

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF PRIMARY PUBLIC EDUCATION IN JORDAN

By:

Phenix Center for Economics and Informatics Studies

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FORWARD:

This paper is prepared in order to examine the current status of primary public education in Jordan and it presents alternative approaches to upgrade the system. Upgrading education in general and, in particular, primary education is considered one of the major challenges facing Jordan at the present time. Jordan has provided free education for all, built schools, provided textbooks, trained and qualified teachers. Despite this investment however, the quality of primary education in Jordan is still in question. Students in primary grades suffer from many educational problems, evidenced by the Minister of Education's statement that 22% of students in the first three primary grades suffer from weakness in reading and math skills. This is further advanced in the outcomes of "Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study" (TIMSS) tests over the past twenty years bringing light to the weak performance of students in the fourth and eighth grades in both subjects of science and mathematics.

This paper aims to present an analysis of the causes which have led to the retreat in the quality of primary education in Jordan supported by available local and international studies, as well as by in-depth interviews held with a number of education experts, and focus groups conducted with specialists in this field. Furthermore, this paper aims to put forward a set of alternative policies and options in order to improve public education that yields a globally competitive system for Jordanians.

We are pleased to extend our sincere thanks to each of the educational experts with whom in-depth interviews were conducted. Our thanks is extended as well to each of the distinguished teachers, school headmasters, and specialists who participated in the focus groups for giving us a valuable part of their time.

INTRODUCTION:

Jordan provides widespread availability of schools in most regions of the Kingdom, whereby the enrollment rate of students in the primary education for ages of 6-15 reaches 98.1%. The number of public schools reaches 3545 and the number of public education teachers is estimated at 75,401 male and female combined¹.

In spite of plans and programs developed by the Ministry of Education to improve the quality of primary education in Jordan, it is noted through public examinations, as well as through reviewed studies that primary education in Jordan experiences weakness in quality, and a retreat in international ranking tests. Jordan has participated in several international ranking tests held to evaluate students, particularly in the subjects of science and mathematics whereby Jordanian students' results were far below the anticipated level.

In 2011, in the subject of mathematics, Jordan was ranked 34 out of 41 participating countries, scoring 406 points, which is below the overall anticipated rate of 500 points. With this result, Jordan has retreated from its 2007 level of 427 points. While in the science test for the eighth primary grade, Jordan was ranked 29 out of 43 participating countries, scoring 449 points², which is below the overall anticipated rate of 500 points, also retreating from its 2007 rate of 482³ points.

With regard to English language, the English Proficiency Index, issued by English First Organization (EF EPI)⁴ placed Jordan at the rank of 50 among 60 countries covered by their study, while the Kingdom was placed fifth among the Arab countries⁵.

Moreover, the British Legatum Prosperity Index pointed to the decline of education in Jordan to the 64th rank in 2013, from the 45th rank in 2011⁶.

The Arab Knowledge Report also pointed to extreme weakness among Jordanian students in four cognitive skills namely: accessing knowledge, problem solving, use of information technology, and written communication measuring skill on a scale of 25 point totaling 100 points for all four skills. The obtained results of this study regarding cognitive skills showed 34.06% out of all 100 points, which reveals weakness of participating students. With regards to the skill of written communication, the average obtained was 5.38 points out of 25, the average obtained for the skill of problem solving did not exceed 6.56 points, and the skill of accessing knowledge obtained 6.5 points⁷.

Furthermore, Results of the study entitled "Students' performance in reading and math" conducted in collaboration between the Ministry of Education and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), of which the Minister of Education referred to in his meeting with the Financial Committee of the Lower House of Representatives, showed that more than 100,000 students, representing 22% of students in the first three grades were unable to read Arabic or English letters.

THE CHALLENGE:

The statistical results illustrate the volume of the dilemma of primary education in Jordan in general, and in public schools in particular. Jordan has declined on international scales. Additionally, there are illiterate students who are being automatically transferred to next class without having gained the necessary educational skills, which reflects on students in the next classes until they graduate from universities and colleges.

