

[COVER PAGE PLACEHOLDER]

Cover pages will be developed in Canva and inserted into the PDF report.

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# Acronyms

CSO	Civil Society Organization
DEO	District Education Officer
ERO	Ethnic Resistance Organization
GCPEA	Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
ISP	Institution for Strategy and Policy
KECD	Karen Education and Culture Department
KED	Karen Education Department (former name of KECD)
KESS	Karen Education System Strengthening
KNU	Karen National Union
KTCF	Karen Teacher Competency Framework
KTTC	Karen Teacher Training College
KTWG	Karen Teachers Working Group
L1	First language/mother tongue
L2	Second language
L3	Third language
MTBMLE	Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education
MTT	Mobile Teacher Trainer
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
PDF	People's Defense Force
PTA	Parent-Teacher Association
PSEA	Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
SAC	State Administration Council (military junta)
SVT	Summer Vacation Training
TEO	Township Education Officer
TPD	Teacher Professional Development
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
WASH	Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene



## Introduction

This research is the result of continued collaboration with other education departments in resistance controlled areas of Myanmar. Discussions between these departments guided its design and focus on supporting teachers in emergency settings. The research was conducted by the Karen Education System Strengthening (KESS) team—a collaboration between the Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD) and the Karen Teachers Working Group (KTWG). The primary objective of the research is to provide teachers, communities, parents, and school leaders working at Karen National Union (KNU) administered schools with a voice that can reach policy making bodies, trusted international partners, and civil society.

This research acknowledges Karen and displaced teachers as frontline service providers and community leaders who have maintained education for tens of thousands of children despite ongoing conflict, displacement, and economic distress. It documents their resilience and innovation while identifying key areas where additional resources and technical support are needed to strengthen the Karen education system and address challenges building and retaining teaching capacity. Teachers' voices and perspectives are not only valuable for improving educational outcomes within Karen schools but also offer important lessons for other education systems operating in similar challenging circumstances across Myanmar.

A secondary objective of this research is to provide a snapshot of the 2023 to 2024 context at Karen schools from the perspective of teachers, school leaders, subject trainers and mobile teacher trainers. Since the coup attempt, the Karen education system has continued to confront new challenges, such as a 56% increase in student enrollment, more linguistically diverse classrooms, and an intensification of attacks on schools by the Myanmar Army. As

our context shifts, we identify areas where teachers need more support to align with the Karen Teacher Competency Framework (shared in Annex 1 of this report), and recommend areas where the framework could change to better align with the lived experience of teaching and classroom realities.

It is hoped that this report will serve as a valuable resource for KNU policy and decision makers, civil society organizations, and trusted development partners in creating responsive education policies and designing targeted support programs for the people of Kawthoolei.

# Executive Summary

This research uses a mixed-methods design to examine how teachers sustain education in crisis-affected Karen State, with particular attention to building and retaining teaching capacity during intensified conflict. The research emerged through collaboration with education departments in resistance-controlled areas of Myanmar and examines teacher experiences across four analytical domains: emotional and psychosocial dimensions, physical safety and security, teaching and learning, and community-parent relations.

Data collection included:

- School-level surveys and focus group discussions with teachers
- Key informant interviews with teacher trainers, school principals, and Karen organization leaders
- Classroom observations spanning primary through high school levels
- Analysis of existing Karen education system data

Research priorities and design were guided by a Research Advisory Committee comprising education department leaders and civil society organizations, while the KESS research team contextualized the broader framework for Karen schools. The study design approaches teachers as key informants and agents of educational resilience rather than subjects of evaluation in recognition of their crucial role in maintaining education for Karen communities.

## Key Findings

### Emotional and Psychosocial Dimensions

Teachers increasingly find themselves extending beyond traditional teaching roles to provide wellbeing support for students, particularly in schools that have experienced direct attacks. Focus group discussions revealed that many teachers start their classes with social games and activities, viewing student wellbeing as a prerequisite for learning. Teachers were also observed playing a significant role in managing student wellbeing outside the classroom, especially at high schools, where many students board in shared housing or dormitories. However, these expanded support roles place additional emotional burdens on already-stressed teachers who lack formal training or resources for providing psychosocial support, which was a significant concern for organizational leaders.

There could be a significant difference between self-reported and observed teacher wellbeing levels, suggesting normalization of stress responses among teachers. While survey data showed neutral ratings for organizational support of teacher wellbeing (averaging 5.8 out of 9), interviews with school principals revealed widespread concerns about teacher morale and motivation. Some schools have sought to address this through monthly teacher meetings that serve as informal peer support groups, but these efforts are inconsistent across schools and are largely unstructured.

Teachers acknowledged that their own wellbeing has a direct impact on their teaching competencies. Several patterns in teacher wellbeing were found in focus group discussions with teachers, which were then categorized as either internal or external factors. Internal factors were largely intrinsic and psychological, such as for teachers who feel they have low subject-content knowledge resulting in low self-efficacy in achieving teacher competency standards. All internal factors were directly linked by teachers to their social-emotional wellbeing. For example, if a teacher's students performed poorly on a test, they would internalize the poor student performance, even if external factors played a significant role in test score outcomes.



**External factors included the work environment, sense of security, and relationships.** Financial security was discussed by teachers as one of the most relevant factors in their own wellbeing, especially in the context of recent hyperinflation of costs of food and basic necessities. Some teachers described the existing teacher compensation as difficult to survive on in their community. Other common external factors included security from attacks on schools, work environment issues such as insufficient learning materials for students, and challenges supporting family and young children.

**School-based cultural and community events have emerged as an important tool for supporting both student and teacher wellbeing in crisis settings.** Across multiple schools, teachers and administrators organize Karen New Year celebrations, wrist-tying ceremonies, music competitions, talent shows, planting initiatives, and sports events during weekends. Mobile teacher trainers observed that these activities serve multiple functions: maintaining student engagement, boosting teacher morale, building teamwork across the student body, and strengthening school-community bonds. The success of these activities suggests that traditional cultural practices may offer sustainable, locally-rooted approaches to wellbeing support in conflict settings.

## Physical Safety and Security

**All teachers, but especially middle school teachers, expressed a need for additional training in responding to emergency situations and security incidents.** Teachers identified managing student behavior during active emergencies, such as freezing or panic, as the most significant challenge for them with respect to physical security. They also cited health-related concerns of staying for extended periods at temporary shelters, where first aid skills to address issues like fungal infections and heat-rash are needed. School leaders view the ability of teachers to manage student behavior during security incidents as a key teacher competency. Teacher trainers who had recently visited schools that had been attacked believed teachers needed specific training in first aid and emergency response to prepare them for sudden air strikes and natural disasters.

**Current security challenges have forced schools to develop complex response systems that extend far beyond simple evacuation protocols.** Research documented how some schools use a spectrum of protective measures. The sophistication of these responses varies dramatically, with some schools maintaining detailed protocols including grade-level specific evacuation points, dispersion strategies for overnight stays, and dedicated communication channels through handheld transceivers. Strong school leadership appears to be an important enabling factor for the development of adequate emergency preparedness.

**Teacher networks play a crucial but often informal role in school security systems,** particularly through information sharing about potential threats. The research identified cases where individual teachers or community leaders maintained information networks with local authorities. These connections enabled their schools to navigate uncertainty about safety and security more effectively than institutions relying solely on formal channels. This finding suggests that social capital and experience of individual teachers significantly influence a school's security capacity.

## Teaching and Learning

**Linguistic diversity in Karen classrooms has prompted significant adaptations in teaching approaches,** particularly at schools near the Thai-Myanmar border. The research documented structured language rotation strategies and peer-based translation of key lessons, especially in secondary subjects where both language and content complexity pose challenges for teachers. However, these innovations remain largely confined to border areas where teachers often possess multilingual capabilities, while schools deeper in Karen State face greater challenges accommodating students from different language backgrounds. They



*Primary students play near a trench near their school created by the community after receiving information about a potential airstrike.*

also come with tradeoffs, as teachers using these approaches reported having less time to spend delivering the lesson or making difficult decisions to skip or summarize parts of the curriculum.

**For displaced students and teachers moving to a Karen school from a different school system, language of instruction remains a key barrier to integration.** Schools with fewer multilingual teachers are unable to meet the needs of displaced students and teachers, who may be learning S'gaw Karen as a third or fourth language. Some schools have established supplemental S'gaw Karen courses to help displaced students, which show promising results. Teacher trainers requested that teaching materials be translated into additional languages, especially Burmese, to help displaced teachers use the Karen curriculum.

**Due to a lack of learning materials, many teachers have adopted sensory-based activities into their teaching.** During classroom observations, teachers demonstrated the use of natural materials as teaching aids during their lessons, most often in science and mathematics classes. However, students copying parts of textbooks and lessons directly from a chalkboard were also observed at most schools due to a lack of textbooks and learning materials. Teachers requested more textbooks, teaching aids such as maps and periodic tables, and teaching props.

**The Karen teacher professional development system shows growing divergence between training and evaluation practices.** Before the coup attempt, in-service teacher training responded systematically to classroom observation data, emphasizing pedagogy, subject knowledge, and professional development. Current evaluation methods still reflect these historical priorities. However, since 2021, teacher training has necessarily shifted toward supporting teacher wellbeing and morale, reducing time spent on traditional professional development modules. Teacher trainers reported this disconnect as particularly challenging for newer teachers who haven't completed multiple training cycles.

**Performance on the Karen Teacher Competency Framework (KTCF) generally aligns with the proportion of new and returning teachers.** Mobile teacher trainers, who are responsible for assessing teachers against the KTCF during classroom observations, reported that teachers generally do well in areas they have received in-service training in, but do not achieve standards in areas they have not trained in. This aligns with quantitative data

provided by the Karen Teachers Working Group (see Figures 8-10 in Section 3.5). However, lesson planning emerged as the most challenging area for teachers, with only around 40% of teachers meeting this criteria in the 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 academic years. The primary factor affecting lesson planning appears to be a lack of time given competing responsibilities in Karen teachers' expanded role as a result of the conflict. For newer teachers, a lack of training in practical lesson planning is likely also a significant factor. In contrast, a majority of teachers (>80%) meet the values and disposition criteria, regardless of whether they are new or returning.

**Infrastructure variations significantly impact learning space quality**, with three distinct categories of school structures emerging from the research: permanent buildings, semi-permanent structures, and temporary forest shelters. Temporary shelters have the greatest needs. For communities where school structures have been destroyed by attacks or natural disasters, schools have continued to operate in temporary shelters with a significant impact on learning outcomes. Rebuilding schools in these communities is a first-order priority for improving learning space quality. A second recommendation comes from classroom observations, which revealed that inadequate partitioning in semi-permanent structures created the greatest challenge for learning, as both visual and auditory distractions impact student concentration and teacher effectiveness.

**Teacher competency assessment practices may need recalibration to reflect current conflict realities.** Only Domains 2-4 of the original six-domain Karen Teacher Competency Framework are currently assessed, and even within these, Summer Vacation Training cannot comprehensively cover the curricula due to time constraints. MTTs report that teachers are sometimes evaluated on competencies they haven't received training for, potentially affecting motivation.

## Community-Parent Relations

**Community and parental support for education has a significant impact on teacher livelihood.** While the Karen teacher stipend is equal for all teachers, a teacher's livelihood at any given school can vary significantly when factoring in the level of parent and community support. Communities often provide direct support to teachers, including for food and basic needs. In remote communities, parents often construct housing for the teacher and provide land for them to use for agriculture or animal husbandry. Community and parental beliefs about the value of education are likely the best predictors of how well teachers are supported outside of their yearly teacher stipend.

**Evidence suggests the current framework may misattribute responsibility for community engagement to individual teachers.** Organization leaders, school principals, and teacher trainers questioned whether building community support should be evaluated as a teacher-level competency in the Karen Teacher Competency Framework. With Mobile Teacher Trainers and KECD staff already performing significant community awareness-raising roles, these responsibilities might be more appropriately assessed at an organizational level rather than adding to teachers' already expanded roles in conflict settings.



# Background

## Education in Myanmar

Armed conflict has continued to escalate throughout Myanmar since the February 2021 attempted military coup.<sup>1</sup> Between February 1, 2021 and July 23, 2024, the Institution for Strategy and Policy (ISP) reported that there were at least 14,457 clashes between the State Administration Council (SAC) and Ethnic Resistance Organizations (EROs) or People's Defense Forces (PDFs) across 233 out of 330 townships in Myanmar. This indicates that 70 percent of townships nationwide experienced armed conflict in the last three years. The repeated airstrikes, artillery shelling, armed clashes, destruction of civilian-owned property, and detentions force people to flee from their homes. According to UNHCR (2024), the number of total internally displaced persons (IDPs) within Myanmar exceeded 3.4 million as of September 2024.

The ongoing armed conflict has severely disrupted education across Myanmar, with millions of children losing access to schooling due to increasing attacks on education. The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) ranked Myanmar among the top four countries with the highest number of attacks on education, alongside Palestine, Ukraine, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.<sup>2</sup> Of the 245 attacks on education nationwide in Myanmar, 40 targeted school students, teachers, and other education personnel (ibid.). Teachers and school children have been arrested for teaching at or attending schools under the administration of anti-junta groups and schools and universities throughout the country are being used as military bases. In 2023, the World Bank reported that approximately 28% of children aged 6-17 struggle to access education as the schools cannot provide a safe and free learning environment.<sup>3</sup>

Apart from the escalating conflict across Myanmar, natural hazards continue to drive additional humanitarian needs across the country. Myanmar is ranked second globally among countries most affected by extreme climate events.<sup>4</sup> In May 2023, Cyclone Mocha impacted more than 3 million people in Western Myanmar.<sup>5</sup> A year later, in September 2024, approximately 5.6 million people across Myanmar faced extensive flash flooding.<sup>6</sup> Amidst the ongoing conflict, natural hazards have significantly increased the need for humanitarian assistance, affecting an estimated 18.6 million people.<sup>7</sup>

## Karen Education System

The Karen education system is built around principles of federal democracy and self-determination. At its foundation lies the provision of education in students' mother

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<sup>1</sup> The ongoing conflict since February 2021 is termed a 'coup attempt' in this research. This terminology has been chosen to reflect how control has not been consolidated by the military, despite its continued attempts at violent suppression. At the time of writing, military authority is being effectively challenged by various resistance forces, and control over territories under ethnic administration, such as those overseen by the Karen National Union, has not been secured by the junta.

<sup>2</sup> Retrieved from GCPEA's Education Under Attack 2024 report: <https://protectingeducation.org/publication/education-under-attack-2024/>

<sup>3</sup> Bhatta S. D., S. Katawal, S. Sinha Roy, R. Van der Weide, U. Sharma, A. P. Kyaw, & M. M. Thwin. (2023). Education in Myanmar: Where are we now? World Bank.

<sup>4</sup> UNOCHA. (2024). Myanmar Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2024 Addendum.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Institution for Strategy and Policy [ISP]. (2024, October 15). Over 5.6 Million People Experienced Flood. <https://ispmyanmar.com/mp-67/>

<sup>7</sup> UNOCHA. (2024). Myanmar Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2024 Addendum.



tongue languages, recognizing this as essential to quality education in a federal context that serves not only Karen communities, but Mon, Pa'O, Burmese, Dawei, Muslim, Hindu, and others. It also reflects KECD's commitment to ensuring that educational policies and practices promote equality, peace, and democracy.

Throughout the seven KNU administered districts of Kawthoolei,<sup>8</sup> The Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD) is responsible for supporting the development and implementation of an education system that reflects the federal nature of the region. To accomplish this, KECD collaborates with community-based organizations, including the Karen Teachers Working Group (KTWG), to ensure all resources that are available to support education are coordinated in an effective and accountable manner. KECD convenes regular meetings across the education sector in Kawthoolei to facilitate resource and information sharing and ensure its policies and structure remains aligned with school needs.

KECD's approach to education governance is decentralized, devolving most of its authority to the district and community levels. District-level Education Officers (DEOs) are empowered to set board exam standards for primary and secondary levels and can determine whether high schools in their areas can participate in board exams. They are responsible for coordinating with KECD to determine resource allocation and how best to implement educational policies. DEOs convene regular meetings within their own education staff to discuss field conditions and monitor needs.

Some areas have Township-level Education Officers (TEOs), which act as intermediaries between DEOs and local schools, helping to coordinate resources and support at a more localized level. TEOs work closely with school committees and principals to understand specific challenges and needs within their townships, facilitating more targeted and efficient support. They also play a crucial role in data collection and reporting, gathering information about student enrollment, teacher needs, and infrastructure requirements that helps inform both district and department-level decision making.

This structure embodies the principles of subsidiarity, ensuring that decisions are made at the most appropriate and local level possible, while maintaining coherence across the education system. The multilayered approach allows for both standardization where necessary and flexibility where appropriate, reflecting the complex realities of delivering education in Kawthoolei.

## Education in Contemporary Kawthoolei

In the 2024-2025 academic year, with the help of Karen communities and trusted development partners, KECD and KTWG provided education services to 11,190 teachers at 1,671 schools. These schools and teachers in turn provide education continuity for 140,732 students enrolled in basic education in the Karen education system.

This system operates through a distributed network of community-based schools structured to overcome significant geographic barriers to access amidst ongoing conflict. Due to the poor road conditions in remote areas, schools are often sited to be within walking distance to communities while also prioritizing school security from artillery shelling, airstrikes, and drones.

