The Hidden Strength

Karen Teachers' Role in Education Continuity

A study documenting how Karen teachers sustain education in crisis-affected Karen State, examining their challenges and identifying key areas for strengthening and building teacher competencies for the future.
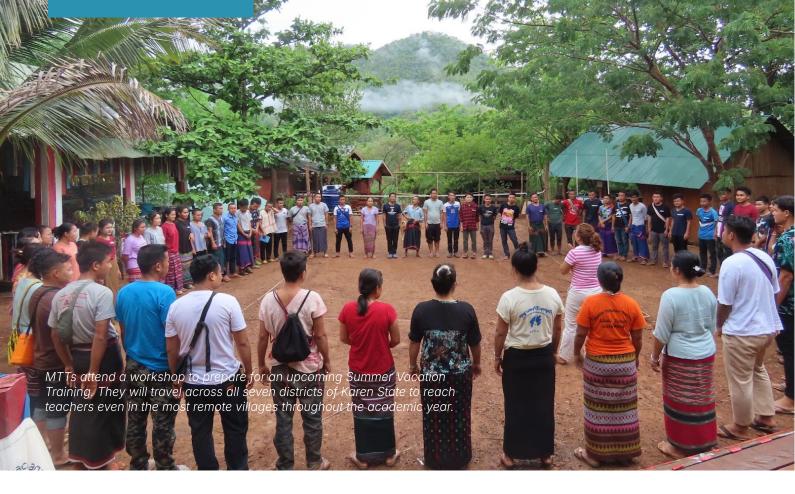
Naw Sandrena, Naw Eh Wah Paw, Saw Way Can

> တၢ်လီၢ်လၢ ပှၤတဝၢအိၣ်သူၣ်လီၤသး, ပှၤကညီအိၣ်မူမှၢ်သ့ဲအလီၢ်နှၣ် တၢ်ကူၣ်ဘၣ်
> အိၣ်သ့�′ကဘၣ်အိၣ်သူၣ်လီၤသးနှၣ်လီၤ.
>
> Wherever people gather to build community and secure their survival,
> the garden of knowledge must also be tended.

Karen Education and Culture Department |
Karen Teachers Working Group

Summary Report
February 2025

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.

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Introduction

Since the 2021 coup attempt, enrollment in Karen schools has surged by 56.6%—from 89,879 students to 140,732 in just three years. This remarkable expansion reflects a deliberate political and social realignment as families increasingly choose the Karen education system's democratic vision over Myanmar's increasingly militarized state-run schools. In this contested landscape, educational choice has become an act of self-determination, with communities consistently prioritizing a system built on mother-tongue instruction that accommodates Karen communities alongside Mon, Pa'O, Burmese, Dawei, Muslim, Hindu, and other groups.

This research documents how Karen teachers sustain education amid conflict, illuminating both their pedagogical innovations and the structural supports needed to strengthen the system's foundations. 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 study examines teacher experiences across four interconnected domains: emotional and psychosocial dimensions, physical safety, teaching and learning, and community-parent relations.

The study's methodological framework used a participatory mixed-methods design guided by a Research Advisory Committee of education department leaders and civil society organizations. Data collection integrated school-level surveys, focus group discussions with teachers, interviews with educational leadership, classroom observations across educational levels, and analysis of longitudinal system data. This approach positions teachers not as subjects of evaluation but as knowledge-holders and agents of educational resilience—a recognition of their fundamental role in educational continuity.

The report reveals communities' enduring commitment to education even in Kawthoolei's most remote and conflict-affected areas. Through innovative mobilization of diaspora networks and strategic adaptations to security threats, the Karen education system reaches children who would otherwise be left without access to learning during humanitarian crisis. Yet the sustainability of this vital educational lifeline depends on addressing teachers' basic needs. By amplifying the voices of those maintaining education in these contested spaces, this research seeks to engage policymakers, international partners, and civil society

in strengthening a system that has not only survived generations of challenge but continues to expand its reach to children who need it most.

Sample

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. Schools represented a range of both urban and rural (remote) communities.

Group/Instrument	Total	Male	Female
Teachers (Survey & FGD)	39	16	23
Teacher trainers (KII)	9	7	2
School Principals (KII)	8	5	3
Organization Leaders (KII)	5	3	2

Background

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. Karen education operates through a distributed network of community-based schools structured to overcome significant geographic barriers to access amidst ongoing conflict. Due to 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 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.

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 remote communities where resources are more constrained. It is also common for teachers to assume roles as a primary caregiver for children and elderly parents.

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.

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.[1] 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.[2]

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.[3] However, these institutions now increasingly share resources and strategies to meet the needs of displaced students and communities, blurring the definitions between them.

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%).[4] While only 6% of respondents indicated Burmese as their mother tongue, data suggests evolving language patterns, particularly among younger generations and in response to recent displacement.

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

[1] Karen Human Rights Group (2024). Schools Under Attack: Challenges to the right to education in Southeast Burma (June 2023-February 2024).
[2] Karen Peace Support Network (2024, November). *Regaining Our Lands: Report Launch* [Zoom session].
[3] Save the Children. (2016). A Model of Education in Hard-to-Reach Areas: The KTWG Model. Accessed October 24, 2024.
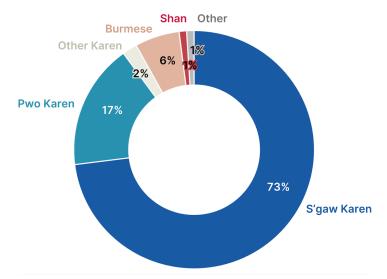[4] Karen Economic Committee and Secretariat. (2023). Karen Socio-Economic Household Survey. Accessed October 24, 2024.

diverse classrooms, particularly with new influxes of students from Karen areas and other Myanmar states and regions, requiring thoughtful adaptation of teaching approaches.

