

The Baccalaureate in a Time of War: Are Lebanon's Students Ready?

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INTRODUCTION

This study examines Grade 12 students' preparedness for the 2026 official examinations within the broader context of compounded crisis and renewed war in Lebanon. The report forms part of a longitudinal monitoring initiative initiated in 2020 to examine the impact of Lebanon's overlapping crises on students preparing for official examinations. Now in its fourth year, the study seeks to document how ongoing instability, displacement, economic hardship, and educational disruption continue to shape students' educational trajectories, wellbeing, readiness, and future aspirations. By centring students' experiences and perceptions, the report provides an evidence-based analysis of the ways in which unequal disruption and protracted crisis are affecting students at one of the most consequential stages of their educational pathways.

The question of whether Lebanon should proceed with official examinations during wartime has emerged as one of the most contested educational and political debates in the country. At the heart of this debate lies a deeper tension between the preservation of institutional continuity and certification on the one hand, and the recognition of the profound inequalities and disruptions generated by protracted crisis and armed conflict on the other. For some policymakers and educational actors, official examinations constitute one of the few remaining mechanisms through which the state can maintain academic standards, institutional legitimacy, and students' access to higher education and future opportunities. For others, insisting on national examinations under conditions of displacement, bombardment, school closures, psychological distress, and unequal access to learning reflects a broader failure to account for educational justice and the differentiated experiences of students affected by war.

These debates must be situated within the broader trajectory of Lebanon's education sector since the onset of the country's multidimensional crisis in 2019. Over the past years, the sector has experienced successive and overlapping shocks that have fundamentally undermined educational access, continuity, quality, and equity. The economic collapse, COVID-19 pandemic, Beirut Port explosion, prolonged teachers' strikes, currency devaluation, institutional paralysis, and repeated episodes of armed conflict have collectively transformed schooling into an increasingly fragmented and unequal experience. The renewed Israeli aggression that began on 2 March 2026 further exacerbated these structural vulnerabilities, affecting a system already weakened by earlier escalations, including the aggression that began in October 2023 and the large-scale military escalation between September and November 2024.

In the initial phase of the 2026 war, more than one million people were displaced, including approximately 200,000 children (UNICEF, 2026a). Schools across the country were converted into shelters for displaced populations, while in-person learning was suspended in multiple regions. Within two weeks, UNICEF reported that 353 public schools had been repurposed as shelters, directly affecting 115,000 children, while approximately 300,000 students in the morning shift and 100,000 students in the afternoon shift were unable to attend school (UNICEF, 2026b). In response, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education announced the closure of all public and private schools, vocational institutions, and the Lebanese University, while issuing successive circulars aimed at regulating educational continuity through remote and hybrid modalities (MEHE, 2026).

The impact of the war was experienced unevenly across regions and social groups. Students in South Lebanon, the southern suburbs of Beirut, the Beqaa, and Baalbek were disproportionately affected by repeated displacement, damaged infrastructure, insecurity, and prolonged interruptions to schooling. For many students, educational continuity became contingent upon remote learning arrangements that were difficult to sustain under conditions of electricity shortages, weak internet connectivity, overcrowded shelters, economic precarity, and severe psychological distress. By mid-May 2026, educational disruption remained widespread. Across Lebanon, 448 schools continued to function as shelters for displaced populations, including 332 public schools, 67 private schools, and 49 vocational and technical institutes. Simultaneously, more than 580 public schools relied on distance learning for over 116,000 students, with more than 320 of these schools located in the South and Nabatiyeh governorates (Kawas, 2026).

It was within this context that Grade 12 students became the focal point of national controversy surrounding the official examinations. On 22 May 2026, Minister of Education Rima Karami announced that the secondary school examinations would proceed through three separate examination sessions, arguing that this approach would preserve the credibility of the Lebanese official certificate while introducing a degree of flexibility that would allow students to choose the session most appropriate to their circumstances and readiness (NNA, 2026). Supporters of this decision framed the examinations as essential to safeguarding students' future access to universities, scholarships, and labour market opportunities, particularly given the continued international recognition of the Lebanese baccalaureate. They further argued that the cancellation of examinations would contribute to the further erosion of institutional legitimacy and educational standards within an already collapsing system.

Critics, however, questioned whether educational fairness could meaningfully be achieved under such profoundly unequal conditions. Students across Lebanon had experienced radically divergent educational realities depending on their geographic location, socioeconomic status, school sector, and degree of exposure to war and displacement. Many students in heavily affected areas had lost substantial periods of learning, experienced repeated displacement, or prepared for examinations while residing in shelters or under conditions of active bombardment. Within this context, critics argued that proceeding with national examinations risked reproducing and legitimising pre-existing educational inequalities while placing additional psychological and emotional burdens on already vulnerable students. The controversy surrounding the examinations therefore extended beyond technical debates over assessment and certification to broader questions concerning educational justice, state responsibility, and the social purpose of education during periods of war and systemic collapse.

OFFICIAL EXAMINATIONS, STANDARDISATION AND CRISIS CONTEXTS

Official or standardised national examinations are often valued because they provide a common measure of achievement across schools, regions and social groups, particularly in systems where school-based grading may vary in reliability. At the system level, such assessments can generate evidence on learning outcomes, identify disparities, inform curriculum reform, and support decisions about resource allocation and accountability (UNESCO, 2026; World Bank, 2021). UNESCO argues that learning assessment helps systems diagnose, measure and monitor learning progress, identify how achievement is distributed across different learner groups, and provide evidence for curriculum, pedagogy and resource-allocation decisions. At the student level, official examinations can also function as a nationally recognised credential, especially at transition points such as entry into higher education or the labour market. This is particularly relevant in contexts such as Lebanon and the wider Arab region, where national certificates often carry strong symbolic and practical value as markers of educational completion and social mobility (UNESCO, 2026).