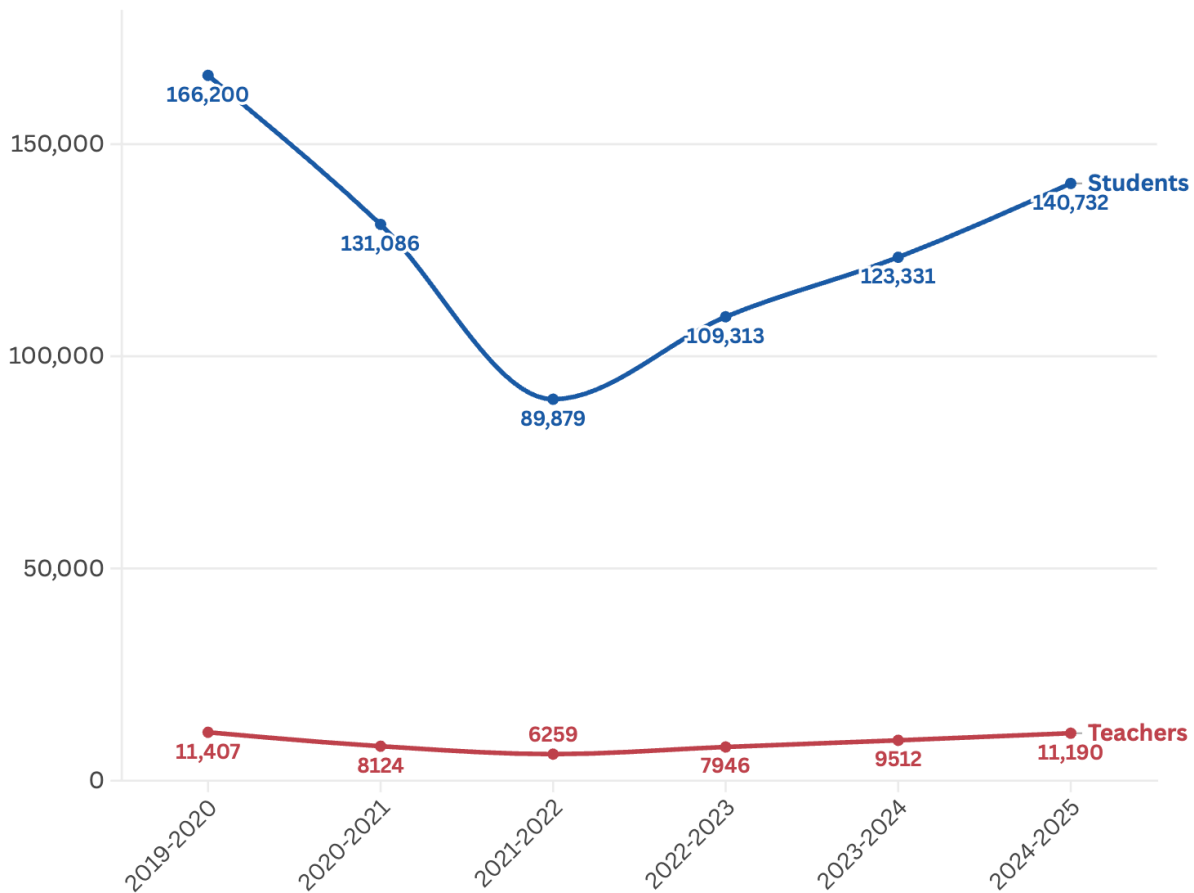
While an aggregate student-to-teacher ratio of approximately 15:1 suggests favorable learning conditions, this figure masks substantial operational complexities within the

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<sup>8</sup> The aspirational homeland of the Karen people, historically associated with areas within present-day Karen State. The term derives from Karen language, often translated as "the land without evil." Kawthoolei represents both a geographic territory and a political vision championed by the KNU since the 1940s.

contemporary Karen education system. Class sizes and compositions vary significantly across schools, influenced by local demographics, security conditions, and resource availability. To continue education at the secondary level, many Karen students commute to high schools where they will board in dormitories or shared student housing, and these facilities are often under the responsibility of schools, and ultimately teachers, to manage.

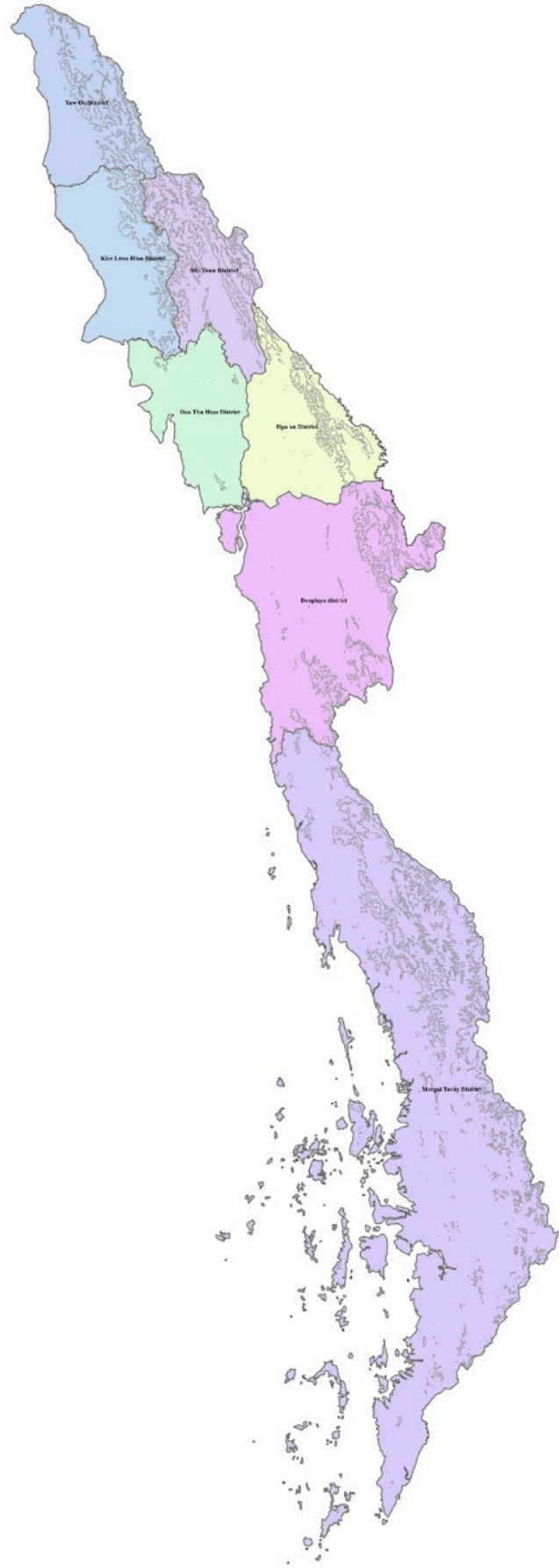
Figure 1. Total Number of Students and Teachers at KECD Schools, 2019 to 2024



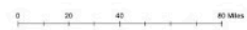
Beyond their instructional duties, teachers usually serve in roles including administrative functions, community liaison work, fundraising, and emergency response during security incidents and attacks on schools. Many teachers must also balance their educational responsibilities with subsistence farming or other economic activities, particularly in more remote communities where resources are more constrained. Others assume roles as a primary caregiver for their children or elderly parents, which limits their availability to teach at the school.

The combination of these factors—multi-grade teaching requirements, extensive non-teaching responsibilities, and part-time availability of some teaching staff—means that the nominal student-to-teacher ratio significantly understates the actual workload of Karen educators. Teachers must develop specialized skills in managing mixed-ability classrooms while adapting curriculum delivery to accommodate both varying grade levels and irregular attendance patterns that may result from security concerns or seasonal agricultural demands. The Karen education system’s resilience depends heavily on teachers’ ability to adapt their teaching methods and responsibilities to meet local community needs while working within these operational constraints.

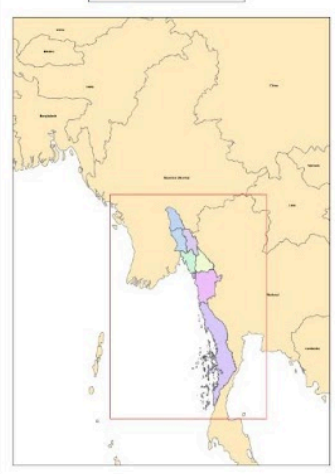
# Karen State MAP



1 cm = 11 km



Legend	
—	Contour 500
Blue	Taw Oo District
Purple	Mu Traw District
Light Purple	Mergui Tavoy District
Light Blue	Kler Lwee Htoo District
Yellow	Hpa an District
Pink	Doooplaya district
Green	Doo Tha Htoo District



KECD schools, often referred to as "community schools," form the backbone of education in KNU-controlled and influenced areas. They are distinguished by their demand-driven establishment process wherein communities themselves initiate requests for school formation. Communities may undertake school construction, participate in school activities, and contribute to local fundraising efforts, depending on local resources and circumstances. Once a community has requested a school from KECD, detailed guidance on school siting and standards is provided, including a comprehensive manual available in S'gaw Karen and Burmese.

The schools operate through a combination of community contributions and institutional support. KECD and KTWG provide substantial supplementary support for teacher stipends and educational materials to strengthen educational delivery. In 2023-2024, the teacher stipend provided to all Karen teachers was THB 10,500, equivalent to about \$300 or ¥45,000, for the entire academic year. Schools often engage in their own fundraising initiatives, typically led by community members or teachers, to support material costs such as textbooks and learning materials. While practices vary across townships and villages, communities play a significant role in maintaining basic education services, which centralizes the importance of strong school-community relationships.

However, the education landscape across Kawthoolei has faced mounting challenges due to ongoing conflict and displacement. Between February 2021 and June 2024, at least 40 attacks on schools were documented by the Karen Human Rights Group, with escalating incidents each year.<sup>9</sup> The destruction of educational infrastructure has been severe, with 22 schools damaged or destroyed by SAC airstrikes or shelling between February 2021 and August 2024. These security challenges are compounded by large-scale displacement, with over one million people (1,052,729) displaced in Kawthoolei between August 2022 and September 2024.<sup>10</sup>

In this challenging context, schools have evolved beyond traditional administrative and curricular boundaries. Historically, schools in Karen State could be categorized as either KECD schools, faith-based schools, mixed schools, or government schools.<sup>11</sup> However, these institutions now increasingly share resources and strategies to meet the needs of displaced students and communities, blurring the definitions between them. This adaptation is rooted in a strong commitment from Karen communities to ensure their children have access to education despite the ongoing conflict and severe economic distress.

Throughout this report, "Karen areas" is used to denote the larger geographic area in which Karen people live in Eastern Myanmar. The term "Karen State" is used when referring to the Myanmar government demarcation, while "Kawthoolei" refers to the territories where the Karen National Union maintains administrative presence.

## Language

The linguistic landscape across Kawthoolei reflects both historical continuity and contemporary demographic changes. According to the 2023 Karen Socio-Economic Household Survey, S'gaw Karen remains the predominant mother tongue (73% of respondents), followed by Pwo Karen (17%).<sup>12</sup> While only 6% of respondents indicated

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<sup>9</sup> Karen Human Rights Group (2024). [Schools Under Attack: Challenges to the right to education in Southeast Burma](#) (June 2023-February 2024).

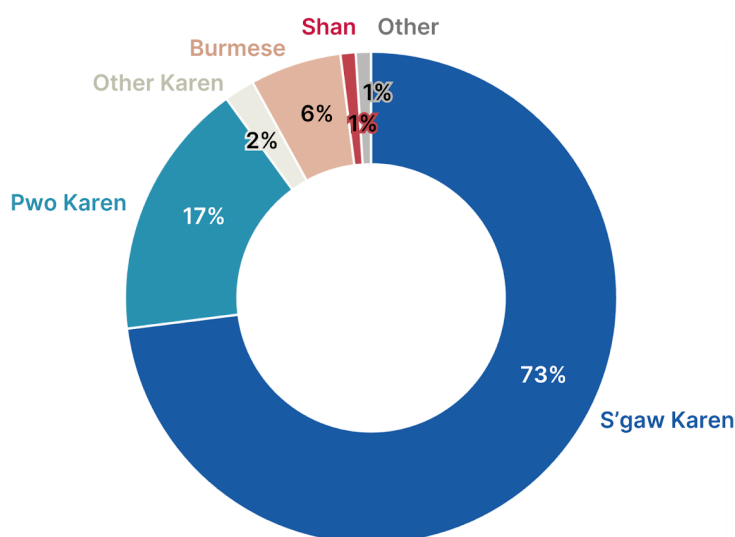
<sup>10</sup> Karen Peace Support Network (2024, November). *Regaining Our Lands: Report Launch* [Zoom session].

<sup>11</sup> Save the Children. (2016). [A Model of Education in Hard-to-Reach Areas: The KTWG Model](#). Accessed October 24, 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Karen Economic Committee and Secretariat. (2023). [Karen Socio-Economic Household Survey](#). Accessed October 24, 2024.

Burmese as their mother tongue, data suggests evolving language patterns, particularly among younger generations and in response to recent displacement.

Figure 2. Mother Tongue Languages in Karen State, 2023



While most households (71%) primarily use only their mother tongue on a day-to-day basis, multilingual communities show interesting patterns. Among households that use additional languages, Burmese serves as the most common second language (61%), followed by S'gaw Karen (20%) and then Pwo Karen (14%). Teachers increasingly report more linguistically diverse classrooms, particularly with new influxes of students from Karen areas and other Myanmar states and regions, requiring thoughtful adaptation of teaching approaches.

The Karen education system has adopted a mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) model, which continues to be a priority for both KECD and KTWG in teacher professional development. This approach enables schools to adapt the language of instruction to meet community needs, while introducing additional languages gradually as subjects, such as Burmese and English. Implementation of this model is often constrained by the availability of multilingual teachers and teaching and learning materials, particularly for other Karen languages such as Pwo Karen.

For a growing number of students who have been displaced from Burmese-medium instruction schools to Karen schools, the transition to a different language of instruction is difficult and is currently a key challenge for most Karen schools. These students navigate multiple languages simultaneously: their mother tongue, Burmese from previous schooling, English as a foreign language, and S'gaw Karen as the most common medium of instruction in Karen schools. These linguistic demands can create additional barriers to educational advancement, particularly at the transition from primary to secondary schooling.

## Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD)

The Karen Education and Culture Department, established in 1947, serves as the primary education authority within Karen National Union administered areas. Through its six specialized bureaus—Secretary, Basic Education, Community Engagement and Learning Support, Special Projects, Higher Education, and Culture—KECD works to develop and implement education policies across Kawthoolei's seven districts. KECD's 2023-2026 strategic framework establishes four priority areas: expanding post-secondary opportunities, enhancing educational quality, strengthening governance systems, and advancing communication and advocacy initiatives.<sup>13</sup>

**VISION:** *A peaceful, pluralistic and just society founded on an educational climate that provides equal access to appropriate and quality educational services and experiences for individuals and their communities to realize their full potentials, and experience and maintain their cultures.*

<sup>13</sup> More information about the organizational structure and strategy of KECD can be found at the department's official website: <https://kecdktl.org/about-kecd/>



**MISSION:** *To develop an inclusive and complementary education system within Southeast Burma that enables learners to develop their individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to critically and creatively contribute to healthy, harmonious and environmentally-sustainable societies.*

Initially established as the Karen Education Department (KED), the organization evolved to integrate cultural preservation alongside educational development. KECD's current operational framework balances standardization requirements with local adaptability, particularly in areas facing security and resource challenges. The department maintains administrative structures at district, township, and school levels to coordinate educational planning and resource allocation. In 2024, the department had around 300 staff members serving across central- and local-level roles, including district and township education officers, distribution and monitoring teams, community mobilization teams, and district-level subject trainers.

A key initiative under the Bureau of Community Engagement and Learning Support is the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) program, which works to strengthen relationships between parents, teachers, principals, and school committees. Through this program, KECD promotes community participation in school governance and development, with 169 PTAs established to date. The department continues to implement an ambitious plan to expand the PTA program across all KECD-administered schools.

### Karen Teachers Working Group

The Karen Teachers Working Group (KTWG), established in 1997, works alongside KECD to support educational delivery across Kawthoolei with a team of 142 staff members. Initially focused on providing teacher training in refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border, KTWG expanded its activities to address educational needs within Karen State through its mobile teacher training (MTT) initiative. Community ownership and locally-driven solutions through programs that complement KECD's educational governance structures form the foundation of KWTG's strategy as a civil society organization, earning it the moniker as a "sister organization" to KECD.



*MTTs attend a workshop to prepare for an upcoming Summer Vacation Training. They will travel across all seven districts of Karen State to reach teachers even in the most remote villages throughout the academic year.*

KTWG coordinates several key educational support activities through its mobile teacher training program and three Karen Teacher Training Colleges (KTTCs). These programs work to strengthen teaching quality through pre-service preparation and ongoing professional development for educators across Karen areas. KTWG also provides broader educational support through stipends for teachers, learning materials for students, and administrative assistance for schools. Through partnerships with international organizations and donors, the organization works to secure and coordinate resources for Karen education

Since the coup attempt, KTWG has shifted resources to prioritize maintenance of educational services and responding to humanitarian needs at schools affected most by the conflict. This requires greater flexibility of the organization in its support of Karen communities, which reach well beyond teacher professional development. Despite these adaptations, KTWG remains a teacher-focused organization and is guided by the belief that teachers are the most important actors on the ground to ensure education continuity for hundreds of thousands of children at the fringe.

## Karen Teacher Development System

The Karen teacher development system devolves much of the decision-making around teacher professional development and recruitment to the district (brigade) and township levels. Teacher recruitment follows three main pathways aligned with regional needs and contextual demands. The primary pathway operates through the Karen Teacher Training College (KTTC), which provides a comprehensive two-year pre-service preparation program targeting candidates from Karen communities who demonstrate commitment to return and serve as educators in their local areas. A second pathway draws from graduates of the Institutions of Higher Education, who have advanced subject-content knowledge but are usually not formally trained as teachers. A third pathway accommodates high school graduates who are either interested in becoming teachers or are planning to pursue higher education in the future.

KECD has established criteria for recruiting teaching staff. However, due to the high demand for teachers in the community, especially with the rapid increase in schools under KECD during the period of political unrest—many teachers have been hired out of necessity, even though they do not fully meet the established recruitment policy. This has led to a gap between the recruitment policy and actual hiring practices, as communities prioritize immediate educational needs over the recruitment standards.

