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Lebanon's education sector faces uncertain year as crisis worsens



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Barnaby Papadopoulos | The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Every Wednesday Yousef spends four hours handing out books in the heat of Tripoli's Al-Tal Square.

"The future in Lebanon is very dark," he says as he pores over the stacks of second-hand paperbacks aimed for school children and university students. "Even if people have a school to go to, where they can learn, how can they afford to go?" he adds.

Despite the large crowds of young people thronging the square, few are taking advantage of his books, which are free. "They can't travel to schools," he says. "If there is no fuel, or if they cannot buy fuel, they can't go."

He points out that this affects anyone not living within walking distance of a school, especially those living outside the city, or in the mountains.

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The education sector in Lebanon is buckling under the double threat of the economic crisis and COVID-19 restrictions. A new report published by Save the Children ranks Lebanon within the 100 countries where education is most at risk, citing political and food insecurity, as well as the consequences of the Beirut Port explosion and the Syrian refugee crisis as reasons for this. The organization said that there could be an attainment gap of up to four years between children of the same age in Lebanon, due to socioeconomic factors.

Last month, the then-education minister, Tarek Majzoub, pledged that the new school year would be fully in person, after two academic years frequently disrupted by COVID-19. However on Sunday, it was announced that the start of the school year - scheduled for Monday - has been delayed.

Abbas Halabi, the new education minister, said the two week delay for public schools reopening was "to continue the constructive dialogue with the representatives of the teachers," who are struggling to work on falling salaries and unable to secure the necessary fuel to commute to work.

Drivers are having to queue for hours, even days, to buy fuel, with stations frequently running completely dry. Fuel prices rose again Wednesday, effectively ending subsidies that have been a lifeline for many. While there are a number of plans in motion to increase fuel supplies, including deliveries from Iraq, Iran, and a new UN initiative to provide fuel to some essential medical facilities, a long-term solution isn't yet in sight.

With prices rocketing, even the private sector is under strain. David Gray, the principal of Brummana High School in Beirut, told The Daily Star that "transportation allowances nationally must be raised substantially as fuel costs increase."

"Otherwise staff will spend their hard-earned salaries largely on fuel, leaving not enough for their domestic expenses. They do a vital job. It needs to be acknowledged."

In order to compensate, his school has started using buses, where appropriate, to get teachers to work. They've also appealed to old students for fresh dollars, and where possible, have raised staff salaries "in order to recognize their efforts and retain them."

These raises have, of course, been down to the raising of school fees for parents, who have been subjected to a tuition fee hike of 40 percent.

In a statement, the school has said that "with increased costs of goods, services and staff, the school is struggling to meet its financial obligations and it is clear that tuition fees cannot remain at the current level."

Such measures are vital for teachers. With the Lebanese pound having lost over 90 percent of its value since 2019, wages, savings and pensions have evaporated. Speaking to The Daily Star at a protest outside Beirut's Higher Education Ministry earlier in September, Hadil, who did not want her surname published, said she was "tired of hearing promises."

"My monthly wage is now less than \$200," she says. "I can't afford to eat well, or pay for gas."

"We want immediate action and for the politicians to hear our demands."

Children from refugee families are among 45 percent of all Syrian children in the country.

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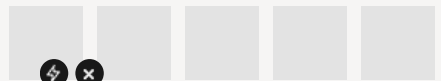
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education in the 2019-20 school year. Moh of them. The 17-year-old has been living in Beirut for the past five years since leaving Syria, where his parents and siblings remain.

His education, he says, has been on and off since he arrived, and he has mainly relied on the support of non-governmental organizations.

But over the past 18 months he says he has had "no school" at all. "I work in a restaurant because it pays me money, and because there is no chance to get education here anymore," he adds. "I read on my day off and I would like to study again, one day, but not now. I need money to live."

As poverty levels continue to rise, organizations that work with the most vulnerable have had to make cuts in order to pay for the growing numbers of families who are in need of food. Northern Lebanon has the worst poverty rates in the country; well over 80 percent of people in Tripoli are living below the poverty line.

In the neighboring district of Akkar, more than 90 percent of all households are living in multidimensional poverty, meaning they lack one of a stable income, housing, health care or education. Half of families live in extreme multidimensional poverty, meaning they lack at least two of the above, according to a new report from the UN's Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia.

At Tripoli Charity House, Lara Rifai says she once provided up to 1,200 meals a week to the city's poor. Now it's 400, despite a massive surge in demand. She can no longer secure the materials to make more food, and for the first time in her organization's history is having to ask for cash donations, and those are few and far between.

"It's like people are drugged," she says. "People are hopeless, without solutions." While the charity house has an education program, it's hard to prioritize it when poverty levels in the city are reaching such levels that, she says, children are facing malnutrition.

However, as growing numbers of people are leaving the country, sparking fears of a "brain drain" of professionals, Brummana High School's Gray is clear that education must be a priority. "It is the younger generation who will be the leaders of Lebanon tomorrow and they need to be educated and enlightened," he told The Daily Star.

"We must support our teachers as best we can and give them the credit they are due."

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