



UNRWA Students are happy and excited to start the new semester. © 2023 UNRWA. Photo by Mohamed Hinnawi

# Evaluation of the UNRWA Education Programme Reform

Department of Internal Oversight Services  
Evaluation Division



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## Commissioning Office

Evaluation Division, UNRWA Department of Internal Oversight Services

## Evaluation Team members



Frans Van Gerwen, Team Leader

Francesca Ballarin, Senior Evaluator

Robert Prouty, Education Specialist/Senior Evaluator

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### [About UNRWA](#)

UNRWA is a United Nations agency established by the General Assembly in 1949 and mandated to provide assistance and protection to a population of over 5.7 million registered Palestine refugees. Its mission is to help Palestine refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, West Bank and the Gaza Strip achieve their full human development potential, pending a just and lasting solution to their plight. UNRWA services encompass education, health care, relief and social services, camp infrastructure and improvement, and microfinance. UNRWA is financed almost entirely by voluntary contributions.

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## Acronyms

ALO: Assessment of Learning Outcomes	PDC: Professional Development and Curriculum
CF: Curriculum Framework	PISA: Programme for International Student Assessment
DCG PP: Deputy Commissioner General (Programmes and Partnerships)	PIRLS: Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
DIOS: Department of Internal Oversight Services	PTA: Parent-Teacher Association
EiE: Education in Emergencies	PSS: Psychosocial Support
EMIS: Education Management Information System	SBTD: School-Based Teacher Development
FGD: Focus Group Discussion	SFO: Syria Field Office
GFO: Gaza Field Office	SQA: School Quality Assurance
HQ: Headquarters - HQA: Headquarters Amman	SSU: Strategic Support Unit
HR: Human Resources -HRD: Human Resources Department	TIMSS: Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
HRCRT: Human Rights Conflict and Resolution Toolkit	ToC: Theory of Change
ICT4E: Information and Communications Technology for Education	TVET: Technical and Vocational Education and Training
INGO: International Non-Governmental Organization	UN: United Nations
JFO: Jordan Field Office	UNEG: United Nations Evaluation Group
KIIs: Key Informant Interviews	UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
LFO: Lebanon Field Office	UNICEF: United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
MLA: Monitoring Learning Achievement	UNRWA: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
MoU: Memorandum of Understanding	VTC: Vocational Training Centre
NAT: Newly Appointed Teacher	WBFO: West Bank Field Office
NRC: Norwegian Refugee Council	

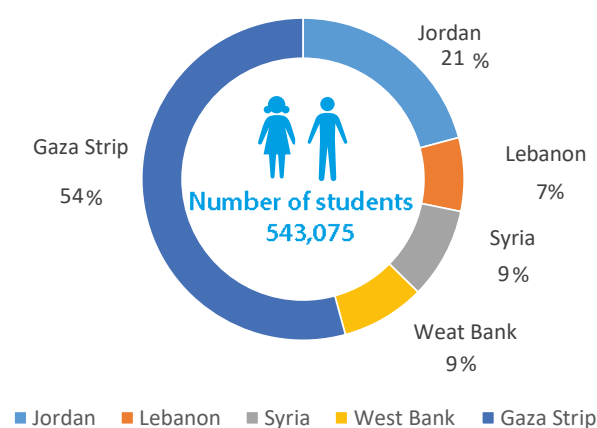
## 1.Introduction

This document is intended as a summary of the findings, conclusions and main recommendations presented in the technical evaluation report for the UNRWA education programme reform. It presents an overview of the evaluation methodology and approach – as well as a summary of achievements and remaining challenges, along with the supporting evidence from secondary data and primary data collection, including the results of surveys conducted specifically for the evaluation.

## 2.The UNRWA education programme and reform process

UNRWA operates one of the largest nongovernmental school systems in the Middle East, managing more than 700 elementary and preparatory schools in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, West Bank and Gaza and eight secondary schools in Lebanon. It began an education reform process in 2011, aiming to create a more inclusive, student-centred approach.

Figure 1: Percentage of UNRWA students per field



The theory of change (ToC) behind the reform was that school-based support to teachers and teacher training in use of a more student-centred approach would change teacher beliefs around learning. This was to be underpinned by eight workstreams – four to directly address pedagogical considerations and other four to provide key institutional support structures. It was believed that this would increase commitment of the school community to learning, with the ultimate result being a system where continuous support to teachers helps to ensure that the diverse needs of all children are met.

Over the course of the reform, a consistent effort was made to improve teacher training and the curriculum, while strengthening school quality assurance and the assessment of learning outcomes. Three strategic support units (SSU) were established in each of UNRWA's five fields of operations: a professional development and curriculum (PDC) unit; an assessment unit; and a school quality assurance (SQA) unit.

## 3.The evaluation purpose, scope and methods

The evaluation aimed to assess what was achieved (and what was not achieved) by the education reform as implemented in the five UNRWA fields of operation (Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, West Bank and Gaza). The purpose was to inform future UNRWA activities and to provide accountability to stakeholders involved in the reform. The evaluation covered the initial reform period of 2011-2015 and the follow-up period of 2016-2022, when the reform was integrated into regular implementation of the UNRWA education programme.

The theory-based evaluation used both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide insights on process and governance aspects and on the effects of the interventions at the classroom level. The methodology applied for this evaluation is based on the UNRWA Evaluation Policy (2022) and the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) Norms and Standards for Evaluation, and the evaluation questions reflect an emphasis on gender equality, protection, inclusion and equity.