However, the academic literature also emphasises that the value of official examinations depends on their validity, fairness and consequences. High-stakes examinations may narrow the curriculum, encourage teaching to the test, and privilege students with greater access to stable schooling, private tutoring and learning resources (Berliner, 2011; Au, 2020). In Lebanon, one relevant study conducted by the Centre for Educational Research and Development examined the 2020–2021 official examinations and highlighted this tension: while official exams were seen as important for maintaining the credibility of the national certificate, the study also raised concerns about equity, learning loss, psychological pressure, logistical constraints, curriculum reduction and the need for a clearer national assessment policy (CRDP, 2022). Other Lebanon-based studies similarly suggest that crisis conditions affected both learning and examination quality; for example, Shaaban found substantial biology learning loss and a decline in the quality of Grade 12 official biology exams during the crisis period (Shaaban, 2023), while Shehayeb found significant mathematics learning loss and reduced cognitive quality in official mathematics exams analysed through Bloom's taxonomy (Shehayeb, 2023). These studies support the broader argument that official examinations can serve important certification and accountability functions, but only if they are embedded in a wider assessment system that monitors learning opportunities, protects equity and uses results for improvement rather than merely selection.

In crisis, conflict and emergency contexts, the debate becomes more complex because the issue is not only whether official examinations are educationally useful, but whether they remain safe, valid and fair under disrupted conditions. During COVID-19, countries adopted different approaches: some postponed examinations, others cancelled them and used school-based evidence, some introduced online or home-based alternatives, and others maintained exams with health precautions (UNESCO, 2020). International examples show this variation clearly: Hong Kong postponed its high-stakes diploma examination and used strict safety measures, while England cancelled summer examinations and relied on teacher-assessed grades, and other systems reduced syllabi, added resit opportunities or introduced contingency grading (UNESCO, 2020; IAEA, 2021). In Palestine, the war effectively fragmented the examination system: Tawjihi exams continued for students in the West Bank and abroad, while around 39,000 secondary students in Gaza were unable to sit the 2024 final examinations because of military assault, displacement, school destruction and the collapse of normal schooling (Defense for Children International Palestine, 2024). Some displaced

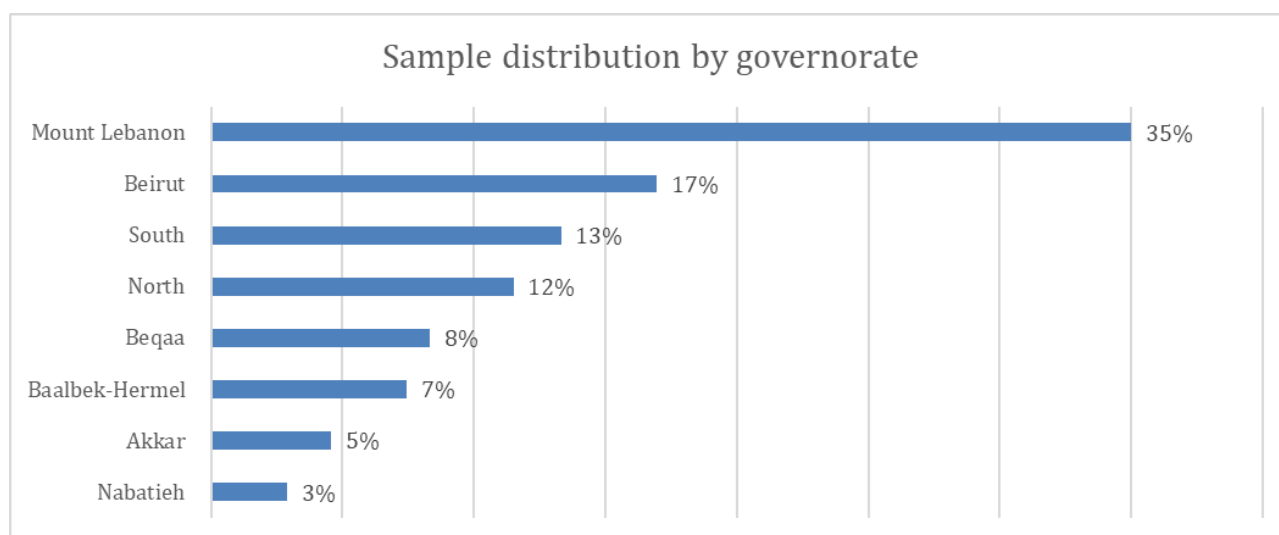
Gaza students were allowed to sit Tawjihi in Egypt and other Arab countries, but the majority experienced delay and exclusion from the normal certification route (Defense for Children International Palestine, 2024). Later, the Palestinian Ministry of Education, with support from partners such as UNDP, moved toward emergency digital arrangements; by September 2025, 28,200 students in Gaza reportedly sat electronic Tawjihi examinations under extraordinary conditions, including displacement, damaged infrastructure and limited access to electricity and internet (UNDP, 2025). During the last USA/Israeli war on Iran and the attacks on some gulf countries, the effect on official exams were different: rather than national examinations being suspended across the board, the main disruption concerned international qualifications such as International GCSEs, A-levels, IB and related programmes. Pearson cancelled May/June 2026 school examinations in Bahrain, the UAE, Kuwait and Qatar, offering deferral, calculated grades, special consideration or portfolio-based contingency grading depending on the qualification and the evidence already available (Pearson Qualifications, 2026). UAE reporting similarly noted that international exam boards and local authorities shifted to non-exam or contingency routes because conflict-related disruption made normal examination administration unsafe or impractical (The National, 2026). Taken together, Palestine illustrates a case where war directly obstructed students' access to national certification, especially in Gaza, whereas the Gulf case shows how international awarding bodies used contingency assessment systems to preserve student progression when conventional exams could not safely proceed.

