Abu Dhabi, UAE

Introduction

Overview of Education System

The vision of the Ministry of Education (MoE) is to provide an innovative education for a knowledge-based, pioneering, and global society across the United Arab Emirates (UAE). By law, it is compulsory for students to start schooling at age 6 and remain in school until they complete twelfth grade or reach the age of 18, whichever occurs first. Under Economic Vision 2030, the Government of Abu Dhabi announced a long-term plan with a greater focus on knowledge-based industries with a highly skilled, highly productive workforce. The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education were recently merged and are responsible for overall education planning and management from early childhood to graduation.

Within the Emirate of Abu Dhabi three types of educational school provision are available: public, private, and charter schools. The Ministry of Education governs the administrative organization, recruitment, and compensation of staff; curriculum strategy; and resourcing of public schools. The Abu Dhabi Department of Education and Knowledge (ADEK) licenses and regulates the private early childhood education sector and K–12 private schools, including special education schools, and operates the K–12 charter school sector. General education policy and directions are issued by the MoE for all emirates centrally; however, ADEK issues additional emirate-specific policies and directions for private nurseries, private schools, charter schools, and specialized schools that align with national laws and policy.

There are 218 public schools with a student population of 119,261, 80 percent of which are UAE nationals. The remainder are non-native but have Arabic as their first language. Since 2019, 22 charter schools have been established, serving over 30,000 predominately native students in a student-centric education model that provides innovative learning practices in a stimulating environment. Currently there are 203 private schools in Abu Dhabi with UAE nationals accounting for 29 percent of enrollment. The number of students attending private schools has been growing at a compound annual growth rate of 2.4 percent up to 2019.

Exhibit 1 shows the demographics for Abu Dhabi schools.

Exhibit 1: Demographics for Abu Dhabi Schools, Kindergarten/Foundation Stage 2* to Grade 12/Year 13

Indicators	Public Schools	Private Schools	Charter Schools
Number of Schools	218	203	22
Number of Students	119,261	246,752	30,397
Number of UAE Nationals	95,176 (80%)	72,075 (29%)	27,552 (91%)
Number of Expats	24,085 (20%)	174,677 (71%)	2,845 (9%)

Foundation Stage 2 generally corresponds to ages 4 and 5.

The Emirate of Abu Dhabi operates the Irtiqaa inspection program, which evaluates the performance of schools against a framework, incorporates internationally recognized standards, and provides schools with recommendations for improvement. Inspection of public and private schools in Abu Dhabi is guided by the UAE inspection framework, guidelines, and tools that are in line with international best practice.

Public Schools

The MoE has developed a comprehensive United Arab Emirates school framework aligned to international standards named the Emirati School.[1] In public schools, Cycle 1 comprises Grades 1 to 4, Cycle 2 comprises Grades 5 to 8, and Cycle 3 comprises Grades 9 to 12.

The Emirati School provides a set of academic and technical or vocational pathways in the second and third cycle, which offer multiple opportunities for students to enroll in subjects according to their capabilities and preferences. These pathways are identified as General, Professional, and Advanced or Elite courses of study. Opportunities for specialization are also available to students with aptitude for sports, science, religion, or creative arts. In addition to their core study, students can choose to enroll in specialized programs in partnership with innovative and recognized industry leaders in their field.

Charter Schools

The charter school education model is dedicated to public school students currently in Kindergarten to ninth grade in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, and offers an American-based curriculum with English as the language of instruction.[2]

Private Schools

With a growing population and influx of families, the demographic profile of Abu Dhabi is very diverse. Uniquely, the majority of the population are not UAE nationals and may not speak the national language, Arabic; consequently, the demand for schooling choices for families employed in the Emirate has seen a rapid and growing choice of curricula on offer (see Exhibit 2). Private schools, established and licensed across the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, currently offer 14 different curricula. There are also schools that provide International Baccalaureate programs linked to

country-specific curricula. The majority of private schools extend from Kindergarten/Foundation Stage 2 to Grade 12/Year 13.

Exhibit 2: Curricula Offered in Abu Dhabi Private Schools*

Curriculum	Number of Private Schools Offering the Curriculum
American	69
British	56
MoE	44
Indian	29
International Baccalaureate School (IBS)	12
SABIS[a]	5
Canadian	3
French	3
Pakistani	3
Filipino	2
Bangladeshi	1
German	1
Japanese	1
Spanish	1

Schools also may offer one or more of these curricula concurrently or as a stream within the school. Moral Education, UAE Social Studies, and Arabic Language (both for natives and non-natives) are taught universally throughout all schools.