Participatory discussions were held with key stakeholders to plan the evaluation design, to analyse the ToC and to validate preliminary research findings. The evaluation data collection was comprehensive, involving:

- Extensive desk review from a wide range of UNRWA education programme documents (2011-2023) as well as other studies and publications, including PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS<sup>1</sup>. The evaluation was also informed by the strategies, policies and programmes of host country authorities and relevant United Nations (UN) agencies and donors. Separate analyses prepared for seven thematic areas of the reform, including those linked to teaching and learning and those linked to the support structures;
- Comparative analysis of academic performance of students in grades 4 and 8 related to characteristics of schools and contract teachers; a longitudinal analysis of longer-term trends and developments in students' academic performance, focusing on three years for which UNRWA carried out more comprehensive monitoring and evaluation exercises (2013, 2016 and 2021);
- Primary data collection in the Fields of Operations, entailing school visits and direct observations, focus group discussions with teachers and parents, child-friendly surveys;
- Online key informant interviews KIs and online surveys to teachers and principals.

Figure 2: Comprehensive process of evaluation data collection



A key limitation was that data collection at the school level in West Bank and Lebanon was interrupted by the outbreak of the crisis in October 2023. Visits in Gaza were not affected as they had been finalized earlier (see Table 1 for a list of schools visited in each field). Most remaining interviews were completed online. Syrian authorities did not approve school visits—online meetings with teachers, principals and other staff were carried out but the inability to consult Syrian students and parents could not be mitigated. Most learning outcomes data prior to 2017 from UNRWA's Education Management Information System (EMIS) were found to be unreliable. This meant that comparative analyses of learning were limited to Jordan and Palestine Territories.

<sup>1</sup> PISA is the Programme for International Student Assessment; PIRLS is the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study; and TIMSS is the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study. These are international assessments used by to analyze learning outcomes.

Table 1. Number of schools sampled for school visits and visits realized

	Total	Sampled	Sampled %	Realised	% of visits achieved
JFO (Jordan Field)	169	11	7%	11	7%
SFO (Syria Field)	103	8	8%	8	8%
LFO (Lebanon Field)	65	6	9%	1	2%
WBFO (West Bank Field)	96	8	8%	6	6%
GFO (Gaza Field)	276	17	6%	17	6%
<b>UNRWA Total</b>	<b>709</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>6%</b>



UNRWA students participated in psychosocial support activities in summer, Syria © 2023 UNRWA

## 4. Key findings

### 4.1 Relevance

The reform's pedagogical approach was relevant to the needs of education programme beneficiaries, and consistent with international evidence-based approaches. It was also very relevant to the needs and capacities of school principals and teachers employed by UNRWA. The reform championed the idea of child-centred, inclusive education. It also tried to improve school governance, in part through the creation of student parliaments and support to Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs). These ambitious efforts were consistent with the Millennium and Sustainable Development Goals for education which called for more inclusive approaches and better quality and access.

UNRWA's strengths working within an Education In Emergencies (EiE) context proved to be particularly relevant. It was able to participate effectively in emergency appeals, providing targeted education responses in emergency situations. Its quick response to the COVID-19 pandemic showcased this strength, as it quickly and effectively rolled out distance and online education programmes. UNRWA's performance in dealing with learning loss due to COVID-19 was better than that of host authorities and of other countries in the region.

However, the reform's approach was not systematically updated and adapted to respond to new challenges, including the chronic challenge of underfunding, and new information over the course of implementation. For instance, as it became apparent that boys were failing to keep up with girls in terms of participation and achievement, there were scattered efforts in some Fields of Operations to address the challenge. Similarly, when instances of resistance to gender equality and student-centred approaches arose, there was little effort to engage with the PTAs around these issues, as confirmed through Focus Group Discussions with parents.

### 4.2 Coherence and efficiency

As noted earlier, the reform was structured into eight inter-dependent workstreams, four of which focused on instruction and four of which addressed institutional support systems. This approach strengthened synergies and coherence in responding to the challenges identified. However, no comprehensive functional review of the Education Department was ever carried out, and the various structures were not well aligned to support implementation of the reform. The Education Department did not develop needed human resource management tools – for instance, the ratio of advisors to teachers was too small for them to provide substantive guidance to teachers in the introduction of a student-centred, inclusive approach. Grading of positions in the Education Programme at the HQ and FO levels was not well coordinated with the HR department. The Education Department and HR department did not align in developing instruments and methods adapted to new requirements to monitor behaviour and on-the-job performance. The reform process also did not sufficiently address the annual class formation process, even though this process is the Education Department's most important cost driver. The annual class formation process is time-consuming, and its largely manual procedures are exposed to human error, delays and fraud. An initiative to automate the annual class formation process was introduced only recently, in 2023.

The vision and strategy for change and capacity development in the Education Reform (ER) were not accompanied by changes in organisational structure and arrangements, leading to fragmented implementation of the Education Reform ER and of education programme delivery, with insufficient communication and coordination between different organisational units at HQ and FO level.

UNRWA follows the curricula of host countries. The evaluation team found that the UNRWA zero-tolerance policy regarding violations of neutrality principles was taken very seriously. Host country curricula and textbooks were reviewed in a timely manner in all FOs to ensure alignment with UN values, and UNRWA consistently provided timely corrective instructions for teachers as appropriate, along with development of supportive curriculum and study materials.