Taken together, these examples demonstrate that there is no single or universally accepted approach to official examinations during crises. Different countries and education systems have adopted different strategies depending on the nature of the disruption, institutional capacity, available evidence on student learning, and the perceived trade-offs between certification, equity, safety, and educational continuity. The literature therefore does not point to a single "correct" response, but rather highlights the tensions and competing considerations that policymakers must navigate when making assessment decisions under exceptional circumstances. Against this backdrop, the Lebanese debate over the 2026 official examinations should be understood not as an isolated case, but as part of a broader international discussion concerning how education systems can balance the demands of standardisation, credibility, fairness, and student wellbeing during periods of crisis and conflict. The following sections examine how these questions played out in Lebanon and assess the extent to which students felt prepared to sit the 2026 official examinations.

METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE

The survey was conducted online between May 12 and May 31, 2026, and reached 659 grade 12 students preparing for the official examinations. The questionnaire was administered through SurveyMonkey, and the data were subsequently cleaned and analysed using Excel. The survey was circulated through the Centre for Lebanese Studies' social media channels, including Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn, and through established networks of educators across Lebanon. This dissemination strategy was used to reach students across different regions, school sectors, and educational backgrounds.

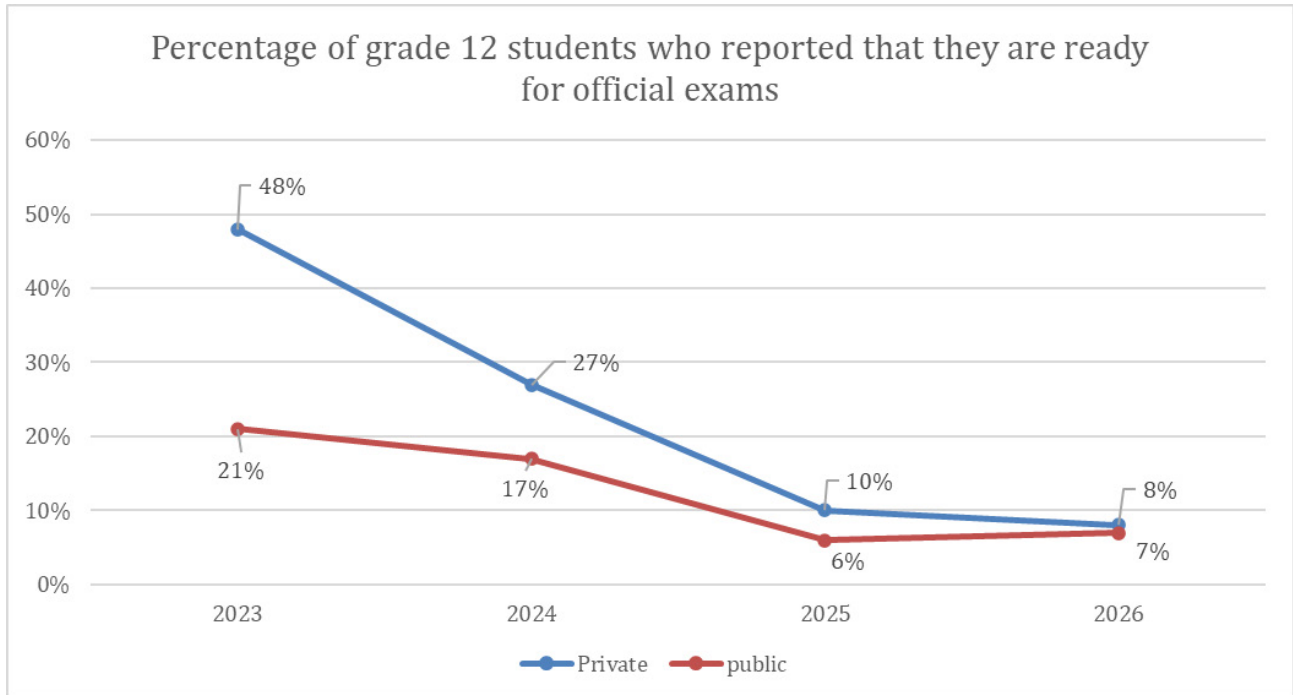
The final sample was predominantly Lebanese, with Lebanese students accounting for 94% of respondents, compared with 3% Syrian students and 3% Palestinian students. In terms of the school sector, 59% of respondents were enrolled in private schools, 39% in public schools, and 2% in UNRWA schools. Most respondents were between 17 and 18 years old, representing 79% of the sample. The gender distribution was relatively balanced, with females accounting for 53% of respondents and males for 47%. The survey included students from all Lebanese governorates, and 63% of respondents reported living in areas directly affected by the Israeli aggression.