These results are in spite of immense efforts exerted by the Ministry of Education to improve the level of education by increasing the number of schools, increased the rate of enrollment in primary stage, and abandoning rented school buildings and the double shift schools. The Ministry since 1987 has also carried out several policies and measures aiming to improve education quality. Among these measures was the adoption of an action plan for educational development for the years 1988-1995 which focused on increasing the number of school enrolled pupils and increasing the number of studied subjects. The Ministry also approved an educational development action plan for the years 1996-1999 which aimed to bring about a qualitative upgrade in all parts of the educational system. The Ministry carried out an action plan to upgrade school curriculums for the years 2003-2008 whereby the Ministry sought the improvement of school curriculums based on the needs of a "knowledge economy". A particular focus of the improvement was by employing technology in education in order to up bring an advanced generation who is capable of catching up with modern technical developments. Moreover, the Ministry issued the National Education Strategy in the year 2006 measuring annual developmental action plans, pinpointing strategies and means of achieving the vision and message of the Ministry in alignment with objectives and policies stipulated in the Education Law No. 3 for 1994. Upgrading the capacity of workers in the educational sector has also been a strategic objective. The Ministry is carrying out several training programs where workers and staff

members are exposed to various training topics. The Ministry of Education is also taking steps to build primary schools in a distance not to exceed four kilometers from homes of students, and secure alternatives for students residing beyond that. There is also the effort to abandon the two shift schools which represent 7.6% of the Kingdom's schools and to abandon rented schools which represent 24.9% of the Kingdom's schools⁹. Additionally, it is employing a program to rationalize basis of selecting schools locations and combining contiguous ones

ANALYSIS OF THE CHALLENGE:

Various factors contributing to the decline in quality of the public primary education in Jordan are related to the instructor capacity, curriculum, school atmosphere, educational atmosphere, teaching method, school and educational management, , educational policies and the poor financial budget of education. Each of above factors has contributed to the decline of quality of the primary public education and are described as follows:

INSTRUCTOR CAPACITY:

- Appointing teachers depending on their certificate or educational qualification, as well as the nomination of the Civil Service Department without giving due consideration to personnel interviews to qualify their teaching capabilities.
- Little attention given to teachers and their living conditions in general in terms of salary payment and other benefits leads to less interest on the part of many qualified persons to work as teachers. Also, the modest care given to teachers working in remote areas in terms of providing them with adequate housing as well as appropriate allowance for the hardship they incur by working in such remote locations leading to their reluctance to go and teach therein.
- Lack of developing teaching tools and methods as teaching in Jordan still follows old traditional methods based on direct dictation, memorization and recalling without focusing on other skills.
- Lack of employing new technology tools in teaching, whereby using computers in teaching is limited to the subject of computing but not scientific subjects, geography and history etc.
- Lack of attention given to individual differences among students by the educational system in terms of the fact that each student has different interests and preferences than those of other students.
- The weak effectiveness of management

systems in public schools (a general case in most public sector institution), which reflects negatively on the ultimate instructional and educational process.

EDUCATIONAL CURRICULUM:

- The curriculum presently used suffers from weakness in scientific substance and needs upgrading and modernization resulting in a lack of motivation and inspiration for learning. Much of the curriculum does not contain illustrative maps, images and graphics related to each subject. The text books presently used also lack these essentials.
- Absence of teaching the two subjects of philosophy and logic intended to make students think more creatively. This subject is taught across countries with high educational outcomes.
- The educational curriculum lacks focus on skills of tracking, conclusion, and reasoning; on the contrary, it depends on a method of memorization and recalling, with lack of scientific critical orientation in thinking, as well as lack of developing elicitation talents among students.
- Lack of extracurricular or outdoor activities including sightseeing trips to historical and touristic sights, as well as landmarks across the country. These activities represent major supplementary factors for a complete educational process.
- Lack of focus on the subject of vocational education and lack of specialized instructors for this subject in many schools, in addition to lack of special laboratories required for teaching this subject.
- Curriculum focus on the past, while skipping many daily realities experienced by the students; i.e., modern times are completely different than what is being taught in our schools.

SCHOOLS AND THE EDUCATIONAL ATMOSPHERE:

- Incompatibility of many school buildings for educational and instructional process, particularly schools which follow a two-shift systems estimated at 270 schools⁹, and accounting for 7.6% of the total number of public schools in the Kingdom. This is a concern that has negative psychological effects on students as they have to go to school in unusual times. The impact is mostly felt by students of the early primary stages. In addition to the dilemma of rented schools estimated at 883 schools¹⁰ accounting for 24.9% of the total number of public schools in the Kingdom, such schools lack many school facilities such as yards and playgrounds; many of such school buildings are very old

whereby the general atmosphere of class rooms is lacking all quality standards such as lighting, ventilation and heating, as well as the lack of necessary school facilities including scientific laboratories, libraries, and sports facilities which suit the tastes, interests and skills of students.