### 4.3 Effectiveness of advocacy and teacher training programmes

The education reform showed mixed results in the achievement of its deliverables and milestones. Thoughtful policies with a strong evidence base were established and broadly communicated, but the field-level support mechanisms needed for their implementation were subject to long delays and inadequate staffing, and many were never translated into operational reality. An example of this can be seen in the introduction of the new teacher policy, which appears to have had a wide impact on changing awareness of student-centred approaches among teachers and principals – from an advocacy perspective, the new policy was extraordinarily successful – but the teacher training programmes and the quality support structures did not result in the classroom-level changes that were intended. While the survey of teachers conducted as part of this evaluation found that 91 per cent and 81 per cent respectively of those who took the first and second school-based teacher development programmes found them to be useful, many key informants indicated that there was no follow-up and that the training packages were not updated or renewed. Teacher focus group discussions raised concerns about an “overcrowded curriculum” and an “emphasis on memorization”.

Only 50 per cent of the teachers surveyed expressed satisfaction with the support structures, whose creation was subject to long delays. Most schools remain understaffed, and the average number of students per class grew well beyond planned-for levels: the percentage of classes with more than 40 students<sup>2</sup> increased from just under 39 per cent in 2105 to over 53 per cent in the 2020-20201 school year.

Despite UNRWA’s zero tolerance policy on corporal punishment and attention to proper teacher behaviour and inclusive teaching in School-Based Teacher Development (SBTD) training, the latest Survey of Associated Factors 2021<sup>3</sup> concluded that agency-wide, nearly half (48.9 per cent) of students have experienced at least one type of verbal or physical abuse from a teacher or school principal, and that this finding is consistent across all FOs. The child-friendly survey conducted as part of this evaluation found only 23 per cent of students disagreed (or strongly disagreed) with the statement: “I have never been shouted at, hit or threatened by a teacher or any other member of the school staff”. On the other hand, 99 per cent of school principals across all fields are familiar with the Human Rights Conflict and Resolution toolkit (HRCRT) which, according to respondents, appeared effective in improving learning achievements relating to violence, inclusion and human rights, with girls feeling better respected and valued when at school.

### 4.4 Effectiveness of partnerships

The Education Department was effective in engaging in partnerships at the structural level (e.g., with United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization UNRWA (UNESCO) in providing staffing support at top-management level), long-term programme- and project-based cooperation with multiple partners such as Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Save the Children and Right to Play to support playful learning and psychosocial needs. However, key informants noted that communication was not sufficient to optimize potential synergies and cooperation through these partnerships. Further, while the EMIS system of UNRWA generally functions better than the systems of host authorities, it is not very user-friendly, with limited utility for analytical purposes.

### 4.5 Effectiveness of service delivery

In the face of almost constant and significant budgetary constraints, UNRWA responded by downgrading educational norms and standards, jeopardizing key ER objectives. Improvements in the delivery of student-centred teaching methodologies were only partially implemented due in large part to chronic underfunding. This led UNRWA to apply counterproductive financial austerity measures which resulted in an increase in average class sizes, with the share of classes larger than the norm of 40 children increasing from 39 per cent in 2015 to 53 per

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<sup>2</sup> 2016-2022 Indicator Methodology Handbook: indicator for class size is maximum 40 and minimum 25.

<sup>3</sup> This study is not available to the public.

cent in 2020<sup>4</sup>. In 2023, 54 per cent of UNRWA schools were operating on a double- or triple-shift basis, due to a lack of facilities.

UNRWA was also unable to adequately support children with disabilities or other special educational needs. Many of these programming choices, however painful, appear to have been appropriate and necessary to allow education programme delivery to continue with minimal interruption. However, they came at a considerable cost to the quality-of-service delivery, even leading to conflicts between different stakeholder groups at the FO level, as was illustrated by the general strike of UNRWA workers in the West Bank in 2023.

Additional cost efficiencies, such as less reliance on expensive external consultancies, more effective use of daily-paid teachers, and preplanning the class formation process, could have eased budgetary pressures to some extent. UNRWA leveraged its partnerships to promote extra rounds of pledging among the donor community. Complemented by increased efforts to obtain project or emergency appeal funding, this alleviated the pressure on the regular programme budget.

#### **4.6 Effectiveness and efficiency of compliance mechanisms**

The key mechanisms established to monitor and enforce compliance with agreed criteria were the SQA units and creation of Parent-Teacher Associations, both of which were to be informed by information made available through upgrades to the EMIS. The school visits conducted by School Quality Assurance units are considered by key informants to be ‘a very important tool in quality improvement’ but they also note that these visits are too infrequent to have a significant impact on school management and governance. Only 35 SQA school visits and reports were completed in 2021-22, for instance, and many schools have never received an SQA visit, limiting their potential contribution to Education Department learning, decision-making and accountability.

The PTAs, on the other hand, were expanded to the point that they were present in 96 per cent of UNRWA schools by 2022. The survey conducted as part of this evaluation found that between 72 per cent (Jordan) and 94 per cent (Syria) of principals credit the reform as having had a positive impact on the relationship between the school and the community. At their best, PTAs enhanced the accountability of the education programme to the communities and brought the views and concerns of parents into the daily management of the school. During school-based Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), parents confirmed their appreciation of the performance of PTAs and their influence on school governance, but they also noted that this is almost entirely subject to the openness of school management to dialogue. Cultural differences were also regularly mentioned as constraints to the role of PTAs, sometimes leading to pushback at the community level around inclusive education, human rights and neutrality principles.