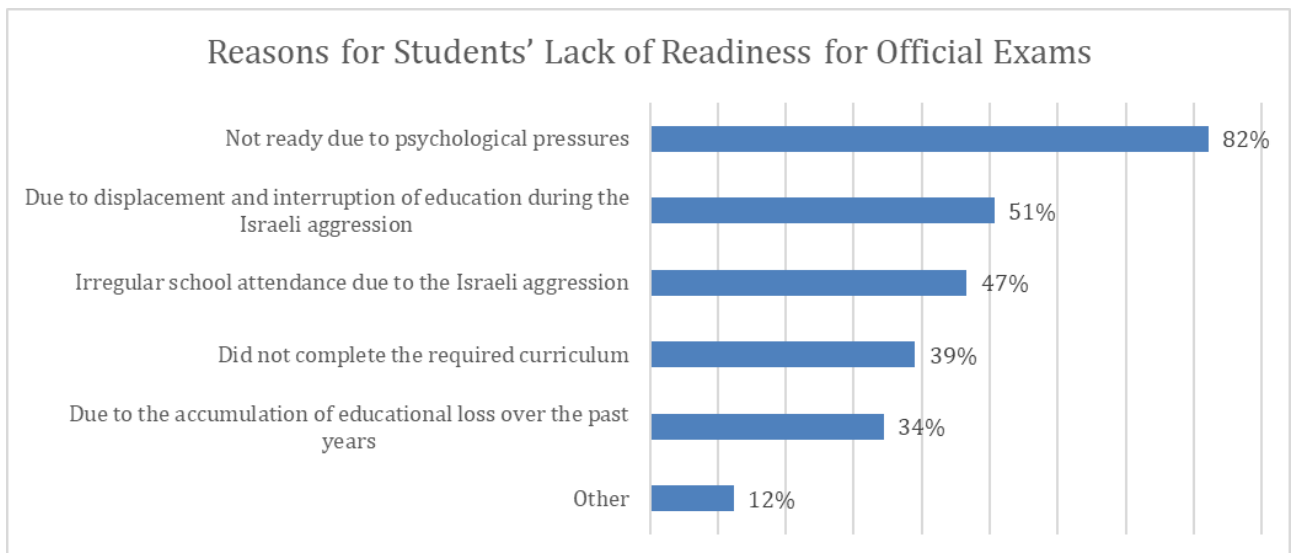
It is important to note that the online survey format introduced some limitations. Participation required access to a digital device and an internet connection, which means that students facing severe deprivation, repeated displacement, or insecurity may be underrepresented. The sample also includes very few Syrian students and students with disabilities, and excludes young people who have already left education. The findings should therefore not be treated as statistically representative of all Grade 12 students, but as evidence of broad patterns among students who could be reached through online channels.

READINESS FOR OFFICIAL EXAMINATIONS

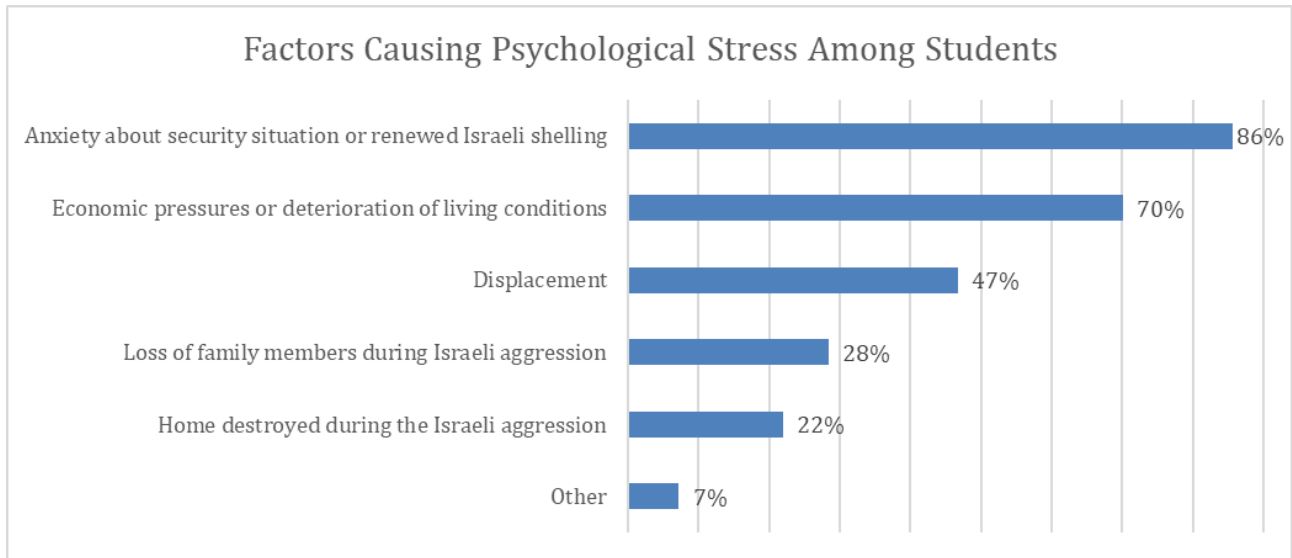
Students' reported readiness for the official examinations remained extremely low in 2026. Only 8% of private school students and 7% of public-school students reported feeling ready to take the exams. These figures point to a continued decline in students' confidence in their preparedness, with readiness now reaching similarly low levels across both sectors.



