

النهضـة العربيــة للديـمقـراطـيـة والتـنـمـيـة Arab Renaissance for Democracy & Development





Education for the Future Basic education and parents' relations with school: Findings from a mini-survey of Jordanian and Syrian refugee households in Mafraq city

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Norwegian Embassy





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Education for the Future

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Introduction

This paper presents descriptive statistics from a limited sample survey of Jordanian and Syrian refugee households in the city of Mafraq in northern Jordan. The main objective is to enhance our understanding of the communication between public schools and the households of their students through information from and the perceptions of parents. The paper answers such questions as: To what extent is there contact between the schools and the parents; how do they communicate; and who initiates the communication? Are the parents satisfied with the information? And, what kind of improvements of relevance to their children's education would they like to see?

The survey was carried out within a wider project seeking to find ways to improve the learning environment of Jordanian and Syrian refugee children in Jordan through operational interventions and legal reform. Additional research components of the project have included school visits, focus group interviews with teachers and parents in the governorate of Mafraq, and research into the legal aspects of basic education in Jordan.

Methodology

The survey was conducted in Mafraq city by Islamic Relief Jordan (IRJ) on behalf of Fafo¹ in October 2016. The survey questionnaire was developed by Fafo and the team received training by Fafo's Jordanian consultant, who also liaised with the team during fieldwork and provided follow-up. Filled questionnaires were scanned by ARDD-LA and later computerized by a former Fafo staff in the Gaza Strip. Questionnaires, both hard copies and electronic versions, were later destructed. The data set comprises no names or information enabling the identification of respondents.

The sample was partly drawn from a list of IRJ beneficiaries of households with children attending basic education, and partly selected from a few neighborhoods with both Jordanian and Syrian nationals. The latter group of households was selected so as to achieve a better spread in socio-economic background than the IRJ beneficiaries that were all poor and vulnerable households.

Our data comprise information about 107 households with one or more children enrolled in a public basic school, 65 households with Jordanian nationals and 42 households comprising Syrian refugees. The questionnaire contained a few questions about the dwelling, the household as a unit (economic standing) and its members (basic demographics). Most of the questions, however, dealt with children's education, parents' perception of their children's education and the relationship between the households, on the one hand, and the schools and their staff, on the other.

The data comprise information about children in public schools only. We chose to collect information about the households' oldest and youngest child currently enrolled in a public basic school. A majority of households had two or more children who fit our criteria, so we have information for altogether 195 children. It should be noted that we did not interview the children themselves but only their parents—mostly mothers. In some instances children and other family members may have listened in and participated in the interview.

There are slightly more girls than boys in our child, or student, sample both amongst Syrian refugees and Jordanians, and the age distribution is fairly good (Table 1).

¹ Fafo, a Norwegian research foundation based in Oslo, conducts applied social research with the objective of generating knowledge that can form the basis for political and strategic decisions. Fafo has carried out surveys and other studies on Palestinian, Iraqi and Syrian refugees in Jordan and neighboring countries since the early 1990s.



	Jordanian		Syr	All	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	All
6 yrs	4	6	11	7	7
7 yrs	8	5	6	16	8
8 yrs	10	15	6	11	11
9 yrs	14	22	14	7	15
10 yrs	10	11	11	11	11
11 yrs	6	6	17	11	9
12 yrs	4	11	11	5	8
13 yrs	12	6	17	20	13
14 yrs	14	9	0	2	7
15 yrs	8	2	3	7	5
16 yrs	10	8	6	2	7
Total	100	100	100	100	100
Ν	50	65	36	44	195

Table 1 Gender and age distribution of child sample by nationality. Percentage.

However, the sample is not representative of the Jordanian and Syrian refugee populations in Mafraq city since it is, for example, skewed towards the poorer segment of these two populations. Being asked to characterize their household's economic standing as above average, average, or below average, 55% ended up in the latter category, 41% in the middle category and only 4% in the above-average category. The latter 4%, or six households, are all Jordanian households, while the same proportion of Syrian refugee and Jordanian households rated themselves as below average.