The slow rollout of EMIS is an additional efficiency factor that has limited the potential role of the SQA units and the PTAs in improving monitoring and accountability. EMIS data are not systematically available for the period prior to 2017, and the unreliability of existing data limits the use of EMIS for analysis and decision-making. The Education Department has long had the goal of giving parents and students direct access to individual learning results—crucial for strengthening accountability and decision-making—but this remains a prospect for the distant future.

#### **4.7 Impact**

The reform led to significant achievements in three key outcome areas, with improved survival rates, a decrease in dropout rates and improved internal efficiency rates achieved by the end of the initial reform period. The final education reform report in 2015 showed student survival rates for basic education at 93.5 per cent for boys against the target of 91.8 per cent and 95.5 per cent for girls against the target of 95.5 per cent. In 2022, the survival rate among boys reached 94.2 per cent and 97.4 per cent for girls. Learning outcomes showed an initial sharp increase – passing rates in Arabic went up from 28 per cent in 2010 to 50 per cent in 2016, subsequently declining to 36

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<sup>4</sup> Source: UNRWA 2023-2028 Strategic Plan – based on EMIS data

per cent on average by 2021; for mathematics, passing rates went from 23 per cent in 2010 to 44 per cent in 2016, subsequently declining to 26 per cent on average by 2021.<sup>5</sup> The inconsistency of in-service training after 2016 was seen as a contributing factor to the decline. The rate of decline accelerated further during the COVID-19 pandemic, although UNRWA schools generally fared better than host country institutions and many private sector providers in minimizing learning losses during the pandemic.

The surveys of teachers and principals found only 4 per cent of teachers and 3 per cent of principals who were not aware of the education reform emphasis on student-centred, inclusive approaches to teaching and learning, although this ultimately was found to have only a modest impact on teachers' classroom performance.

#### 4.8 Equity

The design of the reform process was well articulated with UNRWA policies, priorities and reforms, and rightly took gender equality and equity, inclusion and human rights as cross-cutting priorities. However, implementation was uneven. Efforts to improve gender parity and address human rights considerations were largely successful but the implementation of programmes for children with disabilities or other special learning needs did not receive sufficient attention.

The education programme systematically addressed human rights considerations in its review of the curriculum and its training programmes, although it did not sufficiently address the challenges of out-of-school children and the inclusion of children with special learning needs. Several of the FOs have reliable estimates of the numbers of out-of-school refugee children but none have developed programmes for systematically identifying these children and enrolling them.

Investments in inclusive education did not reflect the aspiration of the reform. Students who need additional learning support and those with special educational needs who needed long-term, extensive support (including children with disabilities) still do not receive tailored and adequate support. It was estimated that in 2018-19, only 19 per cent of children with special educational needs were identified, and that only about 72 per cent of these received any additional support.

The reform process led to the development of several policies and policy tools that were intended to improve implementation of an inclusive approach to education. These included: the Teacher Toolkit for Identifying and Responding to Students' Diverse Needs (and training in its use), the Education Psychosocial Support (PSS) Framework, the School Health Strategy, and rollout of an inclusive self-learning model to reach children during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there was little support given to teachers to support children with special needs in mainstream classrooms. Only 30 per cent and 36 per cent, respectively, of teachers surveyed felt that they were getting adequate support for helping students with mental health or physical disability issues.

Screening was not carried out systematically and no comprehensive system of referrals for children in need of additional support was developed. In 2011, 4.1 per cent of students in UNRWA schools were identified as having a disability but by 2016, only 1.9 per cent of students were identified as having a disability. By 2022, only 50 per cent of UNRWA schools met the UNRWA protection standards including safe access to education facilities meaning that inadequate facilities and physical barriers were almost certainly a significant factor in the declining share of children with disabilities and sensory impairments in school.

Data on the participation of children by socioeconomic status are unclear – with poverty levels among Palestine refugees exceeding 80 per cent in Gaza and 73 per cent in Lebanon, for instance, it can be assumed that most children receiving support through UNRWA were living in poverty.

Regarding gender, girls participate in schooling at higher rates than boys; their achievement levels are higher, their dropout rates are lower, and they remain in school longer than boys. Teacher training incorporates issues of

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<sup>5</sup> Source: MLA 2010, 2013, 2016 and k 2021 studies.

gender equality; curriculum revisions focus on gender; and learning practices aiming at inclusion address gender issues as well. UNRWA also produced a Gender Guide that was developed to support teachers and education staff in ensuring the gender-responsiveness of teaching in the classroom and of the overall culture and environment of schools. The guide was well received by teachers – 75 per cent of the teachers surveyed said that it was useful to their work.

The lack of women in senior leadership positions has been seen for a number of years as a significant area of concern. UNRWA's Gender Equality Strategy 2016-21 noted that in 2015, only 19 per cent of UNRWA directors were female, and less than 30 per cent of all senior staff.<sup>6</sup> The current share of women principals in UNRWA schools (50 per cent), is below the more than 65 per cent share of women teachers in UNRWA schools.

#### 4.9 Sustainability

The results of the reform can be seen as sustainable to a considerable extent, in the form of important policies, such as the teacher policy and the more recent Information and Communications Technology for Education (ICT4E) strategy and through the establishment of training and support modalities. However, there have been long delays in setting up support structures and systems, which threatens the sustainability of changes introduced, i.e.:

- The SSU at the FO level have only become operational in recent years. This jeopardizes the provision of on-the-job coaching and assistance to principals and teachers, which is the single most important mechanism to sustain the results of the reform;
- The EMIS is still not complete. This limits UNRWA's capacity for planning and decision-making on the continuation and further improvement of Education Reform actions, and is a threat to the sustainability of quality education delivery;
- The ICT4E strategy was only finalised in 2022. While it can provide further guidance to the use of Information and Communication Technologies ICTs in education delivery and management, improvements in ICT are needed to secure the continuation of education delivery in crisis and emergency situations, as was clearly demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Initial capacity investments in education staff members have not been followed up sufficiently with the creation of institutionalized on-the-job capacity development, as confirmed by virtually all key informants. Financial constraints caused shortages in staffing and an increased percentage of temporary (daily paid) teachers in the organisations. These constraints limited the ability of UNRWA's education department to sustain the results obtained by the reform process. A further challenge was that many positions in the organisational chart were not filled, creating inconsistencies in supervision, support and cooperation lines in the organisation at the FO and HQ levels and between these levels.

