

# Dispelling the hype around national exit exams

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## Abstract

Five myths prevailing in Lebanon about national exit exams are debunked. Myths pertain to the pretended value of these exams in relation to the quality of education, authentic assessment, school merits, meaningful learning, and constructive teaching. Exams are shown to be detrimental to K-12 education in all five respects, and thus not to be worth the hype surrounding them. An alternative school-based mechanism to be overseen by local educational authorities is then called for to enforce national quality standards as part of a comprehensive systemic reform that entails the creation of the National Education Council.

## Keywords

Assessment, competency, curriculum, education system, governance, high-stakes exams, meaningful learning, myths in education, pedagogy, quality standards, reform, sustainable development.

## Citation

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# **Dispelling the hype around national exit exams**

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There is a lot of hype surrounding national exit exams in Lebanon, and people tend to hold them high as a matter of national pride and as warrant for quality K-12 education. We hereby debunk some of the myths prevailing in society about these exams, and show how detrimental in fact they are for formal education to serve its true mission with high quality and thus to meet the realities of the century and empower students for excellence in individual and collective life. We conclude with a call to reform the entire education system from the ground up and to thereby transcend conventional exit exams as we know them.

There are currently, in Lebanon, two national exit exams that K-12 students are compelled to pass nation-wide for transition, first, into secondary school, and then into higher education. These are commonly referred to, respectively, as the “Brevet” exams required for graduating from Middle School ending in Grade 9, and the “Baccalaureate” or “Bac” exams required for graduating from Secondary School in Grade 12. No systemic, reliable research that I know of has ever been conducted to ascertain the merits of the two exams. In particular, no longitudinal research has ever been carried out to ascertain the exams’ predictive validity regarding the performance of students who pass them in upper grades, namely the performance of students who pass the Brevet exam in secondary education, and of those who pass the Bac exam in tertiary education.

In the absence of any substantiated evidence about the actual exams’ merits, and because of all the hoopla fueled by special interest people and by uninformed or ill-advised decision makers and other influencers, many deep-seated myths or false claims have long prevailed in Lebanese society about national exit exams, which took people by the tide of treasuring them. Five of these myths are discussed in this paper. They pertain to the pretended exams’ value in relation to the quality of education, authentic assessment, school merits, meaningful learning, and constructive teaching.

The five myths about national exit exams are discussed in this argumentative paper in the context of the Lebanese education system. The reader may though easily realize that virtually every point we make about these particular exams applies in certain ways, and to a certain extent, to all sorts of high-stakes exams in many countries around the globe, including national, local, or school-based exit exams, entrance exams to higher education programs, licensing and other qualifying exams administered for induction into specific professions.

We hereby resort to colloquial language to the extent that is possible in order to allow all people to follow our discussion irrespective of their educational background. We also discuss and rebuke the discussed myths as concisely as possible with the acknowledgment that not all necessary points are being raised and that some points are repeatedly more emphasized than others because of their particular importance. Our main aim in this paper is to provide food for thought and to shed light on some serious issues that need to be addressed in considering an alternative to current national exit exams and in reforming our entire education system.

## **Myth 1:**

### **National exit exams induce high quality education**

At least three conditions need to be met for national exit exams, or “exit exams” for short, to induce high quality<sup>1</sup> education. First, and like all sorts of exams, exit exams need to be means to an end, and not an end by itself. Second, these exams must be about what quality education should be about in the first place. Third, stakeholders must have at their disposal what it takes to properly gauge, and benefit of, exams’ outcomes, assuming that these exams are viable<sup>2</sup> in the first place.

When our twin daughters were still at school and in Grade 9, one of their teachers had the guts to tell them candidly the first day of school: “You are here this year not to learn meaningful materials but to do what it takes to pass the Brevet exams”. This statement sums up the status of exit and other high-stakes exams in Lebanon and similar countries mandating such exams. It amplifies the fact that exams of all sorts are in fact being treated as an end by itself, and not as means to a more worthy end: providing students with quality education that empowers them for excellence in life. Schools and teachers are being wrongly judged based on their students’ performance on high-stakes exams, particularly exit exams. Teachers are thus driven to do nothing but “teach to the test”, and students, to memorize by rote answers and solutions to typical exam questions and problems. Students hold such answers and solutions in their short-term memory only for as long as they need them for the sole purpose of blindly passing exams they take, and forget them altogether afterwards.