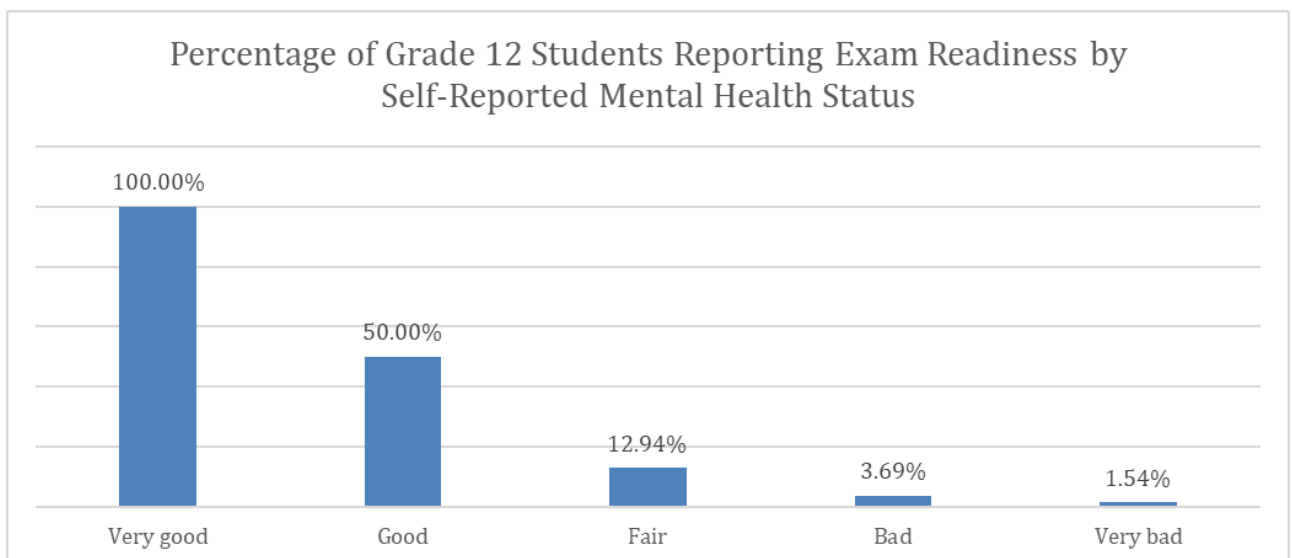
The reasons reported by students indicate that exam preparedness was shaped by a combination of psychological, educational, and conflict-related pressures. Psychological distress was the most frequently cited reason for lack of readiness, reported by 82% of respondents. This was followed by displacement and interruption of education during the Israeli aggression, reported by 51%, irregular school attendance during the aggression, reported by 47%, and incomplete curriculum coverage, reported by 39%. Learning losses accumulated over previous years also remained an important factor, reported by 34% of respondents.



Students' mental health indicators further reinforce the centrality of psychological distress in shaping exam readiness. Only 6% of respondents reported good mental health. The main sources of stress were anxiety about the security situation or the possibility of renewed Israeli shelling, reported by 86%, economic pressures and deteriorating living conditions, reported by 70%, and displacement, reported by 47%. These findings suggest that students' preparation for official examinations cannot be separated from the broader conditions of insecurity, economic hardship, and repeated disruption affecting their daily lives. Similar results were reported in last year's results which also witnessed Israeli attacks on Lebanon.

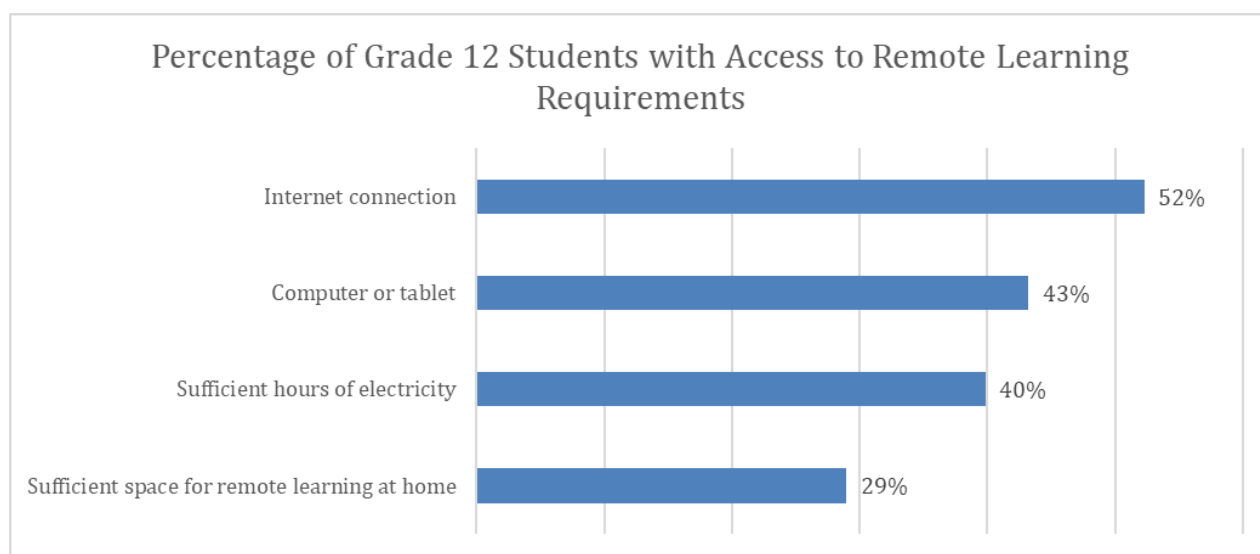


This relationship is further reflected in students' reported readiness by mental health status. All students who described their mental health as very good reported that they were ready for the official examinations, compared with 50% of those who described their mental health as good, 12.94% of those reporting fair mental health, 3.69% of those reporting bad mental health, and only 1.54% of those reporting very bad mental health. This pattern suggests a strong association between students' psychological well-being and their perceived readiness for the official examinations.

