveying Grade 12 students may represent a relatively advantaged or elite subset of the school population. This necessitates acknowledging the limitations of the sample, both in terms of size and composition bias and the likelihood that the situation is much worse than presented here, considering demographics and dropout rates before Grade 12. Additionally, the use of online surveys limits our ability to reach the most vulnerable groups, further skewing the results and underestimating the impact.

Israeli aggressions, which started in October 2023, caused significant disruptions during the last academic year (2023/2024), particularly in southern Lebanon, where schools near the borders were forced to close entirely, while other schools could only provide lessons intermittently. Thousands of families near the border were also displaced. However, as of September 2024, the Israeli aggressions intensified, leading to the displacement of hundreds of thousands from southern Lebanon. As of October 5th 2024, Lebanon's Ministry of Public Health reported that a total of 2,036 people had been killed and 9,662 injured since the beginning of the Israeli attacks in October 2023. This escalation has resulted in the postponement of the academic year until 4 November 2024 in public schools, instead of mid-September while private schools were granted permission to start the academic year on October 7, 2024 using either online or in-person formats, with each school bearing the risk associated with its chosen method. As of 25 September 2024, 600 educational facilities² across the nation have been transformed into shelters, currently housing an increasing number of displaced individuals. This situation has exacerbated the already severe challenges confronting students and families.

B. Impact of Israeli Aggression on Education

During the previous academic year (2023/2024), students in southern Lebanon and Baalbek (in the northeast of the country) faced unprecedented challenges due to the ongoing Israeli aggression. For instance, as of June 2024, 36% of grade 12 students in these regions reported being displaced and 60% have had their education disrupted, either partially or entirely. Among these students, 38% reported that their schools experienced temporary closures before resuming classes, while 30% indicated that their schools were completely shut down, forcing them to transition to online learning. Six percent of students were left without any access to education, further exacerbating their academic setbacks and severely affecting their readiness to sit for the official exams.

As of August 2024, 24% of parents residing in regions affected by the Israeli aggression reported that they had been displaced, and 60% stated that school closures had disrupted their children's education. Additionally, 29% of parents indicated that their child's academic performance has suffered due to the ongoing aggression. The impact on students' mental health has also been profound, with two-thirds of parents reporting a deterioration in their children's psychological well-being. Furthermore, due to safety concerns, 10% of parents were compelled to transfer their children to different schools for this academic year (2024/2025).

In the face of these difficulties, only 23% of parents were confident that their child would be able to continue their education, while the majority (77%) were uncertain about their children's academic future. Additionally, 10% of parents reported that at least one child under the age of 18 had dropped out of school, out of which the majority were males (66.98%).

C. Educational Losses and Readiness for Official Examinations

In November 2023, an assessment conducted by the Centre for Lebanese Studies, targeting 272 tenth-grade students distributed across public schools in five Lebanese governorates (Mount Lebanon, Beirut, North, South, and Beqaa). The assessment was based on previous official examinations as tools to measure competencies defined by the Ministry of Education. The assessment revealed a significant loss of learning, as evidenced by low pass rates in key subjects:

² According to the Higher Authority for Education Management in Emergencies, Crises, and Disasters

only 3% of students passed the mathematics exam, 8% passed the Arabic exam, and 13% passed the English exam (Chahine et al., 2024). The study exposed severe deficiencies in basic competencies, particularly in mathematics and language skills, and highlighting the learning crisis, posing risks to continuity and progression in education.

Moreover, our survey of grade 12 students revealed that only 27% of private school students and 17% of public school students felt ready to take the official exams. The primary reason for this low level of readiness was the cumulative learning losses resulting from approximately 700 missed school days over the past six academic years. These losses have been exacerbated by ongoing educational disruptions caused by crises, including the Israeli aggression in Southern Lebanon, Baalbek, and the Beqaa regions.

As an indication of the trend in loss of learning, the percentage of grade 12 students who believe that the knowledge and skills they have gained over the last three years are sufficient to continue their educational journey has decreased from 21% last year to 19% this year (11% in public schools, 26% in private schools). This decline reflects the accumulation of loss of learning and a decline in the effectiveness of the current education system in preparing students for future educational stages.

D. Deteriorating Quality of Education

Both public and private schools have witnessed a marked decline in the quality of education. For instance, 39% of public grade 12 students reported that the quality of education in their schools was good this year, a slight decrease from 40% last year (Hammoud, 2023). In private schools, only 52% of grade 12 students reported the quality of education being good this year, a sharp decline from 68% the previous year. This suggests that the quality of education in private schools is deteriorating more rapidly than in public schools.

The overall decline in educational quality and the widening gap between private and public schools is further reflected in students' self-assessments of academic performance. While 45% of grade 12 students in private schools rated their academic performance as good, only 35% of their counterparts in public schools reported the same.

E. Financial Barriers to Education

Lebanon's ongoing economic crisis has intensified the educational challenges, with families struggling to afford tuition fees, as over half of the student population in Lebanon are enrolled in private schools. Our recent parent survey reveals that the average annual tuition for private schools, including transportation costs, has soared to US\$3,964 per child this year, compared to \$3,620 and \$2,355 for the past two academic years, respectively. Meanwhile, the average household income reported this year is only \$855 per month. Consequently, 65% of parents have resorted to borrowing money to cover educational expenses.

Moreover, 30% of parents have transferred their children from private to public schools, primarily due to the inability to afford private tuition, as reported by 84% of respondents.