Furthermore, the educational attainment of the parents is low, as approximately one in two did not complete basic education, about one in four has attained basic education whilst 16% have completed secondary education and 6% have attained a post-secondary degree.

Forty-five per cent of the sampled households own their dwelling, 51% rent it, whilst 4% occupy it for free. Ninety-five per cent of the Syrian households as compared with 23% of the Jordanian households rent their dwelling. The most common dwelling sizes are two rooms (six in ten of both Syrian refugee and Jordanian households) and three rooms (three in ten households), while a few households have more or less space. Seven in ten dwellings comprise a separate kitchen.

Due to the small sample size and the way households were selected, no generalization to the overall Jordanian and Syrian refugee populations in the city of Mafraq can be inferred. However, the survey has the merit to indicate general trends that enhance our understanding of the learning environment and particularly the relationship between schools and households. Furthermore, in addition to the new information it provides, the survey was used to check facts and impressions from individual and group interviews with parents and teachers as well as informal visits to approximately 40 public schools in the Mafraq governorate. Such triangulation of data has helped paint a fairly coherent picture of the situation.



The schools

About six in ten children travel less than 1 km to school, while four in ten have a longer distance between home and school. There are no significant differences across nationality, the economic standing of the household or gender, but there is a small tendency that the travel distance increases by age.

Seventy-nine per cent of Syrian refugee children in our sample attend schools that operate with two shifts, whereas 46% of Jordanian children do the same. Seventy-six per cent of Syrian children attend afternoon shift as compared with only 4% of Jordanian children.

One in four Jordanian and Syrian refugee children alike attends recreational classes. It is slightly less common to do so amongst boys (14%) than girls (24%) as well as amongst children from the poorest households (14%).

School performance

The performance of two in three children is reported by their parents as average, whereas one in four does above average and a few perform below average. There is no significant difference between boys and girls and across age groups. However, Jordanian children are perceived to do somewhat better than Syrian refugee children, with only one in ten as opposed to two in ten performing below average. The proportion of children performing below average is also three times higher amongst children from households with low economic standing than amongst children from households with average or above-average economic standing.

Homework

According to parents, about one-half of the children do homework four to five days a week, about one-fourth do homework less often. In one quarter of the cases, parents admit that their children do not do homework or they are not aware whether they do or do not. Syrian refugee parents answer "don't know" more often than Jordanian parents, and Jordanian children reportedly do homework more often than Syrian refugee children. There are negligible differences across groups of children according to such characteristics as gender, age and economic background. However the data suggest that children performing better at school do homework more often than other children (52% of average performers versus 30% of below-average performers do homework five days a week).

Children who do better at school also tend to get help with their homework more often than other children: 42% of those who are average performers receive help daily as compared with 15% of under-performers. In most cases, seven out of ten, the mothers are the ones (usually) providing the support. A few of the Syrian refugee children (5%) but none of the Jordanian children were reported as receiving educational support from a private teacher or neighbors and friends.

Parents' knowledge of classmates and their parents

Trying to tap into the interest of parents in their children's schooling and social environment, we enquired about the extent to which they know and have contact with fellow students of their children, and their parents. Such a network might be a useful source of information for parents about their children in general and also about the school and school-related issues.



About three in ten parents know the names of all or most of the child's classmates, three in ten acknowledge knowing some, while four in ten know only a few or (almost) none. There is no difference between Syrian refugees and Jordanians with regard to such knowledge. However, it appears that parents know slightly more about the classmates of daughters than of sons, something that perhaps is to be expected since girls tend to spend more time with friends at home and at friends' houses, whereas boys often spend more time with friends in the street and other public spaces—making it more difficult for parents to get to know them. The result is roughly the same when asked if they know who the parents of the classmates are.

