

# Public Education in Egypt

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**POLICY PAPER**



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When confronted with the spiral of issues our contemporary society faces, one cannot overlook the adverse effects that poor education has on our population. In all simplification, poor education is the root and underlying cause behind all the major problems societies are enduring nowadays. It could range from overpopulation, child labor, poverty, gender inequality, all the way to conflicts, wars and climate change. These are all one way or another, a consequence of lack of education. According to global competitiveness indicators issued by the World Economic Forum, Egypt ranks 134 out of 144 economies with respect to its quality of primary education (Ille & Peacey, 2019). A number that only indicates a curtailing youth population, growing poverty rates and an obscure prospect for economic development. It is safe to say that the public sector of education in Egypt is a disaster. In an environment of low-quality education, private tutoring is widespread. The system is plagued by corruption, unprofessional teachers, an underfunded education system, overcrowded classrooms, poor facilities, and lastly, a redundant curriculum. Education has always been a right enshrined in the Egyptian constitution, and its most recent iteration in Article 19 of the 2014 Constitution is one that offers more legal guarantees promising to raise the level of education and ensure free education to all (Nassar, 2019). Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that only 4% of government budget is spent on education (World Bank, 2020), and areas deprived of education have increased by 6.5% in the countryside and its outskirts in the past decade. This is a glimpse of how big of a challenge Egypt is facing, especially considering the sector's already existing and longstanding problems. This paper aims to address the issues faced by public education institutions in Egypt, as well as to



underscore the government's efforts in dealing with these challenges, with the purpose of outlining further solutions to support education in Egypt.

### **1. Overpopulated classrooms:**

With a rising youth population and scarce resources, public education in Egypt struggles a big deal with high poverty rates, which preclude a majority of the population from seeking private education. The average number of students in a public classroom is 45 students, while every year an additional 500,000 to 700,000 students enroll in public schools (El-Tamimi&co, 2020). The rapid population growth has placed strains on Egypt's education system, which supports over 21 million students in 50,000 schools (Moustafa, et al. 2022). Aside from lack of funding and resources, this is mostly caused by an infrastructure problem that impedes the creation of sufficient school capacity. There are 55,000 schools across the country, yet, far more schools are still required to meet the challenges of overcrowded classrooms. Some classrooms in public schools are overcrowded to the extent that students cannot find desks, with no strict restrictions on the number of students per class. This does not only hinder the quality of education delivered to the future generations, but also creates a dynamic of educational inequality, generating an interdependency on private tutoring, which is another problematic issue faced by the sector. The problem is worsened when it comes to higher education, as only 31% of students are enrolled in universities (Leila, 2020).

### **2. Quality of education**

A natural result of overcrowded classrooms and underfunded education is a substantial reduction in the quality of education. Student density in classrooms rose during the last



five years for all public pre-university education, at the rate of 5.11% between the school years 2015-2016 and 2019-2020 (Ille. & Peacey, 2018). Meanwhile, the relative increase in private education is stable, reaching only 3% during the same period. Additionally, the public curricula, under Thanaweya Amma, comprises an educational methodology that solely relies on reverberation and repetition. It is not structured to stimulate critical thinking, problem solving nor does it develop the upcoming generations' interpersonal skills, making them unprepared for higher education and later on, unqualified for the job market. This is exemplified by the fact that 35% of higher education graduates are unemployed (El-Masry, 2013).

Egypt is ranked 141<sup>st</sup> in terms of quality of basic education (Unicef, 2020), with only Cairo University, ranked number 392, as one of the best global universities. Even though some schools took on a different approach on how tests are given, by introducing more variety into classroom material through interactive learning, children are still required to answer questions solely based on the textbooks as they are the only answers teachers recognize. Nevertheless, this problem is further exacerbated by a lack of qualified and well-equipped teachers, due to a lack of training and meagre wages. Additionally, another major obstacle to public schools lies not only in how traditional the teaching and learning methodology is, but most importantly, in the scarcity of extracurricular activities. These activities offer students the opportunity apply academic skills in a real-world context, and thus, provide a channel for reinforcing the lessons learned in the classroom.



### **3. Corruption:**

Corruption in public education is endemic in Egypt. It is not confined to corrupt administrations or misallocated resources, and those who are least complicit in corruption, the students, are the worst affected by it (El-Masry, 2013). Students enrolled in public schools in Egypt suffer from extortion, nepotism, bribes and sexual harassment, which unswervingly generates a toxic learning environment. Private tutoring and underpaid teachers compose an endless and vicious cycle perpetuating corruption in all governorates' educational institutions, to the point that it has taken it out of the hands of state control, as private tutoring is now considered to be a social norm. The irony and the vicious cycle lie in the promotion of free education, yet, creating an interdependent and coerced dynamic that hinders students from passing without offering financial benefits to their underpaid teachers. The cost of private tutoring is a physical and psychological burden on low-income Egyptian families, where free education is supposedly a right enshrined in the constitution. This has allowed teachers to take advantage of the failed system and thus prevented the implementation of possible improvements.