Unfortunately, this has also become the case with international comparative tests and surveys like TIMSS, PIRLS, and PISA. Some countries ended up teaching to these tests, thus defeating the very purpose of such instruments that are meant to serve as viable tools for comparative evaluation of education around the globe and, subsequently, to help concerned authorities address related quality issues in their education systems and benefit in this respect from successful, meaningful practices around the globe.

Exit exams, like many other high-stakes exams, are grounded in particular education systems and curricula and are meant to ascertain student achievement in the context of such systems and curricula. Exit exams are particularly constrained in structure and outcomes to what corresponding curricula are about, and can only ascertain what these curricula accomplish with individual students. What goes in comes out. Notwithstanding the problem above that these tests are being considered an end by itself, originally deficient<sup>3a</sup> and, by now, outdated and inefficient one-size-fits-all curricula<sup>3b</sup> like the ones in Lebanon can only come along with exit exams that have little value, if any, whether in terms of student performance on such exams, or in terms of their implications on the quality of education in any respect. To make them even worse than they were at their onset, Lebanese curricula have been gradually watered down in very awkward ways in past years. In tandem, exit exams were increasingly mitigated across the years to the extent that they even lost their offensive sanctioning function.

For exit exams to induce quality education, stakeholders, from students and teachers to curriculum developers and decision-makers, should have at their disposal adequate means and guidelines to properly interpret exams’ outcomes in order to come up with valid implications regarding the state of education system and curricula and take concerted actions needed to improve their quality. Notwithstanding exam viability, in the absence of such mechanisms, stakeholders are mostly left to wander on their own in dark labyrinths!

For the above and following reasons, and more, our exit exams, like any other exam that shares the same issues, do not provide viable quality indicators and cannot be relied upon to enhance the state of education.

## **Myth 2:**

### **National exit exams provide authentic assessment of student knowledge state**

No single exam can ever assess student knowledge about any matter viably<sup>2</sup>, especially when of paper-and-pencil nature. Exit exams are supposed to ascertain student knowledge accumulated in specific areas up to a certain educational level, and subsequently to infer their readiness to pursue education at higher levels and/or to be inducted in the job market and society at large.

Exit exams, like other high-stake exams, are of what we call “summative” nature. They are supposed to allow us sum-up, or come up with a comprehensive picture or, at best, with a partial valid and reliable representative picture of what a person “knows” in a given area, and/or of what s/he can achieve with that knowledge. Notwithstanding many technical issues that are beyond the scope of this paper (e.g., flaws in exam items, individually and in relation to each other, and in item marking), no single exam can provide a viable picture of what a person have actually learned in a given academic year, and, of course, not across many academic years, nor of what s/he can subsequently do with what is presumed to have been learned. For no limited number of items can cover the entire repertoire, not even the most significant and generic repertoire, of any type of knowledge, whatever the nature of an item (question, problem, essay, case study, artistic and artifact production, etc.), and in whatever form the item may be presented and handled (orally, in writing, artistically, kinesthetically, in physical models and other artifacts, etc.).

Assessment authenticity is blemished significantly further when students memorize materials by rote and retain them temporarily only for the purpose of passing a given exam as indicated in the discussion of Myth 1. Students then passively and discretely amass in short-term memory new materials offered in a given course, often as loose bundles of “information” and problem-solving “routines”, without coherent, cohesive, and purposeful integration with older materials for mental and physical growth. Such collection of materials memorized by rote does not constitute “knowledge”, whether it is of epistemic nature (content or so-called declarative knowledge), rational nature (reasoning skills), sensory-motor nature (e.g., for kinesthetics and artifact production), or axio-affective nature (e.g., values, ethics, emotions, attitudes, dispositions). Students’ achievement then on a given exit exam, or any other high-stakes exam, shows only their ability to blindly “spill out” or, at best, re-produce information and routines that they assume good only for handling exam items. Once that purpose is served, the neuronal substrates of short-term memory pertaining to temporarily retained materials are mostly, if not entirely, dismantled and dissociated, thus making those materials fade into oblivion<sup>4</sup>.