F. Psychological Well-Being of Students

Beyond academic challenges, students are facing significant challenges to their psychological well-being, with 44% of grade 12 students reporting poor psychological well-being. Likewise, 66% of parents indicated that the ongoing aggression has negatively impacted their children's psychological well-being. This emotional strain, compounded by the ongoing Israeli aggression and subsequent displacement, not only hampers students' current academic efforts but also makes it increasingly difficult for them to recover from the significant learning losses accumulated over the past years due to school closures and disruptions.

G. Strengthening the Education System

The numbers presented in this brief do not account for the impact of the more recent escalation in Israel's aggression that began in September 2024, which has triggered a further massive wave of displacement from southern Lebanon, Beqaa, southern suburbs of Beirut. Many schools nationwide have been converted into shelters, leading to further educational disruptions and exacerbating the already critical situation for students and families. Nevertheless, these figures represent a baseline for the situation just before the latest Israeli aggressions, underscoring the urgency of the challenges that the educational system must address in the wake of these developments.

The current situation highlights the severity of Lebanon's education crisis, exacerbated by the compounded crises due to heightened Israeli aggression since September 2024. Immediate and coordinated efforts from both government authorities and international bodies are crucial to mitigate the situation; protect schools from violent attacks; prevent violence on students and teachers; and enable Lebanese students to recover from their learning setbacks and continue their education without further disruption. Without prompt and decisive intervention, Lebanese students face the prospect of losing yet another academic year, placing the future of an entire generation of students in serious jeopardy. To address this urgent situation, we highly recommend using the research findings presented in this brief as a baseline for the following immediate and long-term interventions:

1. Immediate interventions

- a. Support for displaced and conflict-affected students:** Special and immediate learning provisions must be made for students in conflict-affected regions, with a focus on preventing further accumulation of learning losses.
- b. Ensuring access to education:** The longer children are out of school, the more likely they are to drop out of school permanently. It is crucial to ensure that all students' have consistent access to learning, whether through in-person or remote methods, to minimise educational disruptions caused by displacement. This includes ensuring that all students and teachers have access to online learning platforms, regardless of their location or circumstances. Hence, a rapid assessment of feasibility for online learning in the context of mass displacement is needed.
- c. Adaptive educational strategies:** Multiple plans should be developed to ensure that those who cannot access online learning still receive some form of schooling, whether through television, radio, community-based, or shelter-based learning avenues. These educational pathways can be formal or non-formal; given the previous learning losses, any form of schooling is better than none at all. The potential for releasing space in schools used as shelters should be explored and alternative learning spaces identified where possible.
- d. Mental health support:** In light of the significant trauma caused by the recent Israeli aggressions, educational policies must integrate mental health and well-being programmes into school systems. These programmes are essential not only for students' well-being but also for

educational recovery, as addressing mental health challenges allows students to re-engage with their studies and recover from learning losses.

- e. Coordinated and continuous data collection in a rapidly changing situation:** As the situation evolves quickly, continuous data collection and monitoring are essential for displaced students, teachers, and students whose schools are used as shelters. This data should be shared between government and key actors in the response to help in adapting educational strategies effectively and promptly to the changing needs³.
- f. Support to displaced teachers:** Targeted support mechanisms for teachers who have been displaced should be implemented, ensuring they have the necessary resources, mental health support, and assistance to continue teaching under challenging circumstances.
- g. Gender-sensitive interventions:** Interventions that take into account the specific needs and vulnerabilities of all genders should be developed and implemented, ensuring that educational programmes are inclusive and sensitive to the diverse needs of the student population.

2. Long-term interventions

- a. Address learning losses:** Strategic interventions are needed to mitigate learning losses. A national recovery plan must include supplementary educational programmes and remedial learning strategies tailored to the current challenges faced by students. These remedial programmes should be designed specifically to address the gaps in knowledge caused by educational disruptions, based on summative and formative assessments, revisit existing curricula and ensure that students can catch up and progress academically.
- b. Regulate tuition fees and ensure accessibility:** Regulating tuition fees in private schools is critical to ensuring they remain affordable for the majority of Lebanese families and correspond with household incomes. Simultaneously, the government must reinforce its commitment to providing free public education, especially for vulnerable families, and eliminate any barriers to education that new schooling fees might create.
- c. Improve education quality across all sectors:** Comprehensive reforms are necessary to enhance the quality of education in both public and private schools. Investments in teacher training, curriculum development, and educational resources should be prioritised to bridge the growing performance gap between sectors and ensure that all students receive a high standard of education.
- d. Teacher training and support:** Enhancing the skills and knowledge of educators through ongoing professional development and support mechanisms is critical to empowering teachers to deliver more effective instruction and to adapt to evolving educational and well-being needs and methodologies.
- e. Strengthen educational infrastructure:** Upgrading physical and digital infrastructure to support a conducive learning environment is essential to make the educational system more resilient. This includes improving school facilities and investing in technology to facilitate both in-person and remote learning, ensuring that education can continue effectively under various circumstances.
- f. Cross-sectoral collaboration:** Encouraging collaboration between private and public schools can lead to shared resources, expertise, and strategies. This partnership is crucial not only for driving overall improvements in educational standards and equity but also for helping close the gap between the two sectors. By working together, schools can leverage strengths from each sector, enhancing the educational experience for all students.

³ Please see Brun et al. 2024 for more on the nature of data systems in education in Lebanon.

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