



October 12, 2016

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As the “Back to School” season began almost a month ago, shedding the light on the education scene seems really essential. As a matter of fact, education upholds a pivotal economic role given its weight in the country’s yearly expenditures. From one side, government expenditures on education are estimated at 1.1% of GDP with basic salaries of education personnel reaching \$601M in 2015 (around 6.8% of primary spending). From the other side, spending of Lebanese households on education averaged 6% of their total yearly expenditures.

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Given the importance of public education worldwide, it is important to highlight the numerous deficiencies of state schools in Lebanon and try to address them. Despite the satisfactory levels of literacy (90%) and gross enrolment (97.2%) ratios in Lebanon, there are several burdens characterizing public education in Lebanon nowadays: lower passing rates and higher repetition rates than those of private schools, lower quality of education impacted highly by public teachers’ ongoing concerns, and elevated education costs per student amid substantial number of public schools and the Syrian refugees’ crisis.

Comparing the passing and repetition rates reveals that the quality of private education is better than that offered at public schools. For instance, the success rates of students in intermediary exams stood at 64.4% for public schooling and 83.1% for students at private schools. As for secondary exams, the gap averaged 8.7 percentage points in favor of students in private establishments for the sections of Humanities, Life Sciences and General Sciences. Still, success rate for students graduating in Sociology and Economics was marginally higher in public schools (83.8%) than in private schools (82.4%). As for the overall repetition rate in the Lebanese education sector, it reached 21.5% in the academic year (AY) 2014/15, of which 52.3% is attributed to students enrolled in the public sector. The remaining share of 47.7% includes repetition rates of students enrolled in private schooling: for-profit, free and UNRWA.

The relatively lower quality of education in public schools could be partly explained by the substantial amount of under-qualified personnel. Due to the lack of governmental supervision, 34% of teachers are either holders of the Lebanese Baccalaureate certificate or have only reached the last grade of the elementary level. This is one of the reasons why Lebanese households usually consent to the high tuition fees of their children’s education in private schools.

Pending issues related to public teachers, both contract and permanent teachers, constitute a serious impediment to the education process in public schools. Aiming for better rights, public teachers usually launch protests and boycott the correction of official exams. In case of contract teachers, the strategies adopted by previous governments attempted to minimize spending by relying more on contract teachers such that by AY 2014/15 they constituted 40.8% of total public teachers. Moreover, contract teachers do not

have access to the social benefits of permanent employees such as pensions. According to Dr. Ghassan Chakroun, advisor to the education minister, "2 years ago, the education minister halted contracts with new teachers. In addition, around 2,140 secondary teachers out of the existing contract teachers were permanently hired in the public sector after passing civil service exams. However, a decision regarding contract teachers at the elementary and intermediary levels is still waiting the approval of parliament". As to permanent teachers, besides the cost of living adjustments they acquired in October 2012, they are still asking for the cabinet's approval on the amended series of ranks and salaries, which covers all public sector employees. Regarding this matter, Dr. Chakroun noted that "this is a group work and involves several ministries, of which the ministry of labor. Education minister Elias Bou Saab fully supports the adjustment of the series of ranks and salaries for permanent public teachers and finds their demands rightful, especially that the latest adjustment took place in 1998. But the solution to this problem lies in the hands of Lebanese politicians".

Another weakness in public education is the high annual cost per student borne by the government in public schools that is much higher than in private schools but not commensurate with better results. While the number of enrolled students in public schools (284,800) is almost half that of students in private schools (540,950), the number of public establishments constitute 44% of total Lebanese schools compared to 41% at the private sector. As a matter of fact, almost 60% of private schools comprise all scholastic levels (pre-school, elementary, intermediate and secondary levels), while there is not even one "comprehensive" school in the public sector. Besides the negative repercussions of constantly changing schools on students, quality of education and curriculums could vary from one public school to the other, which can severely impact public students' learning process.

Not only the cost per student is high but also a good part of state schools are located in rural areas with minimal number of students and poor infrastructure. According to Dr. Ghassan Chakroun, "there are few public schools that have adequate and renovated buildings to provide academic materials and extracurricular activities like music, arts, and sports. On the bright side, donor organizations are now contributing to the restoration of some secondary public schools. The Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) is also planning a compound of public schools that can accommodate large numbers of students, which makes possible shutting several small schools, if inefficient".

Also, a related issue is the high pupil-to-teacher ratio in public institutions. In reality, the ratio stood at 7:1 in public schools compared to 12:1 in the private sector. However, Dr. Chakroun observed that this ratio is inaccurate as the number of teaching hours is not taken into consideration. Given that the number of working hours for full time teachers usually hovers between 20 and 25, contract teachers can work for different amounts of time and in different schools. This complicates the estimation of the numbers of students per teacher.

Additional burdens are derived from the flooding of Syrian refugees since 2011. Their share out of total enrolled students almost doubled between the AYs 2011/12 and 2014/15 going from 6.9% to 13.8%. However, accelerated learning programs, fully financed by international donors, have been initiated lately in public schools allowing new Syrian students to get enrolled in afternoon sessions.

To address these issues, several solutions could be initiated. Improving the quality of public education while reducing fiscal burdens can be achieved, and the implementation of few "exemplary" schools could be a first step. The "exemplary" school will provide education for students starting with pre-school and up to the secondary level. A proper learning system will be offered, including entertainment and cultural activities, and provided by highly skilled teachers paid on merit. Additionally, these schools will be spread along central Lebanese regions with students from different neighboring villages registering at the same school. Given the influence of a school's management on the quality of education, privatizing or subcontracting the management of some of these "exemplary" public schools to private providers could be an option. This kind of structure will increase competition and hence improve performance, efficiency and professionalism.

In addition, rationalizing the number of teachers should also be done. The first step in this direction is to limit the recruitment of teachers to those who pass the open civil service exams, who will be then trained for a certain amount of time before the beginning of the academic year. But the most crucial step is to

periodically oversee the performance of these teachers, which can be done through the creation of a public control commission.

Lastly, implementing various reforms is necessary but insufficient to boost the performance of public education in Lebanon, which is suffering from the lingering political stalemate. The continuing failure of the parliament to convene is delaying the legislative approval of several education proposals that could pull the sector out of its rut. Overcoming these difficulties requires a sustained political solution the soonest.

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