

How to Prevent Lebanon from Experiencing a “Lost Generation”

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Assem Abi Ali

Michel Constantin

Dr. Ghaleb Daouk

Kathy Feghali

The Hon. Edward M. Gabriel

Dr. Ghina AlBadawi Hafez

Steven Howard

Raja Bentaouet Kattan

Nadim Kyriakos-Saad

Fr. Youssef N. Nasr

MISSION

The American Task Force on Lebanon (ATFL) is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization comprised of Americans of Lebanese heritage and others who share a common interest in Lebanon and the goals of the ATFL. We believe that we can make an important contribution to our great nation by enhancing the bilateral relations between the United States and Lebanon. ATFL's mission is motivated by American interests and values, and how these attributes will lead us to improved future bonds between our two countries.

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BACKGROUND

Lebanon's education sector is at risk of collapsing. Lebanon's economic crisis is massively and negatively impacting Lebanon's education sector, which is creating a lost generation as many of Lebanon's future leaders, workers, and changemakers do not have access to a quality education. What will happen to these young people if they are not in school? Losing another year of instruction cannot be seen as an option. If this continues, Lebanon risks losing an entire generation.

The American Task Force on Lebanon convened a group of education leaders from public and private schools as well as experts from leading international organizations to discuss ongoing challenges and potential solutions. This policy paper reflects a group consensus on current challenges and steps that the Lebanese government and international actors can take to rebuild the education sector in Lebanon.

CHALLENGES FACING LEBANON

Teachers are not being paid a livable wage and students are faced with years of learning loss.

Estimates suggest that over one million Lebanese children today do not have access to a quality education.¹ Lebanese children make up 20.9% (or 1.4 million) of Lebanon's population.² Public school teachers have been on strike this year to protest their low salaries, which have not been raised to account for the 98% decrease in value of the Lebanese Lira and currently amount to only around \$90 per month.³ Furthermore, these same public sector students have only completed one-third of an academic term in each of the last four years. These students are not receiving instruction in basic topics such as math, literacy, and life skills. In 2018, before the current crisis even began, the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) found Lebanon to be one of the lowest ranking countries in the world, with two-thirds of students not achieving basic literacy.⁴

Private schools are reaching the most vulnerable students but are facing challenges of their own.

While Lebanon is home to some internationally renowned and expensive K-12 private schools, many of these institutions serve the poor with much lower annual tuitions, often costing between \$150-\$300. In many ways, the private sector is also filling in gaps left by the state and reaching disadvantaged students across Lebanon through over 330 semi-free schools that educate over 150,000 students. It is estimated that 60% of primary and secondary school aged children are in private schools.⁵

However, private schools are also facing severe challenges in the current economic climate. Many have managed to survive only through the support of individual families and NGOs. These institutions have had to increase their tuition to be able to operate, and families who can only pay in Lebanese Lira are struggling to keep their children enrolled. For example, in 2020-21, 55,000 students left private schools and enrolled in public schools.⁶

¹ "One Million Children Left Without Education in Lebanon After Public Schools Shut their Doors," Save the Children. January 19, 2023. Available at

<https://www.savethechildren.net/news/one-million-children-left-without-education-lebanon-after-public-schools-shut-their-doors>

² ACAPS, "Humanitarian Impact of Crisis on Children," May 31, 2022. Available at

https://www.acaps.org/fileadmin/Data_Product/Main_media/20220531_acaps_briefing_note_lebanon_impact_of_crisis_on_children.pdf

³ Sally Abou AlJoud, "Public School Teachers Protest Dire Conditions Ahead of School Year," L'Orient Today. September 18, 2023. Available at

<https://today.lorientjour.com/article/1349752/public-school-teachers-protest-dire-conditions-ahead-of-school-year.html>

⁴ World Bank Group, "Foundations for Building Forward Better: An Education Reform Path for Lebanon." 2021. Available at

<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/627001624033308257/pdf/Foundations-for-Building-Forward-Better-An-Educational-Reform-Path-for-Lebanon.pdf>

Found in OECD, Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), 2018. Available at https://www.oecd.org/pisa/publications/PISA2018_CN_LBN.pdf

⁵ Maya Gebeily, "Teachers' Strike and Soaring Fees: Lebanon's Public School Pupils Miss Class," Reuters. September 27, 2022. Available at

<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/teachers-strike-soaring-fees-lebanons-public-school-pupils-miss-class-2022-09-27/>

⁶ "Foundations for Building Forward Better."

Over the last four years, students in private schools have faced a huge learning loss and these schools are struggling to fill the gap. The biggest concern for private schools has been to secure funds for teachers and students to begin the upcoming academic year without delay.

