

**Ministry of Education and Higher Education**

**Directorate General of Education**

**To Esteemed Human Rights Watch**

3/5310

7/2/2018

**Attention: Ms. Lama Fakih**

**Director, Beirut Office**

**Assistant Director of the Middle East and North Africa Division**

**Subject:** Improving access of children with special needs to education in Lebanon, and ensuring all children's right to education

**Reference:** - Your letter recorded in the Directorate General of Education bureau, number 3/5320, dated 5/15/2018.

- Your report, "I Would Like to Go to School - Barriers to Education for Children with Disabilities in Lebanon"

In reference to the above subject and the two documents;

And further to your letter, which indicated your desire for a follow-up discussion of your recent report about the access to education for children with special needs, and to know how to make progress on this issue in Lebanon, as well as the steps that the Minister of Education and Higher Education has taken to integrate special-needs children into Lebanese schools;

And after reviewing the report, "I Would Like to Go to School - Barriers to Education for Children with Disabilities in Lebanon", by the researchers of Human Rights Watch between January and June 2017 in the city of Beirut and its suburbs, and in the districts of Hermel, Akkar, Nabatiyeh and Chouf;

And since we see a need to correct some of the information stated in this report, in light of the legal and regulatory statutes in effect, and the present steps being undertaken respectively by different units of the Directorate General of Education;

Therefore

Attached please find a letter with the Directorate General of Education's comments on your report. We reiterate our readiness to cooperate with you to address any subject in light of the established facts.

Director General of Education

[signature]

Fadi Yarak

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**To Ms. Lama Fakh,**

After reviewing your letter dated 5/16/2018, further to our email dated 5/16/2018, we would answer as follows:

**One:** Since passage of Law number 220/2000 regarding securing the rights of the disabled the Lebanese Government, through the Ministry of Social Affairs, has allocated yearly financial provisions for the care of the persons with special needs and their education in special institutions, after assessing their conditions in the Model Center for the Disabled and the Program to Secure the Rights of the Disabled, under the Ministry of Social Affairs, where there are doctors and a group of specialists including a corrective educator, a speech pathologist and kinesthetic therapists. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education is responsible for providing education to all students without conducting official evaluation, and for laying out personalized plans and following-up on their implementation to avoid duplication of efforts with the Ministry of Social Affairs.

Based on the fact that the right of people with special needs to education requires promoting a comprehensive educational and learning system at all levels, and necessitates no short period of time to empower them to achieve education without discrimination, consecutive steps were taken by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education that aim to address their needs on different dimensions, the foremost of which was called, "The Committee to Identify the Conditions of People with Special Educational Needs as Regards Official Testing for Intermediate Diplomas," which was formed under Order number 9533 dated 12/17/2012, to study the cases of people with special educational needs and the ill. This committee proposes the kinds of official testing needed for intermediate diplomas for each case studied, after studying the case of each student and meeting with them, so as to issue an exemption from intermediate diplomas for necessary cases before starting the normal round of official tests and continuing this process through the end of the special round each school year. In any case, since official testing is the essential component of the national assessment process for students,

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including those with learning difficulties and special needs, rooms within testing centers are designated to reduce long distances and facilitate their arrival to and departure from examination centers.

**Two:** The report stated that OpenMinds organization provided equipment and paid the costs for preparing schools and training teachers, at a cost of more than two million US dollars to cover only around 15 schools, among them 6 private schools and 9 [public] schools, which seems to be a very high cost to support the education of students with special needs. This amount was not only for public schools but covered the expense of research and accommodative services for more than two hundred people with special needs, meaning that what was spent on public schools was reasonable insofar as the Ministry of Education and Higher Education did not impose any expenses or additional fees of any kind on students with special needs or those with learning difficulties. In addition, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education provided assistance to organizations cooperating to serve persons with special needs in the framework of a meaningful, complementary relationship.

**Three:** The report stated that the Ministry of Education and Higher Education is planning for an experimental program in 2018 to have 30 public integrated schools. However, the report, which states that it was published in March 2018, did not mention the implementation of the project by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, which means that the information it contained does not reflect the reality and should be corrected. It must be noted that the Ministry of Education and Higher Education's interest in the subject of school integration has been ongoing since 2011, since the day that his Excellency the Minister of Education and Higher Education, Dr. Hassan Mneimneh, based on the proposal of the Director General for Education, passed decree number 320/m/2011, dated 2/24/2011, regarding school integration of people with special needs, in which (5) schools were approved for the initial experimental period. It should be stressed that integration is a course from which there is no going back, yet it requires more time and financial resources to be achieved in full.