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.

Figure 2. Mother Tongue Languages in Karen State, 2023

Karen Education and Culture Department

KECD serves as the primary education authority within Karen National Union administered areas and has been active since 1947. 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.[5]

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.

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[5] More information about the organizational structure and strategy of KECD can be found at the department's official website: https://kecdktl.org/about-kecd/

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.

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.*

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.*

Karen Teachers Working Group

KTWG, established in 1997, works closely with KECD to support educational delivery across Kawthoolei with a team of 142 staff and teacher trainers. 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 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 of a "sister organization" to KECD.

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. Since the coup attempt, KTWG has shifted resources to prioritize maintenance of educational services and rapid response to humanitarian needs at schools most affected by the conflict.

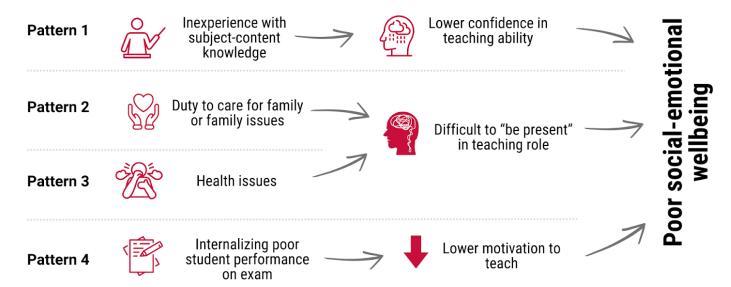# Key Findings

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.

> *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

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

Figure 1. Patterns in Internal Factors for Teacher Social-Emotional Wellbeing

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, teachers reported internalizing test results even if external factors played an oversized role in shaping the outcomes.

A common Karen idiom was used by teachers to describe how they balance their expanded roles during the conflict with their own personal wellbeing:

> ဖဲပဟဲတူၤကိုအဆၢကတီၢ်နှဉ် ပဘဉ်ဟ်တ့ၢ်ပနီၢ်ကစၢ်, ဟံဉ်ဖိဃီဖိတၢ်ဂ့ၢ်ကီဒီး ပကဘဉ်သးစၢၤ်ဆၢလၢ ပကွၢ်ဖိဒီးတၢ်မၤလိအပူၤလီၤ.ဒ်တၢ်ကတိၤဒိစံး—တၢ်ၤတူၤစရိနဲ့ၣ် တၢ်ၤတူၤစရိလီၤ, ညၣ်ကိဉ်စရိနဲ့ၣ်ညၣ်ကိဉ်စရိလီၤ.

> *(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.*

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

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

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 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.
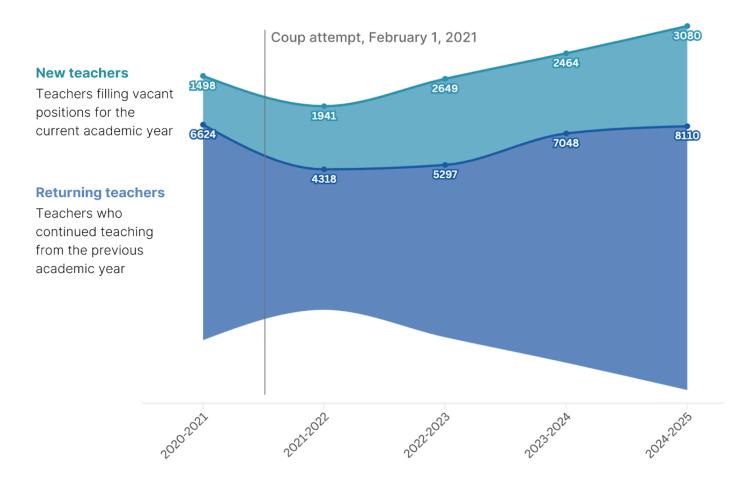
Performance on the Karen Teacher Competency Framework (KTCF) generally aligns with the proportion of new and returning teachers. Mobile teacher trainers, who are responsible for assessing teachers against the KTCF during classroom

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, which shows that across the first three domains of KTCF, 60% of teachers achieved the minimum target. 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 during 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

Figure 2. Proportion of New and Returning Teachers, 2020-2025 Academic Years

Coup attempt, February 1, 2021

New teachers
Teachers filling vacant positions for the current academic year

Returning teachers
Teachers who continued teaching from the previous academic year

New teachers: 1498, 1941, 2649, 2464, 3080
Returning teachers: 6624, 4318, 5297, 7048, 8110

2020-2021, 2021-2022, 2022-2023, 2023-2024, 2024-2025

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.

Recommendations
For All Karen Education Stakeholders

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

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/¥1.17B (representing about $48/¥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 base teacher compensation from the 2024-2025 academic year stipend of $300/¥45,100 to at least $565/¥85,000 in 2025-2026, requiring $7.3M/¥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 year over year since 2022.[6]

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

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[6] Asian Development Bank. 2024. *Asian Development Outlook September 2024*.

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

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.

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, 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

Communities and local leaders take the lead in creating temporary learning shelters when schools face security threats. However, in poorer and more remote communities, even basic shelter materials like tarpaulins are scarce, limiting the effectiveness of these learning environments. Weather-resistant tarpaulins, hygiene and first aid kits, WASH facilities, and improved classroom partitioning would significantly improve learning conditions.

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

Two classes are conducted simultaneously in a semi-permanent school building. Teachers take turns speaking to minimize auditory distractions.

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.