- Overcrowding of students where the number of students in one room sometimes reaches more than 40 students in some public schools. It is worth noting however that other statistics suggest that the average number of students in one classroom reaches only 26.4¹¹. Regardless, this matter represents an obstacle in the face of teachers in terms of performing the educational process effectively. Furthermore, the in-flow of Syrian refugees' students over the past three years and their enrollment in public schools led to increasing this impact of an already stretched system.

ATMOSPHERE OF EDUCATIONAL PROCESS:

- Lack of follow up on students by parents in terms of doing their homework as well as their academic attainments, or even ensuring that they reach their school; as the proportion of drop-offs reach 3.3 per mill, i.e., there are 5254 students who abandon schools every year¹². There is a lack of communicating with parents on problems facing their children individually or communally which could lend a chance for collective participation in order to solve such problems.
- Failure to send children to kindergartens or such pre-schooling in order to train them at young age on classroom disciplines and timely doing home works, as well as learning basics of reading and writing, recognizing letters and solving simple arithmetic questions.

SCHOOL AND EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT:

- Weak educational guidance due to the small number of instructors; evidenced by only 983 supervisors in all 6355 schools of the Kingdom¹³.
- Teaching in the basic primary stages is undertaken by non-specialized teachers while it is known that at this stage, particularly the first basic class, it is the most vital stage for preparing students for subsequent stages.
- The frequent changes in the upper educational management results in interruptions in implementation of developed plans and programs. The constant change of Ministers of Education led to poor application of plans and programs; and accordingly, the Ministry of Education failed so far to follow one comprehensive educational strategy allowing

institutional functioning. It has been witnessed that Ministers of Education do not stay in the position for more than one year.

- Having high number of Education Directorates (42 in Jordan) multiplies decision-making mechanisms as well as the implementation thereof.

EDUCATION POLICIES:

- The decrease in Government spending on Education has led to a decline in the education quality in Jordan. This decline started in 2006 when the amount of Government spending on education started to fall below 10% of the gross domestic product (GDP); the said spending amount ranged during the years 2008-2010 around 09.0% of the GDP while it ranged around 13% in the years between 2000-2005 demonstrating a clear indication to the relevant decline in spending on the right of education¹⁴.
- A lack of dimensional vision to the process of education development in Jordan exists. All previous development attempts used to take into account one or more dimension but without a comprehensive, integral vision.

ALTERNATIVES AND OPTIONS:

Below are a few policies recommend to be adopted in order to improve the quality of education in the primary stage in public schools:

INSTRUCTORS AND TEACHING METHODS:

- Upgrading capabilities of teachers continuously concerning modern and scientific teaching techniques through enrolling them to periodical training courses aiming at upgrading their skills.
- Conducting interviews with instructor candidates based on prefixed parameters and subjecting them continuously in rehabilitation programs for improved teaching techniques.
- In order to make the teacher's job more attractive to competencies, improving the living conditions for teachers in terms of salaries and other benefits distinguishes them from other civil servants given their significant role in the society
- Paying special attention to teachers working in remote areas distant from Amman and other main towns through creating suitable and attractive working and living conditions. This could be accomplished by providing suitable houses in good distance from schools where they work.
- Adopting a professional framework detailing precisely the qualifications of those who could work in teaching, as well as the parameters to be considered when appointing them.

- Upgrading teaching tools and methods so that they are based on participation and discussion instead of being based on the mere skills of memorizing and recalling in addition to encouraging understanding and analysis-based thinking.
- Paying more attention to the practical and applied aspects of teaching so that the teaching process is not limited to only the theoretical aspects, particularly with regard to laboratories and scientific experiments. It is also a necessity to employ modern technology in teaching so that using computers is not limited to computer classes only.
- Taking into account the individual differences between students in all stages of the educational process, and enabling teachers to treat these differences as students' rights.

