

A whole generation is at risk and for once education and ignorance are equally expensive!

Context

Between the dollarization of tuition fees in private schools, the insistence of secondary education associations in public schools on the strike, and the absence of plans and solutions by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, we are on the verge of a major school dropout that Lebanon has not witnessed before. This dropout is not like its predecessors, as the economic situation and the conditions of private and public schools today have made it the most dangerous that we may witness very high percentages of students out of school. In the past, families used to resort to alternative solutions when they fell into financial hardship, i.e. transferring their children from private to public schools out of concern for the importance of education. Today, this solution is out of the picture and the parents no longer have any option to resort. Private schools are powerless and need to increase their tuitions and dollarize part of them to secure their budgets and pay the teachers and their employees, and public schools are helpless as it is expected that their doors will not open this year. Accusations are thrown between the three concerned parties, meaning that the parents blame the schools, the teachers blame the administrations and the ministry, and the ministry blames the unknown, while the affected remains one: the students.

The public education sector has gone downhill since 2019. The Corona pandemic and the stifling economic crisis that is still ravaging Lebanon were the reason for the successive closures of all schools, but their impact was resounding on public schools in particular. On the one hand, it is mostly ill-equipped to deal with a new type of education. Its teachers were, as usual, proactive in demanding their rights through strikes. These moves reached their climax and settled about 50% of actual teaching days in the past year. The next academic year will be no different, as there are no real offers that will bring public education teachers back to their classes. The \$90 grant from donor countries stopped at the end of the academic year, and to this day some professors have not received it without convincing justifications. In addition, the social assistance approved by the government is conditional on attendance, and the possibility of non-payment during the summer months is more likely to happen, so the specter of a strike remains hanging over public schools. The professors are exhausted to the last breath, looking for other jobs so that they can provide for their families. Even though the Ministry issued, a few days ago, a statement in which it announced Monday, September 5, 2022, the date of the beginning of the academic year, the secondary education associations have already reported their decision to the Minister that they are unable to open schools and start the academic year before knowing the percentage of salary correction and proposed incentives and the approval of the teachers. The latter confirmed the state's inability to adjust salaries and continued to negotiate with donor countries to support the launch of the school year, stating that there are difficulties facing this negotiation. The process of searching for funding continues, and the Minister of Education tried to find the necessary funding for incentives to start the school year during his visit to Qatar, but he did not brief the associations on this visit. One of the participants in the meetings between the associations and the minister quotes the latter as saying that "donors do not trust the ministry, and there is no talk with them

about the next academic year." That said, there will be no public schools until this moment and no matter what the ministry claims, there are no solutions because of the worldwide known corruption levels in the government.