### **4. Lack of funds and investment in education:**

By global standards, total spending on primary, secondary and higher education as a percentage of total government expenditure averages 11%, ranging from 7% to 17%, differing from one country to another (Eurostat, 2020). On the other hand, Egypt's spending on education accounts for only 4% of GNP (Nassar, 2019), which is less than half of the amount the government promised. Moreover, the 2014 constitution stipulates

that the government must allocate 6% of GNP to education, broken down into 4% for primary and secondary education, and 2% to higher education (Oxford Business Group, 2021). Even when investments occur, they are not allocated in the right places. It is important to highlight that the education minister invested 9 billion EGP in buying tablets for students in the first stage of high school, whereas only 12 billion EGP were allocated for building new schools and classrooms, out of a total budget of 56 billion EGP. These tablets account for 16% of total education budget, although education experts warned that more than 60% of schools were not prepared to adapt to this technological transition. Some of these schools, mainly rural ones, lacked decent internet infrastructure. The parliament then proceeded with asking the government to reconsider the decision and to firstly invest in upgrading the infrastructure before having students shift to using tablets.

Furthermore, the education ministry estimates that this year, the system will have a shortfall of 200,000 to 300,000 teachers and of more than 28,000 classrooms. The teacher shortage became so acute that the minister came up with the idea of having unemployed teachers and university graduates volunteer to teach. Each volunteering teacher will be paid 20 EGP per hour, that way, the government can avoid having to hire more teachers at a regular salary with conditions and benefits (El-Masry, 2013).

### **Government efforts and future prospects:**

Egypt has been prioritizing education within its national strategy, with goals to be achieved by 2030. In terms of basic education, the government is seeking to develop existing schools as well as establish new ones inspired by the Japanese education



system. As part of the reform, the World Bank has dedicated \$100 million towards increasing access to pre-primary school while simultaneously improving the quality of education (Moustafa, et al. 2022) This entails reforms that focus on restructuring technical schools to turn them into technology-focused schools that provides modern and up to date education. The reforms' strategic objectives include increasing access to pre-primary education, improving the quality of primary and secondary education to align with international standards, as well as to advance the country's ranking internationally. Constrained with limited resources and awaiting the gradual increase in the fiscal budget pledged in the 2014 constitution, the strategy of the ministry of education is to implement reforms gradually to fully transform the education system by 2030. Furthermore, at the primary level, the access and infrastructure objectives are focused on contending with overcrowding and lack of resources in Egypt's public schools. New education tools are proposed to assist with this endeavor, especially digital technology, which is promoted as a method of modernizing the curriculum.

Although government reformative efforts are recognized, it is important to tackle the obstacles that have been deeply-rooted within the system, instead of introducing new educational tools students are not familiar with. For instance, it is of utmost importance to develop critical thinking skills and implement interpersonal skills within the curriculums rather than finding technology-based techniques to counter the sector's impediments. This is for two binding reasons, firstly, due to the scarcity of resources and secondly, because there are greater priorities, such as investing in teaching professionals. The government is advised to provide different outlooks when dealing with the shortcoming of education in Egypt. However, it is crucial to underpin that whilst



the lack of investment in education persists, the reformative efforts will not come to life. That being said, further funding efforts are critical to the success of public education in Egypt. Nonetheless, without an efficient and concise roadmap tackling corruption, poor quality of education, underpaid teachers and overpopulated classrooms, investment in education would have a null result. Instead of further institutionalizing the private sector, the government should work on abolishing educational inequality by ensuring equal educational opportunities. The system should focus on developing a self-reliant student and individual of society, capable of analytical thinking. Confidence in the public educational system should be revived, by raising the quality of education and setting standards for the skills and programs inflicted by the system. An enhanced system of monitoring and evaluation shall be placed to limit the corrupt nature of the educational system, eliminating private tutoring and evaluating teachers' performance. It goes without saying that further budgetary efforts on behalf of the state could save the sector from collapsing. Increasing teachers' wages and investing in their training workshops could definitely go a long way in perpetuating a better, more cultivated society. Improving the quality of education is the number one factor that requires immediate attention.





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