**Four:** The interviews conducted with the Ministry of Education and Higher Education did not cover all of the offices involved with providing education and the school and official testing of all students. Thus, the recommendations provided to the Ministry of Education and Higher Education regarding "ensure all official examinations accommodate the needs of all children with disabilities" did not take into account

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the fact that the official testing bureau in the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, in accordance with Article Six of Order number 9533 dated 12/17/2012, is making the necessary accommodations for all students including students with learning difficulties and special needs, such as providing [testing] centers and facilitating their access to them, as per the arrangement set out in Clause One.

**Five:** You mentioned that a number of administrators and teachers have refused to register students with special needs and learning difficulties, which is surprising because the Ministry of Education and Higher Education has never issued any circular, decision, or official document that denies admission to any student who wants to attend school. Beyond that, the Directorate General of Education has prepared a draft executive order for the Compulsory Education Law number 150 dated 8/17/2011, which stipulates that neither a disability nor a need for appropriate accommodations shall be sufficient in and of themselves to bar a student from accessing school, taking into account all of the conditions stipulated in Article 60 of Law number 220/2000, before deciding on a review of how to educate a disabled child. Special schools that provide appropriate education for those with special needs such as teaching sign language, or Braille, and others, are considered part and parcel of the basic compulsory education system which caters to a large number of disabled students who are unable to follow the program in ordinary schools. These [special schools] receive support from the Ministry of Education and Higher Education on par with public schools, and a joint-committee of the Ministry of Social Affairs including representatives from these educational institutions is responsible for determining the conditions of their work and the cost of education in them.

Indeed, the Special Committee for the Education of Disable Children established by Law number 220/2000 holds its meetings under the direction of the Director General of Education, the last of which was on 2/28/2018, when they reviewed the progress of the implementation of their decision taken in the previous meeting held on **9/13/2017** regarding the preparation a study on the ground realities of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education in cooperation with the Educational Center for Research and Development, and the statistics of schools capable of receiving disabled [students] and of current schools and their capabilities, if they had been rehabilitated, by area.

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**Six:** As regards the figures cited in your report, it is notable that you have relied on the estimated numbers of UNICEF and the World Health Organization and the World Bank for people with special needs aged 5 to 14, being around 5% of the world population. Yet the number of those registered officially in Lebanon—which were cited explicitly in the report—are around 8558 children, according to the governmental Program to Secure the Rights of the Disable, which is charged with recording these numbers, and so it is not logical to use the estimated numbers instead of the numbers stated in official documents issued by the Lebanese State.

**Seven:** You mentioned in your report that interviews with children were held in Arabic with the assistance of a translator skilled in both Arabic and English, and interviews were held with the parents and guardians in English or Arabic with the assistance of a translator. The accuracy of the translations must be questioned here when the subject touches on similar technical questions, and we believe that this matter requires increased accuracy.

**Eight:** You quote a “prominent psychiatrist in Lebanon” who attested to information about the teachers in public schools and about the teaching methods as though it is sure, verified and objective information, which is surprising because the educational process is an integrated series that cannot be sufficiently evaluated by a single individual no matter their capacity and competence. Such an evaluation is made by close coordination among specialized offices of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, and only based on standard scientific metrics upon which any evaluation may rest. Outside of this framework, the report gives the impression of a pre-conceived notion, if not to say negative bias, about the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, as though it were responsible for communal culture that does not accept integration, while the Ministry believes that the matter of integration is an inevitable process requiring care and the necessary focus to achieve success without skipping any of its stages in the pursuit of this success.

**In conclusion,** we value your attention to and efforts towards the interests of children, and we hope that any reports would be consistent with the standards of scientific research as regards the inclusion of information and updated facts issued by the relevant official authorities, and not merely relying on some people’s personal opinions, or as regards the conclusions reached. We want to take this opportunity to

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restate our appreciation of all that non-governmental organizations do, and hope it helps to gain support and assistance for any issue of service. We express to you again our utmost readiness to cooperate fully to address any subject in light of the established facts, and you can follow-up with Ms.

████████████████████ via the following email: ████████████████████, or phone ████████████████████.

CONTACT DETAILS REDACTED FOR PRIVACY