Only 7% of the parents report that they often discuss issues related to their child's school and education with other parents of children attending the same school, while 41% state that they sometimes do and 52% that they never talk with other parents about their child's school and education. Syrian refugee parents and parents of girls tend to discuss such issues somewhat more of than respectively, Jordanian parents and parents of boys.

Information from and communication with school

Asked about the most usual source of information about their child's performance and wellbeing at school, other children (schoolmates) was mentioned by 36%, written feedback from school was mentioned by 25%, 17% said individual meetings with teachers and 6% mentioned other parents. Finally, 17% of parents referred to 'other' sources of information. Syrian parents more often alluded to other children and less often to individual meetings with teachers than Jordanian parents. Parents of children attending the afternoon shift slightly more seldom mentioned written feedback from school.

The survey enquired how often parents receive written information about their child from the school every (school) year. A majority of 54% claim to never receive any report about their child. About one in ten receive such information more than twice a year, three in ten receive it twice a year and a few only once a year. Answers vary by nationality as 61% of Syrians and 49% of Jordanians say they never receive written feedback from the school about their child. The gap is even greater when considering the type of shift attended by the child: 46% of children attending the morning shift contrasted with 69% of children attending the afternoon shift never bring written feedback back home to their parents (and neither do parents receive it electronically).

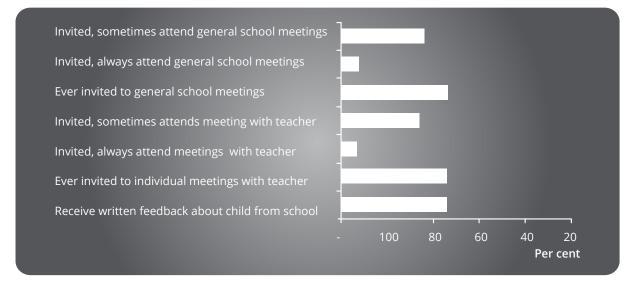
The same share of parents, 54%, state that they are never invited to individual meetings with the teacher(s) of their child. Just over a third receives invitations twice or more very year, whilst one in ten is invited once a year.

Sixty-eight per cent of Syrian refugee parents as compared with 45% of Jordanian parents insist they are never invited to individual meetings with teachers at the school of their child. The difference is roughly the same between parents of children attending the afternoon (71%) and morning shift (45%).

Nine in ten of the parents who receive invitation to individual meetings, attend them always (15%) or sometimes (74%). One in ten (11%) never attend. The results are almost identical for invitation and attendance of general school meetings. Ninety per cent of those parents who say they never receive invitations to individual meetings similarly claim to never receive invitations to general school meetings. In sum, the above implies that five to six in ten parents never attend any meetings at the school of their child.



Figure 1 Percentage of parents who receive written information from school about their child, and percentage of parents who are invited to individual meetings with their child's teacher(s) and general meetings, and the percentage who attend such meetings always or sometimes.



Despite the absence of, or little, written or oral information from the school to many parents, a majority of parents (83%) expresses satisfaction with the general information they receive from their child's school and an even higher share (88%) are satisfied with how the schools follow up with regard to their child's academic performance and behavior. ² This must be seen in light of the diversity of information sources alluded to in this section's first paragraph. The level of satisfaction does not differ by gender or age of child, or economic standing. However, only one-half (47%) of the parents of children whose school performance is perceived as below average are satisfied with the information received and even fewer of them (33%) are satisfied with how their children are followed up with regard to school performance and behavior.

As shown by Table 2, the level of satisfaction is lower amongst Syrian refugee parents than amongst their Jordanian counterparts. However, it can be argued that this has little to do with their national background and instead can be associated with the poorer quality of services rendered at schools run through afternoon shifts.

In fact, the perception of Syrian refugee parents with children attending the morning shift (one in four Syrian children in our sample) does not differ from the perceptions of Jordanian parents with children in such schools. However, when the perceptions of these Syrian refugee parents are removed from the calculation and only those who have children attending the afternoon shift remain, we see a slight fall in the percentage of those who express satisfaction (only 4% of the children in the afternoon shift are Jordanian nationals).