In-service teacher professional development largely takes place during an annual Summer Vacation Training (SVT) program, which spans between two to three weeks between March and April. SVTs typically cover a selection of the following topics aligned with the Karen Teacher Competency Framework, shared in Annex I of this report:

1. Know your students and support their development
2. Know how to teach
3. Know what to teach
4. Community engagement strategies
5. Protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA)
6. Psychological first aid
7. Teacher wellbeing
8. Gender equality, disability, and social inclusion (GEDSI)
9. Positive discipline
10. Mentoring and coaching

Local education officers are empowered to recruit trainers based on the specific needs of their districts and townships. There are two groups of trainers: subject trainers and mobile teacher trainers (MTTs). KTWG is responsible for the training and management of MTTs, an initiative that began in 2001, while subject trainers are trained and managed by KECD. Both





*Students at a Karen Teachers Training College work in groups as they prepare to give a mock lesson.*

groups collaborate closely to deliver professional development training to teachers. For each training course, trainers organize pre- and post-tests, as well as evaluation sessions, to ensure the effectiveness of the training, identify areas for improvement, and ensure that learning objectives have been met.

Those appointed as MTTs are usually graduates from the Karen Teacher Training College and have their resumes submitted to the KTWG office in order to plan training of trainers workshops. MTTs must possess at least two years of teaching experience, proficiency in S'gaw Karen and English, computer literacy skills, and maintain high professional standards. KTWG master trainers typically cover areas such as effective teaching strategies, classroom management, and assessment techniques. MTTs may also receive training from external technical support in collaboration with international partners.

During the middle of the school year, MTTs visit teachers at their schools to conduct school and classroom observations, providing individualized feedback, and support for quality assurance of learning spaces. One key factor that differentiates MTTs from other teacher trainers is their ability to reach teachers who are isolated in their communities. Even as the conflict in some Karen areas has subsided, the remoteness of many communities and long travel times on jungle and mountain routes mean that it is difficult for teachers to assemble outside their communities to attend training without significantly disrupting student learning.

The KECD subject teacher training program aims to strengthen subject-specific knowledge and skills for teachers across all schools in the seven districts. The program is designed to support less-experienced teachers in building the subject knowledge and skills they need to teach effectively. Each year, central- and district-level subject trainers collaborate to deliver tailored training sessions in each district based on classroom observation data collected by MTTs and specific requests from school leaders. Additionally, the subject training prioritizes at the district-level based on respective district board exam results. Subject trainers also make significant contributions to policy-level decision making within KECD and are often present in key stakeholder meetings.



# Methodology

## Conceptual Framework

This framework serves as an analytical tool for understanding how teachers navigate and sustain education in crisis-affected Karen state. It provides a structure for investigating teacher experiences, challenges, and innovations in conflict settings, with particular attention to building and retaining teaching capacity during intensified conflict. The framework emerged from collaboration with other education departments of resistance controlled areas in Myanmar and is specifically adapted to study education provision in Karen schools.

This framework approaches teachers not as subjects of evaluation, but as key informants and agents of educational resilience. It recognizes that teachers in conflict zones generate crucial knowledge about maintaining education during crises, which can inform both policy and practice. Four analytical domains were identified and used to code both qualitative and quantitative data for analysis. Findings were then grouped under each of these domains, and through a process of inductive coding, subheadings were created under each domain.

## Analytical Domains

### Domain 1: Emotional and Psychosocial Dimensions

Research Focus: How teachers navigate the psychosocial landscape of education in conflict

- Teacher strategies for emotional support provision
- Teacher social-emotional wellbeing
- Teacher wellbeing as key factor in education continuity
- Perspectives from school principals and teacher trainers

### Domain 2: Physical Safety and Security

Research Focus: How teachers and schools manage safety in conflict

- Teacher perceptions of safety and emergency protocols
- Teacher and school decision-making during security threats
- Role of teacher and school networks on security

### Domain 3: Teaching and Learning

Research Focus: How teachers adapt and innovate their teaching practices in crisis contexts

- The challenge of displacement and multilingual classrooms
- Teacher support needs in the classroom
- Teacher innovation and adaptation
- Integration of displaced teachers into Karen schools
- Teacher evaluation against Karen teacher competency standards
- Teacher alignment with the Karen Teacher Competency Framework
- Teacher competency variations across grade levels
- Learning space outcomes and quality assurance

### Domain 4: Community and Parent Relations

Research Focus: How teachers maintain educational support networks

- Parents' and communities' role in teacher livelihood
- Community and parent engagement as a teacher competency

## Research Design

This research emerged from a collaborative initiative among education departments of resistance organizations in Myanmar. The study's design was guided by a Research Advisory Committee (RAC) comprising the education department's leaders and local civil society organizations, who established the overarching research objectives and framework.

The Karen Education System Strengthening (KESS) research team, representing both the Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD) and Karen Teachers Working Group (KTWG), contextualized the broader research framework for the Karen education context. This process involved adapting research questions and developing methodologies appropriate to local conditions and available resources.

The study employed a mixed-methods approach to investigate teacher experiences and assess professional development needs across ten teacher competency domains. Data collection methods included:

1. Quantitative Components:
  - School-level teacher surveys measuring relevance and support across teacher competency domains
  - Classroom observations using standardized assessment tools
  - Analysis of existing education system data
2. Qualitative Components:
  - Focus group discussions with teachers
  - Semi-structured interviews with key informants including school leaders and education officers
  - School and classroom observations with narrative documentation

The research process was strengthened through regular collaboration with research teams from other resistance organizations' education departments, enabling comparative analysis and shared learning throughout the study period.

### School-level Teacher Survey

Across 10 teacher competency domains on the school-level teacher survey, teachers were asked to consider how relevant the domain was to their context and what level of support they received on this domain. Using a scale of 1 through 9, teachers were instructed to provide a whole number, with a "1" indicating a domain was not supported/not relevant at all, and a "9" indicating it was very relevant/supported.

However, during the survey, the interpretations of these instructions varied with the context. For example, for a school that had not received any support in a specific domain, teachers instead provided their confidence to support this domain themselves, with a "1" indicating they were not able to support it at all, and a "9" indicating they could completely support it themselves. In the findings section, we distinguish between these different interpretations based on school context.

### Study Participants and Sampling

Schools were chosen to be representative of the broader education context in Karen state, including one middle school and one high school that had recently been attacked by the Myanmar Armed Forces. Schools represented a range of both urban and rural (remote) communities.



Group/Instrument	Total	Male	Female	Notes
Teachers (Survey & FGD)	39	16	23	Same group for both survey and FGD
Teacher trainers (KII)	9	7	2	Three subject trainers and six MTTs
School Principals (KII)	8	5	3	All under KECD
Organization Leaders (KII)	5	3	2	Includes district education officers, school committee leaders, MTB-MLE coordinators, and executive directors

## Limitations

Several significant challenges impacted the completeness of this research, potentially influencing the overall outcomes. A primary concern was the security and political instability that arose during the data collection phase. Political threats, including active fighting in one of the targeted research areas, directly obstructed our ability to collect data as initially planned. Furthermore, one high school identified for the study was deemed a potential target for airstrikes, creating significant safety risks for both the researchers and participants. These factors resulted in incomplete data collection, which likely affected the comprehensiveness and validity of the research findings.

The sample size used in this study was also relatively small when compared to the total number of KECD schools (over 1,600 at the time of writing this report), reflecting the limits of our small research team of three people. We believe this limitation in sample size reduces the representativeness of the data, which led us to be more cautious in making claims that generalize or represent the entire Karen education system. To address this issue, we recommend that future research incorporate a larger and more diverse sample size to ensure representative insights.

Lastly, we observed that teachers in focus group discussions were often very mixed by their experience levels. This led to discussions where experienced teachers contributed more to answering research questions. In some groups, where there were only newer teachers present (less than 2 to 3 years of experience), it was hard to address the research questions specifically under the Domain 3: Teaching and Learning. While we attended to this limitation during our analysis, we recommend that future research group teachers by experience level to ensure that the perspective of new teachers is not overlooked.

# Findings

## 1. Emotional and Psychosocial Protection

### 1.1 Teacher strategies for emotional support provision

In focus groups with teachers, student wellbeing was identified as a first-order priority before learning can start. Several teachers described addressing this by starting class with social games and activities with active student involvement, such as singing and dancing. Teachers also shared that these activities play a role in their own social-emotional wellbeing. To quote one high school teacher living with her students in a temporary shelter:

*We now study in a hiding shelter made with tarpaulin, which has no good lighting. We can't see clearly, and sometimes we need to bring candles while learning. Looking around our situation, we feel discouraged. However, we always have to mentally encourage the students, not to give up, we also have to cheer ourselves among our teachers.*

– High school teacher, female, 30-35 years old

In one focus group, a teacher discussed how he uses dancing, singing, and storytelling to enhance student engagement and create a positive learning environment before introducing the main lesson. Once students demonstrated high levels of enthusiasm and receptiveness, the teacher would pivot quickly to the main lesson and prioritize only the key ideas of their lesson plan. In several focus groups, it was clear that teachers were being judicious about selecting what was important and what could be skipped in order to make more time for these other activities.

**Teachers as emotional first responders.** The trauma of conflict has pushed many Karen teachers to develop more intensive social-emotional support roles with their students. While interviewed teachers considered these relationships important, particularly in schools that have experienced direct attacks, they also place additional emotional burdens on already-stressed teachers. Nevertheless, teachers and administrators we interviewed increasingly view these enhanced support roles as essential for student wellbeing and retention, even as they acknowledge the absence of formal mental health resources or training for this work.

Teachers at several schools, particularly two schools that had recently been attacked, described engaging students outside the classroom as friends to support their social-emotional wellbeing. When students were not feeling well, teachers said that students felt comfortable to approach them for support, in some cases like a parent. In one school, teachers asked students before class one-on-one to share about how they are feeling. One school principal also reported being engaged in supporting students individually with social-emotional wellbeing, a role typically outside the scope for administrators.

At some schools, cultural events such as Karen New Year and Karen Wrist Tying Day, monthly music concerts, planting initiatives during the Kaw Thoo Lei planting month and sports events are also organized by teachers and the school's principal on the weekend to support student social-emotional wellbeing. A teacher trainer observed that these activities are crucial in maintaining student engagement and focus, and also helped boost teacher morale as well, which they acknowledged as a key factor in this approach. Teachers also observed that games and special events helped build teamwork both within the classroom and across the student body.

## 1.2 Teacher social-emotional wellbeing

The teachers we interviewed broadly considered their social-emotional wellbeing as a key factor in their ability to fulfill the caregiver role for their students, a sentiment more acutely expressed by teachers at schools that had recently been targeted in attacks (see High School 1 and Middle School 2 in Figure 3 on the following page). On average, teachers rated organizational support for social-emotional wellbeing as neutral (5.77 out of 9).

Teachers who received support reported experience with the Better Learning Program, a program adopted from the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) by some KECD and KTWG teacher trainers. According to KTWG records, 2,133 teachers received BLP training across 1,033 schools throughout Karen State. However, we found that most interviewed teachers relied largely on their own individual strategies to address the social-emotional needs of themselves and their students. For example, playing sports, cooking, spending time with a friend, prayer and meditation, and listening to music were all cited by different teachers as important personal coping strategies. Teachers were more likely to engage in these activities individually, and in two different focus groups, a common Karen idiom was used to describe how they balance addressing their social-emotional needs with their teaching responsibilities. Quoting one high school teacher,

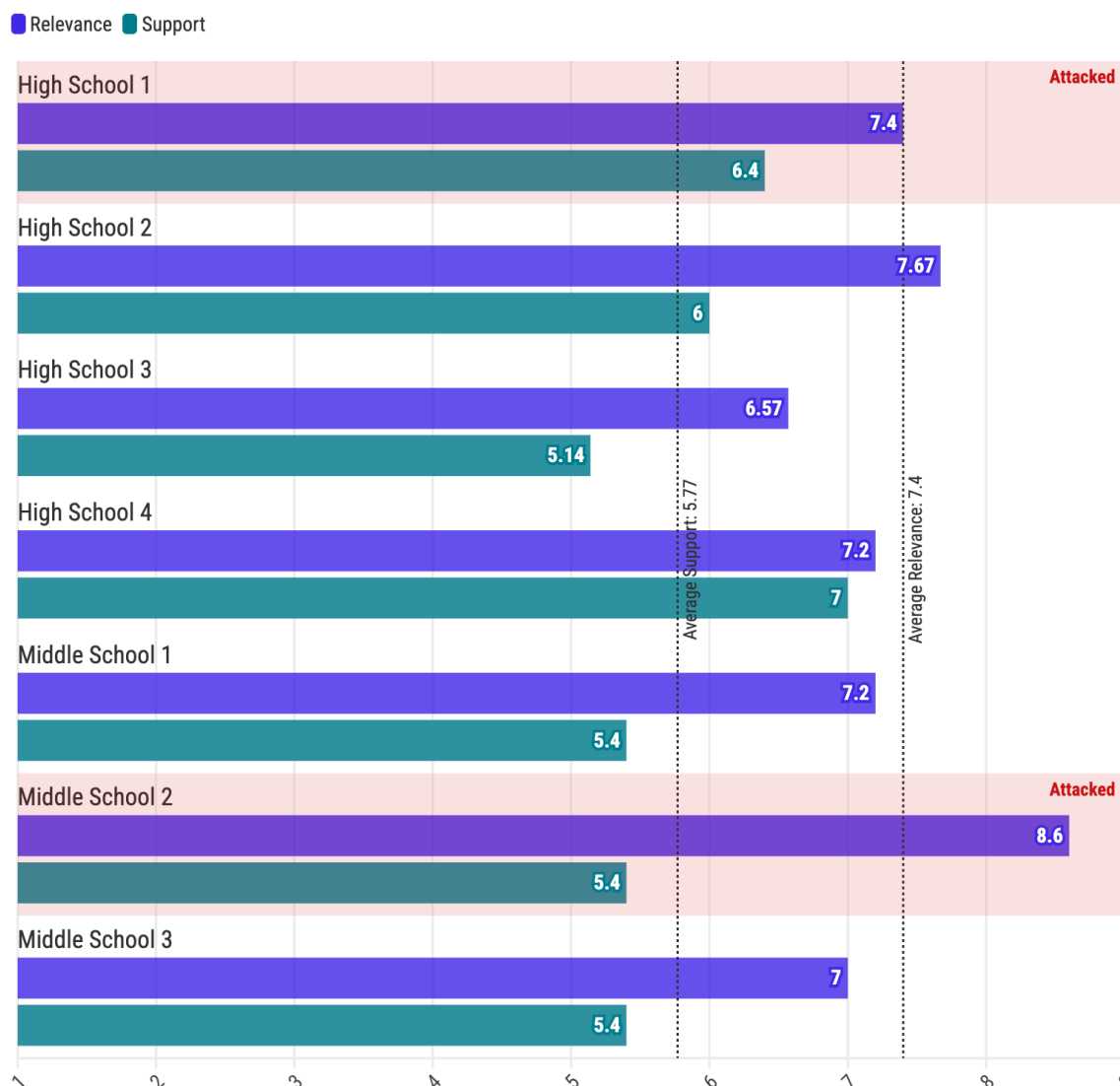
- ဖဲပဟဲတုၤကိုအဆၢကတီၢ်န့ၣ် ပဘၣ်ဟံၣ်တ့ၢ်ပနီၢ်ကစၢ်, ဟံၣ်ဖိဃီဖိတၢ်ဂ့ၢ်ကီၤဒီး ပကဘၣ်သးစၢ်ဆၢလၢ ပကိၤဖိဒီးတၢ်မၤလိအပူၤလီၤ. ဒ်တၢ်ကတိၤဒိးစံး—တံၤတုၤစရီၣ်န့ၣ်တံၤတုၤစရီၣ်လီၤ, ညးကိၣ်စရီၣ်န့ၣ်ညးကိၣ်စရီၣ်လီၤ.

*(Translation): When we arrive at school, we must leave behind our personal matters and family problems, and we must focus on our students and teaching. As the saying goes—work matters are work matters, and home matters are home matters.*

In focus group discussions with teachers, we observed teacher wellbeing to be lower than what was self-reported at one high school. This was also reflected in private interviews with the school leaders, who confided that they were struggling to find new ways to encourage and motivate teachers. Common indications of low social-emotional wellbeing, such as withdrawn social interaction and feelings of inadequacy, emerged in most conversations and focus group discussions with these teachers. This finding suggests that at some schools, there may be a normalization of poor social-emotional wellbeing among teachers.

To address this, some school leaders were organizing monthly meetings with teachers to coordinate on student progress and share about challenges in the classroom. In these meetings, school leaders said that teachers often shared about challenges related to their social-emotional health, and would receive support and encouragement from their peers. This form of peer-based group support from teacher meetings could be an effective strategy for other schools, and is considered in our recommendations section.

Figure 3. Teacher well-being by school, relevance and support



### 1.3 Teacher wellbeing as a key factor in education continuity

Throughout focus group discussions with teachers and key informant interviews with school principals, organization leaders, and teacher trainers, there was a broad consensus that teacher wellbeing plays a significant role in their commitment to teaching. They believed this has a direct effect on their performance in the classroom, how they approach teaching as a profession, and consequently, the learning outcomes and wellbeing of their students. We found it helpful to split factors affecting teacher social-emotional wellbeing into internal (personal) and external (outside their direct control) factors. Because teachers ranked these factors differently than other stakeholders, we focus our analysis on teacher experiences of wellbeing.

