

## Networking for powered-up schools

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It is difficult to envision that there will be another time in history when education will have such a fundamental role in the economic, social, political prosperity and stability of countries.

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated greater appreciation for the significance of schools. As parents battle to work with their kids at home during schools' shutdown deep acknowledgment to the important caretaking mission schools have in society has emerged. This appreciation produced a more grounded and trusting relationship between parents, principals and teachers.

It is the proper time to outline a strategy for stronger development of the education sector after this worldwide emergency and propose a way to capitalize on education's recent community support around the globe.

Over the world, new education allies have arisen. The pandemic has stirred new actors in the community that generally are not effectively associated with education. After the schools closure, educational actors began to partner in manners never done before; schools formed new networks among community actors and associations including health, social welfare and non-profit associations, media firms, technology companies and governments.

Educational systems supported by an environment of learning opportunities inside and outside of school are essential to rebuild a better education system. Sidon and its neighboring towns' School Network -- initiated in 2001 by the head of the Lebanese Parliamentary Commission for Education and Culture MP Bahia Al-Hariri -- envisioned schools as the hub of children's education and development, with strong partnerships among educational actors and other sectors from health to social welfare.

The network is a unique partnership between public, subsidized and private schools in a country facing deep educational inequalities. The network's development and achievements over the last two decades have shed the light on the critical role school networks play in improving quality education in Lebanon.

The network has acted as a platform for capacity building, a tool for dropout prevention and a platform for awareness raising and advocacy. It aims at enhancing communication and cooperation between schools, creating a support system by providing a space to share concerns and best practices, improving the learning environments and optimizing the use of educational resources. In addition, it creates a sense of community among students, teachers and school principals while offering a platform to pilot projects and foster collaboration with local and international organizations.

A thorough understanding of the school system and an assessment of its performance is essential in identifying the building blocks to design an effective school network model that could be implemented in different regions.

To promote quality and equity in education and enhance understanding of school systems, the network started a local dialogue on the pathway toward understanding the challenges and opportunities provided by distance learning at the times of emergencies. A series of discussion sessions have been conducted regionally aiming toward promoting a more equitable and relevant learning ecosystem for all young people.

An article titled "Networking for Educational Innovation: A Comparative Analysis" published by OECD surveying the growth of networking in the field of education as a form of social interaction analyzes the broader social and educational forces behind the formation of educational networks and illustrates how "networks bring together individuals or institutions in a horizontal partnership, where the rationales are democratic exchange, and mutual stimulation and motivation, rather than top-down reforms."

Placing school at the center of a community powers student learning and development and involves the most efficient partnerships, including those that have joined during the COVID-19 pandemic. It will help create powered-up schools that are able to identify long-term strategies that deploy education technology that meets the teaching and learning requirements of students and teachers and avoid technology hazards that can turn into an expensive distraction.

The local guided discussions led by the Network regionally initiates around a vision on how education technology improves learning at the time of COVID-19 considering the dissimilar challenges that require different interventions, faced by diverse school systems.

These guided conversations with school principals that started in Sidon and its neighboring towns, was extended to include other regions as a first phase like Tyre, Akkar and Minyeh, are directed towards assessing the challenges, needs and readiness of school systems and their capabilities of utilizing technology in improving the learning process during the emerging COVID-19 crisis situation.

The diagnosis incorporates specific requirements to improve student learning, assessing the infrastructure to adopt technology-enabled solutions. The data collection exercise through surveys shared with the principals included existing school infrastructure as electricity connection, availability of computers, internet connectivity at school and at students' homes as well as a suitable curriculum and the programs that facilitate distance learning process. It assesses as well parents', students', teachers' and principals' degree of convenience with the type of chosen technology and their perception of challenges and opportunities.

Over the last three decades, there is an increasing conviction on the significance of networking in the field of education at the regional, national and cross-national levels in enhancing quality education and fostering school development. The creation of school networks across different regions will insure a model shift toward better education and more public accountability.

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