

The Costing and Sustainability of Lebanon's Education System

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About the authors

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Lebanon's public education system is at a critical juncture. Decades of systemic underfunding, compounded by a number of devastating blows to the country's stability, has left public schools struggling to deliver quality education. Teacher salaries have collapsed, school infrastructure is crumbling, and operational budgets are inadequate, while international funding continues to provide temporary relief.

Without immediate and systemic reforms, Lebanon risks a lost generation, with long-term impacts on human capital, social cohesion, and economic development. This policy brief synthesizes evidence from desk research, fieldwork, and key informant interviews with Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) officials, teachers, administrators, parents, and UN agencies. It offers actionable recommendations for policymakers to stabilize and sustainably reform the costing of the Lebanese public education system.

Even prior to the Israeli-Lebanese war, the public education system has been described as being in 'a critical state,' with public schools on 'the verge of collapse' (Bahous, Nassar, and Ouais, 2022). Since 2019, compounded shocks, including hyperinflation, currency depreciation, and social unrest, have devastated teachers' livelihoods and weakened daily operations at most schools. Teachers emigrated or pursued alternative income sources, as principals continue to struggle to cover electricity, fuel, and basic maintenance costs.

Up until the financial crisis, public schools in Lebanon historically ensured access to education for students across socioeconomic groups. Today, they face severe dysfunction and diminished learning quality, as approximately 55,000 students shifted from private to public schools during the 2020–2021 school year (World Bank, 2021). Between 2019 and 2023, students received 270 days of instruction instead of the 600 required. The 2022 and 2023 school closures alone could translate into losses to the Lebanese economy of between USD 217 and 253 million in current USD terms (World Bank, 2023).

The sustainability of the public education sector now requires urgent intervention, grounded in both domestic resource mobilization and system-level reforms.

Project Context, Rationale, and Objectives

The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (LCPS) undertook this research to provide evidence-based insight into the costing and sustainability of Lebanon's public education system, with a particular focus on the challenges facing public schools. The rationale for the study is anchored in the urgent need to assess how compounded crises have affected school budgets, teacher remuneration, and the capacity to provide inclusive, equitable, and quality education, while also identifying pathways toward sustainable reforms.

This assessment draws upon a mixed-methods approach, combining a review of relevant literature and policy documents, including MEHE financial frameworks, international agency reports, with primary qualitative data gathered through key informant interviews with education experts and government officials, as well as focus group discussions with teachers, parents, and school administrators across multiple regions.

The objectives of the study are threefold:

First, to analyze the structural and financial vulnerabilities of Lebanon's public education system, including the impact of budgetary processes, centralized governance, and reliance on international aid.

Second, to evaluate the effects of crises on access, quality, and inclusivity, with attention to students with disabilities, refugee populations, and gender-related barriers.

Third, to develop actionable policy recommendations aimed at stabilizing the system, enhancing the sustainability of public investments, and fostering more participatory and accountable governance, enabling schools to respond effectively to current and future challenges.

Design and Methodology

Mixed research methods and a participatory approach were adopted to gather quantitative and qualitative data regarding the costing and the sustainability of Lebanon's education system, with an emphasis on the public education system. This included a desk review of existing literature and documents related to the public education sector, as well as reports produced by key education stakeholders such as United Nations agencies, international organizations, and Lebanese think tanks. The desk research examined the post-2019 crisis context and the changes brought about by the compounded crises that have affected the public education sector. Legal, financial, and policy frameworks were also scrutinized to inform the development of this policy brief.

The desk review was supplemented by five key informant interviews with MEHE representatives, education experts, and academics with experience in education, budgeting, and costing, in addition to nine focus group discussions (FGDs) with teachers, parents, and school administrators across the North, Mount Lebanon, Beirut, the Greater Beirut Area, and the Bekaa.