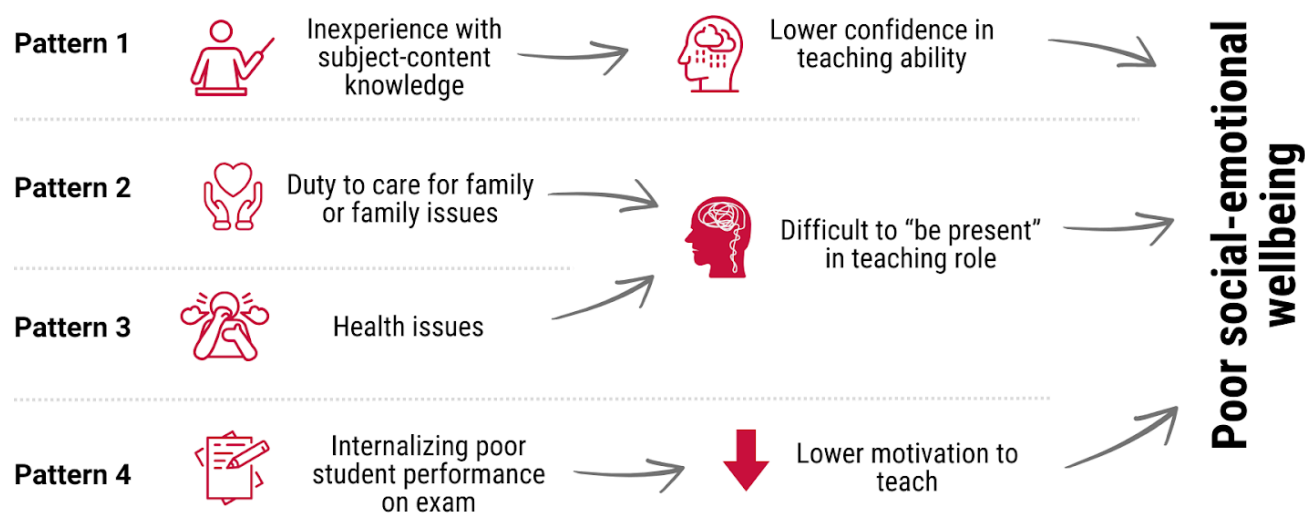
#### Internal factors

Internal factors were largely the personal, psychological, and intrinsic factors that influenced the overall wellbeing of teachers. Through focus group discussions with teachers, four main patterns emerged, which we depict in Figure 4 below. These patterns identify the primary drivers of poor teacher social-emotional wellbeing (i.e., low subject-content knowledge), which then link to secondary factors (i.e., lower confidence in teaching ability). They broadly represent the personal resources that teachers draw upon to navigate the challenges of their



profession in conflict-affected areas. We found that internal factors are believed to play a larger role in the ability of teachers to address the impact of conflict on education.

Figure 4. Patterns in Internal Factors for Teacher Social-Emotional Wellbeing



**Pattern 1:** Inexperience with subject-content knowledge. In focus group discussions, newer teachers reported a lack of experience and familiarity with subject-content knowledge as the main driver of lower confidence in their teaching ability. KECD teachers are provided subject-content training at least once per year, but for many of the newer teachers who participated in focus group discussions, these annual trainings were insufficient to build their content mastery and pedagogical confidence. They expressed the need for more frequent and in-depth subject matter training, particularly in the early years of their teaching careers when they are still developing their classroom expertise and instructional strategies. In semi-structured interviews with both mobile teacher trainers and organization leaders, it was also emphasized that teachers need more subject-content knowledge, specifically in geography, math, science, and English.

**Pattern 2:** Duty to care for family/family issues. Some teachers identified being a provider for their family or the responsibility to care for a family member as being in tension with their role as a teacher. Teachers described living away from their families, being unable to meet family needs, and balancing teaching responsibilities with caring for a young child or elderly parent as common issues. To quote one middle school teacher and a parent of a one-year-old child with a disability:

*As a parent of a young child, balancing my teaching responsibilities has become quite challenging. Without anyone at home to look after my child, I have to bring them to school with me. This adds an extra layer of difficulty to my role as a teacher.*  
– Female middle school teacher, 35–40 years old

**Pattern 3:** Health issues. In most teacher focus groups, health issues or the risk of having a health issue were identified as significant barriers to being fully present in their teacher role. "Health issues" (translated from the S'gaw Karen word, တၢ်ဆူးတၢ်ဆါ, pronounced ta hsö ta hsah) were discussed as a category and were usually unspecific, encompassing both mental and physical issues.

This vulnerability to health issues was particularly concerning for teachers working at more remote schools, where access to healthcare facilities was limited and the journey to receive medical attention was time-consuming. The resulting anxiety about potential health problems

contributes to a broader sense of professional precarity that impacts teacher motivation and commitment to their role. These findings are also reflected in a 2023 household survey conducted by the Karen Economic Committee and Secretariat, which found health expenses to be the most frequent reason for households taking out a loan and that only 34% of communities had an active health facility providing services nearby.<sup>14</sup>

**Pattern 4:** Internalizing student performance on exams. A key finding is that teachers' social-emotional wellbeing is closely tied to their self-assessment of their own teaching performance. This process of internal reflection can lead to both positive and negative outcomes. When teachers perceive their efforts as falling short of their own expectations, it impacts their sense of self-efficacy and professional identity. On the other hand, at schools that had high-performing students, it was a source of confidence and pride for teachers.


In teacher focus groups, we found that this self-evaluation process plays a significant role in shaping teachers' overall wellbeing and their relationship with the teaching profession. For example, in one focus group discussion, teachers discussed how their well-being is closely tied to student performance and achievement on exams. When students fail the board exam at a higher rate than expected, the teachers begin to question whether it's due to a lack of textbooks or their own insufficient subject knowledge, which lowers their motivation.

In contrast, teachers at one school shared that they are happy because their students achieved a high pass rate in the board exams, earning the school a prize.

*Last year, we expected our school to be included in the top student list. Unfortunately, we didn't achieve this. However, our students passed the board examination with a higher percentage rate, and because of this, we received appreciation from the KECD. – High school teacher, female, 30-35 years old*

### External factors for teachers

External factors are conditions, situations, or influences that originate outside of the individual teacher and are largely beyond their direct control. In focus group discussions,



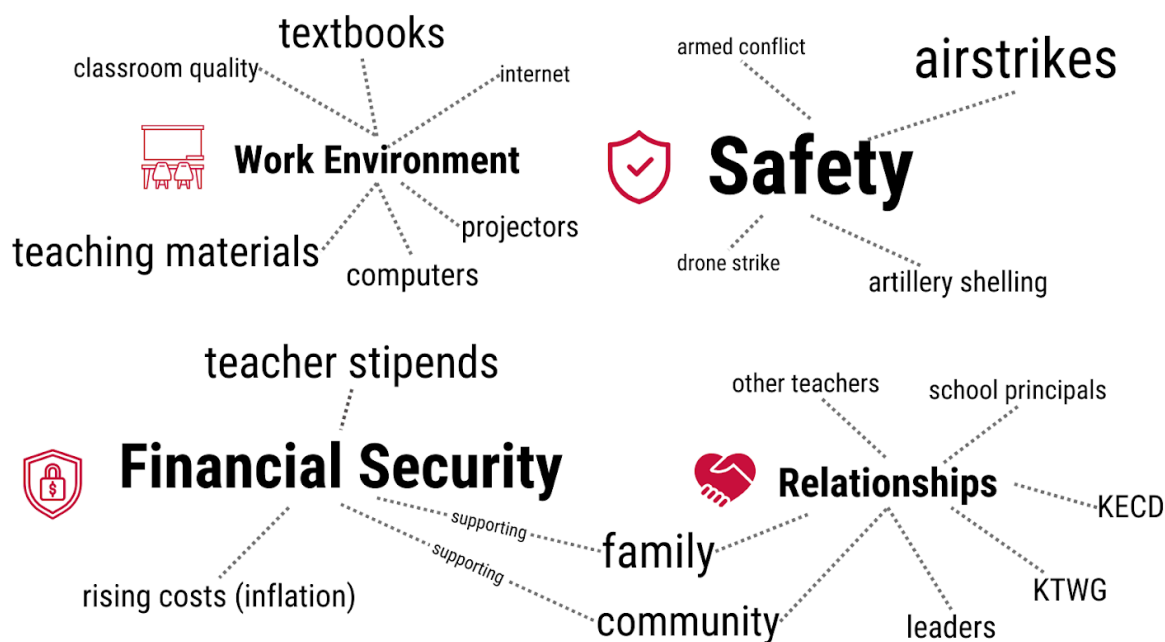
*A primary school temporarily relocated in a 'hiding shelter' in the jungle. During the rainy season, classrooms have high moisture, causing damage to teaching and learning materials.*



these factors were often discussed in relation to larger topics, depicted below in Figure 5. The size of the text depicts the relative level of importance of other external factors. We characterize all schools visited in this research as being inside or near active conflict areas, which may affect the relationships between different external factors.

Figure 5. Relationships of External Factors to Teacher Social-Emotional Wellbeing

Teachers discussed the following themes, ranked in order from most to least important, in relation to their social-emotional wellbeing:



1. **Safety.** For safety, airstrikes were perceived as the main consideration and threat for teachers, followed by the risk of a drone attack, breakout of armed conflict near their school, and artillery shelling. Safety risks were discussed as a source of stress, anxiety, and fatigue, which were directly connected to teacher wellbeing by most focus groups. To quote one middle school teacher:

*I am constantly worried about the possibility of airstrikes and bombings, which significantly impact my mental health. The anxiety makes it challenging to focus on teaching the children effectively. Also, there is the fear of being blamed by the parents if something were to happen. [...] The need to stay alert and in constant communication with local leaders about the safety situation means I cannot fully dedicate my time to creating effective lesson plans for my subjects.*

At a school that had recently suffered an attack, one teacher discussed the daily sense of precarity in their work:

*When coming to school, our primary concern is safety. Unfortunately, there's not much we can do about it. The military junta has started targeting schools, dropping bombs from airplanes. This situation has made it extremely challenging to ensure the security of both students and teachers.*

In a 2023 report published by the Karen Education System Strengthening unit, airstrikes and conflict near schools were a significant challenge for both students and teachers.<sup>15</sup> Local

<sup>15</sup> KESS. "Karen Education in Myanmar: Challenges, Responses, and Resilience 2020-2022".

responses involve placing security restrictions on communities, such as a restriction on the use of lights in the evening and prevention of all non-essential gatherings during the daytime, which regularly disrupted learning for students near conflict areas. Community leaders may also ask schools to close down for extended periods of time, and to continue classes, teachers will organize classes in the forest, usually under a tarpaulin and bamboo structure. These challenges are still present and were reported in all teacher focus groups and interviews with school leaders.

**2. Financial security (teacher stipend).** Every group of teachers interviewed discussed rising costs and growing financial insecurity as major concerns in their everyday lives. Rapid increases in the costs of basic household items, food, and travel contributed to a growing sense of financial insecurity among teachers. This factor was discussed as only slightly less significant than safety in their overall social-emotional wellbeing and was closely connected to factors such as the duty to care for family. Concluding one focus group, a high school teacher expressed the following:

*We are having difficulties with our teaching position because we are only paid a stipend and no salary, which is insufficient to meet our family's basic needs. [...] We need an income. If we worked somewhere else, we could earn a million kyat per month, and in order to keep our good health, we must be able to afford decent food. Yet, out of love for teaching and my community, I remain committed to serving as a teacher." – Male high school teacher, 35–40 years old*

One middle school teacher highlighted the importance of material support from their school:

*The school supports me by providing necessary items for my child, such as formula milk, food, and essential medicines. This support has been so helpful in allowing me to continue teaching despite the challenges. – Female middle school teacher, 25–30 years old*

**3. Relationships with community, colleagues, and leadership.** Relationships with parents in the community were found to be critical factors in teacher wellbeing. Teachers discussed how when parents from the community contributed to the school in small ways, it made them feel supported and recognized. Mobile teacher trainers also recognized the importance of parents in the community in welcoming new teachers and helping them feel settled.

Relationships with local leaders ("leaders" in Figure 5) were also discussed as an important source of motivation among teachers. These leaders serve as vital communication channels for safety information and provide essential community-level support that bolsters teacher motivation. The data suggests that strong leadership relationships create a protective framework that allows teachers to focus on their educational duties with greater confidence.

**4. Work environment.** The work environment was discussed as the reality of the school's infrastructure and classroom setting. It included teaching and learning materials, such as textbooks, teacher resources, teaching props, chairs and desks, toilets, etc. Teaching materials and student textbooks were most often cited as key issues that directly impacted teacher motivation and wellbeing. Reported shortages of textbooks specifically resulted in the most stress, especially close to exam time, when students spent more time copying lessons than studying. Teachers reported that their lesson plans would often be delayed because students had to spend so much time copying lessons. To quote one Myanmar subject teacher whose school had recently been attacked in an airstrike:

*We try to keep the textbooks in good condition. However, due to security reasons, we have to move from one place to another, and for that reason, some books are lost and some destroyed. However, I feel that having enough textbooks in all subjects is*

*one of the most important factors for my ability to teach. That affects my motivation too. – Female high school teacher, 25–30 years old*

Teacher trainers (including mobile teacher trainers and subject trainers) expressed the importance of physical and mental health for teachers, which allow them to connect with students, plan lessons well, and create a positive learning environment. However, they noted that if teachers face health problems or personal challenges, it can make teaching harder and lead to poorer learning outcomes. They considered a teacher's well-being to affect their energy, enthusiasm, and overall performance, which directly influences students' learning. They noted that in areas affected by conflict, extra stress can make it even more difficult for teachers to do their jobs, so it's important to focus on teachers' well-being to keep the education system strong.

School principals also acknowledged that teacher well-being is an important factor in their motivation and success in the classroom. To quote one middle school principal:

*Teachers' well-being and happiness play a crucial role in their engagement and effectiveness in the classroom. When teachers are mentally healthy and content, they are more likely to be dedicated, energetic, more patient, give more time and opportunities for students, and enthusiastic in their teaching, which in turn motivates them to work diligently to help students' overall development.*

Some school principals noted that while teacher well-being is related to the happiness of the teachers, that happiness doesn't happen without intentional support. For these principals, when teachers feel content, supported, appreciated, and recognized in their roles, they are likely to feel happiness. They believed this was key to helping teachers become more dedicated, energetic, and patient, which then creates a more positive classroom environment.

One high school principal expanded on teacher wellbeing to include the need to ensure that teachers can meet their basic social needs, including a sense of belonging, personal attachments, intellectual and physical stimulation, and a sense of feeling valued. To quote:

*Well-being alone is not sufficient; teachers must also have a genuine interest in their job. If teachers do not enjoy their work or feel that it aligns with their personal goals and values, they may struggle to stay motivated, regardless of their physical health. Personal issues, such as family conflicts, can also impact a teacher's ability to perform well. In conflict-affected areas, like ours, teachers may face additional stress from the political environment. Despite these challenges, it is important for teachers to remain encouraged and committed to providing education, because they are so important in sustaining the educational system for the Karen community.*

## 2. Physical Protection

Before discussing findings under this analytical domain, we believe it is important to note that safety and security emerged as a foundational concern across all research sites. As one organizational leader emphasized: "Right now, ensuring safety is our top priority. Without a secure environment, it is difficult to address other concerns such as maintaining teachers' commitment or meeting educational requirements. Safety must come first to create a foundation. After that, we can build and work towards fulfilling the education needs." The intensification of conflict has made physical safety a prerequisite for addressing other educational challenges for many schools, and reflects the difficult decisions school leaders must make between prioritizing emergent needs and building towards more long-term goals.

## 2.1 Teacher perceptions of safety and emergency protocols

In Figure 6 (below), teachers across all schools felt that safety and support as a teacher competency was highly relevant to their context, rating relevancy at 7.5 out of 9 on average. In contrast, teachers felt they needed more support in this competency, indicating a 5.3 and 4 for high school and middle school teachers respectively. We interpret this data to mean that teachers recognize the importance of safety and emergency procedures in their conflict-affected environment, but feel inadequately prepared or supported to fully implement these measures.

This was supported in teacher focus groups. To quote one middle school teacher:

*We need skills for coping with conflict situations. When students suddenly face an airstrike or hear the sound of one, some students experience a deep fear—they start shaking and trembling, they want to pee, they can get very unfocused and start running around. We need skills to help manage these situations. Teachers must have knowledge of safety protocols and emergency response plans to protect students and themselves during active conflict.*

Teachers want more training about safety procedures. Teachers identified managing student behavior during active emergencies as the most significant challenge for them with respect to physical security. Middle school teachers were more likely to identify student behavior as a key challenge (see Figure 6, below). Teachers from these focus groups discussed support not in the context of organizational support, but in their own ability to support students during a security incident or attack on the school. School leaders also see the ability of teachers to manage student behavior during security incidents as a key teacher competency. To quote one school leader,

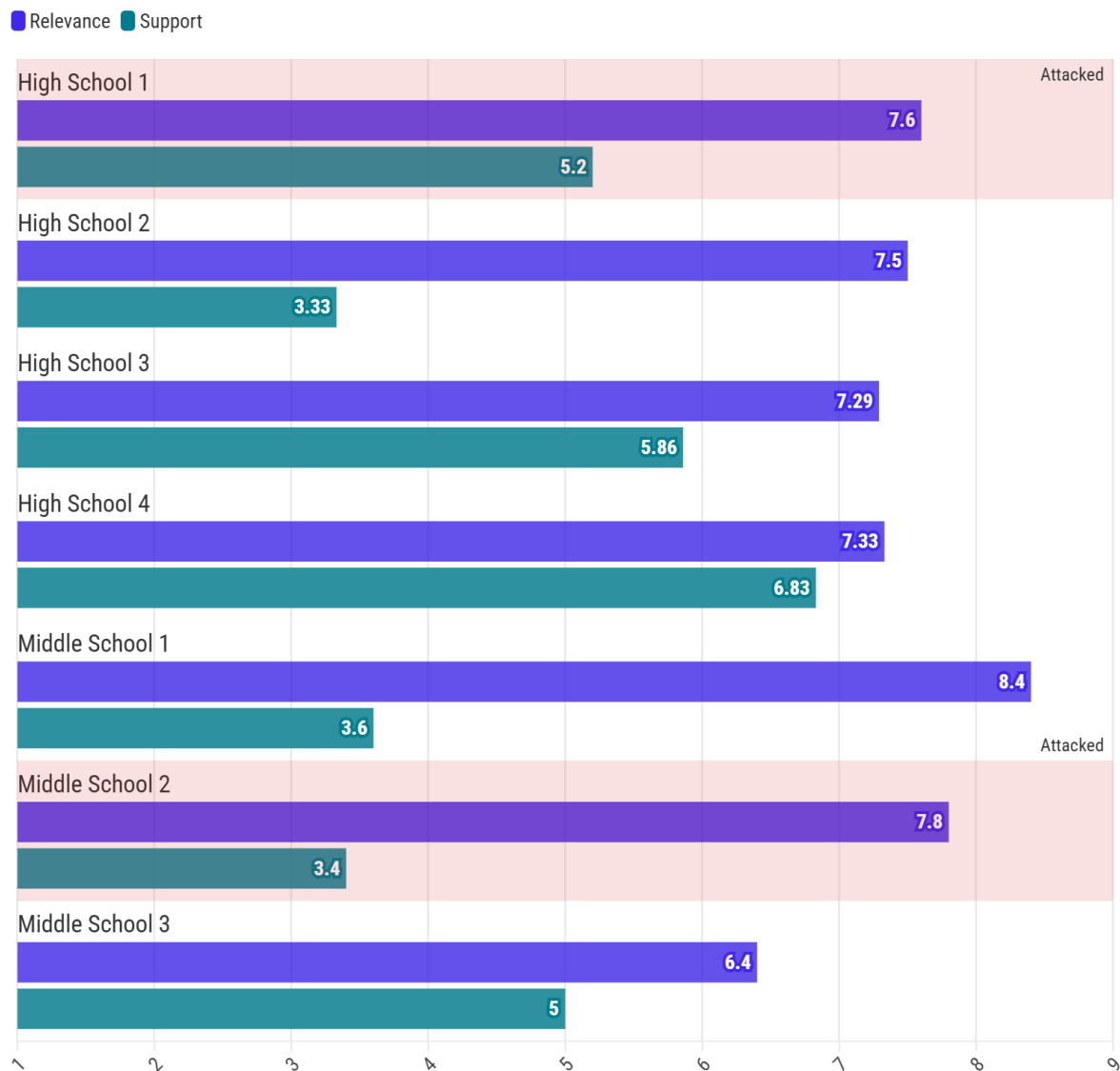
*Teachers must have knowledge of safety protocols and emergency response plans to protect students and themselves during conflict situations. However, strong emotional resilience is also necessary to cope with that stress and the challenges of teaching in a conflict area.*

All teachers, but especially middle school teachers, expressed a desire for more training about safety procedures and more communication from local officials and authorities.