As far as the quality of exit exams and their outcomes are concerned, it is commonly known among assessment experts in Lebanon that exam items are often inherently flawed to the extent that they cannot be relied upon to make any judgment about student performance on such items. More seriously, items are often wrongly marked. A Lebanese minister of education once went

publicly to reveal the latter matter after retrieving samples of marked exit exam copies from different disciplines and asking trusted experts to mark them post-mortem after publishing national results. It turned out that a significant proportion of individual items and entire exam copies were wrongly marked across the board, and as a consequence, students who got things right received low scores, and those who got things wrong got high scores. In another instance, it has once been brought to my attention that after a long debate among examiners on the solution of a specific physics problem, the committee in charge called for a vote to settle on the correct solution. The majority of votes went to the wrong solution, and the exam was marked accordingly!

It may be worth noting at this point that many emotional and other personal and testing environment factors may prevent students from performing as well as they could on any exam. For these and the above reasons, and more, we side with many assessment experts around the globe who refuse to label exit and other high-stakes exams as “assessments”, and especially not as “authentic” assessment means of student “knowledge” state.

### **Myth 3:**

#### **National exit exams provide reliable indicators of school merits**

Stakeholders often rely on exit and other high-stakes exams for comparing competences of individual and groups of students and drawing conclusions about the merits of curricula, schools, and other systemic aspects. As such, it has been common in Lebanon to judge schools based on their students’ performance on national exit exams, which is totally unsubstantiated and unreasonable.

First, and as indicated above, no single exam can ever provide authentic assessment of student knowledge state, and thus one has to be extremely careful about drawing conclusions about the merits of any educational aspect that might be behind student performance on exit exams. At best, conclusions can be limited to student performance on the specific items included in a given exam in relation to the validity of such items in measuring what they are supposed to measure. As such, and particularly in Lebanon, one can only judge schools in terms of how well they make students memorize by rote materials needed for blindly passing exams, and never in terms of fulfilling their true mission of providing quality education to their students.

Second, and as indicated above, judgments about schools have often been made in Lebanon based to a large extent on student performance on national exit exams. As a consequence, schools are being “highly-esteemed” when they have the highest rates of students passing these exams and coming up with the highest total average scores nationwide. A number of colleagues and I have once conducted unpublished research in a large sample of schools from different parts of the country to find out how meaningfully (in the terms outlined in Myth 4 below) secondary school students (Grades 10, 11, 12) learn materials mandated in curricula of general education. As expected, and with the exception of very few students here and there, results showed that practically no meaningful learning of course materials is taking place at any participating school. Most importantly, and to the surprise of many of us, outcomes were the worst among some “highly-esteemed” schools.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, performance on national exit exams is mostly determined in Lebanon by independent, personal efforts of individual students and parental oversight, and not by how much their schools invest in them to prepare them for national exit exams. In fact:

1. “Highly esteemed” schools often tend to retain high performing students who can usually study and excel on their own with little or no help, and to expel low performing students who essentially need teachers’ attention and supervision to achieve what is required of them. As such, these schools fail to fulfill their real mission in education, which, in sum, is to equitably offer quality education to all students, and do not deserve the credit they falsely claim to themselves for helping their students “excel” on exit exams. They particularly do not deserve to be highly esteemed by parents and society at large.
2. An overwhelming majority of Lebanese students prepare themselves for national exit exams through extensive out of school drilling on typical exam items with considerable financial expenditure in: (a) individual tutors, (b) after-school study centers, and/or (c) so-called “annals” that provide actual exam copies administered in prior years along with detailed prescriptions on how to handle individual exam items. Hence, and as “one person's misery is another person's fortune”, and as if to add insult to injury, an unregulated para-schooling market of tutoring and annals’ publishing has flourished in Lebanon. Parents are often being forced to rely on this market to make up for the failure of schools and the formal education system at large to adequately educate their kids and to prepare them for exit exams.