Conflict-sensitive and gender-sensitive lenses were incorporated throughout the research. The South was, however, excluded due to the ongoing Israeli-Lebanese war. Most of the data was collected before the escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian war in October 2023, which led to the conversion of hundreds of public schools, particularly in the South, into shelters for internally displaced persons.

Structural Gaps in Policy for Financing Public Education

Political Dynamics and Budgetary Constraints

Lebanon's public education system operates in a centralized and discretionary allocation process, where budgetary allocations and spending are deeply influenced by power dynamics within the executive branch. Historically, public resources for education have been constrained, with allocations for MEHE often falling short of actual needs (Bahous, Nassar and Ouais, 2022).

As the financial crisis worsened, the sector's budget share was drastically reduced, reaching 4.33% in 2023 and going slightly back up to 6.11% in 2024 (MEHE Budget Allocations 2018-2023), and was also significantly reduced in real terms due to currency depreciation, as the MEHE faced continuous negotiation with the Ministry of Finance and the Cabinet, often having to fight for only a fraction of the funds requested.

Advisors and former MEHE officials report that the Ministry of Finance frequently considers requested budgets inflated, forcing ministers to engage in protracted political battles to secure up to 75% of proposed expenditures. Most of these allocations are absorbed by teacher salaries and remain deeply insufficient. These dynamics undermine strategic planning, restrict long-term reforms, and perpetuate a reactive rather than proactive approach to managing school resources. In this context, schools are left dependent on ad hoc decisions rather than structured and predictable funding, limiting the ministry's capacity to plan and deliver quality education equitably across regions.

Rigidity and Inefficiency in Budget Formulation

The Lebanese public financial system is characterized by rigid and outdated budgetary procedures, which exacerbate inefficiencies in public education financing. Budget preparation at MEHE is largely an accounting exercise disconnected from school-level realities, without clear alignment to strategic objectives, outcome indicators, or performance metrics (Abdul-Hamid, 2017). Draft budgets are frequently delayed, lack transparency, and fail to account for inflation or fluctuating costs, leaving schools without predictable resources to operate effectively.

At the school level, administrators face limited autonomy in managing operational budgets, often having to navigate multiple funding streams: school funds, parent contributions, and sporadic grants, without cohesive oversight. Financial literacy among some principals remains low, which, combined with centralized approval processes, results in delayed procurement, underutilized funds, and missed opportunities for targeted investments in infrastructure, teacher support, and inclusive programs. Consequently, the budgetary process constrains capacity of schools to respond dynamically to crises or local needs and perpetuates systemic inefficiencies.

Over-Reliance on International Aid and External Funding

A defining feature of Lebanon's public education sector is its heavy dependence on international aid, bilateral contributions, and remittances to fill gaps left by insufficient domestic funding. Programmatic support from UNICEF, the World Bank, and other UN agencies has been critical in sustaining the sector: funding public schools and covering teacher training, curriculum development (through supporting CERD), and infrastructure rehabilitation. This was particularly significant in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis and the Transition Resilience Education Fund (TREF) program (MEHE, 2022).

In 2014, the ministry adopted the Reaching All Children with Education (RACE) strategy in partnership with UN agencies, the World Bank, and other donors. In 2017, it was followed by RACE II (2016-2021), which was estimated to cost US\$2.1 billion over a period of five years. In 2022, MEHE launched the Transition Resilience Education Fund (TREF), in partnership with UNICEF, focusing on the humanitarian response and a strategic shift toward a longer-term development approach.

While these contributions are essential in the short term, reliance on external funding raises concerns about sustainability, accountability, and alignment with national priorities. International support often targets specific programs or student populations, leading to fragmentation and inconsistencies in resource allocation. Moreover, overdependence on donors diminishes incentives for domestic fiscal reform and may inadvertently reduce ownership of public education governance at the national and local levels. A sustainable financing model will require a gradual shift toward stable domestic revenue streams while maintaining complementary international partnerships that support inclusive, high-quality education.

