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Classrooms Without Borders: Governing Equal Education Access at No Cost for Displaced Students in Lebanon

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In periods of armed conflict, the erosion of public services rarely occurs through formal policy decisions; it unfolds through administrative fragmentation, uneven enforcement, and the quiet privileging of access for those who can navigate disruption. Education systems are particularly vulnerable to such dynamics. In Lebanon's current war context, displacement has placed acute strain on an already fragile schooling system, risking the emergence of parallel tracks of access - one for those anchored in stable communities and another for those forced into mobility. Preventing this divergence is not primarily a question of funding. It is, above all, a question of administrative coherence. The Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) retains sufficient regulatory authority to ensure that displacement does not translate into exclusion. This policy brief outlines how immediate, no-cost administrative actions can preserve equal access to education for displaced students, while reinforcing system-wide equity under crisis conditions.

The central risk facing the education system today is not total collapse, but unequal adaptation. Schools in less affected areas may continue operating with minimal disruption, while those hosting displaced populations become overcrowded, inconsistent in enrollment practices, and prone to informal rationing of access. Without intervention, such disparities risk hardening into structural inequalities that outlast the conflict itself. The objective, therefore, is not simply to maintain schooling, but to maintain a unified system governed by consistent rules, predictable pathways, and equitable access across regions.

“ Preventing exclusion is not primarily a question of funding, but of administrative coherence ”

A first and immediate measure is the nationwide implementation of double-shift schooling. While double shifts have historically been used in localized contexts, the present crisis requires their elevation into a standardized national policy. By mandating that all public schools adopt a two-shift model - morning and afternoon - the Ministry can effectively double system capacity without new infrastructure. Crucially, this must not be left to local discretion. Centralized directives should define shift durations, curriculum coverage, and staffing norms to prevent quality divergence between shifts. The second shift should not be treated as an inferior or temporary arrangement; it must be institutionally recognized as equivalent in instructional value, with identical curriculum standards and access to examinations.

Complementing this, the MEHE should authorize displaced teachers to teach in host communities through fast-track administrative recognition. Lebanon's displacement crisis includes not only students but also qualified educators who are currently underutilized due to bureaucratic barriers tied to geographic assignment. A temporary, nationally recognized teaching authorization - issued through simplified verification procedures - would allow these educators to fill staffing gaps in overcrowded schools. This measure requires no financial outlay; it is a regulatory adjustment that unlocks existing human capital. To ensure quality, school principals can be granted limited discretion to assign teaching roles based on subject expertise, while maintaining accountability through standard reporting mechanisms.

“ THE CENTRAL RISK IS NOT COLLAPSE, BUT UNEQUAL ADAPTATION ”

Equally critical is the standardization of flexible enrollment and attendance rules. Displaced students often face inconsistent requirements depending on the region they relocate to, including documentation demands, deadlines, and attendance thresholds that are difficult to meet under unstable conditions. MEHE should issue a unified national directive establishing minimum documentation requirements for enrollment - accepting prior school records in any available form - and allowing provisional enrollment where documentation is incomplete. Attendance policies should be recalibrated to recognize the realities of displacement, permitting justified absences without penalizing students' progression. Importantly, these rules must be uniformly enforced across all regions to prevent administrative discretion from becoming a source of inequality.

To sustain participation within this expanded and more flexible system, simple, non-monetary incentive mechanisms can play a decisive role. For students, eligibility for national examinations should be preserved through clearly communicated, flexible criteria that account for displacement-related disruptions, ensuring that continued engagement - rather than strict attendance compliance - remains the key pathway to progression. Recognition certificates, issued at the school or district level, can acknowledge resilience and participation, reinforcing motivation without financial cost. For teachers, adjustments in teaching loads across shifts can be formalized to prevent burnout, while recognition programs can highlight contributions in high-pressure environments. Such symbolic incentives, while modest, can significantly influence behavior when aligned with institutional recognition and professional advancement signals.

Equally important are incentives directed at host communities - particularly schools and municipalities - that are absorbing displaced students. Without deliberate alignment, these actors may face increased pressure on infrastructure and services, creating implicit disincentives to fully implement inclusive policies. The Ministry can address this through targeted, non-monetary incentives that recognize and reward cooperation. Public schools accommodating higher shares of displaced students can be designated as “priority inclusion schools,” benefiting from administrative advantages such as preferential access to future infrastructure rehabilitation programs, expedited approvals for maintenance requests, and formal recognition in Ministry reporting and communications. Municipalities that actively facilitate school access - by supporting facility use, easing local administrative processes, or coordinating community resources - can be similarly recognized through national visibility and priority consideration in future government partnerships. Such measures leverage reputational and procedural incentives to transform local compliance into active participation, ensuring that host communities are not merely passive recipients of policy but engaged partners in sustaining equitable access.

Another key measure is the deployment of catch-up curricula designed to bridge learning gaps caused by displacement. Rather than attempting to fully replicate standard curricula under constrained conditions, the Ministry can issue condensed learning modules focused on core competencies in subjects such as mathematics, languages, and sciences. These modules should be standardized nationally and integrated into both shifts, ensuring that all students - regardless of their displacement status - receive a coherent educational experience. Teachers can be provided with simplified guidance on prioritizing essential learning outcomes, reducing the burden of improvisation and ensuring consistency across classrooms.

