

Al Mezan



Center for Human Rights

Factsheet: The State of General Education in the Gaza Strip at the Beginning of the New Academic Year

Gaza
September 2011



This factsheet was developed and published with the generous support of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

Factsheet: The State of General Education in the Gaza Strip at the Beginning of the New Academic Year*

This factsheet reviews the state of general education¹ in the Gaza Strip, which has deteriorated due to the Palestinian internal split and the four-year Israeli-imposed closure. As a result, there are several obstacles to fulfillment of the right to education in Gaza. This factsheet aims to review the current state of general education and the main barriers that hinder its full realization. It also seeks to clarify responsibilities and requirements needed to ensure the protection, respect, and promotion of the right to education.

General Educational Indexes²

The following are principal indexes of the state of general education in the Gaza Strip.

1. Schools

There are 682 schools in the Gaza Strip, 530 of which are primary schools and 147 of which are secondary schools. They are distributed as follows:

- a. 393 government schools (258 primary and 135 secondary schools). This amounts to 57.6% of the total number of schools.
- b. 243 UNRWA schools.³ This represents 35.6% of the total number of schools.
- c. 46 private schools (34 primary and 12 secondary schools). This represents 6.7% of the total number of schools.

2. Classrooms

Students are divided into 12,499 classrooms in the Gaza Strip. The classrooms are distributed as follows:

- a. 6,228 classrooms in government schools, or 49.83% of total classrooms.
- b. 5,643 classrooms in UNRWA schools, or 45.15% of total classrooms.
- c. 628 classrooms in private schools, or 5.02% of total classrooms.

3. Students

There are approximately 465,000 students in the Gaza Strip. They are distributed as follows:

- a. Approximately 235,000 students in government schools (50.5% of the total number of students).
- b. Approximately 215,000 students in UNRWA schools (46.2% of the total).
- c. Approximately 15,000 students in private schools (3.2% of the total).

* Original Arabic version published 25 September 2011, online at www.mezan.org/upload/12604.pdf (PDF format). This version has been modified and updated.

¹ General Education refers to pre-university stages of education. These stages are divided into: primary, secondary, and vocational secondary education. Primary education is the basis for subsequent education and lasts for ten years. Secondary education lasts for two years and is divided between art and science departments, each with a first and second phase. *Education Statistics Yearbook, 2007/2008* (Ramallah: Ministry of Education and Higher Education).

² The following figures, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the *Education Statistics Yearbook, 2010/2011* (Gaza: General Directorate for Planning, Ministry of Education and Higher Education, 2010).

³ Email correspondence from UNRWA's Gaza field office, 16 October 2011.

4. Teachers

The number of teachers in the Gaza Strip is 18,226. They are distributed as follows:

- a. 9,900 teachers in government schools (54.3% of the total number of teachers).
- b. 7,333 teachers in UNRWA schools (40.2% of the total).
- c. 993 teachers at private schools (5.4% of the total).

General Education, the Siege, and the Internal Factional Split

The Israeli siege imposed on the Gaza Strip is considered the major obstacle to development of the educational sector. One consequence of the closure is a lack of construction materials to build new schools, in order to accommodate the increasing number of students. The Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF) continue to prevent the entry of construction materials and to impose tight restrictions on various materials required for educational purposes.

1. Major Shortage in School Buildings

- a. The Ministry of Education and Higher Education urgently needs to build 105 new schools in order to decrease the shortage of space created over the past four years due to the Israeli siege. Once this gap is filled, and in order to keep pace with student population growth in the future, the Gaza Strip needs to build 20-25 new schools annually. 308 government schools (78.4% of the total) work on double shifts; only 85 (21.6%) work on a regular, non-shift school-day basis.⁴ (The majority of Gazan schools operate on a “shift” system, with some children attending morning sessions and others afternoon sessions, which imposes reduced classroom hours and forces every building to serve as two separate schools during the day).
- b. UNRWA needs to build 119 schools in order to eliminate the shift system. In addition, UNRWA needs to build ten more schools to accommodate the increasing number of students.⁵
- c. At least 280 schools were damaged and 18 (including eight kindergartens) were completely destroyed during Israel’s offensive on Gaza (Operation Cast Lead), including 36 UNRWA schools damaged. Six university buildings were destroyed and 16 damaged.⁶ Al Mezan estimates that there are 37 schools at severe risk due to their location either near the border between Gaza and Israel or near installations that might be targeted by the IOF. These schools suffer from frequent attacks in their vicinity as well as interruption of their work due to violence on the border. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), using a UN methodology for tabulating threats to education, counts 79 schools in Gaza at risk.⁷

⁴ *Education Statistics Yearbook, 2010/2011, op. cit.*

⁵ Information provided on request to Al Mezan field worker by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, Gaza, 18 August 2011.

⁶ Association of International Development Agencies (AIDA), “The Gaza Blockade: Children and Education Fact Sheet,” undated but published 28 July 2009, [online](#); email correspondence from UNRWA’s Gaza field office, 16 October 2011 (figure for UNRWA schools damaged). Because the factsheet cited could not be located on the AIDA website (www.aidajerusalem.org, consulted October 2011), it is cited from its posting on the website of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs – occupied Palestinian Territory (www.ochaopt.org, consulted October 2011), from which the date of publication is also taken.

⁷ Email correspondence from UNRWA’s Gaza field office, 16 October 2011.