Policy Management Gaps in Financing Public Education

Central level governance and oversight

At the national level, MEHE maintains ultimate authority over resource allocation. Yet the ministry operates under severe constraints, including political influence, budgetary uncertainty, and limited strategic capacity. The centralization of decision-making creates a disconnect between policy formulation and school-level realities. Principals and local administrators often lack timely access to budgets or clear guidance on expenditure priorities, while decisions filtered through Regional Educational Offices (REOs) add additional layers of bureaucracy.

Key informants highlighted how MEHE's capacity to implement a coherent and transparent funding strategy was hindered by procedural rigidity and competing priorities. Once the Council of Ministers and Parliament approve the budget, execution takes place at the Ministry of Finance and MEHE

levels, where staff must navigate complex administrative and financial procedures that frequently delay disbursement and budget execution. This lack of predictability undermines schools' ability to plan for recurring operational costs, including salaries, maintenance, and basic services. Moreover, donor-funded projects, while crucial, often operate parallel to the ministry, leading to fragmented implementation and further distancing national policy from school realities (UNICEF KIIs; Bahous, Nassar, and Ouaiss, 2022).

Regional Coordination and Institutional Capacity

REOs are intended to bridge the MEHE to local schools, providing supervision, technical support, and monitoring. However, in practice, REOs often function as administrative 'checkpoints' rather than facilitators of resource management and capacity-building. Interviews and FGDs revealed that principals frequently bypass REOs when accessing external funding or implementing urgent operational solutions, citing slow approvals and a lack of responsiveness.

The regional level is further constrained by limited staffing and low technical capacity, particularly in budgeting and financial management. Personnel shortages and reliance on interim staff mean that REOs struggle to provide consistent oversight or guidance, contributing to inefficiencies in resource allocation. Consequently, regional offices are unable to serve as effective intermediaries for implementing reforms aimed at financial sustainability, equitable distribution of resources, or inclusive education policies.

School-Level Autonomy and Capacity

At the school level, administrators and teachers face the dual challenge of managing constrained budgets while coping with operational and pedagogical demands. Principals and school managers have limited authority over budgetary decisions. In many cases, they further lack the financial literacy required to plan, allocate, or report expenditures effectively. Schools rely on a combination of MEHE funding, parent contributions, and sporadic donor support, resulting in a fragmented financial structure that inhibits long-term planning.

Focus group discussions with teachers and principals indicated a strong desire for greater autonomy in budget management. School-level actors consistently emphasized the need to direct resources to pressing priorities, such as infrastructure repairs, inclusive education initiatives, and essential operational costs like electricity, water, and fuel.

Additionally, administrators value the support provided by UNICEF and other partners, which supplements their resources and strengthens local capacities. However, overreliance on external support risks creating dependency and further diminishes the authority of school administrators to plan and respond strategically.

Implications for Sustainability and Equity

The combined gaps at the central, regional, and school levels create a system that is reactive, fragmented, and highly vulnerable to shocks. Centralized governance, coupled with limited technical capacity at the regional level and constrained school autonomy, inhibits the development of sustainable financing strategies. Schools and teachers remain dependent on external funding, while inequities persist between schools with stronger local leadership and those with fewer resources.

Without reforms to strengthen institutional capacity, improve accountability, and empower local decision-making, Lebanon's public education system risks further deterioration. Sustainable improvements will require a comprehensive approach that aligns national priorities with school-level needs. Necessary reforms include decentralized financial management and the integration of transparent, performance-based budgeting mechanisms to improve efficiency and ensure equitable access to quality education for all students, including children with disabilities, refugees, and girls.

Financial Vulnerabilities in Meeting the 2025 Reform Roadmap

School funding and operational challenges

School budgets are primarily determined by MEHE based on annual fiscal projections and macroeconomic constraints, rather than evidence-based assessments of the actual needs. Funding for schools accommodating Syrian refugee students under the afternoon shift model (a lifeline for many) has been significantly reduced, dropping from \$140 per student to \$80 in the 2023-2024 academic year. Although a specific official explanation has not been publicly clarified, this reflects adjustments in available resources and financing conditions amid broader budget constraints and fluctuating donor support.

