

# Bahrain

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## Introduction

### Overview of Education System

Education is a right guaranteed to all citizens in the Kingdom of Bahrain.<sup>1</sup> Basic education is compulsory for nine years starting from age 6. Both basic and secondary education are free in all public schools; however, parents might choose to educate their children in private schools, which are fee-based.

The Kingdom of Bahrain's Economic Vision 2030 aspires to secure a “first-rate education system [that] enables all Bahrainis to fulfil their ambitions.”<sup>2</sup> It is believed that education is an important principal to developing a “just, thriving society”;<sup>3</sup> hence, much attention has been given to the education system especially in the last decade, and several education initiatives and projects have taken place. Examples include the Digital Empowerment Project; the restructuring of the Ministry of Education (2020); and, importantly, the formation of the Supreme Council for the Development of Education and Training (SCDET), which was established in 2015 and chaired by His Highness Shaikh Mohammed bin Mubarak Al Khalifa, Deputy Prime Minister.<sup>4</sup> This council oversees the continuous development of education and training in the Kingdom and seeks to improve the quality of education by setting policies and strategies, and outlining national education standards, to ensure that they match international expectations.<sup>5</sup>

The Ministry of Education (MoE) in Bahrain is the official responsible body for developing and implementing education policies for public schools, determining the general objectives of basic and secondary education, and determining instruction time for all subjects.<sup>6</sup>

The public/government school system in Bahrain consists of nine years of basic education for students ages 6 to 15. Basic education includes two main stages of education: the Primary Stage, which includes Cycle 1 (Grades 1 to 3) and Cycle 2 (Grades 4 to 6), and the Intermediate (Middle) Stage, which includes Cycle 3 (Grades 7 to 9). Together, these three cycles of basic education constitute compulsory education as stipulated in Bahrain education law.<sup>7</sup>

Secondary education lasts for three years (Grades 10 to 12), over which two systems are offered: a unified academic track (scientific, literary, and commercial) and a technical and vocational track. Successful students are granted a general secondary certificate at the end of the secondary stage in each of their majors.

Public schools in Bahrain are segregated by gender; male teachers teach boys and female teachers teach girls, except in primary schools where most primary boys' schools have female teaching staff. In 2020, there were 204 public schools (101 girls' schools and 103 boys' schools) enrolling a total of 146,950 students, of which 73,531 were girls and 73,419 were boys. There are eight types of public schools: 106 primary schools, 23 primary/intermediate schools, 34 intermediate schools, 1 intermediate/secondary school, 29 secondary schools, 1 comprehensive school (caters to all age groups in Grades 1 to 12), 5 vocational schools (secondary schools designed to provide vocational education or technical training), and 3 religious institutes (boys' schools that have Islamic studies as the core education component while also providing general education).<sup>8</sup>

There were 79 private schools that operated independently but were licensed by the Directorate of Licensing and Follow-Up of Private Schools. Private schools are often coeducational. They are divided into three types: national schools, foreign schools, and foreign community schools. Although private schools operate independently, their curriculum and textbooks are approved by the Directorate of Curricula. Additionally, all private schools must use the Ministry-approved national curriculum and textbooks for Arabic language for Arab students, Islamic studies for Muslim students, history, and geography of Bahrain for all students.

Policy decisions for the development of education usually are discussed and approved by higher level political authorities (the Cabinet, SCDET, the parliament, and the Ministry of Education Leadership [Council of Undersecretaries]). The policies are implemented by schools and other related directorates. Executive policies usually are created and specified by designated bodies within the Ministry. For example, if the policy is related to curricula, often it is articulated by the curricula directorate in collaboration with educators from various supporting directorates and bodies after approving the overall concept by the Council of Undersecretaries.

Public school systems operate with a centralized approach overall. For example, teachers, leaders, and administrators in schools and even at the Ministry directorates are employed centrally by the civil service bureau; however, detailed criteria and procedures for the employment process are created by the Ministry's human resources (HR) department. After teachers are hired, the HR department at MoE places them at schools based on schools' needs. The Directorate of Curricula is responsible for developing, reviewing, and adapting curricula and textbooks of all subjects taught in public schools. The development and adaptations are carried out with consideration of national and global events and changes. Hence, students in public schools are exposed to the same curriculum and similar resources. Additionally, the Educational Supervision center provides support to teachers in their teaching methods and pedagogy. Teachers also are exposed to various professional development opportunities, some of which are developed centrally by the Training and Career Development Directorate to satisfy the needs of teachers in the system, while others are developed based on schools' needs.

