
UNITED NATIONS DAY OF THE TEACHER

East Jerusalem, October 5, 2007: Violence, occupation, closures and poverty are having a dire effect on the schooling of Palestinian refugee children according to a new study of regional exam results undertaken by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees, UNRWA.

UNRWA's education programme serves over half a million students in three countries and the occupied Palestinian territory. This unique regional reach allows UNRWA to compare the exams results of the children in its schools in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and the Gaza Strip. To mark UN Teacher's Day 2007, the Agency is releasing the figures for the first time.

The figures show that in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan, the performance of children in UNRWA schools compares very favourably with that of their contemporaries in Government-run schools. In the Gaza Strip, independent testing conducted by UNRWA this year reveals a worrying rate of failure in Mathematics and Arabic in UNRWA schools.

In response, UNRWA is pursuing a programme of urgent remedial action to improve educational standards in Gaza. This includes hiring more than 1,500 new classroom assistants, limiting class sizes in boys' schools to 30, adding extra classes in Arabic and Mathematics and building a new teacher training college. UNRWA is embarking on a special Gaza Recovery Plan with a wide range of steps including a programme of training for staff and specific school-based interventions. UNRWA is planning to undertake a comprehensive review of the education programme in the West Bank, and will institute an "awards for excellence" initiative across all areas of operations to reward the best UNRWA teachers and to celebrate excellence in education.

Christopher Guinness, UNRWA spokesman said: "The strength of UNRWA's education programme ultimately rests on the quality of its teachers and their commitment to attaining international standards of excellence. The combination of the Agency's curriculum enrichment efforts and the Palestinian community's own high regard for education is a recipe for success. The Agency is dedicated to introducing reforms that are necessary to attain and maintain the highest possible standard of education for refugee children. UNRWA's dedication to high educational standards will not flag in the face of difficult circumstances."

John Ging, Director of UNRWA operations in Gaza added: "Among other things, the cumulative impact of years of violence and closures, of disrupted schooling and endemic poverty is clear from the stark exam results of Gaza's schoolchildren. In spite of the challenging environment, we are determined to ensure that our reforms and our drive for excellence in UNRWA schools will be successful."

To mark UN Teacher's Day, Karen AbuZayd, UNRWA's Commissioner-General, has written to all 21,000 of the Agency's teachers across the region. She writes: "You are entrusted with the future of some half a million Palestinian refugee students. I cannot think of a loftier mission than yours. A special thank you goes to our teachers working in our Gaza and West Bank fields of operations for their dedication to deliver education despite the long delays at checkpoints, worsening safety and security conditions and rising levels of threats and intimidation."

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