An inspiring revelation emerged in Lebanon in recent years that further supports the latter point and especially shows how to turn calamity into opportunity through commitment, dedication, resilience, and perseverance. Schooling has been regularly disrupted, and even interrupted for long periods, in Lebanese southern and eastern towns because of Israeli hostilities in the past few years. Students in these towns keep working hard to make up on their own for what they have been missing in lost school days and excel in all areas that make the subject of their curricula. Top ranking students on national exit exams country-wise have subsequently been coming from these towns. There is a very important lesson to be learned here not only in the education sector, but in all other sectors of society about how crucial committed citizenship and dedication for excellence are, along with resilience and perseverance, for defying challenges and for individual and collective success. The prime lesson though remains for our schools to foster such attitudes and dispositions as conditions for excellence in education and society, and for sustainable development of community and nation.

#### **Myth 4:**

#### **National exit exams foster meaningful learning**

Schools’ main mission to provide quality education to all students so that they be empowered for excellence in individual and collective life involves helping students develop meaningful learning of course materials. In contrast with memorization by rote, meaningful learning is about<sup>4</sup>: (a) explicit realization of what any knowledge is about and good for, (b) quasi-autonomous systematic and insightful knowledge deployment and regulation in accordance with well-defined rules, (c) purposeful and continuous knowledge development (acquisition

and/or growth), particularly as part of specific and generic competencies<sup>5</sup>, (d) conscious knowledge consolidation in long-term memory and coherent integration with prior knowledge, (e) knowledge transfer to new domains and extrapolation to serve new functions in original and new domains, within respective field and in different fields, and (f) taking full advantage of any knowledge in daily life at the personal and collective levels.

As indicated above, exit exams have long been driving students into memorizing by rote course materials necessary to pass these exams at the detriment of meaningful learning. The same goes for all forms of assignments, quizzes, school exams, and all other sorts of exams (commonly referred to hereafter as “tests”, exit exams included). The pressure for good test achievement and the anxiety that comes with it for students, parents, and teachers drive all stakeholders away from meaningful learning. But above all, Lebanese curricula are not actually designed, and especially not being implemented, to bring about meaningful learning in the terms indicated in the previous paragraph<sup>3</sup>. The very few students who succeed in this direction often do so on their own with little intervention, if any.

Report cards, honor lists, and the entire school culture idolize test scores, which forces students to concentrate their efforts almost exclusively on compiling in short-term memory what is necessary for getting blindly and mechanically the highest scores possible. This culture subsequently turns students away from purposefully developing their own competencies meaningfully for self-fulfillment and excellence in various aspects of life. More dreadfully, that same culture often drives students into egocentrism and merciless competition, as well as into bullying and introversion. It is well-documented in the literature that students often learn more meaningfully from each other than from teachers. Getting on an honor list instigates competition to perform better than all others on all sorts of tests, and thus abstention from helping classmates by fear of being beaten to that list. Bullying high and poor test performers has also become a common bad practice at schools, which often forces these outliers into introversion and away from mixing with classmates to benefit from each other potentials for the purpose of achieving meaningful learning.

Meaningful learning requires to turn all sorts of tests into means of “assessment ‘as’ learning”<sup>4</sup>. As such, tests need to be carefully designed not to merely ascertain how well students can perform on specific items or tasks, but to provide opportunities to students to learn course materials in meaningful ways. Students need then to be explicitly guided to go through continuous evaluation and insightful regulation of every piece of knowledge they invoke while handling any task, of every process they go through, and of every outcome they bring about. Most importantly, teachers need to ensure that all students receive timely and efficient feedback needed to guide them through the evaluation and regulation process so as to hold the course in the direction of meaningful learning as indicated in the introduction of this section.

Assessment “as” learning is not only about learning course materials, but, more importantly, about “learning how to learn” in order to achieve meaningful learning of any material at school and beyond, in daily life. This begins with the judicious choice of what is worth knowing and of how to learn it. It follows with systematic: (a) evaluation and regulation of learned materials in specific contexts, (b) consolidation of the outcomes of the new experience and their integration with prior knowledge, and (c) coming up with necessary prescriptions for the extrapolation of that particular experience and its outcomes to other contexts.

## **Myth 5:**

### **National exit exams promote constructive teaching**

Teachers are under pressure to achieve what national curricula mandate in K-12 Grades and to concentrate throughout all grades on what prepares students to pass national exit exams when they reach Grades 9 and 12. As such, and because of the lack of appropriate resources and appropriate pre-service and in-service training and support, teaching practices are seldom constructive, particularly not practiced in the direction of student learning of course materials and individual profile development in meaningful ways.

