

The Mission Laïque Française in Lebanon warns : in 2020 all private schools are in danger

The Mlf (Mission Laïque Française) is a non-profit institution that aims at spreading the French language and culture around the world through secular, plurilingual and intercultural teachings. Established in Lebanon for more than a century, today the Mlf has more than 8,000 students, 1,000 employees and over 100,000 alumni. Having been a historic operator of the teaching of the French program in Lebanon, the Mlf is well integrated into the fabric of the country's private education sector.

Today and given the current Lebanese economic context, the Mlf and its 5 schools are finding themselves in danger.

Indeed, even if the Mlf has been a forerunner in terms of budgetary transparency (thanks to external audits conducted each year), even if she acted in solidarity (via the establishment of solidarity funds) and rigor with regards to the French homologation (by entrusting the management of its schools to French principals salaried by the French state), it must face the extremely rapid changes in the Lebanese economic context.

However, this change is completely external to the Lebanese private education sector, of which almost all schools do not make profits and are looking for external resources, which is neither healthy nor logical with respect to Law 515/1996.

The fact of the matter is clear: the Mlf, one of the only private educational institutions in the country to have its accounts audited by an independent firm, recorded a deficit of LBP 24 billion over 3 years, even going so far as to be forced to present budgets in deficit.

The Mlf has never given up on offering the highest possible educational level at cost price. Being in a solid agreement with 4 parent committees, it has already undertaken a reduction in non-essential costs to deal with the deficits of the schools and so as not to have to pass them on to families. The Mlf also succeeded in deploying a remote learning system of recognized quality, in an extremely short period of time.

However the economic crisis which started 4 or 5 years ago and which is entering its hardest phase, is probably the most serious that Lebanon has experienced since its independence. And it turns out that it is amplified in the private education sector because of the consequences of the application of law 46/2017 on the remuneration of teaching staff, which the Mlf has applied in full and which has led to an increase in tuition fees of up to 30%.

One of the consequences of this crisis may be that Lebanese families can no longer afford to pay the expenses necessary for the operation of Mlf schools. However, it should be recalled that in Lebanon the private school activity of the Mlf is not a lucrative one. It is a contribution, like that of other educational actors in the private sector, to preparing the young people for their future and that of their country; evidently, the private education sector is subject to supply and demand laws, families having no obligation to enroll their children there.

Faced with the economic and monetary crisis, aggravated by the health crisis, the reaction of families who are putting a strong pressure on schools is not surprising for the Mlf who shares with them their great concern. But it is important to note that they are not the only ones to suffer from this situation which is already starting to weigh heavily on the financial situation of the schools, and the latter will have to assume an increased deficit even though the Mlf does not foresee the additional invoicing to which law 515/1996 entitles it to do.

The Mlf collects the full tuition fees in Lebanese pounds without increases since 2017/2018, and it is committed to keeping it at the same level for the next school year. Consequently, the collapse of the Lebanese pound in fact led to a drop in staff salaries and tuition fees, the value of which, in absolute terms, had been reduced by at least 50%.

All these financial efforts have a limit and it is definitely reached.

The Mlf fully understands the situation of the families who educate their children in its schools and are faced with reductions in wages or liberal income, or even layoffs. However, the priorities of families are completely shaken by this crisis when until now they sacrificed themselves for the education of their children. All this will force the Mlf to give up the employment of foreign teachers due to the collapse of the local currency, and will also force it to end many local jobs.

The private education sector is increasingly weakened and its future is in danger when it was a pillar of the national school system. Going after each other will not solve anything, be it for families forced to sell their assets, or for schools forced to close their doors.

The country and its schools are in need of a stability that cannot come from families or schools. Only the State, in all its components (executive, legislative, judicial) has ultimately the heavy burden of implementing the means necessary to secure the private education sector. Without this stability, without aid to families, even by reducing burdens, the Mlf, like the other players in the private education sector, will not be able to overcome the consequences of this crisis. If nothing is done then Lebanon would be deprived of the development of high quality human resources, with long term damages.

Everyone, State, families, schools, is facing its responsibilities. Meanwhile, the Mlf has assumed its responsibilities for a long time; it remains fully open to participate with all players in Lebanese society and the education sector, in any discussion process of the solutions to be implemented.