Teacher preparation programs are also centralized and delivered by Bahrain Teachers College, which provides a Bachelor's of Education degree (BEd) for secondary school graduates who are

interested in pursuing a teaching career in addition to a postgraduate diploma in education (PGDE) for educators who already have their bachelor's degree in various subject areas. Hence, the expected level of entry for teachers is assumed to be consistent.

According to Article 4 of Law No. 27 of 2005 with respect to education, “The ministry is the responsible body for directing the educational system in the country, drawing its policy within the framework determined by the Kingdom, supervising its progress, determining its quality standards, and cooperating with other public and private bodies and institutions for its development and linking it to the needs of the individuals and society.”<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, in 2015, the Supreme Council for the Development of Education and Training was established and chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister. This council plays a central role in “[s]etting policies, strategies, and outlining national education standards, to ensure that they match international expectations.”<sup>10</sup>

The Arabic Language Curriculum Document for Basic Education states that at the end of third grade, students will have achieved a basic proficiency level in reading.<sup>11</sup> The education policies in Bahrain focus on students' proficiency of the reading skill in the basic education stage, third grade in particular. This grade represents an important transitional stage in the student's life, which equips the student with core competencies needed to guarantee a good start in life. Additionally, third grade marks the end of Cycle 1, the first cycle in compulsory education.

### Use and Impact of PIRLS

Bahrain first participated in the PIRLS study in 2016. A total of 182 schools participated (121 public schools and 61 private schools). The overall average score was 446. The average score for girls was 468, which was higher than the average score for boys (424). The results encouraged schools to work on improving students' reading skills and also encouraged the Ministry to review several policies related to reading literacy and to work on the development of teaching and learning in that area.<sup>a</sup> Several initiatives and developments took place, including:

- Developing the Arabic language curriculum document in a way that enhances the learners' acquisition of reading competencies and considers comprehension processes an essential element in designing reading activities that target reading comprehension in the developed books
- Preparing a Literacy Standards document that defines specific indicators to measure learners' performance in Arabic language competencies
- Authoring Cycle 1 textbooks with emphasis on:
  - Children's literature as an entry point for learning reading
  - Comprehension processes for better learning progress

<sup>a</sup> Discussed in the newspapers *Al-Watan* and *Al-Ayyam*.

- Including “comprehension processes” in professional development programs for teachers and textbooks authors
- Implementing the *Iqra’a (Read)* project, which evolved from the allocation of 15 minutes of daily reading time only for primary schools to a 30-minute daily reading period for all primary and intermediate schools (Cycle 1, Cycle 2, and Cycle 3) three times a week for reading in Arabic and two times a week for reading in English (plus one optional time per week for reading in French for intermediate schools that implement the French Language Teaching Project). Additionally, this project also was implemented in general secondary education and technical and vocational education (Cycle 4) through allocating an additional two periods a week, one for Arabic reading and one for English reading. This project is believed to have contributed to the spread of reading culture among students. It also motivated them to diversify their reading materials and helped them develop their own experiences in understanding and evaluating what they read.

## The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades

The Arabic Language/Reading Curriculum for fourth grade is based on several basic competencies and standards that develop students’ performance in reading. Students start with a limited or partial understanding of what they read and gradually, with the guidance of the teacher, can derive the apparent meanings of the messages they read and use a limited number of reading strategies. Competencies develop until students can show an excellent understanding of what they read from texts and books, so they extract the most important events, ideas, and explicit meanings, and infer some implicit meanings based on textual clues that they choose in light of their previous reading experiences and life experiences. In addition, students learn to diversify their reading strategies to derive what was learned in class.