However, there is also evidence that school leadership can play a key role in attenuating teacher concerns about security. High School 1 stands out as an example where, despite a recent attack, teachers still felt they were able to support safety and emergency procedures compared to other groups of teachers. This is discussed further in the next section, 2.2.

Figure 6. Teacher Perceptions on Safety and Emergency Procedures, Survey Data



## 2.2 Teacher and school decision-making during security threats

Proactive school leadership is crucial for effective emergency protocols. At High School 1 in Figure 6, a school principal played a proactive role in supporting teacher competency in safety and security during an attack on the school. The principal's ability to communicate and put into practice emergency protocols had a clear effect on both teacher and student wellbeing, which was observed in both focus group discussions with teachers and in classroom observations.

The school principal was informed by local authorities to prepare in case of an attack, as they believed the school could become a target. The high school had over 200 students attending on a regular basis, with most students coming from very remote communities and boarding at one of the school's dormitories or in a nearby community. In response, the school principal held a meeting with all teachers and school staff to develop a safety plan. Together, they



decided that each teacher would be assigned to a specific grade. For example, a 9th grade teacher would be responsible for preparing all Grade 9 students for a possible attack and guiding them through the security protocols. Along with teachers, the school principal developed a comprehensive protocol that included:

1. Arranging alternative shelters for students based on their grade levels.
2. Implementing a dispersal strategy for overnight stays, with students sleeping in different locations to avoid concentration during potential attacks.
3. Establishing clear communication channels, including the use of handheld transceivers, to maintain contact with local authorities.

During the night of the attack, the school was struck by airstrikes three times in quick succession. The damage could have been devastating given the large student population residing on the school campus. However, because the attack was anticipated by local authorities who were then able to quickly relay information to the school principal, the school was able to implement the security protocol before the airstrikes occurred. The teachers and students were able to follow the planned protocols, and as a result, no students or teachers were harmed in the attack despite the large assembly hall being completely destroyed, and two dormitories and a classroom sustaining significant damage.

### 2.3 Role of teacher and school networks on security

Individual teacher networks play an important role in supporting emergency protocols. One former school principal, now working as a school teacher at High School 4, maintained a network with relevant local authority groups, monastic organizations, and community leaders. Acting as a conduit for sharing information with his school through his own personal network, the teacher played an active role in helping the school navigate uncertainty about safety and security. We believe this is the reason teachers at High School 4 in Figure 6 indicate that they feel much more supported on the safety and emergency protocols teacher competency compared to other schools.

Community perspective on school leadership. We observed that the community's perception of school leadership plays an important role in their willingness to collaborate with teachers when there is a safety concern to address. For example, one community played an active role in building a temporary shelter area in a forest for a middle school. The school leadership was perceived as strong, and parents were more willing to work with the teachers and school principal to build a good shelter.

Teachers may also play an important role in ensuring communities continue to prioritize education in protracted conflict and security risk. One teacher trainer observed the following:

*In times of conflict, a teacher should be aware of the emergency schedule for the safety of the children and have a thorough understanding of the local context. In the area, there are so many groups with different views. Some local community members might prioritize other concerns over education. Therefore, teachers should have the skills to build partnerships with local leaders and the students' parents to raise awareness about the importance of education.*

Teacher trainers who had recently visited schools that had been attacked believed teachers needed specific training in first aid and emergency response to prepare them for sudden air strikes and natural disasters. They also believed more leadership skills for school leaders could make a difference in teacher and student wellbeing, and several also suggested expanding the Better Learning Program to more of these schools in or near conflict areas.

## 3. Teaching and Learning

### 3.1 The challenge of displacement and multilingual classrooms

The impact of displacement on Karen schools has created a cascade of interconnected challenges centered around language barriers. At the classroom level, teachers face immediate practical difficulties in delivering lessons across multiple languages. As one school principal describes:

*Some teachers face challenges in explaining subjects to students who only understand Burmese, because they might not be proficient in Burmese themselves. So this language barrier can cause delays in the students' understanding and progress. Also, students who are not confident in speaking Karen might hesitate to ask questions, and that also slows their learning.*

This challenge is compounded by resource limitations at the school level, where schools must develop new strategies to support students as they transition to the language of instruction (S'gaw Karen) without translated teaching materials or multi-lingual teachers. One teacher described their school's approach to creating supplementary language classes on weekends to help students who were challenged by instruction in Karen:

*In our situation, we face a unique challenge as a consequence of the ongoing conflict in nearby urban areas. Families are fleeing from those areas and seeking refuge with us, and among them are Karen children who struggle with the Karen language, but also many Burmese children. Both these students were actually learning in Burmese their whole lives, and now they have to adapt to learning in Karen. So this language barrier makes it very difficult for them. We have been trying to address this with the school committee and parents by making special Karen language classes on Saturdays. This has been effective so far, and we see some good progress in the children's language skills after only a month of attending these classes.*

While the above approach demonstrates communities and schools working together to overcome language barriers, this practice was only observed in schools near the Thai-Myanmar border. These border communities historically have greater linguistic diversity, with teachers often speaking multiple languages including Burmese. This existing multilingual capacity appears to make these schools better equipped to accommodate increased enrollment from displaced students with diverse language backgrounds.

The challenge extends beyond individual classrooms to the broader support system for teachers. Mobile teacher trainers characterized these language barriers as being widespread in focus group discussions. As one trainer explains:

*During these years, many students come from Burmese-speaking areas. They belong to many different ethnic groups and struggle to communicate in our Karen languages. Because of that, teachers must use many different techniques to support students who speak different languages to help them understand the lessons and engage with their classmates. Therefore, teachers need training in language skills and teaching methods that are relevant to the students' requirements.*

Teachers serving at schools deeper in Karen State express needs centered on deeper curriculum content knowledge and more frequent and longer-duration in-service training opportunities to effectively deliver the Karen curriculum. While these teachers are also

confronting multilingual challenges, they prioritize and adapt to multilingual classrooms differently. Due to a combination of security challenges and the remoteness of many communities, schools are smaller in these areas, and classrooms are mixed not just linguistically, but equally or even more so by grade- and ability-levels. Teachers in these communities confront isolation, and closer geography to the conflict, which act as significant push factors out of the teaching profession over time.

Teacher trainers expressed difficulty in meeting these diverse needs, as most MTTs will visit both remote and urban schools in their post. In interviews, MTTs advocated for both enhanced subject matter expertise—particularly for advanced curriculum topics in high school—and strategies for delivering training effectively across language barriers. Several MTTs specifically requested teacher training modules be developed in Burmese, as they currently only exist in Karen and English.

### 3.2 Teacher support needs in the classroom

Analysis of interview data revealed the most pressing needs for teachers in the classroom to include access to adequate teaching materials. Teacher trainers also often emphasized the need for grade-specific textbooks rather than the current practice of using combined textbooks across multiple grades, referring to the 'key stage 1' system currently in practice for Burmese subjects. To quote one teacher trainer referring to the Burmese subject curriculum:

*In my opinion, teachers need grade-specific textbooks, as the current practice of combining textbooks for multiple grades, like combining Grades 1 to 3, can lead to confusion in teaching.*

Two organization leaders also point to a gap in current resource allocation at the secondary level, where teachers require more advanced materials and practical tools to support content delivery in science and mathematics. To quote one organization leader:

*One key support that we are currently missing is access to teaching aids for science. Effective science teaching requires practical demonstrations and hands-on activities, which are not possible with only theoretical explanations. To improve teaching effectiveness, we need to invest in those teaching aids and practical resources.*

In addition, both mobile and subject teacher trainers observed that teachers broadly require more training in both subject-specific content and pedagogical approaches. For teacher trainers, the consensus was that a focus on increasing teacher subject matter expertise in the long term would do the most to improve teachers' effectiveness and ability to maintain student engagement. However, trainers also believed more focus on developing teacher pedagogical approaches was needed to improve instructional strategies and classroom management skills in the near term.

For schools that have experienced displacement by the conflict and were using temporary shelters or hiding areas as classrooms, teacher trainers also identified basic classroom materials and health supplies as key needs. At these schools, teachers must often serve as both educators and basic healthcare providers for their students. As one teacher trainer emphasized:

*[In shelters or hiding places], there are many needs to support the teachers, such as providing notebooks, pencils, pens, and teacher guide books. But also medicines are highly needed for health issues, like paracetamol and mosquito spray. Despite facing many challenges, we see the teachers trying hard and staying strong.*



### 3.3 Teacher innovation and adaptation

In this section, we focus on best practices that emerged from classroom observation, focus group discussions with teachers, and interviews with mobile teacher trainers. Mobile teacher trainers often provided examples from schools outside of our target research areas, but which were similar to schools selected for this research.

**Sensory-based activities.** One adaptation observed across several Karen schools was the innovative use of sensory-based learning activities. While these approaches emerged partly from necessity due to textbook shortages, teachers deliberately choose these methods based on their observed effectiveness in student engagement and comprehension. Teachers acknowledged however that relying on locally-sourced materials isn't ideal for all learning objectives, and still cited shortages in textbooks and teaching aids as a significant challenge. Mobile teacher trainers report that these activities have become particularly important in schools affected by displacement, where traditional teaching materials are often left behind during evacuations.

At one school, teachers used what they called “five senses” activities, which began with the teacher asking students to collect objects from outside that contributed to the lesson. One common example was the use of stones and bamboo sticks for math exercises, such as practicing addition, subtraction, multiplication, and long division (see photo, right, below). In another example, high school students collected different plants and leaves and were then encouraged to ask questions about why they had certain attributes. Plants with strong smells, for example, led to discussions about chemical defenses in nature and how plants adapt to their environments (see photo, left, below).

**Structured language rotation.** Language instruction remains one of the most challenging aspects of teaching in Karen schools due to the increasing linguistic diversity of students displaced by conflict. Teachers have developed various approaches to multilingual education, often making difficult choices between maintaining Karen as the primary language of instruction and ensuring all students can access the curriculum.

One approach that has emerged in some schools is structured language rotation, where the language of instruction is changed at regular time intervals (e.g., altering between S'gaw Karen and Burmese each week). Teachers recognize this method requires substantial time investment and may slow overall curriculum coverage. Teacher leaders also acknowledged limitations in teachers' abilities to teach in multiple languages as a reason this practice isn't more common.



High school teachers at one school rotated between Karen, Myanmar, and English on a weekly basis. Students were instructed to only use that language in class for that week, even outside of class. Teachers believed this was helpful for increasing student confidence in using L2 (Burmese in this case) and L3 (English) languages. A mobile teacher trainer, commenting on seeing structured language rotation implemented at a different school, noted that it seemed to increase student engagement and helped them understand subject-content better. We noted that the success of structured language rotation seemed linked to strong enforcement of the practice by the school leadership.

*Peer-based translation of key lessons.* The challenge of making key lessons accessible in multiple languages while maintaining academic rigor was discussed as a common issue for Karen schools. Some teachers have responded by developing peer-based translation strategies, where students are tasked with presenting the main lesson objectives to their peers after the teacher has given the lesson in a shared language in a different target language. This strategy appeared most common in secondary subjects where both language and content complexity pose significant challenges for teachers with linguistically diverse classrooms. While these approaches can extend lesson duration and may not capture all content nuances, teachers view them as necessary compromises that serve multiple purposes: content delivery, language practice, and peer relationship building.

At one high school where this strategy was observed, students came from four different linguistic backgrounds, speaking a combination of S'gaw Karen, Burmese, Rakhine, and Pwo Karen as their L1 language. A geography teacher addressed this by teaching in a shared L3 language (English) the main concepts of his lessons. This was also the language of the textbook that he was using for this class. He would then ask students to share those main concepts in their L1 language to the entire class, making sure to call on boys and girls equally. Each L1 language present in the classroom would take a turn presenting the main lesson to other students, which allowed the teacher to also check for comprehension and give feedback. Key to the success of this approach was the teacher's ability to speak multiple languages themselves.



*A school leader teaches a geography class at his secondary school. School leaders typically take up teaching responsibilities throughout the academic year, teaching up to two or three classes at a time.*



*Pairing students to address individual learning challenges.* The difficulty of supporting students with diverse needs in Karen schools has become more acute as conflict-related injuries increase and displaced students arrive with unmet medical needs. Without access to specialized equipment, training, or support staff, teachers have turned to peer-based accommodation strategies. Teachers viewed these approaches not as substitutes for proper disability support, but as necessary given the situation at their school.

In one school, teachers had paired a student with a hearing impairment with another student at a shared desk, who assisted by sharing written notes to help the students follow the teacher's lectures and activities throughout the class by sharing their written notes. At several other schools, teachers had identified students who needed prescription glasses and placed them at the front of the class, again pairing them with other students who could share written notes if needed. In a more severe case, a student had recently lost one of their legs after stepping on a landmine. A teacher we observed played an active role in organizing other students to support this student to help meet their mobility needs during and after classes.

*Identifying the support needs of students outside of class.* Teachers in Karen schools increasingly find themselves extending their roles beyond the classroom to address students' basic needs, particularly for those displaced or separated from families due to conflict. While this expansion of responsibilities raises concerns about sustainable workloads and professional boundaries, teachers expressed that they view these support activities as essential to preventing dropout.

At one school, we observed how a former principal exemplified this expanded support role. Serving as a regular teacher at a school near an active conflict area, he lived with the school's boarding students in a separate room at the school dormitory while his family resided in a temporary shelter in Thailand. This allowed him to learn each of the students' backgrounds and identify socio-emotional and health needs of his students. His experience and connections with the Karen diaspora in Thailand enabled him to channel support to his students, all of whom were facing significant financial hardship and were at risk of dropping out of school. The case demonstrates how teachers' social capital and experience can be significant factors in maintaining educational access in crisis settings.

### 3.4 Teacher evaluation against Karen teacher competency standards

The Karen education system calls for teacher competency assessment through a standardized classroom observation tool, called the Karen Teacher Competency Framework (KTCF) Classroom Observation Form, shared in Appendix 1. This tool evaluates teachers of all grade levels against five teacher competency domains:

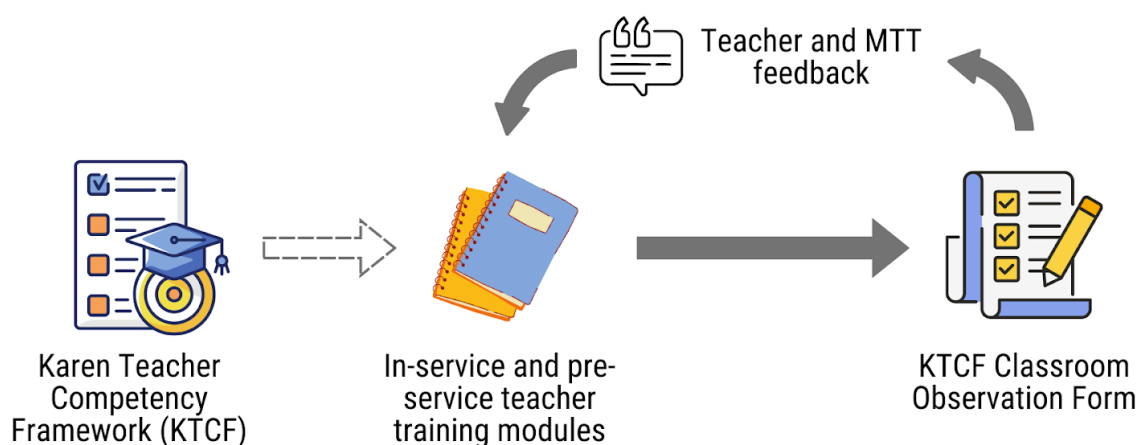
- Domain 1. Know your students and support their development
- Domain 2. Know how to teach
- Domain 3. Know what to teach
- Domain 4. Professional value and dispositions
- Domain 5. Lesson planning

These domains are derived from the in-service teacher development modules used in summer vacation training (SVT) and pre-service curriculum used at Karen Teacher Training Colleges (KTTCs). As discussed in greater detail in our background section, SVTs are intensive teacher development workshops conducted during school breaks by mobile teacher trainers (MTTs) and subject trainers. SVT duration has historically varied based on three factors: security conditions, logistical constraints, and available funding. In 2023 and 2024, these workshops ran for only two weeks, whereas before the 2021 coup attempt, SVTs typically lasted three to four weeks.

According to organizational leaders involved in planning SVTs, while security and logistical considerations were factors in the overall reduction of in-service TPD, the primary constraint has been funding.