The current conflict situation in the region presents huge additional challenges to UNRWA to sustain changes and results from the reform.

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<sup>6</sup> Integrating Gender, Improving Services, Impacting Lives. Gender Equality Strategy 2016-2021. UNRWA 2016.



UNRWA students underscore the importance of Education In Emergencies during the earthquake, Syria © 2023 UNRWA

Figure 3. Main Gains of the Reform

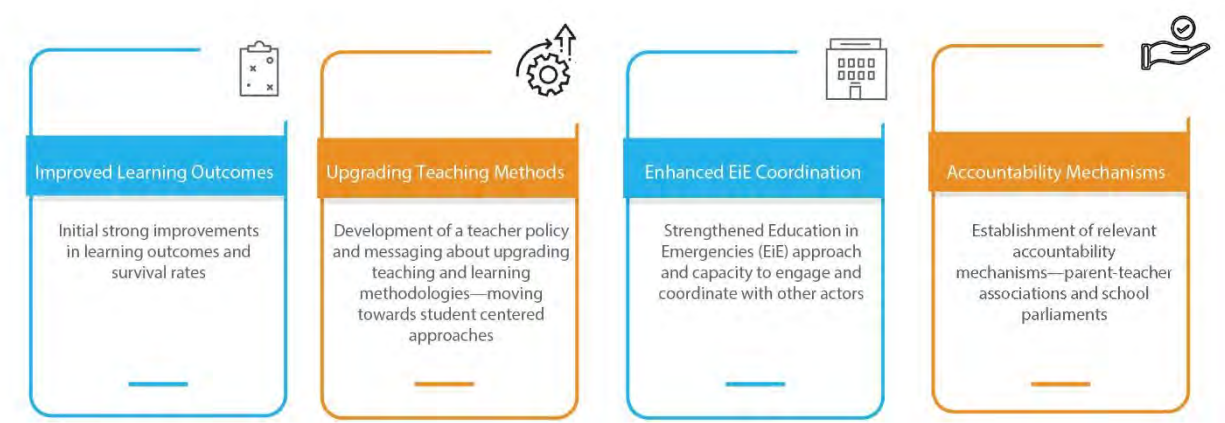
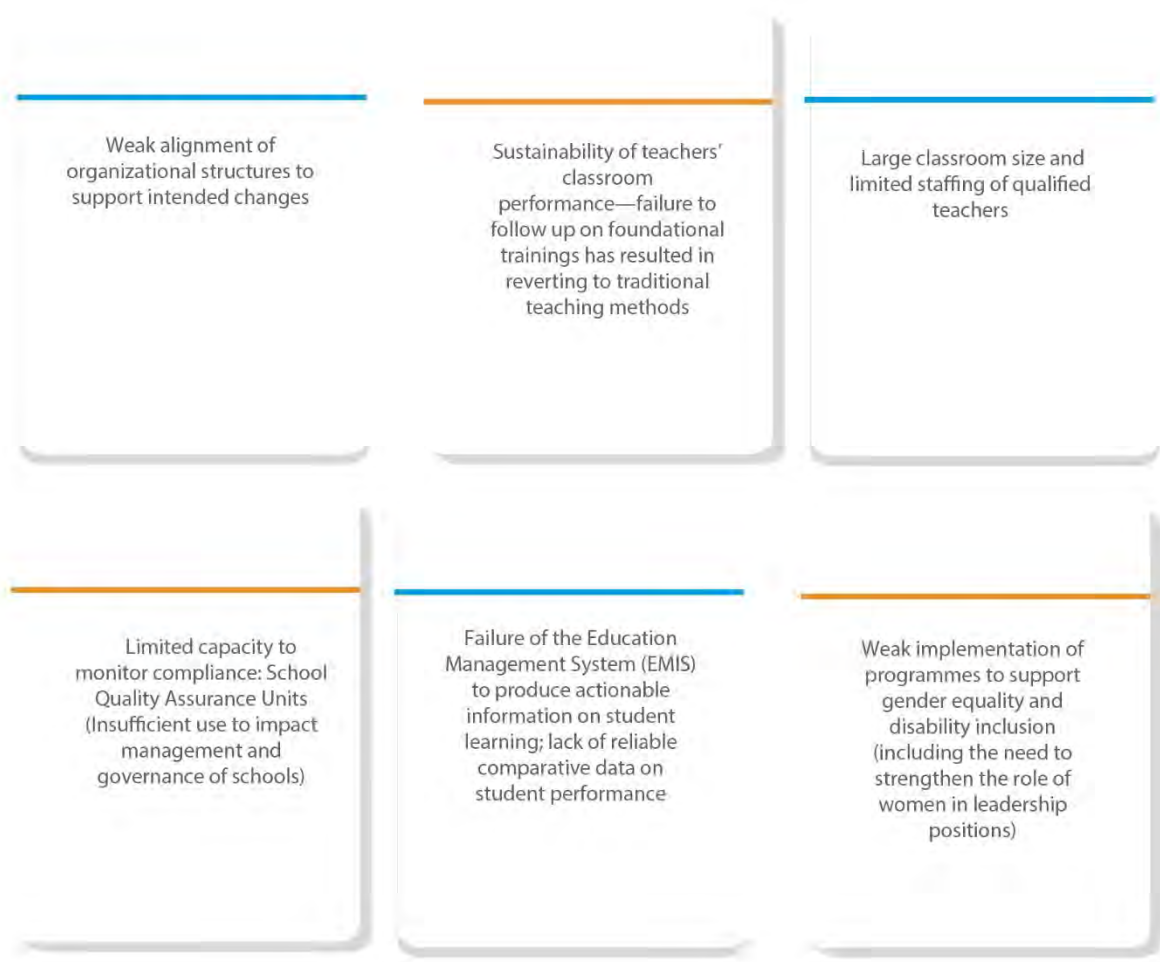