The curriculum in each of the first and second semesters is characterized by teaching narrative texts that achieve the elements of the triad, or three stages, structure in narrative discourse (beginning, middle [climax], and end), which are selected from the writings in biographies, stories, novels, children’s stories, etc. This is in addition to two poetic texts in each subtheme.<sup>12</sup>

The Arabic Language Literacy Standards Document emanating from the Arabic Language Curriculum Document for Basic Education defines the reading standards for the fourth grade of primary education as follows:

- Construct meaning for the text, showing understanding of reading communication
- Employ various reading techniques to develop linguistic repertoire and enrich and expand reading communication
- Analyze the structure of the text and determine its basic elements, indicating their implications on constructing the meaning of the text and its indications

- Employ library and research skills to enrich and expand reading communication, using a variety of reading sources such as visual aids and electronic media
- Evaluate procedures in constructing the meanings of texts

Reading in the fourth grade is taught through the Arabic language textbook, which was developed by including a set of literary and informational texts where the reading comprehension questions are formed according to the gradation of different comprehension processes, with learners trained to classify texts according to their patterns and show their qualitative elements.<sup>13</sup>

## Professional Development Requirements and Programs

The Ministry of Education seeks professional development for teachers, as they represent one of the pillars of education development in Bahrain. Organized training is designed and supervised by the Training and Career Development Directorate in cooperation with the Directorate of Educational Supervision and the Curriculum Directorate. One of the most important requirements for professional development for newly recruited teachers for Cycle 2 is to design training programs for them, such as Teaching for Learning 1, 2, with approximately 25 credit hours approved by the Training Directorate. Educational Supervision Directorate specialists also provide teachers with a set of supervisory methods that aim to raise professional competence in the specialized subject in relation to reading comprehension, analysis of poetic texts, and teaching writing.

Continual professional development programs in language and reading available for new teachers of fourth grade are conducted through the following:

- Determining teachers' training needs by reviewing the training plan of the Training and Career Development Directorate
- Preparing induction programs for new teachers
- Designing training programs by Educational Supervision and curriculum directorates to enhance teachers' professional competence
- Localizing training in schools through training workshops in Arabic language competencies and teaching strategies for teachers, provided by senior and middle leadership

## Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

To monitor student progress in reading, teachers tend to use several methods and techniques. One technique is classroom observations, which are explained in the *Teacher's Guide for Evaluation Methods* as follows: "the extent to which student interacts with the educational process through careful listening and paying attention to teacher's explanation, his eagerness towards positive discussion, and his collaboration with colleagues in group work & participatory work in completing classroom activities and assignments."<sup>14</sup>

Teachers in Bahrain's schools motivate their students through working together to design brochures that guide students on how to focus and improve their level of observation and critical thinking. At the beginning of each semester, teachers also conduct diagnostic tests that measure students' level of knowledge and the extent to which they possess basic competencies for learning, and then provide them with constructive feedback.

## Assessments and Examinations

Article 4 of the Educational Evaluation Law (the education evaluation system document for basic education) specifies the types of educational assessment as follows:

- Formative assessment (30 percent). In evaluating students, the teacher employs various assessment methods that are appropriate to each student's academic level and that meet the requirements of the learning situation to measure and evaluate the different competencies, skills, values, and trends. The educational assessment system determined the relative weights of the formative assessment methods for the Arabic language in Cycles 2 and 3 (see Exhibit 1).

**Exhibit 1: Relative Weights of Formative Assessment Methods for the Arabic Language (Cycles 2 and 3)**

Regular Classroom Observations		Projects and Reports		Quizzes	Student's Portfolio	Total
Classroom Behavior	Practical Performance	Project/ Report	Oral Presentation			
5%	5%	4%	2%	10%	4%	30%

- Summative assessment. The educational evaluation system for basic education specifies two types of summative assessment:
  - Initial summative assessment (20 percent) refers to a midterm examination for the first and second semesters. These examinations test the learner's performance in the curriculum content preceding the midterm examination.
  - Final summative assessment (30 percent) refers to final examinations, which are examinations that test the learner's performance in the curriculum content over the entire semester.
- Distribution of midterm and final examination scores for the Arabic language for the fourth grade (first part of the examination). Two hours are allocated for this first part of the examination (see Exhibit 2).

**Exhibit 2: Grade 4 Midterm and Final Assessment/Examination Scoring Distribution (Part 1)**

Examination Section	Score
Listening	15
Writing	20
Dictation	10
Calligraphy/handwriting	5



- Distribution of midterm and final examination scores for the Arabic language for the fourth grade (second part of the examination). Two hours are allocated for the second part (see Exhibit 3).

**Exhibit 3: Grade 4 Midterm and Final Assessment/Examination Scoring Distribution (Part 2)**

Examination Section	Score
(Seen) poetic text	The total score for the examination should be 50 (60% of the score for reading and 40% for grammar).
External (unseen) prose text	The total score for the examination should be 50 (60% of the score for reading and 40% for grammar).
External (unseen) poetic text	The total score for the examination should be 50 (60% of the score for reading and 40% for grammar).