MTTs are designated as the main evaluators of teacher alignment with the KTCF, primarily through classroom observation. School principals may conduct observations throughout the school year, adding an extra layer of oversight and feedback, though this varies with school capacity. Classroom observations also serve as a conduit for teachers and school leaders to provide KECD and KTWG with qualitative feedback on teacher support needs. This data and feedback is then integrated into teacher development work plans at both KECD and KTWG through an internal reporting structure that is empowered to create recommendations independent of organization leadership. Thus, while the KTCF serves as a foundation for developing in-service and pre-service teacher training curricula, TPD within the Karen education system is constantly evolving to prioritize emergent needs. We depict this cycle below in Figure 7.

Figure 7. Development of the KTCF Classroom Observation Form



In key informant interviews within this internal reporting structure, several trends have emerged in the past few years. Due to the more limited time window for SVTs, teacher trainers have narrowed the focus of the content that is covered to align only with the most requested modules. Since the coup attempt, this resulted in a focus on supporting teacher wellbeing and morale. This contrasts with a focus on literacy and numeracy in the years leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic and coup attempt. For example, in the 2017-2018 academic year, SVTs included an intensive TPD module called "Literacy and Numeracy Boost 2.0," which was developed to respond to low literacy and numeracy scores on early-grade reading and numeracy assessments.

Because of this evolution, the classroom observation form used for teacher evaluation now assesses a different set of domains than those in the original KTCF. The KTCF itself contains six high-level domains designed to apply across all grade levels:

- Domain 1. Know your students and support their development
- Domain 2. *Know how to teach (teaching and learning pedagogy)\**
- Domain 3. *Knowing what to teach (subject and curriculum)\**
- Domain 4. *The professional values and dispositions of a Karen teacher\**
- Domain 5. Building partnerships with parents and the community
- Domain 6. A commitment to professional growth and development

Only Domains 2-4 are covered in the current classroom observation form (emphasis



added\*). Even within these three domains, SVTs are not able to comprehensively cover the curricula outlined by the KTCF.

To quote one district education officer on how the framework is viewed at his office:

*In our experience, the framework has been beneficial in setting clear standards and expectations for teacher performance. It provides a solid foundation for teacher improvement and helps maintain consistency in teaching practices. However, we also recognize that the framework should not be static. As the situation in our classrooms changes and new teaching methods emerge, we should be open to updating the framework. – District Education Officer, male, 30-35 years old*

The view that the KTCF should evolve with the current context was shared by organization leaders, school principals, and MTTs.

### **Role of Mobile Teacher Trainer ( MTTs) in teacher evaluation**

In 2023, MTTs evaluated 1,413 teachers out of approximately 9,512 teachers in the Karen education system. MTTs primarily conduct classroom observations for teachers who have completed SVTs. For teachers who receive these assessments, the system functions as intended, providing valuable feedback on their performance.

One issue that occasionally emerges for new SVT participants is that they may be evaluated across all domains of the classroom observation form, even though any single SVT typically covers only one or two domains fully. Prior to the coup attempt, it could take teachers several SVT cycles to cover all of the teacher competency domains in the classroom observation form. This evaluation can catch new teachers off guard in areas not covered by their recent training, and was perceived by MTTs to contribute to teacher turnover of newer teachers. This situation contributes to a sense that expectations are too high for new teachers. As one MTT noted,

*I observed that some teachers have not received training on all the tools; they've only been trained on a few. For example, a teacher might only learn a few basic teaching strategies, so during observation, we might notice that they excel in classroom management, but other areas may not meet the expectations of the framework. Teachers tend to do well with the tools they've been trained on, but struggle with those they haven't.*

### **Role of school principals in teacher evaluation**

School principals demonstrate different approaches to maintaining teacher quality that were largely outside the formal evaluation system. Half (4 out of 8) school principals that were interviewed focused primarily on foundational aspects of teacher performance. For example, one principal viewed that "vocal projection and self-confidence" was a key indicator of teacher effectiveness. Others adopt a more structured approach, implementing regular meetings with senior staff to identify areas where teachers need additional support in meeting competency standards. However, these are typically not based on either the KTCF or the classroom observation tool.

The variation in approaches shows the different challenges schools face in maintaining and building teaching quality. Many school principals are focused on retention and motivation, encouraging teachers to "not give up" and emphasizing their community impact. Others are able to implement more systematic quality assurance through regular assessment and feedback sessions. This suggests that the current teacher competency framework might benefit from adjustments that account for these different institutional contexts, allowing principals to address immediate stability needs while working toward longer-term quality improvements.

### Role of teachers in teacher evaluation

Some teachers are taking proactive steps to fill evaluation gaps. They seek feedback through alternative channels, including peer observations and assessments from school principals. As one newer teacher explained,

*Occasionally, I ask my fellow teachers to evaluate how I teach and to tell me what needs improvement. I also ask the headmaster to observe my teaching and provide feedback and suggestions. Overall, I believe my teaching methods are in the right direction for the students.*

Student feedback is also used, though this feedback is not explicitly aligned with KTCF standards. As another teacher noted,

*We ask for feedback from students, asking them to write about their experiences and suggest improvements. We also consider their requests for explanations in Burmese, although it can be challenging due to language limitations, and I am working on speaking more clearly and loudly in my class.*

## 3.5 Teacher alignment with competency frameworks

Current data from KTWG shows that approximately half of teachers meet expected competency levels and are similar to pre-disruption achievement rates. Figures 8 and 9 present a detailed breakdown of “achievers” (those who meet the competency level) and “non-achievers” across each domain of the classroom observation tool, providing a quantitative snapshot of current teacher alignment with competency standards.

Figure 8. Teacher alignment with Classroom Observation Target Domains, 2023-2024 Academic Year

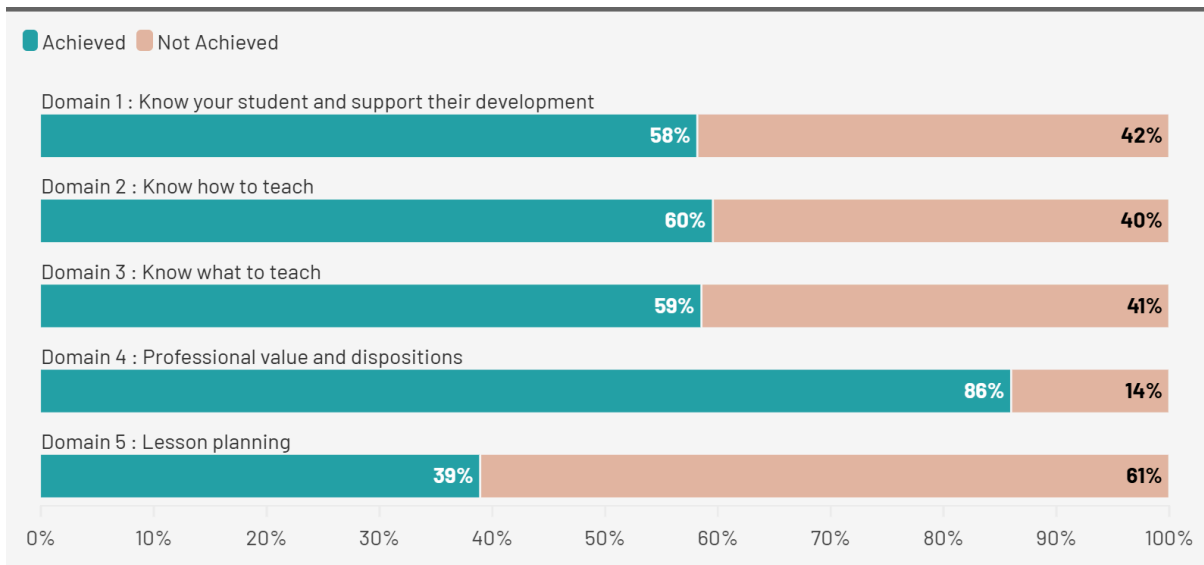
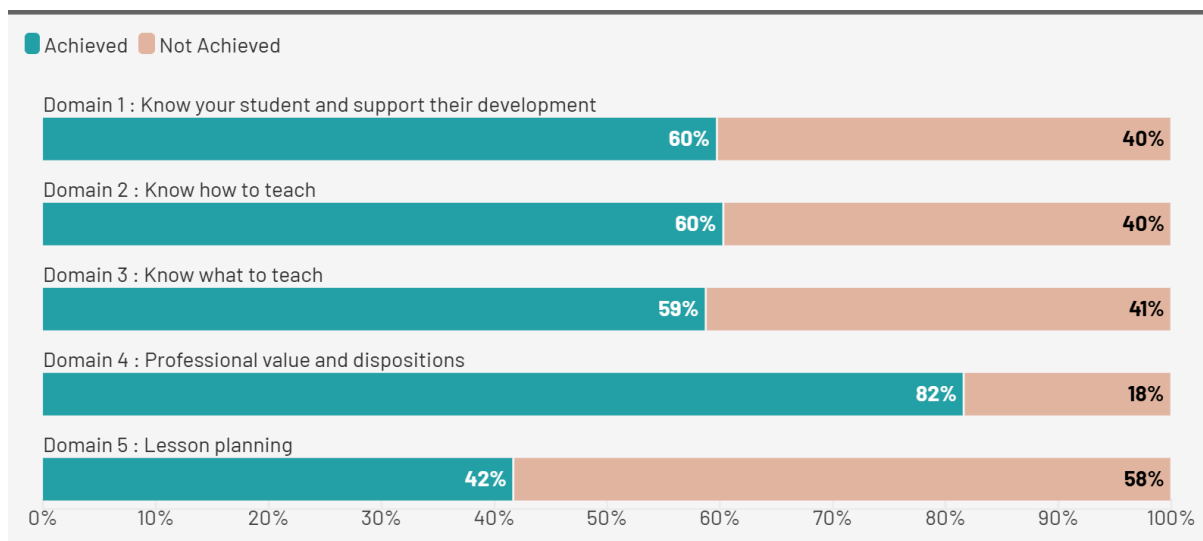
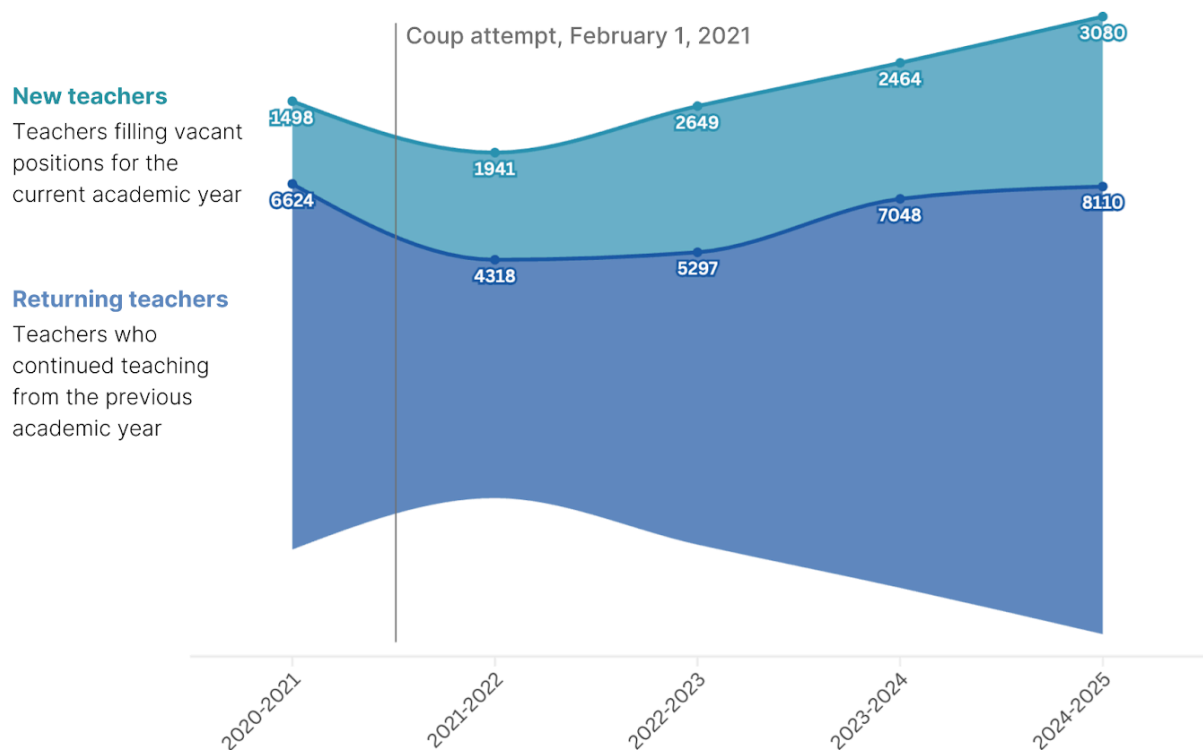


Figure 9. Teacher alignment with Classroom Observation Target Domains, 2024-2025 Academic Year



Analysis of classroom observation data from the 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 academic years reveals consistent patterns in teacher competencies across the five domains of the KTCF. Professional values and dispositions (Domain 4) stands out as the strongest area, with 82-86% of teachers meeting standards. Core pedagogical competencies in teaching methods (Domain 2) and subject knowledge (Domain 3) show stability at around 60% achievement. However, lesson planning (Domain 5) emerges as a persistent challenge, with only about 40% of teachers meeting competency standards. Student support and development (Domain 1) achievement rates hover around 60%, suggesting moderate capability in this foundational area. Patterns in Domains 1 through 3 largely reflect the proportion of new and returning teachers (see Figure 10, below).

Figure 10. Proportion of New and Returning Teachers, 2021-2025



### Challenges in maintaining commitment to teacher competency frameworks

The relationship between teacher compensation and competency development remains a key challenge. Teachers who remain in the system often do so out of deep commitment to their communities, but must frequently seek additional income sources or take on greater household responsibilities to sustain themselves and their families. This reality limits the time available for professional development and full engagement with competency framework requirements outside of SVTs.

Another challenge is a lack of comprehensive teacher support. As one principal observed, this support would ideally include "regular training and workshops... counseling services and stress management programs... and access to essential teaching materials," but resource constraints currently prevent the implementation of such holistic support systems. Furthermore, as more teachers continue to be added to the Karen education system each year, the resources that are available are stretched further.

The challenges of framework implementation extend beyond resource constraints to fundamental issues with the available talent pipeline. As one organization leader explains, "We aren't able to meet all the aspects [of the framework] due to the difficulty in finding qualified teachers in the current circumstances." Many teachers have not received proper teacher training. This makes it hard to evaluate skills that teachers usually develop during professional education programs. Despite these challenges, education leaders maintain that continued collaboration and support can strengthen framework effectiveness over time.

## 3.6 Teacher competency variations across grade levels

The current approach to teacher training and assessment in the Karen education system does not differentiate significantly between elementary, middle school, or high school levels. Teachers at all levels receive the same in-service training content and are assessed using the same classroom observation form, leading to very similar measured competencies. This uniform approach has remained practical given that many teachers work across elementary, middle, and high school grades simultaneously, especially at remote schools.

According to teacher trainers and school leaders, variations in teacher competency stem primarily from educational background rather than differentiated training. High school teachers typically possess more years of formal education, though this additional schooling does not necessarily translate to enhanced subject expertise, as many teach outside their specialized fields. KTTC graduates represent an exception to this pattern, receiving targeted pre-service training in specific high school subjects and then being designated to teach in their respective field.

Internal program evaluations conducted by KTWG and KECD have identified limitations in this unified approach. The current system makes it difficult to understand differences in teacher competency across grade levels, and as a result may not adequately identify the distinct needs of elementary and high school teachers. This standardization extends beyond assessment to other aspects of the system—for instance, teacher stipends remain uniform across positions regardless of experience, responsibilities, or required qualifications.

Organization leaders that were interviewed expressed an ambition to implement grade-level differentiation in the future. However, leaders also cited the 2019 framework revision process as a key lesson-learned, noting that it required significant time and resources that limited their ability to emergent needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of this experience, they expressed wariness at the prospect of undertaking significant reforms given even greater resource constraints and humanitarian priorities since the coup attempt.



For one leader, a key reason to continue with the current uniform approach to TPD is the challenge of designing differentiated standards that work within the reality of Karen schools, where teachers often manage multiple grades simultaneously. From their perspective, the current version of the KTCF is responsive to this specific challenge and continues to be relevant.

### 3.7 Classroom conditions and educational challenges in Karen schools

The following section relies on data gathered from classroom observation of 17 classes across different grade levels, including Grade 12, Grade 9, Grade 7, and Grade 4. These observations were conducted in primary, middle, and high schools, covering various subjects such as English, science, geography, and math. Class sizes varied, with some having a small number of students (<10) and others being larger (>25).

All classrooms were observed equipped with some learning materials to support teaching and learning. Textbooks were available for both teachers and students, though some classes relied just on handout sheets as students did not have their own textbooks. Teachers used whiteboards and pens as primary teaching tools, while students typically used notebooks and distributed handouts. Additional teaching aids, such as maps, and clocks, enhanced the learning environment at some schools. Traditional tools like blackboards, chalk, erasers, desks, and chairs were also present in most classrooms, providing a basic functional setup for effective education.

Decorations and visual aids improved the learning environment. Timetables, posters like world maps, Myanmar maps, and anatomy charts, along with student artwork, were displayed on the walls. Some classrooms also had ground rules posted to maintain order and discipline.

Teachers in most classrooms showed dedication and effectiveness in their work. They were highly motivated, creating a lively and engaging learning environment. They were also well-organized, managing activities smoothly and helping students learn effectively. Many teachers made good use of local resources to improve their lessons, showing creativity and adaptability. Their lesson plans included all students, meeting their diverse needs and helping everyone feel included. Teachers also cared about students' well-being, creating a supportive and friendly atmosphere.

The data suggests that there are multiple interconnected factors that significantly impact learning space outcomes in Karen State schools. These factors can be categorized into physical infrastructure challenges, environmental conditions, and security concerns, all of which affect the ability to maintain consistent quality standards in education delivery. Security concerns are covered in more detail in Section 2, Physical Protection. These factors are consistent with findings in a previous study conducted by KESS in 2023.<sup>16</sup>

#### **Electricity and internet connectivity**

Limited access to electricity and the internet are ubiquitous across all schools and geographies. Data from the 2023 Karen Household Survey reports that only 11.3% of Karen households have access to public electrical grids, while 84.2% of households rely on small, modular solar systems.<sup>17</sup> Solar systems are predominantly used as lighting sources, making them susceptible to seasonal fluctuations in the rainy and winter seasons (discussed further below). None of the schools visited in this research had lighting systems that were still functional.