Use and Impact of PIRLS

Abu Dhabi first participated in PIRLS in 2011 as a benchmarking participant, which was the first international reading performance benchmark for the Emirate. In 2016, the Emirate participated again with nationally representative samples from schools that also included participation in the ePIRLS assessment. The UAE Government recognizes the results of high-quality international assessments in the provision of insights and contribution toward improving education quality.

Abu Dhabi has been undergoing significant education and systemic reform to standardize its education models to meet the objectives of the National Agenda. Considering the substantial and ongoing transformations, measuring significant impact could be considered premature. However, Government at the federal and national levels leveraged the results to strategize and promote reading initiatives for all schools and communities. Building on the Abu Dhabi Reads campaign launched in 2013, the month of March is dedicated annually to raising awareness of literacy in the community and in schools.[3]

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[a] See https://www.sabis.net/ for more information.

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Additionally, both the MoE and ADEK have initiated awareness and media campaigns for schools to develop a stronger focus on student agency, school self-evaluation, and the use of formal assessment data. These include professional development policies and capital investment into digital reading programs and resources in both Arabic and English. Furthermore, awareness of international assessments is highlighted in the media in addition to a greater emphasis on the development of holistic literacy skills, particularly in the first language of the student.

The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades

Arabic—Public and Private Schools

The focus of the fourth grade Arabic curriculum is to enable students to determine their reading goals, predict the content of writings, and use a variety of skills to analyze different texts. Students are required to summarize and predict while reading independently from a variety of appropriate resources, including digital and hard copy texts. Other objectives include, but are not limited to, outlining the main idea with supporting details to demonstrate the ability to discern the difference between fact and opinion.

English—Public and Private MoE Schools

The Ministry of Education developed the UAE's English Language Curriculum Framework in line with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) for public schools. The Framework delivers clear outcomes that discern the different levels of English language learning.[4]

The Framework follows a skills-based approach to language learning. The four language skills are addressed separately within the levels, demonstrating alignment across the skills to ensure consolidation and recycling of outcomes. As learners progress through the levels, the outcomes increase in difficulty to reflect the learners' increasing language proficiency. In some cases, strands within the skills may appear or disappear as learning expectations develop across levels.

English—American Private and Charter Schools

All charter schools and American Curriculum schools follow the US Common Core State Standards in primary grades.

The Common Core Standards for Language Arts in the US program for fourth grade broadly cover three skill areas within the domain of Reading: Foundational Skills, Informational Text, and Literature. Foundational Skills focuses on phonics, word recognition, and fluency, while Informational Text and Literature outcomes include identifying key ideas and details, describing style and structure, and integrating knowledge and ideas utilizing a range of texts.[5]

English—The National Curriculum in England

The National Curriculum in England expects that students completing Year 5 (fourth grade) should be able to read aloud a wide range of poetry and books written at an age-appropriate interest level with accuracy and at a reasonable speaking pace. They should be able to prepare readings with appropriate intonation to show their understanding, and should be able to summarize and present a familiar story in their own words. Students are expected to read widely and frequently for pleasure and information. Additionally, the ability to read silently with good understanding, inferring meanings of unfamiliar words followed by discussion of what has been read, is intrinsic to the curriculum.[6]

Professional Development Requirements and Programs

The Educational Professions Licensure System (EPLS)

Teaching licenses became a requirement for education professionals in the UAE at the end of 2020. All principals, vice principals, managers, and teachers working across all public schools in the UAE are required to hold a UAE teacher's license or an internationally recognized license to work legally.

In terms of language requirements, policy states that priority is given to a teacher that has the following:

- A minimum International English Language Testing System (IELTS) academic score of six or equivalent for non-native English speakers and those who have completed their education in a language other than English in any school delivering a curriculum in English
- Preference for being bilingual in Arabic/English or any other language per the school's needs

Public school teachers are required to undertake a minimum annual delivery of 25 hours of professional development. Private schools follow their own internal policy for professional development depending upon the curriculum offered, school governance directives, and school needs analysis. Charter schools develop their own plans for professional development across networks and prioritize areas according to staff and student needs.

Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

In 2021, Standardized Curriculum Assessments (SCA) were mandated across all private schools and charter schools. Four types of assessment are approved for use depending upon the curriculum model followed. These provide a benchmark of reading skills within the English or Arabic component.

Alongside this, some schools opt to use digital literacy packages linked to the standards of their adopted curricula. They in turn encourage students to engage in reading and provide further evidence of progress for reading standards. Formative and summative assessments, informal

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observations, and classroom tests validate and provide data to inform next steps for students, grade levels, and the wider school community.