As for the private schools, imaginary and illegal increases in tuition fees for the next academic year 2022-2023, a part is in Lebanese pounds and add to it additional fees in cash dollars, to feed the school's support fund. This may be normal as long as the prices of all commodities in Lebanon are linked to the price of the dollar, but with people unable to secure fresh dollars, the fate of some students is doomed. Like everything in the country, education in private schools has become a luxury that only the affluent can enjoy, and it seems that the outcry of parents will be loud this time after some schools have started sending their tuition costs to the parents. After a tour of several schools in and around Beirut, the results were shocking, and here are some samples of the tuition fees. St. Joseph Aintoura School asked the students' families to pay an average of \$400 per student depending on the number of children per family in addition to an amount in Lebanese pounds ranging between 24,800,000 and 25,200,000 Lebanese pounds according to the educational stage. As well as the "Mont La Salle" school, where the installments ranged between 200 and 300 dollars, in addition to an amount in pounds ranging between 12,500,000 and 19,500,000. The "Saint Famille - Fanar" school, which imposed a dollar amount ranging between \$575 and \$750, divided according to educational level, in addition to an amount in Lebanese pounds with the necessary discounts on the dollar according to the number of children per family. There is also a difference between the same schools affiliated with a foreign mission or a secular mission, as is the case of the two major French-Lebanese Lycée schools in Ashrafieh, Beirut, which set the fee at \$1,200 for the first student of the family, while its branch in Ma'aysara - Nahr Ibrahim set the fee at \$1,000. The tuition at Jesus & Mary school has become about 10,500,000 L.L, in addition to \$850 for each child. The more a student advances in his class, the more the cost naturally increases. At the "Saint Coeurs" school in Sioufi, about 15,000,000 L.L and \$550. As for the Central College in Jounieh, the cost ranges from 8,000,000 for the kindergarten class up to 12,500,000 L.L for the secondary stage, in addition to \$250 for each child. The Antonine school tuition, amounted to 12,000,000 L.L and \$500, in addition to \$100 to be paid before the start of the academic year, otherwise, the student will be considered unregistered. In "Ecole Secondaire Des Filles de la Charité - Ashrafieh", the tuition amounted to about 7,500,000 L.L and \$250. At the "Val Père Jacques" school, the increase ranged between 13,000,000 for kindergarten plus \$300, and 13,500,000 L.L for secondary grades plus \$300. As for the schools that are somehow considered modest, the range of tuition came as follows: an average of 8,000,000 L.L and \$110 per student depending on the educational level. However, some of the schools that were classified as almost free have no other choice now but to follow the same strategy. For example, the "Saint Maron" school in Baouchrieh, which also includes Genius Association, an institution for individuals with special needs, had to impose tuition fees ranging between \$100 and \$500 per student. Today, about 70 percent of Lebanon's students attend private schools, while 80 percent of the Lebanese people live below the poverty line. Thus, these numbers indicate that a large number of students' families are suffering and their suffering will increase next year, as they are unable to bear these increases on their own.

On the other hand, concerning professors and teachers, the salaries are no longer sufficient for those working in the educational sector, especially since the financial crisis is at its height. Several professors chose the best solution for them, so they asked for unpaid leave, or deposit, to do private work or even travel for work. Here a new problem arises, which is the emigration of professors not only students, and

it is noteworthy that the percentage of those who left the profession reached 30%. These teachers are just like all of us. They have families they need to provide for, expenses, and duties they need to complete. Exactly as parents and students cannot move freely because of fuel prices, teachers need transportation. For all of the above, to pay respectful salaries to the teachers, schools need to increase tuition fees to fit the general situation.

The problem of education in Lebanon is synonymous with the increasingly difficult daily life in the country, and it is linked to the energy sector, in terms of securing electricity and diesel, to the high price of fuel cans. A problem that is exacerbated in light of the financial collapse that hit the country, and the closure of the prospects for solutions for teachers, employees, and students' parents. Some drown in the differentiation of priorities in terms of educating children or securing their livelihood. In the past year, there were not many objections from parents to a factual matter that cannot be dealt with. And between maintaining quality in education, and not neglecting the educational cadre that distinguished Lebanon, the parents' committees succumbed to increases in tuition in the national currency. But the mouthpiece of the majority speaks of difficulties in paying in fresh dollars, as most of them lost much of the value in their wages.

In sum, it can be said that the next school year is at stake, and indeed the educational sector is in danger. Schools, teachers, parents, and students alike are blown away by the unknown. Therefore, the educational crisis has three pillars: professors whose number of immigrants or those who resigned has become more than the number of workers, students and their families whose abilities are unable to ensure the continuity of their children's education, especially in private and Catholic schools with a high level of education, and finally, institutions that incur the burdens of employment, salaries, and dollarized diesel. So, dollarizing the tuition fees in private Catholic schools is the only solution at present, and there is a constant quest to pay attention to what is appropriate for parents and teachers alike, as well as institutions in order not to deprive any student of education and to maintain the continuity of the sector, even though the matter is legally forbidden, but the exceptionally difficult situation imposes itself. But the dilemma is between understanding the necessity of this dollarization and the ability to bear its burdens.

Pro Terra Sancta intervention

Through the funds collected, in 2021 Pro Terra Sancta was able to support tuition around 600 students. The tuitions were still fully rated in Lebanese pounds, and the budget used was around 50.000 usd.

Now that the tuitions will need to be paid in fresh dollars our support is even more needed. The project aims to support at least 600 students, and the budget needed has doubled to 100.000 usd.

Help us grant a future to students in Lebanon!