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<sup>16</sup> KESS. "Karen Education in Myanmar: Challenges, Responses, and Resilience 2020-2022".

<sup>17</sup> Karen Economic Committee and Secretariat. "Karen Socio-Economic Household Survey," 2023.



*Example of a typical classroom of a "permanent structure" school type in Karen State. Wall partitions contribute significantly to learning space quality.*

Though 90% of Karen households have access to a mobile phone device with internet, computer or laptop ownership is less than 1.1%. Only one school visited had access to a computer, and it was a school located near the border, which tends to be better resourced than those deeper in Karen State. None of the schools visited had broadband internet, and teachers' use of the internet for lesson planning was done with their own data.

### **Physical infrastructure challenges**

The research identified significant variation in school infrastructure across Karen State, with facility quality largely correlating with geographic location and security conditions.

Three distinct categories of school infrastructure were observed:

1. **Permanent Structures.** These schools operate under relatively normal conditions and remain mostly unaffected by airstrikes or security concerns. They feature brick buildings with metal roofs and proper classroom partitions. The facilities include cement floors with moveable furniture, allowing flexible classroom arrangements. These schools may also be equipped with supporting facilities such as toilets, playgrounds, libraries, and offices, enabling a comprehensive learning environment.
2. **Semi-Permanent Structures.** These schools typically consist of wood or bamboo buildings and are the most common school infrastructure type. They are characterized by large halls divided by thin wooden boards or bamboo partitions, which offer limited sound insulation between classrooms. The wooden floors usually accommodate students sitting on benches or directly on the floor, with furniture that can occasionally be rearranged. However, sound traveling through the thin partitions frequently creates cross-classroom disruptions.

Classroom partitioning emerged as a critical factor affecting learning outcomes in our data, and were common-practice at virtually all semi-permanent structure schools. Inadequate separation between learning spaces creates both visual and auditory distractions that impact student concentration.





*Two classes are conducted simultaneously in a "semi-permanent structure" school type. Teachers will often take turns speaking to minimize auditory distractions.*

3. **Temporary Shelters.** These learning spaces take two main forms: constructed shelters and natural formations. Constructed shelters utilize bamboo frameworks covered with tarpaulin and bound together with bamboo bark or shreds. Natural formations include caves and mountain overhangs near valleys, which provide limited protection from the elements. These locations are strategically chosen for natural protection from airstrikes but come with significant challenges: difficult access routes, environmental hazards from the surrounding terrain, and dirt floors that become muddy during the rainy season. The combination of fixed seating arrangements and environmental challenges severely limits teaching flexibility and leaves these spaces vulnerable to weather conditions.

#### **Environmental conditions**


Seasonal weather patterns pose substantial challenges to maintaining quality learning environments, particularly for semi-permanent and temporary learning spaces. The research identified several critical issues: in the rainy season, excessive moisture damages teaching and learning materials, while metal and plastic roofing amplifies rainfall noise, which disrupts the lessons leading to difficulty for students maintaining attention. Flooding and road damage make access difficult, and high humidity leads to increased health risks from mosquitos and seasonal illnesses. On the other hand, during the winter and early summer the weather conditions generally support school learning environments.

#### **Security concerns**

For safety reasons, some teachers must conduct classes in hidden forest areas where lighting is limited, making these makeshift classrooms too dark for effective learning. In these settings, tarpaulins provide minimal protection from the rain and other weather conditions, which further hinders students' comfort, focus, and safety during lessons.

Both semi-permanent and temporary shelters may have additional security features, such as protective ditches or trenches adjacent to classrooms. During periods of elevated security,





*An example of a “temporary shelter” school type. Lighting can be a significant challenge for these classes, especially during the rainy season and in areas where shelters are constructed in mountain shadows.*

the use of indoor lighting from candles, flashlights, or lights are prohibited, further limiting indoor visibility.

Schools often have to close because of flooding and local unrest in the area. In focus group discussions, several teachers expressed frustration because they could not keep up with the curriculum schedule due to frequent school closures. Teachers also reported that they notice learning losses when students miss too many consecutive days due to security threats.

In areas affected by bombing, classrooms showed significant structural damage, with holes in walls, roofs, and windows. This led to leaks and dampness during the rainy season, further complicating the learning experience. Despite these challenges, essential facilities were provided, including drinking water containers and cups. Cleaning supplies like brooms and trash bins were also readily available in some schools, helping to maintain a clean environment.

## 4. Parents and Community

### 4.1 Parents' and communities' role in teacher livelihood

Parent-teacher associations (PTAs), which fall under the management of the Bureau of Community Engagement and Learning Support of KECD, often provide critical support for teachers between stipend payments. Karen teachers only receive a teaching stipend in cash once per year, typically in November. PTAs meet about once every three months for most KECD schools and conduct specific fundraising activities two to three times per year, usually on major Karen holidays. For example, one common strategy is to raise funds for the community's school by selling traditional Karen clothing. A group of parents will typically be selected to weave the clothing, and the PTA will then organize and sell the clothing, typically in a third country within the Karen diaspora. These funds are distributed to teachers by the PTA.

Individual communities may also provide direct food and living cost support. Typically organized by community leaders, including religious leaders, village heads, and individual school committee members, a specific plot of land may be assigned to an individual teacher. That land is then used to grow crops or raise chickens and pigs, which are either consumed directly by the teacher or sold for additional supplemental income for the teacher. Teachers and individual parents typically care for these plots of land together, though this is not a uniform practice across all school communities.



In this context, while the Karen teacher stipend is equal for all teachers, teacher livelihood at any given school can vary significantly when factoring in the level of parent and community support. To quote one KECD district officer:

*Teacher well-being really depends on the community. Our organization also relies on community support, so teachers depend on community involvement for their well-being. –District Education Officer (KECD), male, 30-35 years old*

Our data suggests that this is influenced most significantly by the value communities place on education. Even in poorer communities, schools and their teachers may enjoy significant community support if there is a strong belief in the value of education and schooling among parents. Community and parental beliefs about the value of education are likely the best predictors of how well teachers are supported outside of their yearly teacher stipend.

**Teachers as education advocates.** The education system has long considered the role of community and parental support as central to teacher livelihood. The KTCF integrates this in the teacher competency of “community engagement,” which was understood by organization leaders and MTTs as a teacher's ability to promote and strengthen the perceived value of schooling within their local community. We observed that teachers considered this competency relevant in their context across all seven schools (averaging 7.62 out of 9), and that they feel somewhat supported (6.13 out of 9) in achieving this competency. However, in focus group discussions, teachers indicated this as a difficult competency to address, which is discussed more in Section 4.2, below.

## 4.2 Community and parent engagement as a teacher competency

Across focus group discussions with organizational leaders, school principals, and teacher trainers, there was strong agreement that the level of support from communities and parents for schooling has a significant impact on teacher livelihood. However, when discussing community and parent engagement, many did not feel it should be a teacher competency. Rather, they placed much more emphasis on the role that PTAs, community leaders, and parents themselves should play in supporting teachers. As one organizational leader put it:

*The parents and local leaders—not only the education leader—need to support and continue encouraging and visiting schools, and take responsibility for the basic needs [of teachers], such as helping to build teachers' shelters. And a mechanism like PTAs that helps build these relationships and appreciation will ultimately benefit teacher continuity. – Organization leader, female, 50-55 years old*

Teacher trainers identified the importance of regular engagement from community members and KECD:

*To help teachers stay committed, I believe parents, the school committee, mobile teacher trainers, education staff, officers, and senior leaders all should regularly visit and engage with teachers. They should encourage, guide, and support them, listen to their concerns, and acknowledge their voices. – Mobile teacher trainer, male, 25-30 years old*

Even in areas such as raising awareness for the value of education in the community, key informants believed this should be led by community leaders and key organization staff. For example, one of the major responsibilities of mobile teacher trainers is to perform this awareness-raising role in the community to increase parental support for education. This is incorporated into their training curriculum as part of their in-service training, and is planned with district education officers to target specific groups of parents in school communities.



*Parents of school-aged children attend an awareness training to raise community support for a local school and involvement in their child's education.*

These findings call into question the role that teachers should play in raising community and parental support for education. Our findings suggest that shifting this to an organizational-level competency could reduce the burden on teachers and allow them to focus more on their core educational duties while benefiting from improved community support structures.

# Recommendations

## For All Karen Education Stakeholders

### 1. Teacher compensation must increase to retain talented teachers and improve education quality

The decision about where to send your child to school has become deeply political and socially consequential for households near contested areas in Myanmar. Karen education as a demand-driven, community-based approach to schooling offers a democratic vision of education that contrasts sharply with the increasingly militarized nature of Myanmar's state-run schools. Parents and communities are voting with their feet as Karen schools continue to expand education services to reach displaced communities. The rapid expansion of Karen schools—from 89,879 students in 2021 to 140,732 in 2024, representing a 56.6% increase over three years—illustrates both the system's responsiveness to community needs and the mounting pressure on its resources.

This report documents the creativity and resilience of Karen teachers to continue basic education services despite ongoing attacks and economic distress throughout Myanmar. It shows the resourcefulness of communities to mobilize support from the Karen diaspora and work with school leaders to respond to security threats. However, without the ability to meet the basic needs of teachers, the sustainability of gains made in MTB-MLE and teacher competencies over the past decade are in jeopardy.

Across our data, teacher wellbeing and livelihood emerged as the common denominator in building teacher competencies. While Karen teachers work under the constant threat of military airstrikes and targeted attacks on schools, our research suggests it is the challenge of basic survival on insufficient wages that most threatens educational quality. Teachers and school leaders cite the need for livelihood support as most consequential for teachers' ability to fulfill their expanded roles in conflict settings. School and organizational leaders identify inadequate compensation as the primary driver of a teacher turnover rate that has averaged 31% over the last five years. Teacher trainers noted the costly implications: their resources are diverted to preparing new teachers rather than building on existing teacher competencies.

A teacher compensation and retention strategy is urgently recommended, requiring an estimated \$7.8M/€7.41M/¥1.17B (representing about \$48/€46/¥7,200 per student) in total annual funding. This investment would focus on the 2025-2026 academic year teaching workforce, which is estimated to grow to at least 13,000 based on current trends. We recommend an initial increase in teacher compensation from the 2024-2025 academic year stipend of \$300/€285/¥45,100 to at least \$565/€536/¥85,000 in 2025-2026, requiring \$7.3M/€6.94M/¥1.10B annually. This 53% increase falls in line with high levels of inflation since the coup attempt, which have continued at double-digit numbers since 2022.<sup>18</sup>

It is also recommended to introduce a retention bonus with a 5% stipend increase after completing one year of teaching, followed by an additional 10% increase after completing three years. These additional incentives are estimated to cost a total of \$0.49M/€0.47M/¥73.7M annually while significantly increasing the likelihood that teachers will remain in their roles for longer than three years. This will increase the effectiveness of

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<sup>18</sup> Asian Development Bank. 2024. [Asian Development Outlook September 2024](#).

teacher professional development programs and net savings from having to train and recruit new teachers.

The implementation of this compensation strategy should be accompanied by the development of a standardized teacher salary framework that accounts for qualifications, experience, and local cost of living factors across Karen areas. This would require technical support to establish transparent verification systems for teacher credentials and to develop multi-year budget forecasting tools that allow for sustainable growth. Additionally, KECD should be supported in engaging with broader Karen governance structures about resource allocations to education services, potentially including reviews of public financial management systems. Establishing these governance mechanisms alongside immediate compensation increases would transform the current emergency response into a sustainable system that can maintain educational quality while continuing to serve displaced communities throughout Karen State.

## 2. Increase the frequency and duration of subject training

Teacher professional development should allocate more time to subject-content training and practical teaching strategies relevant for low-resource settings. This recommendation emerged consistently from teachers and school leaders across all research sites, including remote schools, border schools, and schools near conflict areas. Organization and school leaders should recognize that these TPD activities support not only instructional quality but also teacher well-being when teachers can gain confidence in practical teaching strategies.

KECD should expand both the duration and frequency of subject-content knowledge training, ideally offering sessions every two to three months. Teacher collaboration should be strengthened by creating structured opportunities for lesson planning and knowledge sharing during TPD activities. This approach builds on existing strategies that teachers have already developed for low-resource settings and facilitates the exchange of best practices between educators working in similar contexts. Additional focus on practical approaches to lesson planning could address the lower achievement rates in this domain of the Karen Teacher Competency Framework, where only 40% of teachers currently meet competency standards.

## 3. Increase community capacity to support teacher livelihood in the long term

The sustainability of teacher support requires strengthening community structures that can contribute to teacher wellbeing beyond organizational stipends. To address this need, KECD needs support to continue expanding and strengthening Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) programs across all Karen schools, building on the existing 169 PTAs established to date. This could include developing vocational training programs specifically designed for PTA members that enhance their ability to generate funds for teacher support, and creating a PTA leadership curriculum that includes fundraising strategies, community organizing, and financial management skills.

## For International Partners

### 4. Ensure sufficient textbooks for all students, particularly in displacement settings

The research documented a persistent shortage of textbooks across Karen schools, with particularly severe deficits in schools accommodating displaced students. Teachers reported that students spend significant instructional time copying textbook content rather than engaging with learning activities. This inefficient use of classroom time delays lesson plans and reduces opportunities for comprehension-focused instruction.



Schools displaced by conflict face additional challenges maintaining learning materials. When communities relocate to temporary shelters, textbooks often sustain damage during transit or deteriorate rapidly due to environmental conditions like high moisture, which promotes mold growth. A targeted textbook distribution program should prioritize schools in temporary shelters while addressing system-wide shortages. Providing durable, moisture-resistant materials would help preserve these resources longer.

## **5. Recognize Karen education to allow qualified students to pursue further studies**

The lack of formal recognition for Karen education credentials creates significant barriers for qualified students seeking to advance their education at regional universities and contribute to ASEAN's development. The consequences of this lack of recognition extend beyond individual students to impact regional dynamics. Currently, many talented Karen youth pursue GED certificates or other alternative credentials because their Karen education qualifications are not formally recognized. This creates a challenging situation for Karen communities that could be more effectively managed through education pathways.

International educational institutions, regional educational authorities, and development partners should explore frameworks for recognizing Karen education credentials through equivalency assessments, bridging programs, or certification mechanisms.

## **6. Establish merit-based scholarships for Karen educational advancement**

Due to political instability, hyperinflation, and rising costs—including transportation and education expenses—Karen students face significant financial barriers to pursuing higher education in our region. Many talented students have lost motivation and hope during the ongoing crisis, unable to see viable pathways to university. Creating a scholarship program specifically for high-achieving students would strengthen the perceived value of the Karen education system while creating concrete opportunities for students to continue their educational journey.

## **7. Expand classroom teaching materials at the secondary level**

Subject-specific teaching materials are needed across the curriculum of secondary schools, with particular emphasis on math, science, and geography to support student-centered learning. Teachers would benefit from materials such as geometric manipulatives, anatomy illustrations, diagrams such as periodic tables, physics demonstration kits, and maps or globes for geography and history instruction. Teachers specifically requested mathematics textbooks that include comprehensive teacher guides with detailed answers and additional examples to support their lesson preparation.

## **8. Integrate low-power digital resources into high school classrooms with electricity**

High schools with more permanent structures and access to electricity would benefit from basic digital teaching tools. Low-power projectors, computers, and printers would support teachers in preparing and delivering more advanced subject content, particularly in science and mathematics where visual representations enhance understanding. This recommendation addresses findings from teacher interviews, where secondary-level educators identified limitations in their ability to effectively present complex concepts without visual aids.

## 9. Support construction of temporary learning shelters at conflict-affected schools

This study found that communities and local leaders take the lead in creating temporary learning shelters when schools face security threats. These community-driven initiatives demonstrate a strong commitment to education continuity despite ongoing conflict. However, in poorer and more remote communities, even basic shelter materials like tarpaulins are scarce, limiting the effectiveness of these learning environments.

Providing targeted material support would enhance these community-led efforts. Weather-resistant tarpaulins, hygiene and first aid kits, WASH facilities, and improved classroom partitioning would significantly improve learning conditions. Moisture-resistant classroom materials are particularly needed, as teachers reported that high humidity in temporary shelters damages learning materials. This support would build upon existing community initiatives while addressing specific environmental challenges documented in the research

## 10. Support school building renovation

KECD data from the 2024-2025 school year indicates that over 120 schools reported sustaining damage from natural disasters including flooding, landslides, and severe storms. Many of these structures, originally built by communities years ago, have deteriorated over time and can no longer withstand increasingly extreme weather events.

School buildings that have been weakened by natural disasters create safety concerns for both students and teachers. While not a direct finding of this research, organizational leaders discussed how Karen communities are actively fundraising to improve school structural integrity. These community-driven efforts highlight the importance local leaders place on safe learning environments, even as they navigate the complex challenges of conflict. Additional support for school renovation can improve learning outcomes and address an emerging concern among many communities about the quality and safety of their childrens' learning environment.

## 11. Advocate for the protection of schools from military attacks

Despite international protections for educational institutions under international humanitarian law, Karen schools continue to be deliberately targeted by airstrikes, drone attacks, and artillery shelling by the Myanmar Army. We ask for consistent international pressure to prevent attacks on educational facilities through:

- Documenting and amplifying violations to increase global visibility
- Advocating for expanded sanctions against those responsible for targeting schools
- Strengthening cross-border coordination to provide emergency educational support
- Engaging with international mechanisms that specifically protect education in conflict zones

We encourage readers to refer to a full statement from the Karen Human Rights Group published in September 2024:

<https://www.khrg.org/2024/09/statement-2024-international-day-protect-education-attack>

## For KECD and Karen CSOs

### 12. Develop supplemental multilingual resources to support linguistic diversity

Karen teachers are already adapting to linguistic diversity in their classrooms through innovative practices. Teachers have specifically recommended creating learning materials in Pwo Karen for students in Pwo Karen areas, while teacher trainers have suggested developing training guides in Burmese to help displaced teachers adapt to the Karen curriculum. These materials could be provided in digital formats where printing is not feasible.