2. Shortage in Stationary, Books, Laboratory Equipment, and Other Materials Essential to Providing Educational Services

- a. The Israeli siege has created shortages in ten types of printed educational materials necessary for education.
- b. There is a real need for laboratories and provision of laboratory equipment to classrooms, affecting 100 school buildings. Existing laboratories need to be upgraded and equipped with chemicals, furniture, LCD projectors, computers, printers, and other lab equipment.

3. Most Pressing Problems in Vocational Education

- a. Shortage in raw materials, supplies, and office equipment needed for training.
- b. Need for continuing maintenance, renovation, and expansion of schools.
- c. Need to build three new vocational schools.
- d. Lack of availability of cheap books for students, especially the poor.
- e. Lack of availability of fuel for generators to provide electricity during daily electricity cuts.
- f. Need to provide specialized training courses for teachers.
- g. Need for computerized vocational education.⁸

4. Effects of the Acute Shortage in the Number of Schools

- a. As noted above, roughly 79% of government schools operate on the “shift” system, meaning only 21% of schools have a unified schedule serving a single student body.⁹ Nearly 95% of UNRWA schools (228 out of 243) operate on the shift system.¹⁰
- b. In order to avoid the possibility of having triple shifts in the coming couple of years due to the increasing numbers of children and the halt in construction of new schools, or within existing schools, there is an urgent need to build hundreds of classrooms. The Israeli ban on the entry of construction materials has been the only obstacle preventing construction. As a result, thousands of children are faced with the risk of having to go to school for shorter times in the evenings.
- c. The average number of students per class at government and UNRWA schools is 37.4.¹¹
- d. There is little exchange of knowledge and experience with the West Bank and the outside world due to the Israeli siege, which prevents the movement of educational service providers from inside and outside the Gaza Strip.

5. General Education and the Internal Palestinian Split¹²

Education has been one of the sectors affected by the Palestinian internal split, resulting in the following problems:

⁸ Information provided on request to Al Mezan field worker by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, Gaza, 18 August 2011.

⁹ Information provided on request to Al Mezan field worker by Dr. Osama Al Mazini, Minister of Education and Higher Education, Gaza, 18 August 2011.

¹⁰ Information provided on request to Al Mezan field worker by UNRWA, Gaza, 18 August 2011; email correspondence from UNRWA’s Gaza field office, 16 October 2011.

¹¹ *Education Statistics Yearbook, 2007/2008, op. cit.*

¹² The information in this section is drawn from the information provided to Al Mezan by Dr. Osama Al Mazini, *op. cit.*, and from Alaa Mattar, “Reality of General Education in Palestine,” *Policy* magazine (Institute of Public Policies, Ramallah), no. 15, 2011.

- a. Acute failure to coordinate between the Ministry of Education and Higher Education in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. This negatively affects the educational process, which requires coordination in making day-to-day decisions.
- b. Inability to reach agreement on a unified and comprehensive process to modify the curriculum. As a result, many problems in the curriculum which have long since been pointed out by teachers and educational staff continue to exist.
- c. Several programs and projects are paused due to the financial strains on the Gazan government. As a result, some school infrastructure projects have been suspended. There are also shortfalls in covering the needs of schools, teachers, and students for supporting tools and services.
- d. Projects such as building and preparing school programs and educational and psychological training programs, as well as other projects funded by donor countries, including Finland, Belgium, Germany, Sweden, and Russia, have been suspended. Funding is limited to programs implemented in the West Bank. As a result, projects with a value of more than \$100 million are currently suspended in the Gaza Strip.
- e. Many schools in the Gaza Strip do not benefit from supervision and guidance services, and other appropriate external support, due to a strike by a number of supervisors. The government has not replaced the striking employees.
- f. The Gazan government is not implementing several plans and programs decided upon by the Ramallah Ministry of Education and Higher Education, such as the second five-year plan (2008-2010) on education. This means that any benefits or improvements resulting from implementation of these plans are lost in Gaza.

Conclusion

The information reviewed above demonstrates that there are several obstacles hindering the implementation of the right to education in Gaza. These barriers are the consequences of the Israeli siege and the Palestinian internal split. Schools in Gaza also continue to be affected by IOF attacks, which often cause damage and/or interrupt schooling, especially in border areas. The continuing IOF attacks are a manifest reminder that the Gazan educational system (and Gaza generally) is in need not just of reconstruction but of active protection.

As part of its mission to ensure economic, social, and cultural rights in the Gaza Strip, the Al Mezan Center for Human Rights recommends the following:

1. The international community and the contracting parties to the Geneva Convention must uphold their responsibilities and exert pressure on the IOF to end the collective punishment of the population of the Gaza Strip; to lift the siege; to halt attacks on schools; to allow the entry of construction materials needed to build new schools and to expand existing schools; and to allow the entry of equipment and materials needed for the educational sector in the Gaza Strip.
2. International donor institutions must continue their assistance and support to projects and programs to develop general education in the Gaza Strip.
3. International donor states must provide funding to build classrooms in existing schools in Gaza. They must pressure Israel to allow the construction materials needed to enter Gaza without delay.
4. Steps must be taken to remove the educational sector from the internal political dispute. States having influence on current political affairs in the occupied Palestinian territory should direct their policy towards shielding education from the negative consequences of the internal split. This can be achieved by providing direct support for the educational

sector in Gaza and, at a minimum, refraining from opposing efforts to restore unity to the Palestinian political system.

5. Steps must be taken towards ending the Palestinian internal split, and there must be immediate measures for coordination between the Ministry of Education and Higher Education in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank in order to develop the educational sector.

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