² For an unknown reason, approximately 25% of parents did not respond to the question about performance and behavior.



Table 2 Percentage of parents who are very satisfied or satisfied with the general information from school and the school's follow up regarding the child's performance and behavior. By nationality and type of shift.

	Nationality		Shift attended		
	Jordanian	Syrian	Morning shift	Afternoon shift	
General information	88	73	88	69	
Individual follow-up	95	76	94	70	

To conclude on the above, information policies and practices seem to vary substantially between schools. Some inform well, while other schools, and particularly the administration and teachers of schools running afternoon shifts, have a considerable improvement potential.

Let's next move from contact between schools and pupils' homes as a result of initiatives taken by the schools to communication initiated by the parents. Only one-half (51%) of them admit feeling free to contact the school or their child's teacher(s) with concerns regarding the child's daily life at school. Fifty-nine per cent of Jordanian parents and 38% of Syrian refugee parents feel comfortable approaching the school with such concerns. The result for children attending morning versus afternoon shift is 56% and 41%.

Asked who at their child's school they would contact regarding social problems affecting their son or daughter, and who they would contact regarding his or her school performance, four in ten parents mention the teacher and five in ten mention the principal with regard to both kinds of issues. A few respondents also say they would contact the school counselor and other parents. Syrian parents somewhat more often mention the school principal than Jordanian parents (a gap of ten percentage points), and the same difference exists between children attending morning and afternoon shifts.

In the case of nearly one-half of the children in our sample, the parents have contacted the child's school at least once concerning his or her social wellbeing or performance. There is variation by nationality and type of school shift, as 52% of Jordanian versus 41% of Syrian parents have approached the school and 54% of parents with children in a morning-shift school versus only 34% of parents with children in an afternoon-shift school have done the same. Furthermore, about two in three parents who have received written information about their child from school and two in three parents who have received invitations to individual meetings with the child's teacher(s) have ever initiated contact with the school about their child's social welfare and school performance. In contrast, only one third of parents who have never received written information or an invitation have done so. This suggests that some parents show more interest in their children's schooling than others but may also indicate that schools that take their information mandate seriously get more involved and interested parents in return.

The vast majority of parents who contacted the school are very satisfied (16%) or satisfied (73%) with its response. Only 7% say they are very dissatisfied or dissatisfied with how they were met. A higher share of Syrian (16%) than Jordanian parents (2%) voice dissatisfaction, which is also more common amongst parents of children attending afternoon than morning shifts (20% versus 3%).

In the case of one in three children, the parents have ever contacted the school concerning the school environment or with safety concerns (39% of Jordanian and 25% of Syrian parents; 39% of morning-shift and 23% of afternoon-shift parents). Around two in five parents who have received written information about their child from school and the same share of par-



ents who have received invitations to meetings with teacher(s) have ever contacted the school regarding the school environment and safety matters. In contrast, only one in ten parents who have never received written information or an invitation have done the same, lending weight to the argument alluded to previously that parents' engagement is unevenly distributed and that there is an association between the level of information from school and parents' interest and involvement in their children's schooling.

Eighty-eight per cent of those who did approach their child's school on the school environment or school safety are very satisfied or satisfied with the school's response (93% of Jordanian and 75% of Syrian parents). Eight per cent of Jordanian versus 25% of Syrian parents, and 6% of morning-shift versus 36% of afternoon-shift parents are very dissatisfied or dissatisfied with the response.

Our final theme regarding school-home communication concerns parent-teacher associations, so-called PTAs. These are fora where representatives of teaching staff and parents meet to voice concerns, discuss challenges and not least attempt to solve such challenges together. Alongside information from schools to parents, PTAs may serve as a way for schools to be accountable and may create increased parent "ownership" over the education process.