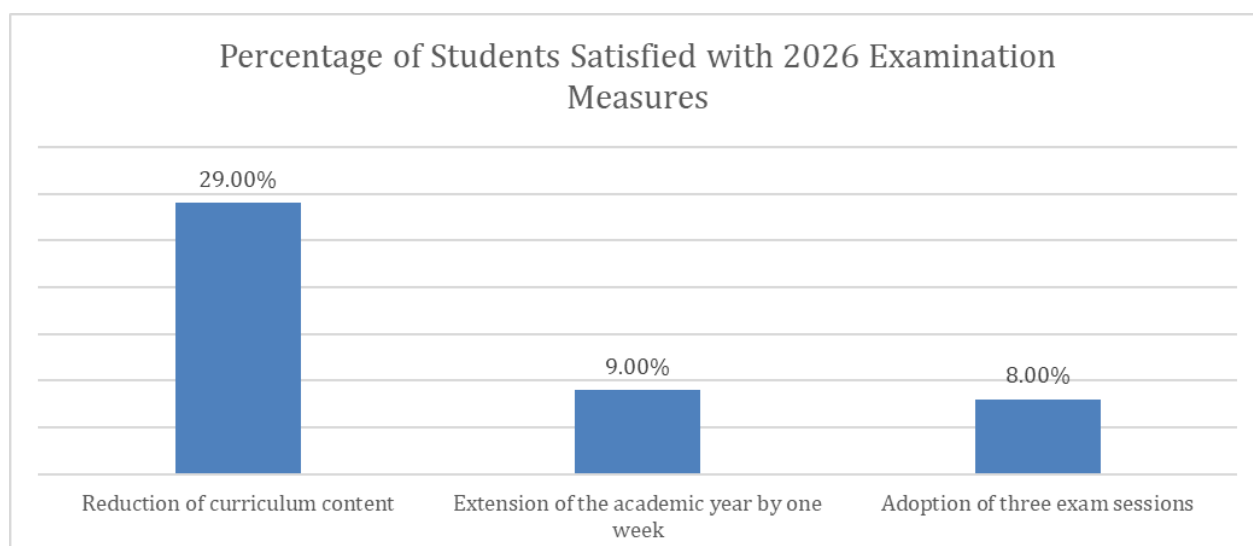


Curriculum coverage also remained a major constraint on students' readiness. Only 23% of private school students reported that their school was able to cover the full curriculum, compared with 9% of public school students. This sectoral gap shows that public school students continue to face more severe instructional constraints, although incomplete curriculum coverage remains a concern across both sectors.

The limited availability of basic remote learning requirements further constrained students' ability to compensate for interrupted schooling. Only 52% of respondents reported having an internet connection, while 43% had access to a computer or tablet. Access to electricity was also limited, with only 40% reporting sufficient hours of electricity. The most constrained condition was the availability of adequate space for remote learning at home, available to only 29% of students. These findings suggest that remote learning could not serve as an adequate substitute for in-person schooling for many grade 12 students, particularly under conditions of displacement, household overcrowding, electricity shortages, and economic pressure.



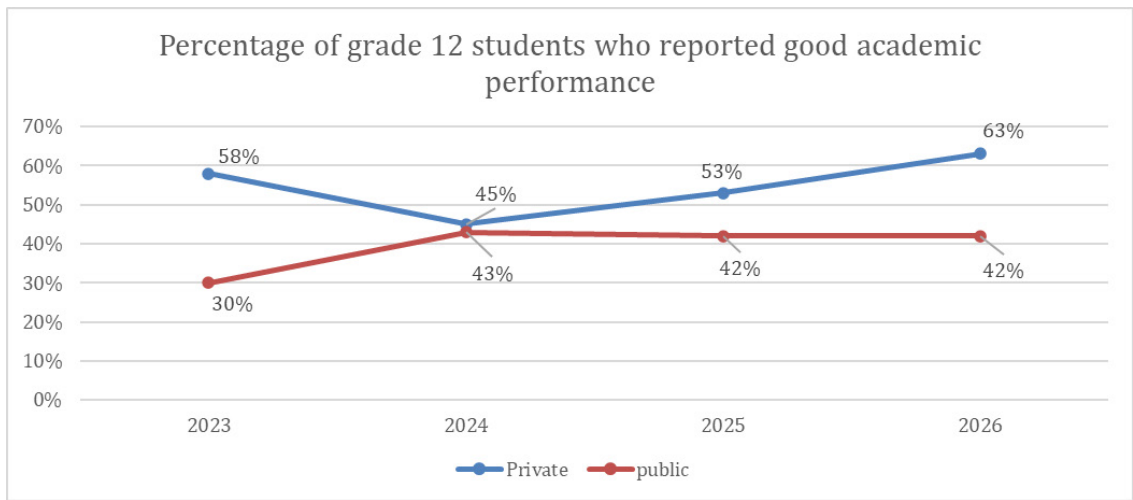
Moreover, policy measures related to the official examinations continued to receive limited support among students. Only 8% of respondents reported being satisfied with the adoption of three exam sessions, while 29% expressed satisfaction with the reduction of curriculum content. Satisfaction was also low regarding the extension of the academic year by one week, with only 9% of respondents reporting that they were satisfied with this measure.