Figure 4. Ongoing Challenges



## 5. Conclusions

UNRWA's education reform of 2011-2015 initiated a relevant and soundly structured reform process. It resulted in quick improvements in learning outcomes and teaching practice, as many stakeholders in all FOs reached consensus on programme delivery norms and standards for a student-centred, inclusive approach. However, budget shortfalls and organizational constraints meant that support for new teaching and learning processes was not available to the extent needed, and the achievement of structural improvements in student-centred methodologies and teaching practices among teaching staff was not sufficiently achieved. Early gains eroded over time, a process that was accelerated by the pandemic and ongoing conflicts, meaning that the reform process has been only partially successful.

### 5.1 Relevance

The education reform design was relevant to teachers and students; key challenges were correctly identified and addressed. However, relevance diminished over the course of implementation as external developments and underfunding hampered the ability of management at the HQ and FO levels to adjust programme implementation. Concerns about the relevance of education programming for boys are raised by their declining participation and success within UNRWA schools.

### 5.2 Coherence

The reform design was broadly coherent with overall UNRWA policies and priorities, though the lack of a clear governance framework has led to challenges in balancing UNRWA interests at the central and decentralised levels in establishing partnerships and fundraising.

### 5.3 Effectiveness

The early gains in learning were a clear result of important policy decisions, well-considered professional development support that created momentum towards improved classroom practices, and community engagement through the Parent-Teacher Associations that addressed cultural impediments to change and increased accountability. Momentum was lost through insufficient attention to follow-up support for teachers and school principals, and financial austerity measures resulting in an increase in average class sizes and an inability to adequately support children with disabilities or other special educational needs.

### 5.4 Efficiency

In the face of chronic underfunding, there were missed opportunities to achieve efficiencies through a more thoughtful and equitable class formation process. Teacher costs could have been further lowered by embracing the use of daily-paid teachers as part of a career path progression. This would have helped to slow the growth in class sizes and to free up resources to improve EMIS and to fully equip and staff the FO-level strategic support structures.

### 5.5 Impact

The ER has contributed to a significant improvement in student survival rates, largely by reducing dropout and improving internal efficiency. It has also increased awareness of, and conversation around, student-centred approaches to teaching and learning. After a period of rapid improvement of learning outcomes among UNRWA students until 2016, learning outcomes, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic have shown a steep drop. It will take some time to see if the learning losses linked to the pandemic have been reversed. The ER did not have its intended impact for the most vulnerable children. Processes to ensure schooling in EiE contexts have improved but out-of-school numbers remain high for refugee children, and there was little operational commitment to the concept of inclusive education—services to children with special needs and disabilities may even have declined over the course of the reform process.

### 5.6 Sustainability

Despite very real challenges to sustainability, many of the innovations introduced during the reform process appear sustainable (although not without additional effort and application of cost efficiency measures). PTAs are in place – they now need systematic support and a greater voice as advocates for the most vulnerable children. The SSU are now in place at the FO level – they now need to make better use of EMIS to inform decision-making,

particularly around learning outcomes, and to make better use of technology to support teachers (in the absence of adequate budgets for school observations, etc., many systems worldwide are making surprisingly effective use of distance-based approaches). The creation and creative use of partnerships has become a strength, one that will be much needed to increase funding and achieve greater alignment among stakeholders.

## 6. Recommendations

### ▶ Recommendation 1:

The Education Department, in close coordination with the HQ Gender Section and alignment with the UNRWA Gender Strategy, should update the education gender policy to fully address the challenges around boys' participation and learning as well as the challenges for girls' transition to higher levels of education and the workforce. This policy review should include recommendations for developing a gender-based analysis framework. It should also analyse and strengthen the role of women in leadership positions at the school, FO and HQ levels, and develop a plan for ensuring equity.

*See Finding Gender and Conclusion Relevance; Time frame: medium- to long-term; resource implications: modest*

### ▶ Recommendation 2:

The Education Department should develop clear data on the number of out-of-school children, the main causes, and potential solutions. All FOs should be supported to identify dropouts and develop targeted programming to address their needs. This may require deeper cooperation with sister UN agencies (UNICEF, UNESCO), specialised education programmes/organizations within each field, and with host countries to develop accredited programmes or flexible learning pathways for overaged children and school dropouts, so that they can complete their education to grade 9 and transition into Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) or higher secondary education.