The survey asked parents whether the schools of their child, to the best of their knowledge, had a PTA. Seventy-five per cent answered in the negative, 23% said yes, and 2% did not know. In 32% of the Jordanian cases the answer was affirmative, which compares with 10% of Syrian refugee cases. There is an almost identical 20 percentage-point gap in the existence of PTAs between the schools of children attending morning and afternoon shifts (30% versus 9%).

Only one in there parents with a child attending a school with a PTA have ever attended a PTA meeting in that school, with no difference between Jordanian and Syrian parents, and between parents of children attending schools running morning or afternoon shifts. Hence, very few parents in our sample have any experience from a PTA meeting. However, 85% of the respondents said they would want to participate in the PTA at their child's school in the future—and Syrian refugee parents slightly more often express an interest in doing so than Jordanian parents.

Overall satisfaction with schools

Despite the mixed picture painted by the indicators of contact between the school and children's homes, one in four parents feels they generally get all the information they need and want from school, and one in two feels they partly get it. Fifteen per cent of Jordanian parents and 34% of Syrian refugee parents, and 16% of morning-shift versus 38% of afternoon-shift parents feel they do not receive the information they need and want.

Seventy-six per cent of parents are satisfied with the overall quality of the education of children in the sample, 6% are neither satisfied not dissatisfied, whereas 18% are dissatisfied. A higher share of Jordanian parents are satisfied (82%) than Syrian refugee parents (68%), something which primarily seems to relate to whether children attend morning or afternoon shift, as 83% of Syrian refugee parents of children in the morning shift are satisfied as contrasted with 63% satisfied Syrian refugee parents of children in the afternoon shift.

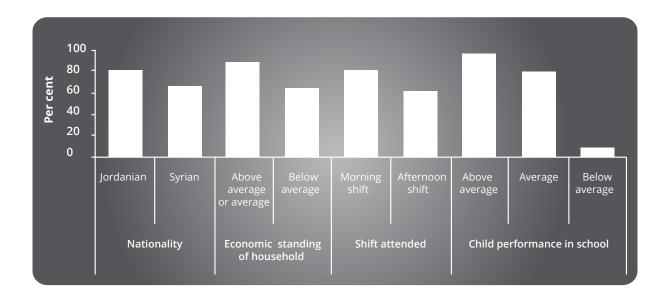
Parents of children who perform below average are significantly more often dissatisfied (68%) than parents of children rated with average performance (15%), a gap that is similar for Jordanian nationals and Syrian refugees. As shown in Figure 2, almost all (98%) of parents with children who perform above average voice general satisfaction with the schools of their children and 80% of parents with children with average performance do the same. This is contrasted



by merely 9% of parents with children whose school performance is perceived as being below average.

Findings on satisfaction with teachers are comparable to the findings just presented for the overall quality of schools, perhaps suggesting the prominence of teacher quality when assessing the school more in general: 75% are satisfied, 7% are neither satisfied not dissatisfied while 18% are dissatisfied with the teachers of the their children. Again, Jordanians express satisfaction more often than Syrians refugees (83% versus 62%). Furthermore, as with assessment of the overall school quality, parents of children in the afternoon shift are less often content with the quality of teachers, with just above one-half voicing satisfaction. Two out of three (68%) parents with children performing below average are dissatisfied with their children's teachers.

Figure 2 Parent's overall satisfaction with quality of education by nationality, household economy, type of shift and child performance. Percentage very satisfied or satisfied.



Children are less critical of their teachers than their parents, at least as judged by the reporting of their parents: 89% are very satisfied or satisfied with their teachers and other school staff, whilst only 7% are very dissatisfied or dissatisfied. The gender and age difference is insignificant and the variation across nationality is also minimal. Children attending the afternoon shift are slightly more discontent than other children as 12% are very dissatisfied or dissatisfied with teachers and school staff as compared with 5% of children attending the morning shift.