Special Reading Initiatives

Reading and digital literacy has been identified as a key strategic pillar toward the building of a knowledge-based society. A 10-year national strategic plan for reading was launched in 2016 to foster reading as a daily habit.

The Arab Reading Challenge (ARC) is an Arab literacy initiative designed to develop students' fluency in Arabic and build their critical thinking and analytical skills.[7] ARC challenges students to read as many books as possible in one academic year. The *ADEK Parent Guide to Raising an Avid Reader*, communicated in both Arabic and English, provides parents with key information and strategies to support their child to develop vital reading skills.[8]

Every March, the UAE celebrates a month of reading through various activities and initiatives around the country involving schools and the general public to encourage a love of reading. Abu Dhabi Reads features a multitude of reading- and literature-associated topics, including creative writing, bookmark design, language workshops, storytelling training, and public speaking, as well as puppet shows.[9] Children also have the opportunity to engage in exciting and interactive storytelling sessions presented by UAE-based authors.

Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

All schools in Abu Dhabi were closed physically following a ministerial decree in March 2020, in which it also was announced that all schools were obligated to switch to distance learning (DL). During this time, physical attendance of staff was reduced with the in-school capacity left to the discretion of each school.

In planning for reopening, schools were asked to calculate their physical capacity; based on this capacity, each was able to choose its own reopening model from an option of full face-to-face (FTF) return or four partial return models. The partial models consisted of the following agile options in which any partial model was supplemented by distance learning:

- Half-day
- Alternating day
- Alternating week
- Hybrid alternating

The implementation of the reopening was uniform for all school types, with policies being sufficiently flexible to meet specific requirements. Ongoing arrangements included the

continuation of DL for a portion of students whose parents opted for this learning mode and the continued application of COVID-19 protocols in schools.

The pandemic unveiled areas of focus in policy development such as DL or staff and student well-being, and highlighted the need for the digitization of resources and optimization of knowledge management tools.

The Ministry of Education provided public schools with all resources necessary to implement distance learning successfully while schools were teaching remotely. Central agencies partnered with external providers to create free and accessible online learning platforms so that all public and private school students could successfully transition their learning online. The external providers also created online platforms to allow schools to share teaching and learning resources with their peers. As plans to return to school during academic year 2020–2021 were being made, detailed documents from central agencies also provided guidance on what teaching methods were to be used and which health and safety measures were to be implemented, including the requirement for schools to have a plan for staff and student well-being.

ADEK created an online tutoring program for children of frontline healthcare workers in addition to providing teaching and learning support for Students of Determination (students with special or additional learning needs) through behavioral therapy courses and continued distance learning.

In the area of plans and policies for teaching and learning, private schools were provided with the autonomy to determine what worked best for each but were encouraged nonetheless to focus on the teaching of core subjects. Schools were required to assess students following the closure period and to develop interventions to address learning loss with guidance provided on relevant approaches.

ADEK published a policy to identify areas of learning loss and advise about developing interventions. Schools were encouraged to assess students' learning in a face-to-face context to determine any areas that should be revised or retaught and to integrate these learning losses into the program for the new academic year.

Policy and Practice Changes

In line with international practice, policy advised schools to use diagnostic and formative assessments to identify learning gaps. Schools were advised to conduct formative assessments to evaluate learning for students who continue to stay home and learn by DL. Summative assessments, considered high-stakes and necessary for graduation and college entry, require students to travel to appointed examination sites.[10]

Impact of the Pandemic on PIRLS 2021

A total of 174 schools were sampled for participation in PIRLS 2021, with approximately 8,500 students sampled. The assessment was postponed to a later start in October–November 2021 due to the pandemic.

Since PIRLS needed to be administered in person at school, a survey was conducted to determine some of the challenges faced by students and schools in Abu Dhabi in terms of onsite attendance and their ability to follow safe protocols.

Most computer labs in schools were closed and if there was limited availability of devices in the school, a BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) policy was implemented where students used their own laptop. Where this was not possible, laptops were provided. Training of School Coordinators and Test Administrators was conducted online via Microsoft Teams, and schools worked hard to support the test administration and communicate its importance to parents.

To observe social distancing, most schools opted for an extended test window over two to four days to administer the PIRLS assessment, with each test administration generally comprising approximately 20 students.

Suggested Readings

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8   Abu Dhabi Department of Education and Knowledge. (n.d.). *A parent's guide to raising an avid reader.* Retrieved from https://adek.gov.ae/-/media/Project/TAMM/ADEK/A_Parent_Guide_to_Raising_an_Avid_Reader_En_Final.pdf

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