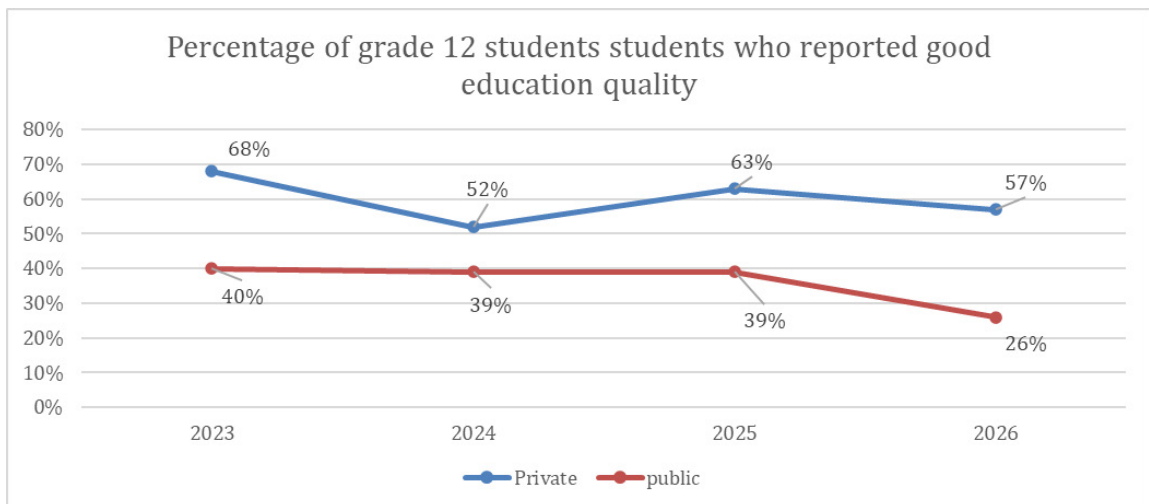
These findings suggest that, although the measures were intended to respond to educational disruption and support exam preparation, they were not widely perceived by students as sufficient to address the pressures they faced during the academic year.

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AND EDUCATION QUALITY

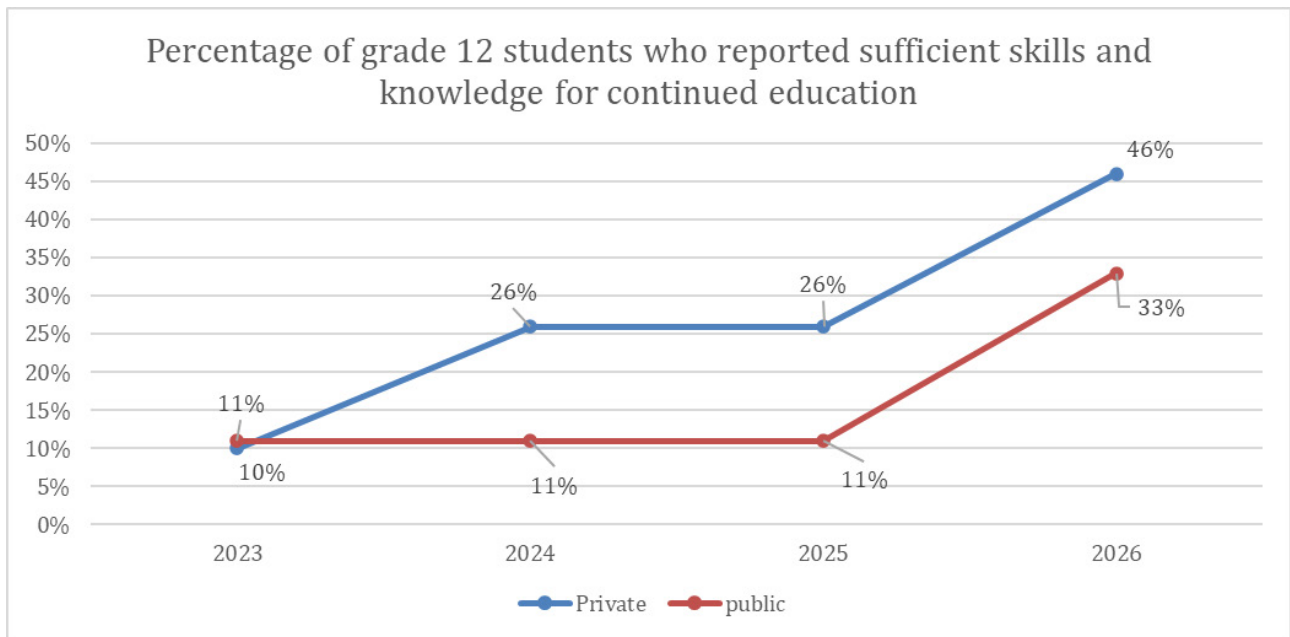
The 2026 findings show a mixed pattern in students' self-reported academic outcomes. Private school students reported a marked improvement in academic performance, with 63% indicating good performance in 2026, compared with 53% in 2025, 45% in 2024, and 58% in 2023. This suggests that private school students' perceptions of their academic performance have recovered from the decline recorded in 2024 and have now exceeded the 2023 level. Among public school students, however, perceived academic performance remained unchanged from the previous year, with 42% reporting good academic performance in both 2025 and 2026. Although this remains higher than the 30% reported in 2023, the absence of improvement since 2024 indicates that public school students continue to face more constrained conditions for academic recovery.



Perceptions of education quality reveal a more concerning picture, particularly in the public sector. Among private school students, the share reporting good education quality stood at 57% in 2026. This represents a decline from 63% in 2025, while remaining above the 52% recorded in 2024 and below the 68% reported in 2023. Public school students reported a sharper deterioration, with only 26% describing the quality of their education as good in 2026, compared with 39% in 2025, 39% in 2024, and 40% in 2023. The widening gap between private and public-school students on this indicator points to persistent inequalities in students' learning environments and to the continued pressures facing the public education sector. It also indicates that despite the war, the students in public have not changed their perception of their academic performance



Students' confidence in the skills and knowledge gained over the last three years of schooling improved in both sectors, though the increase was stronger among private school students. In private schools, 46% of students reported having acquired sufficient skills and knowledge to continue their education, compared with 26% in both 2024 and 2025 and 10% in 2023. Public school students also reported progress, with 33% indicating that they felt sufficiently prepared for continued education in 2026, compared with 11% in each of the previous three years. Despite this improvement, a majority of students in both sectors still did not report feeling adequately prepared for the next stage of their education. This points to the continuing effect of interrupted schooling, uneven curriculum coverage, and accumulated learning losses on students' perceived readiness for post-secondary pathways.