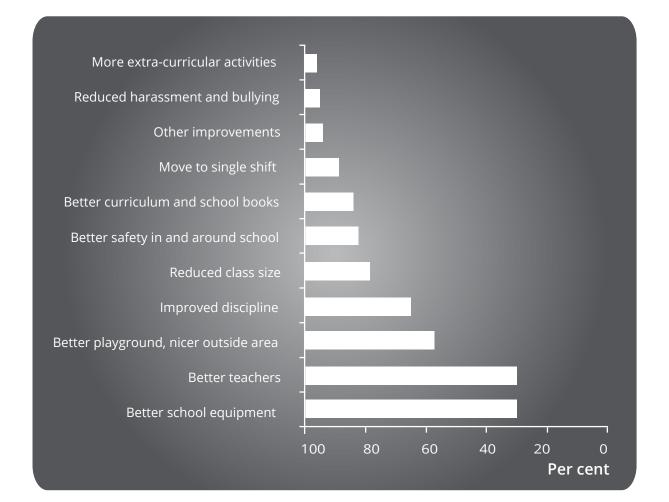
According to their parents, the vast majority of children (about nine in ten) are very satisfied or satisfied with their relations to fellow pupils. Ten per cent of Syrian refugee children and 3% of Jordanian are, according to their parents, very dissatisfied or dissatisfied. Once more, afternoon shift is associated with poor results as 14% of Syrian children attending classes in the afternoon and early evenings are not content with their relation to other children at school, while not one Syrian child attending the morning shift voice discontent.



School improvement

The survey invited the parents to suggest the three areas most in need of improvement at the schools of their children, and rank the three areas according to importance. There are several ways to present these findings. One way is to examine which areas were identified as the 1st, 2nd or 3rd priority. The result is presented in Figure 3. As shown, about seven in ten parents list better equipment and higher qualified teachers amongst the top three areas, whereas four in ten think that the school's outdoor environment requires an upgrade. Improved discipline is mentioned by one in three. Perhaps a bit surprisingly given information from qualitative interviews and school visits, having fewer pupils in class and moving away from afternoon classes, were only listed by respectively 22% and 11% amongst the three most crucial areas of improvement.

Figure 3 Areas of improvement. Percentage of parents who has mentioned an item as the 1st, 2nd or 3rd most important issue to tackle.





However, as shown by Table 3, there is some variation in priorities between Syrian and Jordanian parents. Jordanian parents put significantly more emphasis on school equipment and reduced class size than Syrians do. On the other hand, Syrian refugees more often mention better teachers, improved discipline, improved safety, and avoiding double shifts. The latter reflects the fact that a majority of Syrian children (approximately three in four) attend the afternoon shift, whilst almost no Jordanian children do so. As is visible in the Table, figures on the opinions of parents of children attending morning shifts are comparable to the opinions of Jordanian parents, whilst figures on the opinions of Syrian refugee parents and parents of children attending the afternoon shift are equally similar.

	Nationality		Туре		
	Jordanian	Syrian	Morning shift	Afternoon shift	All
Better school equipment	86	46	79	52	70
Better teachers	64	77	67	75	69
Better playground, nicer out- side area	42	45	43	43	43
Improved discipline	29	44	30	44	35
Reduced class size	29	12	28	10	22
Better safety in and around school	13	24	14	24	18
Better curriculum and school books	17	14	18	13	16
Move to single shift	3	23	6	22	11
Other improvements	7	5	5	8	6
Reduced harassment and bul- lying	3	9	4	8	5
More extra-curricular activities	6	1	5	2	4

Table 3 Areas of improvement. Percentage of parents who has mentioned an item as the 1st, 2nd or 3rd most important issue to tackle. By nationality and type of shift.