The PISA assessment found massive discrepancies in outcomes between schools, with private schools performing generally better than public ones. However, some private schools also struggle with quality of learning. Of the 100 lowest performing schools in the assessment, 91 were public and 9 were private.⁷

There is a lack of government vision and support for education.

Education leaders across Lebanon, from the north to the south and even in the capital of Beirut, all describe a heartbreaking situation for the country's youth. Advocates for Lebanese students describe poor or even absent levels of state support for the country's schools. They remark that education is either not politically relevant or, when relevant, exploited for political agendas. They add that there is a general lack of vision for the sector and that the government's stated plans that do exist lack funding. The deep and pervasive economic crisis means that schools cannot afford even basic supplies, let alone electricity or fuel. Furthermore, there is no government in place to meaningfully lead needed reforms in the sector.

Lebanon's students are suffering because Lebanon's teachers are suffering.

Schools can no longer pay teachers an affordable or competitive wage. This is a challenge affecting both public and private schools. Although the Lebanese state has raised the wages of public school teachers seven times since November 2022, the devaluation of the Lira has negated the impact of those raises. Private schools, meanwhile, have largely maintained teacher salaries at pre-crisis levels while adding subsidies in US dollars, although retired private school teachers still receive their pensions in Lebanese Lira without additional subsidies. Despite these efforts, the larger impact of the economic crisis has impaired the ability of private schools to offer competitive wages. Over the past four years, private schools have lost 20% of their staff. A recent study found.

- 73% of teachers struggle to pay their bills, forcing 66% of them to work second jobs to make ends meet.
- A staggering 99% of teachers reported the current crisis has limited their access to healthcare.
- 73% of teachers are planning on leaving the education sector.
- Three out of four teachers are planning on leaving Lebanon.⁸

Prior to the current crisis, Lebanon's public schools were already facing problems with the quality of instruction. For example, between 2015 and 2018, there was an

⁷ Foundations for Building Forward Better.

⁸ Mohammad Hammoud and Maha Shuayb, "Children in Lebanon Cannot Afford to Lose Another Academic Year." Centre for Lebanese Studies. August 2022. Available at <https://lebanesestudies.com/publications/children-in-lebanon-cannot-afford-to-lose-another-academic-year/>

increase of concern amongst principals in Lebanon over the issue of teacher absenteeism, affecting 23% of Lebanese students enrolled in public schools.⁹ Furthermore, public school teachers in Lebanon already spend less time in the classroom (10 to 15 hours a week) than the international benchmark (20 hours a week). These problems have only worsened in the current context.¹⁰

There is a need to rebalance priorities in domestic financing for the education sector.

Currently, 84% of Lebanon's education expenditures go to teacher salaries, which is above the international benchmark of 80%.¹¹ State spending on education sector infrastructure is also insufficient to meet current needs. This is reflected in a recent World Bank survey of Lebanese parents with children in public schools, which reveals:

- 18% rated school water quality as bad.
- 43% reported there were no multipurpose rooms at school.
- 25% reported a lack of art and cultural facilities.
- 30% reported an absence of laboratories.
- 28% reported an absence of computer equipment.¹²

Other key challenges in Lebanon are access and inclusion. In a small number of rural areas, families may prefer to send boys to school rather than girls. Furthermore, the public education sector struggles to sustain an inclusive program for students with special needs. While the private sector provides better services for students with special needs, inclusive programs cost more and not all families are able to afford them.

Challenges in education are related to other challenges in Lebanon.

Understanding and responding to the interconnected nature of many of Lebanon's challenges is essential to identifying creative solutions for the education sector. For example, electricity can comprise up to 40% of a school's budget, while the persistence of blackouts has worsened across the country. Solar energy projects have the potential to increase the availability of electricity for schools while greatly reducing overall operating budgets.¹³ Likewise, four in 10 children in Lebanon currently face acute food insecurity, in which case the provision of food could greatly improve students' participation.¹⁴

⁹ Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, PISA 2018 Results (Volume III): What School Life Means for Students' Lives, December 3, 2019, Figure III.7.1 Teaching Behavior Hindering Learning (Based on Principal's Reports). Available at <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/db2e5b3b-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/db2e5b3b-en#fig37>

¹⁰ Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, "Education at a Glance," OECD Indicators. 2020. Available at https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-at-a-glance-2020_69096873-en Found in "Foundations for Building Forward Better."