## Special Reading Initiatives

In an effort to develop the teaching and learning of reading in the basic education stage, the Ministry of Education in Bahrain has implemented a series of successive initiatives:

- My Arabic Library is a project adopted by the Ministry of Education since the 2005–2006 academic year in cooperation with the international publishing house Scholastic. It establishes classroom libraries in primary schools and equips them with a variety of books and stories that deal with different topics and include international stories aimed at enriching students' knowledge and information, providing them with positive human values, developing their reading skills, and motivating them to read.
- The Shared Reading program targets Cycle 1 grades (Grades 1 to 3) and implements Shared Reading for classes by providing 23 books for Cycle 1. A Shared Reading guide (in the process of final review) is being prepared and includes:
  - A description of the procedures for implementing a Shared Reading program in schools
  - A detailed plan for the proposed Shared Reading activities over a full week
  - Distribution of a series of Shared Reading books for Cycle 1 grades
  - Samples of Shared Reading activities for three books to guide the teacher in designing learning activities for the rest of the Shared Reading books
  - A selection of reading strategies appropriate to the students' level and the Shared Reading situation
- Training courses have been conducted on reading strategies, comprehension processes, and Shared Reading.
- The "Read" project is conducted in schools for the purposes of promoting lifelong learning and developing a positive attitude among students toward reading; providing them with knowledge and skills they need in their academic and social lives; and supporting their learning to create opportunities for a better future.

- The Arab Reading Challenge is an Arabic reading competition with participating students from Grades 1 to 12 schools across the Arab world. The competition starts every year in September and continues until the end of March. Students work through five stages of the competition by reading 10 books and summarizing their content in the challenge passports. Upon completion of the reading and summarizing, the final stage of elimination commences according to set criteria. The eliminations are done among schools, education zones, and Arab countries until the finals, which are held annually in Dubai in October.<sup>15</sup>

The most important initiatives of the Ministry of Education for outstanding students focus on providing special programs, such as the care for gifted and talented students program. This program began in 1996–1997 and comprises several programs, including the development of scientific research skills, creative problem solving, the Future Dialogues program, and building self-esteem programs. This program is in addition to strengthening the students' leadership roles at school, inside and outside the classroom, and engaging them in local competitions.

As for initiatives for students with low achievement, the Ministry of Education has implemented the Remedial Classes Project in addition to special programs for students with learning difficulties. The objectives are to guarantee the right of all groups of students to education and equal learning opportunities and achieve the principle of equal opportunities by providing special education services to students in this category and to support the education process. The project also aims to address education problems and provide remedial classes in core subjects with a focus on basic skills. The Ministry of Education also seeks to qualify teachers, education staff, and administrative staff to engage with lower-performing students. Hence, it offers training programs to conduct tests, apply standards, and interpret results to discover students in this category. This is in addition to communicating with parents in education meetings and honoring outstanding students by the Ministry of Education.

With regard to teaching Arabic to speakers of other languages, in addition to the extra support provided by Arabic language teachers in schools, it is worth noting that an integrated program has been implemented since the 2012–2013 academic year to support low-achieving students in the Arabic language. This program uses four levels (introductory, first, second, and third levels) of the I Love Arabic series designed and published by the Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States (ABEGS). The series contains suitable learning materials for the needs of the students and is appropriate for their knowledge and psychomotor levels.

## Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

### Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The first COVID-19 case in Bahrain was detected in February 2020. Based on the directives of the Coordination Committee headed by His Royal Highness Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, Crown Prince, Deputy Supreme Commander and First Deputy Prime Minister (at that time), the



Ministry of Education announced the immediate suspension of studies in public and private schools and Kindergartens for a period of two weeks, starting on Wednesday, February 26, 2020, as a precautionary measure to ensure the safety of students.<sup>16</sup> All schools, Kindergartens, universities, and other learning institutes stayed closed until the end of that academic year (June 2020). The education system quickly shifted to a new form to overcome the challenge of school closures, and the Ministry of Education worked immediately on preparing teachers and all its employees for online learning. On March 22, 2020, only 50 percent of school staff were allowed to be physically on school premises while 100 percent of students were at home. Thus, remote instruction started. The Ministry encouraged public schools to use platforms such as the Ministry's education portal, an application created by the Ministry, YouTube, and educational TV channels. Centralized synchronized online lessons also were provided for secondary schools through Microsoft Teams. This was combined with training education staff to produce electronic lessons and digital enrichment materials that facilitated distance learning for the students, including methodological guides that covered all aspects related to distance learning and blended learning, and the provision of central digital lessons for various education levels that were uploaded daily and broadcast on the TV channel and 14 YouTube channels, including a channel dedicated to students with special needs. Students' performance was evaluated through the implementation of standardized assessment to measure specific educational competencies and skills.<sup>17</sup>

