Getting Truants Back to School

Author: IWPR
Poor families offered food aid to persuade them to let their working children resume their studies. For five months, Ahmad Dahdoush, 12, stopped attending classes.

Instead, he went to work as a delivery boy in a grocery store to support his family in Al-Gharebeh, an impoverished village in the north of the country.

Recently, however, his relatives decided to send him to school again after a state-run project began offering food to the families of dropouts as a means of encouraging them back into the educational system.

“I used to carry heavy bags every day,” said Dahdoush, adding that he was happy to be back among his classmates.

In Syrian towns around the northern city of Aleppo, illiteracy exceeds 18 per cent, according to some estimates.

One of the main reasons for such a high rate is that children in these deprived areas are often forced to abandon their education to find work in agriculture or other fields in order to help out their families.

Although children generally earn around 60 US dollars a month or less, many poor families consider such relatively small sums a vital contribution to the household budget, say experts.

“Classes are often empty. Sometimes, we go to the houses looking for missing students,” said Rami Hael, a primary school teacher in the Deir Azzor region.

Hael added that poverty leaves parents with little option but to pressure their children to work.

While primary education is mandatory until the age of 16 in Syria, authorities seldom enforce the law in poor villages.

Poverty in rural areas has been aggravated by ongoing, severe drought, which began three years ago.

With farming becoming less productive, many children are forced to leave their villages to work in mechanics’ workshops or construction yards in nearby cities.

The ministry of education is trying to tackle this problem with its Food for Education initiative, which is funded by the state in cooperation with the United Nation’s Food and Agriculture Organisation. Bags of flour are offered to the families of children who attend classes as a form of financial support, said Abdel-
Salam Salameh, an official at the ministry.

The initiative has already had some success. Salameh noted that some 260 students had returned to school in the villages of Deir Azzor since it began two months ago.

He added that the project – which is to last for three years – will cover 145 schools in its first year, potentially supporting around 23,000 students in rural areas in northeast Syria.

But not everyone has welcomed the move.

Some truants who returned to school have since gone back to the workplace because they feel they need to earn money.

Khaled Taha, 13, left his job at a painting workshop to return to class recently. But he said he’d changed his mind because the food offered to him by the government was no substitute for the salary he had been earning.

“[And] at least [in the workshop], I didn’t have to do any homework,” he said.

There are parents too who say they can’t afford to do without the money their working children bring home.

Oum Saraa Joumaa, a housewife living in the village of Al-Gharibeh, said she received a bag of flour this month for sending her son Mouhawesh, 12, back to school.

She said, however, that she was considering asking him to return to his old job in a slaughterhouse.

“He was earning 5,000 Syrian pounds every month (the equivalent of around 100 dollar),” said Joumaa. “I cannot sacrifice this income for few bags of flour.”

Officials supervising the project acknowledge that their current efforts are only a small step towards getting truants back to school.

“The next phase might include giving small sums of money to children who attend their classes regularly as a form of assistance to their families,” said Abdel-Aziz al-Nahar, who is in charge of health matters in state schools at the education ministry.

But Nahar pointed out that this kind of incentive might turn out to be counterproductive, as it risks presenting education as desirable only when it’s rewarded with food or financial aid.
Running parallel to the food project, the ministry is offering free literacy courses to poorly educated women to enable them to assist their children with their studies, said officials.

Most of the school dropouts in villages are girls, who are often compelled to ditch the education to get married at a young age, or to help their parents in the fields or with household chores, say observers.

The aim of the initiative is to provide basic education for 3,000 underprivileged women between the ages of 15 and 45, over the next three years.

“I feel like I have been granted a new life,” said Fatima al-Obeid, a housewife from Deir Azzor who has been taking one of the courses.

“There is no meaning to life without reading and writing,” she said, adding that she hopes she will be able to help her children with their studies.

“When my children asked me questions related to school, I used to tell them to stop worrying about their studies,” she said. “I didn’t want to look stupid for not knowing the answers.”

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