IMPACT OF ISRAELI AGGRESSION

The Israeli aggression that began during the 2026 academic year caused major interruptions to schooling, with students in directly affected areas experiencing the most severe consequences. In this year's sample, 63% of respondents reported living in areas directly affected by the aggression. Among these students, 86% experienced forced displacement, while 98% reported that their schooling was disrupted in some form. The largest share, 64%, reported that their schools were completely closed and that they continued their studies remotely via online platforms coordinated with their schools and teachers. A further 20% reported being fully cut off from education, with no opportunity to continue their studies, while 14% stated that their schools closed for a few days before reopening. Only 1% reported that the aggression did not affect their education during the academic year.

The effects of the aggression were also reflected in students' psychological well-being and sense of academic preparedness. Although the most severe educational interruptions were concentrated in directly affected areas, anxiety and insecurity extended across a wider geographic range, including areas that were periodically targeted during the year. Many students reported fear of renewed airstrikes, displacement, economic pressure, damage to homes, loss of family members, or the loss of household income. These experiences interacted with earlier rounds of educational disruption, including the aggression that began in October 2023 and the escalation between September and November 2024. As a result, students are entering another official examination year under conditions shaped by repeated interruption, accumulated learning losses, and significant psychological strain.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study illustrate the extent to which Lebanon's 2026 official examination cycle unfolded within a context of profound educational disruption, social insecurity, and accumulated crisis. Students preparing for the baccalaureate examinations did so under conditions shaped not only by the renewed Israeli aggression of 2026, but also by years of economic collapse, interrupted schooling, displacement, institutional instability, and deteriorating living conditions. Within this context, the exceptionally low levels of reported exam readiness across both public and private sectors point to the cumulative effects of prolonged disruption on students' educational experiences, psychological wellbeing, and confidence in their preparedness for high-stakes assessment.

The findings of this study suggest that Grade 12 students in Lebanon entered the 2026 official examination period with very low levels of perceived readiness. Only 8% of private school students and 7% of public-school students reported feeling prepared to sit the official examinations. These findings indicate that the 2026 examination cycle took place within a context marked by significant educational disruption and instability affecting students across both sectors.

Students' lack of readiness was associated with a combination of educational, psychological, and conflict-related factors. The most frequently reported challenges included psychological distress, displacement and interruption of education during the Israeli aggression, irregular school attendance, and incomplete curriculum coverage. Many students also reported the continuing effects of accumulated learning loss from previous years of crisis and disruption. The findings further demonstrate that readiness for official examinations was closely associated with students' mental health conditions, suggesting that exam preparedness was shaped not only by curriculum completion, but also by broader conditions of insecurity, economic pressure, and emotional strain.

The study also points to substantial inequalities in the conditions under which students prepared for the examinations. Students experienced the academic year differently depending on their geographic location, school sector, socioeconomic circumstances, and exposure to war and displacement. While students in directly affected areas experienced school closures, displacement, and interruptions to learning more intensely, students across Lebanon also reported anxiety related to insecurity, economic deterioration, and uncertainty regarding the continuation of schooling. At the same time, limited access to internet connectivity, electricity, digital devices, and adequate study spaces constrained the effectiveness of remote learning arrangements for many students.

The findings additionally suggest that the policy measures introduced for the 2026 examination cycle, including multiple examination sessions and curriculum reduction, were not widely perceived by students as sufficient to address the difficulties affecting their preparation. Although these measures aimed to provide flexibility under disrupted conditions, many students continued to report significant concerns regarding their readiness and ability to prepare adequately for the examinations.

The findings therefore raise broader questions concerning the meaning of fairness and educational justice in contexts of protracted crisis and war. Educational inequality in Lebanon is no longer only expressed through differences in academic achievement, but increasingly

through unequal access to stability itself: stable schooling, stable infrastructure, stable learning environments, and stable emotional conditions in which learning can occur. In this sense, the controversy surrounding the examinations reflects wider tensions concerning the role of education during periods of conflict and state fragility – whether education policy should primarily prioritise institutional continuity and certification, or whether it should first respond to the differentiated vulnerabilities shaping students’ capacities to learn and participate.

Importantly, the findings also suggest that students’ preparedness cannot be understood solely through curriculum completion or academic performance indicators. Psychological wellbeing emerged as one of the strongest factors associated with perceived readiness for examinations, underscoring the extent to which learning and assessment are deeply shaped by emotional, social, and material conditions. Students preparing for examinations while experiencing fear of bombardment, displacement, economic precarity, or loss cannot be expected to engage with schooling in the same manner as students learning under relatively stable conditions.

The study therefore points to the need for a broader rethinking of educational recovery and assessment in contexts of prolonged crisis. While emergency measures remain necessary, they are insufficient in the absence of sustained policies addressing learning recovery, psychosocial support, digital and material inequalities, and the long-term effects of repeated educational disruption. Ultimately, the Lebanese case highlights the challenges of maintaining a standardised national assessment system during periods of protracted crisis and conflict. The findings suggest that debates surrounding the 2026 official examinations were not solely about examinations themselves, but about how education systems balance competing objectives: maintaining certification and institutional continuity, safeguarding fairness and credibility, and responding to the unequal realities experienced by learners. As Lebanon continues to navigate recurrent crises, the challenge for policymakers is not simply whether to hold examinations, but how to ensure that assessment systems remain meaningful, equitable, and responsive to the conditions under which students are expected to learn and demonstrate achievement. It’s critical for the educational system and its policy makers to show solidarity with their students especially those paying the highest cost of the current Israeli attacks.

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