**“ Education must remain
a public good guaranteed to all ”**

Maximizing physical capacity without new spending also requires the coordinated use of public facilities beyond traditional school buildings. Universities, municipal halls, and other public spaces can be integrated into a rotating schedule of educational use, particularly for afternoon shifts or catch-up sessions. This requires a centralized coordination mechanism within the Ministry to map available spaces and assign usage schedules in collaboration with local authorities. The objective is not to create parallel systems, but to extend the reach of the existing one. By maintaining unified curricula and administrative oversight, these additional spaces can function as extensions of the public school system rather than substitutes.

Transportation and geographic access present another layer of inequality that can be addressed through administrative coordination. While large-scale transport programs may require funding, immediate steps can be taken to align school assignments with displacement patterns. The Ministry can temporarily relax area restrictions, allowing students to enroll in the nearest available school regardless of prior residence. This reduces the burden of travel and increases the likelihood of sustained attendance. Clear communication of this policy is essential to prevent local-level resistance and ensure consistent application.



Data and monitoring are indispensable to maintaining equity under these conditions, but their effectiveness is ultimately shaped by underlying political economy constraints. Fragmented administrative authority across central, regional, and school levels, combined with uneven enforcement capacity, creates scope for discretionary implementation that may reproduce inequalities the policy seeks to eliminate. School principals and local officials operate under competing incentives - balancing resource constraints, community pressures, and institutional expectations - which may lead to informal rationing of access, uneven quality across shifts, or resistance to enrolling displaced students. To mitigate these risks, The Ministry should pair its reporting system with simple but credible accountability mechanisms: standardized weekly reporting on enrollment, attendance, and shift allocation; random administrative audits; and public aggregation of school-level indicators to increase transparency. At the school level, risks of quality divergence between morning and afternoon shifts can be addressed through unified timetables, shared teaching staff across shifts, and periodic pedagogical inspections. Local resistance can be reduced by aligning incentives - linking compliance to reputational recognition and future administrative advantages, as well as clearly communicating that inclusion policies are system-wide mandates rather than locally negotiable decisions. By embedding monitoring within an incentive-compatible framework, the Ministry can move from formal policy issuance to effective, system-wide implementation.

Coordination with non-state actors, including NGOs and community organizations, should be framed within a unified regulatory structure. Rather than allowing parallel education initiatives to proliferate independently, the Ministry can require that all supplementary education programs align with national curricula and reporting standards. This ensures that external support reinforces, rather than fragments, the public system. Administrative recognition of compliant programs can serve as an incentive for alignment, while maintaining oversight without financial commitments.

“ What is required is not extraordinary resources, but administrative will ”

Communication strategy is another low-cost but high-impact lever. Clear, consistent messaging from the Ministry regarding enrollment rights, attendance flexibility, and examination access can reduce uncertainty and prevent misinformation from shaping behavior. Displaced families, in particular, benefit from predictable rules that reduce the perceived risk of engaging with the system. Schools should be provided with standardized communication materials to ensure that policies are conveyed uniformly across regions.

Importantly, these measures should be institutionalized not as temporary exceptions, but as components of a crisis-response framework that can be reactivated in future displacement episodes. Lebanon's recent history suggests that displacement is not an isolated event but a recurring structural challenge. Embedding these administrative practices within the Ministry's operational toolkit enhances system resilience and reduces the need for ad hoc responses in future crises.

The broader implication of this approach is that equity in education under wartime conditions is achievable through governance rather than expenditure. By focusing on rules, incentives, and coordination, the Ministry can prevent the emergence of unequal access without relying on additional funding. This does not negate the importance of financial resources in the long term, but it underscores the immediate capacity of administrative action to shape outcomes.



At its core, the challenge is one of maintaining a shared institutional framework in the face of physical fragmentation. Schools are not merely sites of instruction; they are nodes of a national system that confers legitimacy, continuity, and opportunity. When access to these nodes becomes uneven, the system itself begins to fracture. Conversely, when access is preserved through coherent policy, the system can absorb shocks without losing its integrative function.

In conclusion, the current war has turned Lebanon's education system into a profound test of governance under constraint. The danger lies not only in students falling behind, but in the quiet normalization of inequality - where the principle of equal access is eroded in practice while still affirmed in principle. Yet this outcome is not inevitable. The measures outlined in this brief show that even under severe pressure, a unified and equitable system can be preserved without additional financial burden.

Through nationwide double-shift schooling, the mobilization of displaced teachers, standardized yet flexible enrollment rules, targeted non-monetary incentives, catch-up learning programs, and the strategic use of existing public facilities, the Ministry of Education retains the tools to keep education collectively accessible. What is required is not extraordinary resources, but administrative will: decisiveness in implementation, clarity in policy, and consistency in enforcement - qualities well within institutional reach even in conditions of crisis and wartime. If pursued effectively, these steps can safeguard a fundamental truth: education must remain a public good guaranteed to all, not a privilege reserved for those fortunate enough to live in stability.