Principals report that this reduction exacerbates already stretched resources, leaving essential operational costs such as salaries, electricity, water, and fuel inadequately covered. The depreciation of the national currency has further eroded the purchasing power of school funds, making routine maintenance and school infrastructure improvements increasingly unaffordable.

Teacher remuneration is particularly vulnerable, with salary disparities across morning and afternoon shifts creating inequities and lowering morale. Morning shift contractual teachers earn approximately 150,000 LBP per hour (approximately \$1.68 USD per hour), while afternoon shift teachers receive the equivalent of \$9 USD per hour (approximately 858,000 LBP per hour). This financial instability has led to labor migration, absenteeism, and diminished teaching quality, with long-term implications for educational outcomes and human capital development (World Bank, 2023; UNICEF, 2023).

Inclusive and Gender-Sensitive Education

Financial constraints significantly undermine inclusivity and gender equity in the Lebanese public education system. Public schools are largely ill-equipped to serve children with disabilities, with only 116 public schools nationwide providing specialized programs, predominantly for mild disabilities. Handicap International (2022) estimates that only 6,000 children with disabilities attend school, representing a mere 0.5% of the student population. Insufficient budgets for teacher training, adaptive learning materials, and accessible infrastructure limit the capacity of schools to implement inclusive education effectively.

From a gender perspective, economic barriers disproportionately affect female students and educators. For instance, 66% of adolescent girls face challenges in accessing menstrual hygiene products, contributing to increased absenteeism and dropout rates (Plan International and Fe-Male, 2021; UNICEF Lebanon, 2024). Female teachers, who constitute the majority of the public schools' workforce, remain underrepresented in administrative and decision-making positions, reflecting a structural gender imbalance that is reinforced by constrained budgets and centralized governance (UNESCO, 2023).

Parent Council Funds and Community Contributions

'In public schools, they don't ask for our opinion.' This citation from a parent in Beirut reflects the widespread frustration felt by parents regarding Parent Council Funds and the limited influence that parents have in decision-making processes.

Parent Councils, intended to support school operations and foster community engagement, have seen their influence and financial capacity significantly diminished. Councils are often limited to logistical functions and are unable to meaningfully contribute to infrastructure, learning resources, or critical operational costs. Rising poverty and reliance on external aid have further constrained community contributions, leaving schools dependent on sporadic international support for program continuity.

Refugee Education and Equity Challenges

The influx of Syrian refugees has added additional financial pressures on the public education system, particularly for schools operating afternoon shifts. While international donors provide targeted support, funding gaps remain significant. Schools with large refugee populations face challenges in maintaining quality education, equitable resource allocation, and sufficient staffing. The compounded effect of overcrowded classrooms and limited financial autonomy undermines both Lebanese and refugee students' access to inclusive, quality education.

Implications for Sustainability and Reform Implementation

The financial vulnerabilities described above directly threaten the successful implementation of the 2025 education reform roadmap. Without sustained and equitable funding, schools cannot adequately maintain infrastructure, pay

staff fairly, or invest in inclusive and gender-responsive education programs. Overreliance on international aid and donor support perpetuates dependency and limits long-term planning.

Addressing these vulnerabilities requires a dual focus: 1) short-term stabilization, ensuring salaries, operational costs, and critical resources are met, and 2) medium- to long-term structural reforms to strengthen fiscal management, decentralize budget authority, and enhance financial transparency. Only through a systemic approach that aligns resources with school-level needs, integrates inclusive practices, and secures domestic funding can Lebanon's public education system achieve the sustainability envisioned in the 2025 roadmap.