Support is also needed for the supplemental S'gaw Karen language classes that many communities have implemented to help displaced students integrate into Karen schools. These community-driven initiatives would benefit from appropriate teaching and learning materials designed specifically for S'gaw Karen as a second or third language.

### 13. Promote school-based cultural and community events

The research found that school-based cultural and community events serve as important tools for supporting wellbeing in crisis settings. This practice was observed across various school environments—from temporary shelters to semi-permanent structures—suggesting its adaptability to different contexts. Teachers and administrators organize Karen New Year celebrations, wrist-tying ceremonies, music competitions, talent shows, and sports events that engage the entire school community.

Mobile teacher trainers observed that these activities boost teacher morale while strengthening student engagement and school-community bonds. KECD and Karen CSOs should document and share these approaches as contextual best practices, providing guidance for schools to implement similar activities. Establishing student clubs and organizations, particularly at high schools with boarding students, would further extend these benefits.

### 14. Encourage and support more teacher innovation

Karen teachers have demonstrated remarkable creativity in adapting to challenging circumstances, particularly in developing sensory-based activities and multilingual teaching strategies. Research observations documented teachers using natural materials as teaching aids during mathematics and science lessons, showing resourcefulness despite limited supplies. Building on these innovations, professional development programs should incorporate structured opportunities for teachers to experiment with new approaches and share their classroom successes with peers.

Knowledge sharing should focus on practical implementation rather than abstract concepts. Teacher innovations could be documented through video recordings and written testimonials, then distributed through regular newsletters that include actual lesson plans and teaching resources. Subject trainers can facilitate this knowledge exchange during in-person workshops and summer vacation training sessions, while also publishing effective strategies on organizational websites.

### 15. Strengthen teacher capacity to handle security threats and student wellbeing

As this research has shown, some school leaders have implemented effective emergency protocols during attacks, including arranging alternative shelters, implementing dispersal

strategies for overnight stays to avoid student concentration during potential attacks, and establishing clear communication channels with local leaders. These practices demonstrate the importance of proactive planning and coordination.

However, the findings document that many teachers need training to respond to security threats with greater confidence, particularly in managing student behavior. This training should address specific challenges observed during actual incidents, such as students freezing or struggling to follow procedures during attacks. Training should incorporate psychological first-aid techniques to help teachers provide immediate emotional support to distressed students. Additional topics should include managing student wellbeing in temporary shelters, addressing health and hygiene concerns like fungal infections and heat rash, and helping teachers manage their own stress while sustaining their ability to provide care and guidance in challenging situations.

## **16. Strengthen encouragement programs for teachers**

The wellbeing of teachers at schools that have been displaced to remote areas emerged as a significant concern for school leaders. Research findings documented how teachers at one high school experienced isolation after relocating that affected their social-emotional wellbeing and professional development.

Supporting these teachers should involve structured socialization opportunities with colleagues. When security conditions permit, exchange programs with other schools could allow these teachers to travel to other schools and observe peers, substitute teach, and receive feedback on their practice. These exchanges could include teaching specialized subjects for short periods, leading social activities with fellow teachers, organizing school concerts, or coordinating sports events, for example.

## **17. Visits from organization staff and local education officers are important**

Many school leaders and teachers expressed that visits from organization staff and local education officers help teachers feel represented and valued. School leaders have requested assistance with teacher encouragement through formal recognition events, speeches, community appreciation activities with PTAs, and visits from local leaders to acknowledge teachers' contributions to education continuity during conflict.

## **18. Supporting school leaders to build stronger relationships with local authorities**

The research revealed that schools with strong local authority connections received timely security information, enabling successful evacuation before attacks, while others struggled with information access. Training programs for school principals should focus on communication protocols and relationship-building strategies, potentially pairing experienced leaders with those developing these skills. For schools in conflict zones, handheld transceivers would address immediate communication needs when mobile networks fail and provide a reliable communication channel during emergencies as documented in successful school evacuation cases.

## **19. Support teacher trainers to teach in different languages (Recruit teacher trainers with skill in multilingual education)**

The research documented how linguistic diversity in Karen classrooms has increased significantly since 2021, creating challenges for both students and teachers. Mobile Teacher Trainers (MTTs) and subject trainers reported difficulty supporting displaced teachers who



are not fluent in S'gaw Karen or English. These trainers requested additional support to deliver effective training across language barriers, particularly for complex subject-specific terminology.

Recruiting trainers with multilingual capabilities, especially those proficient in Burmese and Pwo Karen alongside S'gaw Karen, would strengthen the teacher development system's capacity to integrate displaced educators. Additionally, developing translated training materials for core teacher professional development modules would address the immediate need identified by current trainers.

## 20. Continue conducting research on the Karen education system

School leaders, teacher trainers, and organization leaders expressed a need for more research to understand challenges and solutions for improving Karen education. They expressed interest in research that brings new ideas and conducts comparative education studies on the Karen education system. Teachers and school leaders also provided feedback that they greatly appreciated meeting with researchers and discussing their concerns openly.

Throughout the study, "teacher commitment" emerged as a significant concern among school leaders and teacher trainers. Future research could examine the current teacher pipeline and preparation system, particularly how teachers' career aspirations affect their commitment to classroom teaching. Many teachers in the Karen education system fulfill teaching commitments as a pathway to finishing higher education degrees in lower division Karen college programs. They may view teaching as a stepping stone toward becoming "professionals" with higher incomes or completing bachelor's degrees. The impact of this pattern on the talent pipeline and teacher competency achievement requires deeper investigation.

Some districts have addressed this by requiring teachers to serve minimum terms of three years, which helps improve stability for students and schools. Future studies should focus on defining teacher commitment in the Karen education context, developing appropriate measurement tools, and identifying strategies to attract and retain committed teachers who will build lasting careers in education.

# Appendix 1. Karen Teacher Competency Framework

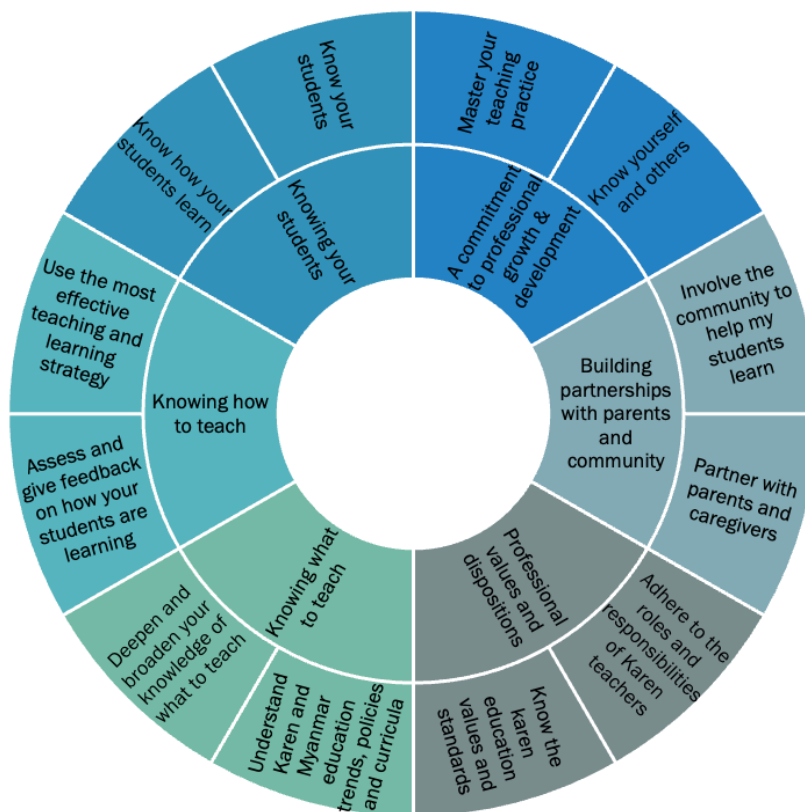
Revised April 2019

## Definitions of Essential Competencies

1. Knowing your students and supporting their development is the ability to know your students, their background and what makes them unique, and how students learn and build on prior knowledge and experiences.
2. Knowing how to teach – Teaching and Learning Pedagogy is the ability to apply appropriate strategies, techniques, teaching aids and approaches to encourage and trigger the learning process in children and assess and give constructive feedback.
3. Knowing what to teach is the ability of teachers to deepen and broaden their knowledge of the subject matter they are teaching and to understand Karen education reforms, policies, standards and curricula and be updated on local, national, regional, and global education trends.
4. Professional values and dispositions of a Karen teacher is the ability to maintain professionalism, adhere to the expected standards of teachers in Karen state and be proud of the teaching profession as a highly valued position in Karen society.
5. Building partnerships with parents and the Karen community is the ability to partner with parents and caregivers, involve the community to help students learn, and encourage inclusiveness, respect and diversity.
6. A commitment to professional growth and development is the ability to know one's strengths and weaknesses and commit to lifelong learning and mastery of the teaching practice.

The 6 essential competencies consist of 12 general competencies, 31 enabling competencies, and 90 indicators of success. The enabling competencies are a set of performance criteria that could be used for individual teacher performance planning while success indicators explain the observable behaviours expected of a high performing Karen teacher. A collection of these could be used for lesson observation and mentoring of Karen teachers.

## KTCF Essential and General Competencies



## Detailed KTCF with Indicators

1. Knowing your students and supporting their development			
General	Enabling	Success Indicators	
1.1. Know your students	1.1.1. Recognise students' prior knowledge and experiences that has informed who they are and how they learn	1.1.1.1 Understand your students' background and past performance	
		1.1.1.2 Understand your students' issues and concerns at home and in school	
	1.1.2. Identify your students' learning needs to help them learn better	1.1.2.1 Be aware of your students' interests and strengths	
		1.1.2.2 Identify and help your students who are likely to stop school early and those who need additional support	
	1.1.3 Value what makes your students unique	1.1.3.1 Include your students' experiences and interests As part of the learning process	1.1.3.2 Assist and support students with unique learning needs and abilities
			1.1.3.3 Develop your students to continuously learn and improve themselves

1.2. Know how your students learn	1.2.1 Identify child development stages and phases	1.2.1.1 Understand the stages and phases of child development
		1.2.1.2. Understand language development in multi lingual contexts
	1.2.2. Identify different learning preferences	1.2.1.1 Understand that students learn in different ways and at different times
		1.2.1.2 Utilise different approaches to respond to students learning needs and preferences
		1.2.1.3 Encourage risk taking and teach your students to learn from their mistakes
	1.2.3. Know how to challenge students to apply new learning and different learning approaches	1.2.2.1 Encourage your students to set challenging yet achievable goals for themselves
		1.2.2.2 Teach your students effective learning strategies to apply and practice
		1.2.2.3 Teach your students to see the connection between what they learn and what they experience in real life situations
	1.2.4. Adopt an inclusive mindset	1.2.4.1. Understand how to identify children who are differently abled
		1.2.4.2. Utilise inclusive education strategies in the classroom
		1.2.4.3. Utilise gender inclusive strategies in the classroom

## 2. Knowing how to teach – Teaching and Learning pedagogy

General	Enabling	Success Indicators	
2.1. Use the most effective teaching and learning strategy	2.1.1 Select appropriate teaching and learning strategy	2.1.1.1 Use appropriate teaching and learning strategies to develop your students' creative, innovative, collaborative and critical thinking skills	
		2.1.1.2 Using teaching aids effectively to support learning	
		2.1.1.3 Engage your students in collaborative learning to develop their social, academic, and emotional skills	
	2.1.2 Design clear and effective lessons your students can understand	2.1.2 Design clear and effective lessons your students can understand	2.1.2.1 Plan your lessons with clear learning objectives and clear learning process
			2.1.2.2 Design individual, pair and group learning activities
			2.1.2.3 Communicate clear learning expectations
			2.1.2.4 Give clear instructions
			2.1.2.5 Make lessons interesting and relevant to your students
			2.1.2.6 Design lessons and activities that generate new knowledge among your students
	2.1.3 Create a positive and caring learning space	2.1.3 Create a positive and caring learning space	2.1.3.1 Create safe and nurturing classroom learning environment
			2.1.3.2 Treat your students fairly and give equal opportunities to everyone



		2.1.3.3 Encourage your students to share their ideas
		2.1.3.4 Reinforce class values so that students learn to mutually respect each other
		2.1.3.5 Develop procedures and routines inside the classroom
		2.1.3.6 Adopt a classroom management strategy that applies positive discipline
2.2 Assess and give feedback on how your students are learning	2.2.1 Design assessment process and tools	2.2.1.1 Describe learning outcomes, knowledge, and skills your students will learn
		2.2.1.2 Ask reflective questions and encourage reflective listening among your students
		2.2.1.3 Design assessment strategies to improve, enhance, and support student learning
	2.2.2. Monitor your students' progress and provide appropriate support	2.2.2.1 Constantly assess your students' work and provide constructive and timely feedback
		2.2.2.2 Encourage student self-reflection and self-assessment
	2.2.3. Use results from assessment to improve instruction	2.2.3.1 Use assessment results to help students monitor their learning
		2.2.3.2 Share the assessment results with students and parents

### 3. Knowing what to teach – Subjects and Curriculum

General	Enabling	Success Indicators
3.1 Deepen and broaden your knowledge about what you teach	3.1.1 Master your subject content	3.1.1.1 Know and understand relevant theories, concepts, and principles of what you teach
		3.1.1.2 Use accurate and relevant content in your lessons drawing on available resources
	3.1.2. Identify foundational learning areas critical for functional and applied learning	3.1.2.1 Understand foundational literacy and numeracy skill and strategies to support student learning in these areas
		3.1.2.2 Understand how the MTB-MLE framework supports learners in multilingual contexts
3.2. Understand Karen and Myanmar education trends, policies, and curricula	3.2.1. Study educational policies and how they affect your teaching	3.2.1.1 Familiarise yourself with relevant Karen and Myanmar policies and education standards
		3.2.1.2 Assess and apply relevant educational policies, standards and processes based on the local school context
		3.2.2.1 Understand the curriculum goals, learning objectives and core content areas of the curriculum
	3.2.2. Understand how to Implement the curriculum	3.2.2.2 Assess subject content and sequence within and between grade levels
		3.2.2.3 Use methods and approaches from different fields of knowledge to enrich your subject content

#### 4. Professional values and dispositions of a Karen teacher

General	Enabling	Success Indicators
4.1 Know the Karen education values and standards	4.1.1 Identify the mission and values of Karen education	4.1.1.1. Understand the history of the Karen education system
		4.1.1.2 Understand the education philosophy and values underpinning Karen education in Myanmar
	4.1.2 Identify relevant codes and standards for Karen teachers	4.1.2.1 Understand the Karen school policy and code of conduct for teachers
		4.1.2.2. Understand the Karen teacher standards and the importance of fulfilling requirements of the TCF for professional growth and development
4.2 Adhere to the roles and responsibilities of Karen teachers	4.2.1 Identify the key roles and responsibilities of the Karen teacher	4.2.1.1 Familiarise yourself with the Karen teacher roles and responsibilities
		4.2.1.2 Understand how the school is structured and managed
	4.2.2. Identify the important daily requirements of the teacher in Karen schools	4.2.2.1. Know how to complete enrolment and attendance records and student reports
		4.2.2.2 Know how to develop school timetables and schedule important school events based on the academic calendar
	4.2.3. Inspire your students and colleagues by setting a good example	4.2.3.1 Be inspired to achieve the highest standards of teaching
		4.2.3.2 Carry your work with skill and dignity at all times
		4.2.3.3 Treat others fairly without favouring one student over another
		4.2.3.4 Encourage your students and colleagues to work at their personal best

#### 5. Building partnerships with parents and the community

General	Enabling	Success Indicators
5.1. Partner with Parents and caregivers	5.1.1 Build a support network for your students	5.1.1.1 Invite parents and caregivers to join classroom and volunteer in school activities
		5.1.1.2 Know your students' family
		5.1.1.3 Community regularly to engage parents in their child's learning journey
		5.1.1.4 Provide regular feedback to parents and caregivers about their child's performance through meetings and report cards
	5.1.3 Sustain the partnership with parents and community	5.1.3.1 Coordinate parent-teacher association activities
5.1.3.2 Visit your students in their homes when needed		
5.2. Involve the community to help your students	5.2.1 Engage parents and caregivers to be partners in learning	5.2.1.1 Talk to parents and caregivers about how they can support their child's learning at school

learn		5.2.1.2 Guide parents and caregivers to support their child's learning at home
	5.2.2 Design learning activities using community conditions, local wisdom, tradition, and knowledge	5.2.2.1 Teach your students to connect and apply what they learn in their daily lives
		5.2.2.2 Involve your students in community activities and events
		5.2.2.3 Use community knowledge and natural resources for your students' learning tasks and lessons.

## 6. A commitment to professional growth and development

General	Enabling	Success Indicators
6.1 Know yourself and others	6.1.1 Continue to grow by Knowing yourself more	6.1.1.1 Know your strengths and areas of growth
		6.1.1.2 Examine yourself to become a better person and a better teacher
		6.1.1.3 Reflect if what you think and do follow the best qualities of being a teacher
		6.1.1.4 Learn from others' feedback
	6.1.2 Become more aware and responsible for your emotions and health	6.1.2.1 Understand deeply what affects you
		6.1.2.2 Be calm and composed in resolving conflicts
		6.1.2.3 Practice effective ways to manage stress
		6.1.2.4 Take care of your physical and psychological health
6.2. Master your teaching practice	6.2.1 Keep alive your passion for teaching	6.2.1.1 Know the deepest reasons of why I teach
		6.2.1.2 Value your role as a teacher in Karen society
		6.2.1.3 Regularly reflect on your work and its impact
	6.2.2 Take responsibility in your own personal and professional growth	6.2.2.1 Become a self-directed learner
		6.2.2.2 Identify your areas of growth and work on them
		6.2.2.3 Set your professional learning and practice goals
		6.2.2.4 Participate in peer learning opportunities and work with other teachers to improve your teaching