



USAID West Bank and Gaza

Strengthening Basic Education Systems

Overview

USAID/West Bank and Gaza has been actively supporting the Palestinian education system since the early 1970s. Over this period, its support has ranged from assistance to school facilities, infrastructure improvements, and scholarship programs to strengthening human resource capacity. In the past 10 years, USAID has introduced innovative programs designed to improve the quality of basic and higher education and enhance the competitiveness and good citizenry of Palestinian youth in preparation for the demands of the twenty-first century economy.

Over this 40-year period, the Palestinian education system has undergone a series of seismic shifts, which have required USAID to adapt and evolve its assistance to the situation. It was only 22 years ago, as a result of the 1994 Oslo Accords, when the Palestinian Authority assumed control and ownership of their education system. The Palestinian Authority faced significant challenges from a neglected system: deteriorating infrastructure, borrowed curriculum from the Egyptians (in Gaza) and the Jordanians (in the West Bank), a disproportionate number of unqualified teachers, an administrative management system that had to be built from scratch, and severe financial constraints.

Basic Education System Challenges

Although the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) has made significant progress in improving the education system, there remain a number of challenges that continue to constrain learning outcomes. Achievement levels are improving, but Palestinian students continue to perform significantly below the median scores in math, sciences, and English (according to the 2011 Trends in International Math and Science Study and Progress in International Reading Study). The curriculum is based mainly on textbook teaching, and textbooks are overloaded with content, some of which is

outdated, irrelevant, or not needed for modern education. Teaching methods continue to rely mostly on memorization and rote learning, and 60% of the teachers remain unqualified to teach per MEHE standards.

These issues are compounded by a heavily centralized system with minimal delegation of authority to the district and school levels. Administrative management silos reduce information-sharing among divisions and units, and limit the capacity of the system to learn and evolve. The Ministry also has significant financial constraints: 80% of the budget goes to salaries, 5% to operational costs, and only 15% to capital development, according to the 2014–2019 Education Development Sector Plan. Moreover, the many different school types that offer different combinations of levels lead to the inefficient allocation of resources and limitations to the planning processes. Lastly, the continuing challenges in Israeli-controlled Jerusalem, Area C, and lack of authority in Gaza have reduced the MEHE's ability to assure support and quality over all schools in the West Bank and Gaza.

USAID's Response and Approach in Basic Education

USAID's work in basic education has resulted in broader systemic reforms. From 2007 to date, USAID has implemented a series of programs aimed at transforming the way instruction is delivered in classrooms: beginning first with the **Model Schools Network** (2007–2012), and carried on through the **Leadership and Teacher Development Program (LTD)** (2012–present) and the **School Support Program (SSP)** (2013–present). Each of these programs is implemented by AMIDEAST, with oversight from the same USAID Agreement Officer, which means that the programs benefit from *nearly a decade of continuity in programmatic vision and leadership.*

These programs have collectively introduced the following three innovative models of education reform, which have been successfully adopted by the Ministry and counterparts.

Establishing an Innovative Model for In-Service Teacher Professional Development

The Model Schools Network was a program designed to strengthen the quality of teaching and learning by primarily focusing on school leadership, the use of technology, and classroom instruction methods. The program launched in 2007 in response to the MEHE's teacher education program and strategy. The MEHE undertook an ambitious strategy to improve the skills of the vast majority of its teacher workforce after a census survey of all teachers found that 72% were unqualified. The MEHE strategy relied on residential-based training of teachers at universities. However, there were two main challenges with this approach: (1) universities had limited facilities in which they could train only so many teachers at one time, and (2) the instruction provided at universities was modeled on traditional pedagogic approaches, thereby undermining the effectiveness of the training.

The Model School Network offered a different approach that was strategically oriented to address schools as the unit of change and model a scalable, sustainable program for teacher professional development by introducing cluster-based training and support. The program focused on building the capacity of school leaders and teachers with a focus on how to change teaching practices at the classroom level. From 2007 to 2009, the Model School Network worked in 17 private schools and expanded to 40 public schools from 2009 to 2012.