Toward an Equitable, Accessible, and Sustainable Public Education System

Lebanon's public education system stands at a critical juncture. Without immediate interventions and structural reforms, decades of human capital development are at risk of being lost. Building on the evidence gathered through fieldwork, key informant interviews and a thorough review of public finance, policy, and programmatic documentation, the following recommendations provide a strategic roadmap for government authorities, MEHE and development partners. They aim to enhance financial sustainability, improve governance, strengthen inclusivity, and ensure equitable access to quality education for all students, including refugee populations and children with disabilities.

Recommendations

- **Short-Term Stabilization Policies:** Regularize existing compensation top-ups to ensure predictability and adequacy in the face of continued inflation, secure stable funding for essential school resources, and guarantee uninterrupted coverage of core operational costs such as electricity and water. These measures should serve as transitional arrangements within a broader medium-term education financing and public sector wage reform strategy.
- **Sustainable Financing Strategies:** Strengthen domestic resource mobilization and improve expenditure efficiency to gradually reduce dependence on external financing. Explore innovative funding mechanisms, such as public-private partnerships, and promote energy-efficient solutions like solar power to minimize operational costs and ensure long-term financial sustainability. In parallel, advance public financial management reforms to enhance transparency, rationalize inefficient expenditure, and reallocate resources towards priority education investments, particularly in school facilities such as laboratories, gymnasiums, and playgrounds.

- **Public-Private Partnerships:** Explore carefully designed partnerships with private sector actors to support targeted school programs and infrastructure improvements. Where appropriate, consider policy incentives that encourage private sector contributions to priority education investments while ensuring transparency, accountability, and alignment with national education objectives.
- **Decentralized Budgeting:** Gradually move toward a more decentralized budgeting framework that allows schools greater flexibility to allocate resources according to their specific needs and local contexts, while maintaining clear oversight mechanisms. This approach can help ensure that under-resourced schools, including those serving both Lebanese and refugee students, receive more responsive support.
- **Strengthen Stakeholder Communication and Collaboration:** Establish regular and transparent communication channels between MEHE, REOs, school administrators, teachers, and parents. Leveraging digital platforms, structured consultations, and periodic coordination meetings can strengthen trust, improve information flows, and support more responsive decision-making.
- **Enhancing Participatory Governance and Accountability:** Reinforce participatory governance mechanisms by revitalizing Parent Councils and encouraging the involvement of teachers, parents and school administrators in school-level planning and oversight processes. Capacity-building initiatives can support stakeholders in effectively contributing to decision-making and accountability frameworks.
- **Strengthening Financial Management and Transparency:** Promote transparent budgeting and financial oversight practices within the education system to improve resource allocation and accountability. Encouraging inclusive budget discussions at the school level (engaging parents, teachers, and administrators) can support more equitable and needs-based distribution of resources.
- **Promote School-Level Autonomy:** Further decentralize decision-making by empowering school administrators and teachers to manage local school budgets and policies without requiring them to submit all budget plans to REOs for approval. This would allow them to address their specific school needs based on their unique school environments.
- **Mental Health, Well-being Programs, and Inclusive Initiatives:** Invest in programs that support the mental health and well-being of students and teachers, including school-based counseling services and training in trauma-informed practices. At the same time, strengthen inclusive education initiatives by improving accessibility for children with disabilities and promoting gender-responsive policies within schools.

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About the Policy Brief

A Policy Brief is a short piece regularly published by LCPS that analyzes key political, economic, and social issues and provides policy recommendations to a wide audience of decision makers and the public at large.

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Founded in 1989, the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies is an independently managed, non-partisan, non-profit, non-governmental think tank whose mission is to produce and advocate for policies that improve governance in Lebanon and the Arab region. LCPS's current research agenda focuses on: enhancing governance, informing the process of economic growth and sustainable development, promoting inclusive and effective social policies, and informing the development of policies for a sustainable environment. Four themes cut across the above areas of focus, including gender, youth, conflict resolution, and technology.

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