*See Finding Equity and Conclusion Impact; Time frame: medium- to long-term; resource implications: significant*

### ▶ Recommendation 3:

Each SSU should develop a realistic, funded plan to increase support to all classrooms through a mix of site visits and distance-based approaches. It is recommended to conduct an organizational review of the education programme's HR structure to ensure better classroom- and school-level support. The EMIS unit at HQ and FO level and Assessment Units at the FO level should be supported to monitor and analyse student learning outcomes and teacher practices. The EMIS unit and Assessment Units should also work in closer collaboration internally and with Host Authorities to improve assessment and analysis of learning outcomes.

*See Finding Effectiveness and efficiency of compliance mechanisms and Conclusion Sustainability; Time frame: medium- to long-term; resource implications: flexible, in line with available budget*

### ▶ Recommendation 4:

To improve the efficiency and timeliness of teacher recruitment and deployment, the Education Department should fully automate the class formation process, basing it on recent student numbers rather than waiting for students to be enrolled before hiring teachers. New HR instruments will be needed to improve merit-based recruitment of teachers and improve performance management of teachers in the classroom. Under this model-based approach, adjustments can be made once actual enrolment is confirmed. This should be a priority linked to implementation of the ICT4E strategy.

*See Finding Coherence and efficiency and Conclusions Sustainability and Efficiency; Time frame: short- to medium-term; resource implications: limited cost but potential for considerable cost savings*



► **Recommendation 5:**

Given the inability of the Agency to mainstream students with disabilities under the Education Reform or in subsequent years, UNRWA should partner with host countries and specialized partners to bring the necessary resources into the UNRWA education system. This includes building on existing partnership models in education wherein INGOs deliver capacity and quality building programmes in Newly Appointed Teacher NAT Understanding MoUs. Other innovative partnership models should be explored as mechanisms through which UNRWA's ambitious strategies could be implemented in a manner that does not only rely on increased financial input to UNRWA. Specific norms regulating teacher support to students living with a disability should be developed.

*See Finding Equity and Conclusions Effectiveness and Impact; Time frame: medium- to long-term; resource implications: flexible—moderate to substantial*



A teacher works with her students in an UNRWA school in Arroub camp, West Bank. © 2015 UNRWA

## Appendix 1. Management Response

General response:

Date of management Response: 20 February 2025	reference number: DIOS/EVAL/2021/1
<p>HQ Education Office.                      Julia Dicum, Director of Education                      Unai Sacona: Deputy Director of Education                      Mohammad Salameh: Chief of Strategic Planning</p>	
<p>The UNRWA Education Department, both at HQ and in the Fields, actively participated in the Education Reform Evaluation process at various staff levels. The evaluation highlighted significant achievements, particularly in improving survival rates and promoting gender equality in school participation, while also identifying key challenges, such as large class sizes, weaknesses in EMIS, and gaps in teacher support.</p>	
<p>UNRWA acknowledges and values the findings and recommendations of the evaluation report and remains committed to strengthening its education services to ensure quality, inclusive, and equitable learning opportunities for Palestine refugee children.</p>	
<p>This management response outlines UNRWA’s planned actions to address the evaluation’s recommendations, subject to available funding and in alignment with UNRWA’s financial policies. The Education Department fully agrees with two recommendations (1 &amp; 4). The first focuses on gender as a cross-cutting issue, aligning with the Colonna Report’s recommendations. To address this, UNRWA is in the process of recruiting a Gender Advisor. The fourth recommendation relates to updating the Curriculum Framework (CF) system as part of the ICT4E strategy to improve data quality and system <b>modernization</b>, for which funding is already secured.</p>	
<p>The remaining three recommendations (2, 3 &amp; 5) are partially agreed upon, as they concern out-of-school children, organizational development, and support for children with disabilities. While these areas are critical to improving educational outcomes and ensuring equity and inclusivity, their full implementation requires substantial funding, which remains uncertain given UNRWA’s financial constraints. Nevertheless, the Education Department remains committed to securing resources and establishing partnerships to advance these priorities whenever possible.</p>	

Response to specific recommendations:

recommendation	management response (agree, partially agree, disagree):	action planned / taken / reason for partially agreeing or disagreeing	planned date for implementation
<p>recommendation 1: The Education Department, in close coordination with the HQ Gender Section and alignment with the UNRWA Gender Strategy, should update the education gender policy to fully address the challenges around boys’ participation and learning as well as the challenges for girls’ transition to higher levels of education and the workforce. This policy review should include recommendations for developing a gender-based analysis framework. It should also analyse and strengthen the role of women in leadership positions at the school, FO and HQ levels, and develop a plan for ensuring equity.</p>	<p>AGREE</p>	<p>UNRWA has no existing “Education Gender Policy” and therefore if we are to implement, we would need to first draft a specific Education Gender Policy. Instead, the Agency has a UNRWA Gender Strategy which focuses on hiring and empowering female staff across all aspects of UNRWA and an older guidance document, “Towards a Gender Sensitive Classroom”. UNRWA acknowledges that there is much to be done in the area of Gender and Education in UNRWA schools and VTCs. The Education Department at HQ is in the process of recruiting a Gender Advisor. The gender advisor will be responsible for overseeing the implementation of the UNRWA Gender Policy (or strategy), to address the different gender challenges in the Education Department, as well as developing policy guidance specific to the Education Department programmes of Basic Education and TVET.</p>	<p><i>June 2026</i></p>
<p>recommendation 2: The Education Department should develop clear data on the number of out-of-school children, the main causes, and potential solutions. All FOs should be supported to identify dropouts and develop targeted programming to address their needs. This may require deeper cooperation with sister UN agencies (UNICEF, UNESCO), specialised education programmes/organizations within each field, and with host countries to develop accredited programmes or flexible learning</p>	<p>PARTIALLY AGREE</p>	<p>UNRWA agrees that in some fields of operation, there is a steady stream of students leaving UNRWA schools before the end of the full cycle of education that UNRWA provides. However, it is not entirely clear how much of this is “drop-out” and how much is families choosing to transfer their children to other schools for which they are eligible -- public or private. Other reasons that Palestine refugee children under 18 might not be enrolled in school (UNRWA or otherwise) include: disability/special needs, early marriage, and economic difficulties requiring children (especially boys) to work. While JFO undertook a University of Bath led</p>	<p><i>By end of the current strategic plan – Fourth quarter 2027</i></p>