Teachers are commonly constrained by materials available in textbooks put at their disposal. They often have no say in the choice of textbooks, which, in many instances, is dictated by the special interests of their superiors, and they are often forced to follow their textbooks to the letter. Like curricula they serve, textbooks are often inadequate to drive constructive teaching and meaningful learning, and teachers are seldom competent enough or even free or encouraged enough to make up for the shortcomings of curricula and textbooks. In fact, many a time, teachers are chastised by their school superiors and reprimanded by their students' parents when they deviate from their textbooks in content or methodology to take students in the direction of meaningful learning and profile development for the purpose of success in life and not merely for test achievement with high scores.

The very few teachers who head in the right direction are driven by their own good will and high ethics, and by their dedication and determination to work for the welfare of their students. However, they are often left to do so on their own. Necessary resources and support are seldom available to them, and the overall school environment is seldom conducive for them to achieve their goal. These fervent teachers often face many obstacles and barriers within and outside school including but not limited to the prevailing inertia of colleagues and supervisors who refuse to step out of their comfort zone and give up traditional instruction of lecture and demonstration about a one-size fits all content to a passive and blindly obedient audience. School-community and public-private partnerships should be forged at large in order to turn teaching and learning into real praxis<sup>4,6</sup> that brings theory and practice together in insightful, experiential, and fruitful ways for the benefit of individual students and their communities.

Above all, teaching must be turned into a true profession that attracts highly competent and dedicated people, and that comes with appropriate norms and criteria, mechanisms and incentives, for the induction and retention of these people in that profession. High quality pre-service and in-service training must be in place, with continuous monitoring and enhancement mechanisms, including but not limited to the establishment of professional learning communities and other human and material platforms that facilitate exchange of best ideas and practices among teachers within the same and different schools and communities.

Training and platforms must then be instituted under appropriate pedagogical and governance frameworks<sup>4</sup>. Pedagogical frameworks should take advantage of latest developments in neuroscience, particularly at cognitive and affective levels, as well as in digital technology, AI included. Teachers and their supervisors must then become well-versed into educational neuroscience and technology, and must always stay abreast of relevant advances in these fields. Governance frameworks must account for the realities of the century and take advantage of what makes successful enterprises thrive in the job market. Frameworks should all be dynamic and flexible enough so that teachers and schools can adapt curricular content



and teaching and learning practices and ecologies to the actual needs of their own students and communities. Rigid, one-size fits all frameworks and curricula can never drive constructive teaching, meaningful learning, and sustainable and constantly evolving development of students, teachers, and communities.

## **Toward authentic reform of education that transcends conventional exit exams**

The five myths or false claims discussed above, along with other issues discussed in prior papers<sup>1,3,7</sup>, show that the hype surrounding national exit exams in Lebanon is not only much ado about nothing. More seriously, and in addition to their inherent drawbacks from the outset, these exams and the respective curricula have forever been detrimental to the true mission of formal K-12 education. This is the mission to provide quality education that meets the realities of the century and that turns students into committed and insightful citizens and empowers them equitably for self-fulfillment and excellence in life, and for significant contributions to sustainable development of communities and nation. Exit exams and curricula can thus by no means be considered a matter of national pride. Along with the entire education system, they should instead be urgently considered for authentic reform from the ground up.

An alternative school-based mechanism<sup>8</sup> must replace national exit exams and be overseen by local educational authorities, not to sanction students, but to enforce national quality standards throughout all grades. The mechanism may culminate in end-of-cycles diplomas that are granted not based on exit exams, but on a comprehensive account of student performance and evolution throughout all grades in a given cycle. We currently entrust schools, for better or worse, to do what it takes to allow, or not, students pass from one grade to an upper grade in a given cycle. For fairness, justice, and more ethical and practical reasons<sup>8</sup>, we should entrust individual schools to do the same at cycle end. However, there should be then a reliable monitoring and accountability system in place to ensure that every school lives up to national quality standards regarding all curricular aspects, from pedagogy to learning, teaching, assessment, evaluation, and outcomes, as well as regarding governance and ensuing ethical, administrative, and daily operational aspects.