The follow-on **LTD** (2012–present) and **SSP** (2013–present) programs built on and further refined the Model School Network model, paving the way for the MEHE's adoption of the Leadership Diploma and Teacher Qualification Diploma programs.

Today, the Ministry has accredited the Leadership and Teacher Qualification Diploma programs and identified external financing to sustain both diploma programs; the programs have graduated an additional 3,000 teachers beyond the LTD and SSP contributions. Further, the percentage of unqualified

teachers has dropped to 60%, which, although still high, reflects a significant difference from 2007.

The diploma programs also demonstrated to the MEHE that teacher training is not merely a means to produce qualified teachers, but also a way to improve the quality of teaching and student learning by changing the way schools are managed and instruction is delivered. As Dr. Shahnaz Far, former Director of the National Institute for Educational Training (NIET) and current NIET Director of Supervision related, "the other directorates in the Ministry saw how often the [Model School Network] and [LTD] schools were getting recognized for their high quality, their performance on national competitions, and inspired them and other schools to get involved in the training NIET was delivering. When principals talk with other school principals, they see the quality of their work and say 'this is what we can learn from NIET'."

Aligning the Program to MEHE Strategy, Policy, and Institutional Needs

LTD was designed to work with the MEHE to institutionalize the teacher training and professional development programs introduced under the Model School Network. A necessary first step was to find an organizational home within the MEHE. At the time, NIET, which was established in 2003, was implementing training programs for school principals and education administrators. These training programs were reliant on donor funding and, mostly, ad-hoc; they were not systematically focused on producing accredited, certified diplomas, nor were they tied to specific Ministry strategies, goals, or outcomes. The Model School Network and, subsequently, the LTD changed this.

When the Model School Network first developed the Teacher Qualification Diploma training course, senior NIET officers were involved as part of the team of counterparts developing the modules. Their initial engagement set the stage for future ownership of the program. Teachers were interested in the training course for three primary reasons: (1) the success of the diploma program itself and its impact on the quality of teaching and learning, (2) standards-based training that reflected the professional standards for teaching and school leadership described by

the Ministry, and (3) the demand-driven nature of the program and its relevance to the needs of the school principals and teachers.

Although the course modules were formalized and structured following a standard curriculum, the participants selected projects to complete based on both their school and classroom needs and interests relevant to their work.

Fostering Collaborative, Peer-To-Peer, and Experiential Learning Opportunities

The hallmark of the Leadership and Teacher Qualification Diploma programs is the emphasis they place on peer-to-peer, project-based learning. As Dr. Sofia Rimawi, Head of Research and Evaluation at NIET, mentioned at the North Hebron Leadership and Teacher Development Project Conference, “LTD changed the culture of cooperation between and within the Ministry, NIET, districts, and schools. Before, we were closed off from one another. Now, look around. You can see that there is much more openness and willingness to share what works, what needs support, and how. The culture within NIET has changed considerably. We are far more knowledgeable now of the needs of schools and teachers, and we owe this to our efforts in developing the diploma modules and our participation in project conferences like this.”

Every school that participates in the diploma programs can testify to their impact. Success stories are shared through LTD-produced publications, as well as through diploma-project conferences. These project conferences are organized as an end-of-school-year forum for diploma candidates to share the projects they have implemented over the course of the school year and to discuss their ideas, innovations, and challenges with other teachers, principals, district officials, and university professors. Completing a work-practicum project is one of the core requirements for obtaining the diploma. Every year, diploma candidates submit their projects to the LTD board for review and evaluation. The very best projects are selected for presentation, and many others are selected to showcase as posters at the conference.

Presenting a work-practicum project as a requirement for obtaining a diploma forces the participant to apply their learnings to a real-world application in the school or classroom.