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Hussein Abdul-Hamid and Mohamed Yassine, "Political Economy of Education in Lebanon," 2020, 192 World Bank Group. Available at

<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/b43de3ff-7112-5920-bda0-f232809b3730/content>

¹³ John Burger, "Catholic Schools Might be the Only Thing to Save Lebanon, If We Can Save Them." Aletheia. December 10, 2022. Available at

<https://aletheia.org/2022/12/10/catholic-schools-might-be-the-only-thing-to-save-lebanon-if-we-can-save-them/>

¹⁴ Save the Children, "Lebanon: Children Facing Crisis Hunger Levels to Rise by 14% in 2023 Unless Urgent Action Taken." January 3, 2023. Available at

<https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/lebanon-children-facing-crisis-hunger-levels-rise-14-2023-unless-urgent-action-taken>

There is no time to waste. Instability is threatening the very existence of Lebanon's education infrastructure. Lebanon's current leaders need to respond to these challenges because the future of the country is at stake. Inaction is not an option.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE GOVERNMENT OF LEBANON

▶ *Resolve political and economic crises in order to begin with needed reforms*

- Absent a president and economic reforms, it is very difficult for the Lebanese government to tackle challenges in education.

▶ *Establish a national vision for education*

- The country should have a national conversation on what it wants from the education sector and from its teachers.
 - The only available vision is the Five-Year Education Plan.
 - Launched in 2021, this aims to provide accessible and inclusive learning to the most vulnerable children.¹⁵
 - Implementation is essential, but funding gaps could necessitate a pause in coming months.
 - Lebanon needs to develop a common education policy for the public and private sectors, to define its expectations for education, and to identify the qualities of good citizenship.
 - The private sector is expecting legislation from the government tackling issues such as a minimum wage and a pay scale for teachers.

▶ *Distribute domestic financing more equitably*

- The government should think of ways to raise domestic financing, especially targeting the most marginalized children and promoting gender equity.
 - Equally important is that it is more equitably and efficiently spent.
- Increase spending to improve infrastructure, the quality of instruction, and other needed materials.
- Support semi-free schools at the same black-market rate that is used for calculating fees.

▶ *Guarantee that education is accessible and inclusive*

- Increase teacher salaries and benefits to improve the quality of education.
 - Teachers should benefit from a livable wage in US dollars.
 - Teachers should receive benefits, such as health insurance, and continued professional training.

¹⁵ UNICEF, Education Program. Available at <https://www.unicef.org/lebanon/education-programme>

¹⁶ "Political Economy of Education in Lebanon."

- Improve tracking of teacher attendance to better hold teachers accountable for instances of absenteeism.¹⁶
- All young people of all learning abilities should have access to quality public education.
 - Improve the quality of education in public schools for students with special needs.
 - Partner with rural communities to ensure families are supportive of girls' education and that there are local schools to provide a good education.
- Consider the use of technology solutions, such as tele-education, for underserved areas.
- Guarantee clean water and healthy food for students at all schools.

▶ *Modernize instruction in schools*

- Schools and educators need to account for trends in remote learning and second language learning in the sciences as well as integrate new teaching modalities.
- The curriculum needs to be updated to focus on skills needed in today's economy.

▶ *Reform the education sector*

- Make the public education sector more cost effective.
 - Merge smaller schools.
 - Solarize schools to lower costs of fuel.

CHALLENGES FACING THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

The international community is losing faith in Lebanon.

The international community is hesitant to provide support to Lebanon considering the country's current political deadlock. IMF reforms have gone unimplemented for over a year and the country remains without a president, government, or central bank governor.

There is a certain amount of donor fatigue because Lebanon has been in crisis mode for years with no resolution in sight. International donors are also assigning higher priority to crises elsewhere in the world. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has consumed a lot of attention and funding. Even for donors with eyes on the Middle East, many shifted their support to other countries, such as Syria after the earthquake.

Private schools are a crucial part of Lebanon's education sector.

The majority of Lebanese students are enrolled in private schools and it is essential to recognize challenges facing these institutions. The fact that many private schools have religious affiliations should not deter Western donors. These schools should be seen as vital partners in reaching the most vulnerable students. For example, Catholic schools do not provide religious education to their non-Christian students and many of these institutions provide a quality education to predominantly Muslim student bodies.

There are good examples of the international community supporting education in Lebanon.

International organizations do have programming in place to respond to challenges facing students in Lebanon. UNCHR pays for every Syrian refugee student in public schools (which costs \$700, more than the cost of a Lebanese student). Last year, UNICEF reported spending over \$70 million to support education in Lebanon, including paying the salaries of over 12,500 teachers and cash assistance to 70,000 children.¹⁷ UNDP has installed solar panels at 50 public schools. UNESCO has also undertaken efforts to modernize Lebanon's education system through textbook reviews, curriculum development, and improving teacher professional development.¹⁸

Syrian refugees and vulnerable Lebanese host communities are suffering.

More support from the international community is needed. Lebanese public school shifts are divided between a morning shift for Lebanese students and an afternoon shift for refugee students. In 2019, it was estimated that 365,000 Syrian refugees attended Lebanese public schools. However, half of all Syrian refugee children are reported to be out of school.¹⁹ At the same time, Lebanese families have expressed frustration that Syrian refugee students are able to attend school in the afternoon because UNHCR pays teachers in US dollars whereas the same teachers have been on strike during the morning shift because the Ministry of Education pays them in highly depreciated Lebanese Lira.