That mechanism should come as part of a long-due, comprehensive reform<sup>1</sup> of curricula and the entire education system in Lebanon under totally new, systemic and dynamic pedagogy and governance paradigms<sup>4</sup>. The reform must then involve radical foundational, structural, and operational changes in all curricular and systemic aspects<sup>9</sup>, and benefit from related substantiated theoretical and practical advances around the globe. It would bring about new concepts of formal and informal education, culture, pedagogy, school, school districts, educational authority, curriculum, student, teacher, and all other aspects, in order to serve best the above stated mission.

The reform should entail the creation of the National Education Council<sup>10</sup> (NEC), an independent, overarching organism that would set and enforce clear and viable national educational vision, policies, and standards aligned with broad national vision and strategies, and turn education into the most important local and national investment. To do so and realize the mission in question, and more, NEC would endeavor to bring about concerted actions among concerned public and private authorities and organisms, without superseding any of

them, particularly the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) and the National Center for Educational Research and Development (CERD).

All in all, NEC would ensure that formal education, from pre-K to higher education, is totally emancipated of superannuated paradigms and of unsubstantiated, mythical foundations and practices. It would also ensure that the aspired reform does not come about as old wine – turned sour – in new bottles, or as a mere face lift that hides behind it all the pitfalls of the current education system and curricula.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Aside from equity, justice, affordability, and similar aspects, the quality of education at any level is determined to a large extent by what curricula in place are about and how they are being implemented in the framework of a well-substantiated pedagogical paradigm under an education system with a productive governance paradigm. For related discussion, see, for example:

Halloun, I. A. (2018). *Toward authentic reform of education in Lebanon* (and references cited therein). Jounieh, LB: H Institute.

<sup>2</sup> Something is “viable” for us (whence the terms “viability” and “viably”) when it is valid and reliable, and when, among others, it is as well: fair, realistic, trustworthy, useful, efficacious, affordable, feasible, reasonable, unambiguous, harmless, and/or dynamically sustainable.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example:

a. Halloun, I. A. (1998). Lebanon’s precollege science curricula and modern educational trends. (In Arabic). *An-Nahar*, 14, 15, 17 August 1998.

مناهج التعليم العام الجديدة: أين هي من "الاتجاهات التربوية الحديثة" في مواد العلوم؟ *النهار*، ١٤ و ١٥ و ١٧ آب ١٩٩٨.

b. Halloun, I. A. (2007). *Evaluation of the impact of the new physics curriculum on the conceptual profiles of secondary school students*. A summative, comparative report. Beirut, LB: Lebanese University.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, related discussion in:

Halloun, I. A. (2023). *Systemic Cognition and Education: Empowering Students for Excellence in Life*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature.

<sup>5</sup> A competency is a coherent mix of epistemic, rational, sensorimotor, and axio-affective knowledge required to accomplish similar tasks that may fall in a restricted domain of a particular discipline (*specific competency*) or a variety of tasks that cut across different disciplines and fields (*generic competency*). The term “competency” differs from the broader term of “competence” that refers to the potential of using any knowledge, competencies included, successfully and efficiently where appropriate. See, for example, the above cited reference<sup>4</sup> for details.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example:

Halloun, I. A. (2023). *SPICE: Systemic, Praxis Immersive, Convergence Education: A paradigm shift in education for excellence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. Jounieh, LB: H Institute.

Halloun, I. A. (2022). P-SPICE: Physics for Systemic, Praxis Immersive, Convergence Education. *Physics for Teachers*, 2, 3-13.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example:

Halloun, I. A. (2016). *Upholding our conventional exit exams is a crime against students and society*. Jounieh, LB: H Institute.

Halloun, I. A. (2016). Time to abolish high-stakes exit exams as we know them. *Naharnet*, 30 March 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Halloun, I. A. (2016). *Premises for authentic diplomas in the context of reformed curricula and education systems*. Jounieh, LB: H Institute.

<sup>9</sup> Halloun, I. A., Nahas, G., et al. (2019). *Toward authentic reform of education in Lebanon: A synopsis of major systemic changes*. Jounieh, LB: H Institute / CARE.

<sup>10</sup> Halloun, I. A., Nahas, G., et al. (2019). *Toward authentic reform of education in Lebanon: The National Education Council*. Jounieh, LB: H Institute / CARE.

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