The projects also emphasize the experimental nature of participants' work with the intent for the diploma candidate to evaluate the impact of learning through baseline, midline, and endline assessments.

For example, one of the projects featured in the North Hebron Conference dealt with creating an active classroom learning environment for mathematics classes, where traditional instruction was replaced with a diverse set of interactive learning programs, such as dramatic role play, peer-to-peer student learning, sports and outdoor activities, and the development and use of non-textbook learning aides.

Strengthening District Leadership and School-Based Management Practices

At an early stage, LTD understood that lasting behavior change cannot come from participation in a training program or completion of a project alone. The education system must align to support and reinforce these behaviors at the school and classroom level. Thus, the program turned its attention to the workings of the MEHE and districts as part of a broader effort to sustain the pedagogic and school leadership reforms introduced through the diploma program.

LTD sought to reform the work of the districts in two meaningful ways. The first was to help each district function as a coordinated and cohesive unit through the establishment of district leadership teams. The second was to help the Ministry identify the barriers and constraints in administrative management systems through a functional audit of the Ministry and districts.

In early 2013, LTD introduced district leadership teams comprising the district director and heads of several units (e.g., planning, administration, finance, and supervision). These leadership teams focus on cross-unit planning, coordination, and communication. Collectively, the teams meet to review and provide feedback on schools' improvement plans, organize district-wide conferences, and coordinate activities of district officers who plan to visit schools. The teams are also responsible for developing and monitoring the implementation of the district education plan. The district leadership teams were formally recognized as an administrative

structure within the district through formal communiqué by the Ministry.

The Bethlehem and North Hebron Education Districts shared their experiences and related how the work of their district leadership teams has transformed the role that districts play in supporting their schools. In Bethlehem, the first action taken after the formation of the leadership team was to establish 44 school clusters and reorganize the school supervisors so that they could take on geographic responsibility. Prior to this action, supervisors were organized by functional responsibility (following subject-based advising or solely responsible to a division within the Ministry). The districts were also motivated by the success enjoyed by LTD-supported schools, infusion of technical and material assistance, and changes in quality seen in those schools and teachers participating in the diploma programs. The initial victories cascaded into greater buy-in from both school principals and district officers.

Today, Bethlehem District has taken on a greater role in expanding the service offerings of LTD to non-program schools. The district sponsored the participation of non-program schools in the NIET diploma program, established a database of school needs that all units can access and use to prioritize school support and allocate resources, and introduced localized and relevant curricula, such as a vocational-technical education tract for secondary school students that focuses on tourism and hospitality. Additionally, North Hebron District elevated the 20 LTD schools to serve as mentors and trainers to non-program schools, established exchange visits between program and non-program schools, and created clusters for intensifying school support.

These initial activities do not guarantee that LTD interventions will be replicated or sustainable beyond the life of the program, but they do signify the degree of ownership and sense of agency that districts possess as a result of their engagement.

Keys to Successful LTD Uptake

A number of themes have emerged that have enabled the diploma programs to take root in the country and flourish.

The diploma programs have been successful in changing the behaviors of school principals and teachers by instilling a sense of agency (i.e., control), a shared understanding of the reforms, and the attitudes and beliefs in the value of the reforms. Still, these behaviors might wither as time and external pressure progress, especially if the normative environment goes unaddressed. To this end, LTD focused its attention on the broader education systems that needed concentration to support and sustain these reforms.



A school principal at the North Hebron Diploma Conference shares his project experience from the Leadership Diploma course. Photo credit: AMIDEAST

Perhaps more important was the sense of ownership from Palestinian counterparts, which was cultivated early through the Model School Network program. Although many programs attempt to instill ownership through participation, LTD's approach drew on the visible leadership of these counterparts in developing and implementing the LTD. The ownership of these programs was fostered within the Ministry, NIET, and districts, as well as among the participating school principals and teachers.