<p>pathways for overaged children and school dropouts, so that they can complete their education to grade 9 and transition into TVET or higher secondary education.</p>		<p>qualitative study on the issues in 2023, a systematic study of the issues in each field including an examination of the options and costs of undertaking these options needs to be done.</p> <p>The Education Programme will explore the feasibility of innovative partnership models to address this issue and the feasibility of developing flexible learning pathways for overaged children and school dropouts, so that they can complete their education to grade 9 and/or transition into TVET or higher secondary education, despite recognising the cost and financial difficulties involved in implementation.</p> <p>Note: Under UN definitions of “out of school children”, the children of Gaza would presently be considered “out of school”;</p>	
<p>recommendation 3: Each SSU should develop a realistic, funded plan to increase support to all classrooms through a mix of site visits and distance-based approaches. It is recommended to conduct an organizational review of the education programme’s HR structure to ensure better classroom- and school-level support. The EMIS unit at HQ and FO level and Assessment Units at the FO level should be supported to monitor and analyse student learning outcomes and teacher practices. The EMIS unit and Assessment Units should also work in closer collaboration internally and with Host Authorities to improve assessment and analysis of learning outcomes.</p>	<p>PARTIALLY AGREE</p>	<p>At the time that the evaluators undertook their work, and in that context, this recommendation made sense.</p> <p>Indeed, The Education Department at HQA developed and presented a draft proposal to the Deputy Commissioner-General (Programmes and Partnerships) DCG PP in July 2024 to seek to conduct a full-scale organisational review of the Education programme to ensure better classroom and school level activity. The proposal was well received by the DCG PP, but to date has not been executed due to lack of funds to support it and uncertain future directions of the Agency and its mandate under the present ongoing crisis facing the Agency, the latest iteration of which evolves around the Knesset Bills and the Agency’s ability to function in the oPT. Now is not the time for a full organizational review of the education department without knowing the overall direction of the Agency or the end state of its structure.</p> <p>At the present time given the state of the agency-wide</p>	<p><i>Dec 2026</i></p>

		political and financial crisis, an Organizational Review of the education department structure should be done only when the vision for the Agency becomes clear and/or as part of an organization-wide organizational review.	
<p>recommendation 4: To improve the efficiency and timeliness of teacher recruitment and deployment, the Education Department should fully automate the class formation process, basing it on recent student numbers rather than waiting for students to be enrolled before hiring teachers. New HR instruments will be needed to improve merit-based recruitment of teachers and improve performance management of teachers in the classroom. Under this model-based approach, adjustments can be made once actual enrolment is confirmed. This should be a priority linked to implementation of the ICT4E strategy.</p>	AGREE	Funds were received from KfW to support the automation of class formation in November 2024 and will be a focus of the HQA education department’s work in 2025 & 2026.	<i>January 2027</i>
<p>recommendation 5: Given the inability of the agency to mainstream students with disabilities under the Education Reform or in subsequent years, UNRWA should partner with host countries and specialized partners to bring the necessary resources into the UNRWA education system. This includes building on existing partnership models in education wherein INGOs deliver capacity and quality building programmes in UNRWA schools through MoUs. Other innovative partnership models should be explored as mechanisms through which UNRWA’s ambitious strategies could be implemented in a manner that does not only rely on increased financial input to UNRWA. Specific</p>	PARTIALLY AGREE	<p>UNRWA’s current policy as pertains to students with disabilities is to provide a referral to an education system/school that has the specialized support services that children with disabilities need. While several of our fields have/have had in place centres to support children with mild to medium cognitive learning challenges, we do not have the funds to comprehensively support the full integration of children with disabilities into UNRWA schools and Vocational Training Centres. And trying to do so could cause more harm than good.</p> <p>Due to the current financial crisis the Agency faces, it is extremely difficult to find partners to support the inclusion of children with disabilities in all UNRWA schools across all UNRWA fields of operation. Moreover, project funds, if</p>	<i>Dec 2027</i>

<p>norms regulating teacher support to students living with a disability should be developed.</p>		<p>available, may not sustainably address these issues for the long term.</p> <p>Going forward, and given the Agency’s funding and existential crisis, for the next three years, the Department of Education will seek modest ways to support innovation that builds on existing policy and practice in supporting and including children with disabilities in UNRWA Schools in fields where specific needs are acute (such as in Gaza for newly disabled children including amputees) or well defined/existing, and will seek funds to do a strategic review of both what the Agency is doing now for children with disabilities and to better understand the type of disabilities and numbers affected among Palestine refugee children on a per field basis to ensure we have comprehensive data on this cohort of children in our schools. Furthermore, we will explore options for developing Norms and Standards for Class Formation related to special education to better support the quality of education and our ability to teach children with disabilities in our schools.</p>	
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