Considering the area receiving top priority only, 'better school equipment' is mentioned by about one-half of the parents (Table 4). In contrast, 'better teachers' scores best amongst areas rated as the second most important area in need of intervention. The different perception of Jordanian and Syrian parents, (and hence) parents of morning-shift versus afternoon-shift children, is obvious (Table 5). Again, just as when considering the sum of people's first three priorities, a higher share of Jordanians and parents of children attending the morning shift puts emphasis on school equipment than Syrian parents and parents of children attending the afternoon shift, and a lower share points to better teachers. Reduced class size and shift from afternoon to morning shift are the priority areas of a small number of parents only.



Table 4 Areas of improvement. Percentage of parents who has mentioned an item as respectively the 1st, 2nd and 3rd most important issue to tackle.

	1st	2nd	3rd
Better school equipment	51	10	10
Better teachers	9	53	8
Better playground, nicer outside area	27	12	4
Improved discipline	2	1	33
Reduced class size	1	3	18
Better safety in and around school	2	8	8
Better curriculum (school books)	3	7	6
Move to single shift/ morning classes	2	3	7
Other improvements	4	1	1
Reduced harassment and bullying	1	1	4
(More) extra-curricular activities	0	2	2
Total	100	100	100

Even amongst Syrian refugees and those attending the afternoon shift, getting rid of the afternoon shift is only ranked in sixth place. It appears that Syrian parents understand that the construction of new school buildings to accommodate their children or renting buildings temporarily, which are the only solutions to the afternoon-shift practice, are unlikely. Instead they opt for improvement of the situation where their children are, and better teachers, improved physical infrastructure and school equipment, improved discipline and better safety are their priority areas.

Table 5 Most important area of improvement. By nationality and type of shift.

	Nationality		Type of shift		
	Jordanian	Syrian	Morning shift	Afternoon shift	All
Better school equipment	59	38	56	40	51
Better teachers	4	17	5	16	9
Better playground, nicer outside area	22	33	24	30	27
Improved discipline	2	1	2	2	2
Reduced class size	2	0	2	0	1
Better safety in and around school	4	0	2	2	2
Better curriculum (school books)	4	3	3	3	З
Moving to single shift/ morning classes	1	3	1	3	2
Reduced harassment and bullying	0	1	1	0	1
Other improvements	4	4	4	5	4
Total	100	100	100	100	100



Conclusion

While not representative of its total population, the small survey of Syrian refugee and Jordanian households in Mafraq city has generated results in keeping with other observations and data obtained by the Education for the Future project in Mafraq Governorate. It thus paints a picture of certain features of Jordanian public schools, which we believe corresponds well to reality and suggests ways forward. Our final words will concentrate on enhanced school-home communication and strengthened role of parents as key principles for the improvement of the learning environment in Jordan's public schools.

As shown in this paper, there is considerable variation in communication practices across schools. Afternoon-shift schools provide less information to parents than schools running morning shifts, be it through written reports about the individual child, through general school meetings or through individual meetings with the child's teacher. This implies that Syrian refugee parents and children, who predominantly attend afternoon shifts, are most negatively affected.

However, the information flow is not a one-way thing as many parents approach their child's teacher(s) or the school administration to e.g. enquire about the school performance or general well-being of their child, or to voice concerns. The survey shows that parents who are well-informed by the school more often take such initiatives to engage with the school. Turning "passive" parents to more "active" and interested parents by improving the communication from schools to parents should be positive for schools, parents and children alike—the assumption being that informed and engaged parents reflect well on children's behavior and school performance, which in turn should make teaching "easier".

Judged by statistics on parents' support with homework and their level of contact with schools, some parents seem uninterested in the schooling of their children, or at least lack the capacity and energy to engage. However, it seems many parents wish to get more involved—something that can be concluded from the level of discontent with the school environment, the quality of teachers and information from school (they do have opinions!) and their expressed willingness to participate in PTAs: as many as 85% of the respondents asserted they would want to participate in the PTA at their child's school in the future. Consequently, there is reason to be optimistic about the potential of enhancing the involvement of Jordanian and Syrian refugee parents in the schooling of their children and through steps to that effect improve substantially the learning environment in public schools.





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