EDUCATIONAL CURRICULUMS:

- Developing the mechanisms for how curriculums are prepared so that they are authored by high-caliber specialists in a single subject who possess deep experience in teaching methods and curriculums.
- Forming specialized committees to reconsider curriculums of all subjects and for all primary classes, cancelling repeated or similar content and deleting all what is not necessary, while replacing it with useful topics. Additionally, considering new technology and tele-communications' technology developments is important in this regard.
- Introducing subjects of philosophy and logic in curriculums either independently or in parallel with other relevant subjects.
- Focusing on occupational education, whereby specialized instructors and entire laboratories are provided enabling the students to select the discipline they like. Additional care is to be given to extracurricular and outdoor activities to stimulate learning.
- Focusing on authoring curriculum on the present and future and reducing topics discussing the past.
- Focusing on English language instruction, so more books are taught such as literature and arts to enable students in the primary stage to master English language fluently.
- Re-designing the textbooks to be more interesting and to contain maps, images and illustrations related to each subject.

SCHOOLS AND SCHOOL ATMOSPHERE:

- Setting a time limit to cease the two-shift system presently applicable in many schools across the Kingdom. Expediting the termination of rented school buildings,

especially those in residential buildings lacking yards and playgrounds, is also instrumental.

- Building new classrooms in such schools where classrooms are crowded so as to reach a situation where students in one class room never exceeds 25.
- Improving access to availability of computers, improving the quality of schools' laboratory equipment, particularly in scientific and computer laboratories, libraries, and upgrading sports gears to suit tastes, interests, and skills of the students.

EDUCATIONAL ATMOSPHERE:

- Engaging parents in the educational process in order to jointly reach solutions to problems facing the students through the activation of a joint parents' council.
- Enrolling children in kindergartens or such pre schooling so as to help them to learn basics of reading and writing, recognizing letters and solving simple arithmetic questions, as well as classroom disciplines and homework doing.

SCHOOL AND EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT:

- Adopting prefixed parameters for the selection of headmasters and educational instructors considering educational capabilities and skills; continually enhancing their training and rehabilitation through training workshops and specialized courses, and conducting periodical evaluation for their competences.
- Drawing a comprehensive educational plan for the advancement of education in all stages and at all levels to take into account quantitative and qualitative dimensions, as well as scientific and technological progress and the evolution of education around the world.
- Increasing the number of educational instructors so as to improve follow through of the educational process and put forward recommendations pertaining to each school to advance education therein.
- Reducing the numbers of Education Directorates to become one directorate in each Governorate to facilitate streamlining directorate operations, and to avoid contradicting educational decisions in the same Governorate.
- It is necessary for the upper educational management in the Ministry of Education to remain in position for suitable periods to be able to carry out drawn educational plans and ensure the proper implementation thereof to avoid plan changes that may occur according to a continual change of ministers.

EDUCATION POLICIES:

- Conducting fresh field study of the reality of education in the Kingdom, as no such study has been carried out since 1987.
- Increase government spending on education to reach 15 of the GDP for the purpose of increasing the numbers of schools, opening new classrooms, improving the status of scientific laboratories, as well as abolish both rented schools and double-shift schools.
- Focus on what students should master of knowledge and skills, as well as occupational and human competencies in each educational stage without being limited to the curriculum alone; i.e., not considering the curriculum is only the textbook, but the relevant set of experiences acquired by the student in his life.
- Allowing teachers of the same subject to establish a professional association to uphold teaching the subject or topic, review the curriculum and put forward their own comments thereof to be presented to concerned parties for consideration in order to develop teaching methods, exchange experiences and success and failure cases. Offering exchanging visits across schools, as well as organizing an

annual specialized conference on one or more subjects in order to exchange working papers, experiments and educational experiences.

- Avoiding subjecting students of the first three grades to traditional school examinations so as not to create a state of awe on their part, but instead develop alternative evaluation methods thereof.
- Maximizing investment in the potential of information and telecommunications technology sector and considering ways and means how to benefit from it. For example, using the (I-pad) instead of the textbook, where all educational materials may be loaded, and it can be used for many years, in addition to the possibility to conduct examinations through such apparatus. The technology also allows for the educational curriculum to be modified at any time during the year unlike the textbook. Furthermore, the use of such an apparatus reduces health hazards to which students are exposed as a result of the heavy weight of books in school bags.

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www.phenixcenter.net
info@phenixcenter.net

هاتف: 00962 6 5164491 ، 00962 6 5164490

فاكس: 00962 6 5164492



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