¹⁷ Zeina Khodr, "Lebanon Economic Crisis: Public Schools Risk Closure Due to Lack of Funds." Al Jazeera. August 23, 2023. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RDDzAGpTeHc>

¹⁸ UNESCO Beirut, "Curriculum, Teachers, and Learning Assessment," May 11, 2023. Available at <https://www.unesco.org/en/fieldoffice/beirut/teachers1>

¹⁹ "No Lost Generation: Investing in the future: Protection and learning for all Syrian children and youth," UNICEF. 2019. Found in Rima Bahous, Fadi Nicholas Nassar, and Makram Ouais, "On the Brink: The Critical State of Lebanon's Education System," The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies. March 9, 2022. Available at <https://www.lcps-lebanon.org/articles/details/4664/on-the-brink-the-critical-state-of-lebanon%E2%80%99s-education-system>

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

▶ *Increase international support for Lebanon's education system*

- There should be a donor's conference, different from previous conferences in both approach and scope, that focuses on bilateral assistance, multilateral assistance, and private sector assistance to increase international support for Lebanon's K-12 education system. It should include governments, but should also reach out to unconventional actors in the private sector and civil society.
- Foreign governments should identify ways to support the education sector so that Lebanese children are not held hostage to the failure of Lebanon's leadership to address these challenges at a national level.
- At the same time, consulting non-traditional actors from civil society may be the most effective way to garner support for Lebanese schools.
- This conference should also propose solutions and reforms that go beyond financial support.

▶ *Channel assistance directly to schools, private and public*

- Implementing institutions should do this because it has local transparency and accountability.
- This aligns with USAID's localization agenda.
- Encourage USAID and other donors to channel support directly to local networks of schools that have a credible track record of innovation and integrity, and to ask their international contractors to do the same.
- This can help ensure that sizeable support is best targeted to support students.

▶ *Balance support for refugee students and Lebanese host community students*

- This will ensure all children in Lebanon have access to a quality education and promote healthier relations between the two communities.

▶ *Engage the Lebanese diaspora in responding to the education crisis*

- The Lebanese diaspora must use its political capital to advocate for international education assistance to Lebanon.
- The diaspora can also provide resources and funding into schools in Lebanon.
- This could even be scaled down to an "Adopt a Village" program so donors abroad can support their ancestral villages.

▶ *Support efforts to modernize Lebanon's education system*

- The international community should support UNESCO's efforts to review textbooks, update the curriculum, and improve teacher professional development.

▶ *Solarize schools*

- Solar energy can be a solution to the cost of education. International aid agencies should prioritize solar energy projects for Lebanese schools and provide monitoring and evaluation of programs to ensure that school administrations know how to reach efficiency gains with solar panels.
 - UNDP is working on installing solar panels at 20 public schools in anticipation of the upcoming academic year. Many private schools are also in need of solarization.

▶ *Understand the value of private education as part of the solution to the current crisis*

- The private sector and civil society should be an entry point for the most marginalized children, especially out of school children, and support their transition to public schools.
- Support private schools with religious affiliations who educate students from all confessional backgrounds.
 - Private sector teachers also need salary support from the international community.
 - Subsidies at \$200 per child have helped children attend private schools and have to be increased to \$400 per child in light of the increased cost of education.²⁰
 - Catholic schools have been especially supported by private donors with business leaders recently contributing \$10 million.

²⁰ Doreen Abi Raad, "Lebanon's Catholic Schools Face 'Crisis with Empty Pockets,' look for help," Crux. September 16, 2021. Available at <https://cruxnow.com/church-in-the-middle-east/2021/09/lebanons-catholic-schools-face-crisis-with-empty-pockets-look-for-help>

ACTORS INSIDE AND OUTSIDE OF LEBANON MUST WORK TOGETHER TO SUPPORT EDUCATION IN LEBANON

The most urgent priority for public schools is getting both students and teachers back to school. The most urgent priority for private schools is ensuring they stay open. Both depend heavily on strong support for educators.

Leaders in Lebanon's government need to isolate the country's education system from the toxic nature of the country's current political climate. No amount of political division or deadlock should leave the country's most vulnerable children without a quality education for years at a time.

The international community should increase its support for students and teachers in Lebanese schools, public and private. Foreign countries, international organizations, and the Lebanese diaspora should all contribute to this effort.

Lebanon's youth are at a crossroads and there is limited time to respond. Leaders inside of Lebanon need to create a national vision and plan for the country's education sector. Friends of Lebanon abroad, whether they be governments, international organizations, or diaspora groups, should unite behind an unconventional donor's conference with the goal of ensuring a sustainable future for Lebanon's education sector.