

EGYPT

SCHOOL'S OUT

At a primary school in a working-class district of Cairo, the bell rings at 11 a.m. Children in smocks pour out of the heavy iron gates. Their school day has already ended. Other children will soon be flocking in. Holidays apart—as at this moment, a break for the last two weeks of Ramadan—half of Egypt's 25,000 schools have to operate more than one shift a day.

Decades of underinvestment and surging population have strained public education beyond endurance. While parents pay out to private schools and crammers, planners worry that poor brainpower will remain a brake on growth even as Egypt's economy emerges from the long stranglehold of central planning.

The statistics are grim. Half a century after universal free education was decreed in Egypt, adult literacy is reckoned to be just 50%. Among the women of the poor southern town of Mallawi—a stronghold of the Islamic radicals who have battled Egyptian police for the past five years—that figure is only 10%.

Typically, an Egyptian completes 4 1/2 years of school, whereas an Israeli completes ten. The quality is poor too. A 1994 survey of 10-17-year-olds who had finished at least five years of school found that barely one in 20 could calculate the volume of a cube. The ratio of pupils to teachers in public schools is 45 to one. Some city classes pack 100 children to a room. With a school-age population of 16m, even the respectable 6% of GDP spent on education means only \$200 per year per pupil; in practice, less, since spending is skewed towards universities—though even so Egyptian college students get 0.04% of the money spent on their Japanese counterparts.

To make space for incoming classes, schools regularly let pupils go to the next class up regardless of merit. Similarly, teachers are pro-

moted solely on the basis of seniority. Paid, on average, less than \$100 a month, most resort to private tutoring to make ends meet. Two-thirds of primary students and nearly all secondary pupils take outside lessons—not only to prepare for exams but to incline their teachers-cum-tutors to let them pass.

In Egypt's rigid system, exam results determine not only whether a student may qualify for higher education but which faculty he may be eligible for. Thanks to poor pay prospects, teacher-training colleges long attracted only those who did worst in exams. Now competition to get into them has stiffened—thanks, ironically, to teachers' ability to earn from private lessons. By one government estimate, cramming has grown into a \$2 billion industry. The cost of schooling, supposedly free, is 10% of the average family income per child, and rising, says Nader Fergany, an educational consultant. In effect, he says, "when the government builds a new school, it is actually building a marketplace for teachers to meet their clients."

The teaching itself, by tradition, encourages rote learning rather than critical thinking. Martial drills and physical punishment are standard. "They flatten students," says a consultant for UNICEF, the United Nations' organization for children. "The Ministry of Education sees its role as socializing and disciplining children as much as teaching them."

Belatedly, the government has recognized the scale of its problem. It has tripled the education budget and built some 6,000 schools in the past five years. Colorful new textbooks contrast with the dreary stuff that children used to have to endure. The ministry now talks of basic education as a priority, and has loosened rules to allow experiments like the 120 community-run schools that UNICEF has

established in some remote hamlets in upper Egypt.

Recognizing that the state cannot cope, the ministry has encouraged private-sector higher education. Four private universities opened in 1996. These, it is hoped, will produce graduates better attuned to the needs of a job market saturated with incompetent holders of degrees in unwanted subjects from the 13 state universities. Demand is fierce. The American University in Cairo, the oldest private college in Egypt, can demand 92% scores in its entry exams and fees of some \$10,000 a year.

Privatization is not seen as an answer lower down, though.

The state allows its schools to offer fee-charging "remedial classes," but remains committed to providing eight years of free basic schooling. Uprooting the practice of outside teaching has proved difficult. Nail-ing crammers for tax evasion has been one method, yet only 4,000 out of 400,000 teachers have registered their lessons with the taxman. Another effort failed just as miserably. Middle schools used to allow teachers' evaluations to make up 20% of a grade, the rest being determined by standardized tests. Finding that teachers used their 20% to pressure students into private lessons, the Ministry of Education decided to make grades 100% exam-determined. Though this liberated students from blackmail by their own teachers, even more of them resorted to exam crammers.

There is one hope on the horizon, however. Two decades of dropping birth rates mean that the school-age population is set to peak this year. By 2000 Egypt will have 1m fewer children to teach.