Schools then reopened in October 2020 with the continuation of online learning. Schools gradually began to receive students who chose face-to-face learning provided that the Ministry's preventive measures to protect students and staff were taken. However, if COVID-19 cases were detected in schools, they would be closed for a period of two weeks as a precautionary measure while online learning continued in Bahrain.

During the precautionary period, when all schools in Bahrain completely relied on distance learning, increasing numbers of enrichment materials were designed and uploaded to the Ministry's education portal. The Ministry also has formed 45 working teams to prepare and upload model lessons for all subjects and grades. The prepared lessons should:

- Exhibit scientific accuracy of the content taught and conform with the curriculum content
- Exhibit language accuracy
- Include interactive activities in the lesson
- Maintain the lesson sequence (recognizing, applying, evaluating)
- Consider the lesson's time frame
- Use applications and software programs available to the learner
- Consider the lesson's feasibility in the two types of distance education (synchronous and asynchronous)
- Include functional audio and visual aids and effects

- Employ the applications offered by distance learning platforms when designing learning and assessment activities
- Consider intellectual property rights when designing the content

In addition to the services already available on the Ministry's education portal, the Ministry was able to prepare, through working teams and schools, many educational activities and materials for students of different education levels to benefit from. In fact, 8,016 digital lessons have been prepared for different subjects, and there have been more than 3,352 televised lessons, 402 special needs lessons, and 324 audio recordings. Moreover, 14 YouTube channels have been opened with 9,340 lessons, 23 learning units, and 14 support media, in addition to a partnership contract with Microsoft to present centralized lessons and train 1,611 educators or specialists.

Schools also provided support to students by uploading enrichment activities (according to different categories of students' abilities, such as high achievers, low achievers, or speakers of other languages) and reinforcing basic skills through remedial classes.

Support was provided to primary school teachers through seminars about the subject of specialization, remote training courses about methods of remote assessment of students, and workshops on how to actively utilize the Ministry's education portal.

### Impact of the Pandemic on Student Learning

As schools around the world began to close in early 2020 and started the switch to remote learning, quality assurance measures were suspended in many countries. In so many ways during the pandemic, Bahrain acted quickly and decisively in responding to the emerging public health situation. From moving to online learning, codifying public health measures, and performing antigen testing in schools, keeping children safe and ensuring that learning opportunities were not interrupted were forefront in the response efforts.

The Bahrain Education and Training Quality Authority (BQA) also responded very early on in the pandemic to ensure that quality reviews could continue in some form, understanding the balance between the need for independent quality checks and the huge pressure that educators were facing. BQA devised and put into use an Exceptional Review Framework to review school readiness to offer online or hybrid education. The exceptional reviews conducted highlighted the following:

1. Schools set operational plans to organize resources to respond to online and hybrid teaching.
2. Schools implemented appropriate health and safety emergency plans for students and faculty members who were physically present.
3. Schools provided the necessary procedures to support students.
4. Schools devised strategies and digital educational resources to ensure continuity of provision.

The reviews conducted under the Exceptional Review Framework measured the ability of the reviewed entities to adapt to distance learning and training; they did not measure the quality of the education provided as the normal reviews do. The results published show that of the 44 public schools that were reviewed, 95.5 percent achieved an A rating, and of the 17 private schools who were reviewed, 94 percent achieved an A rating. The A rating indicated a high adaptability to distance learning and/or training.<sup>18</sup>

### **Policy and Practice Changes**

In response to decisions issued by the Government Executive Committee and based on the recommendations of the National Medical Taskforce, the Ministry of Education announced an operational strategy for public and private educational institutions adopted in line with the COVID-19 Alert Level Traffic Light System (see Exhibit 4). The resolution adopted a model incorporating both in-person and remote learning with the decision to return to in-person learning left to the discretion of students' legal guardians.

The operational strategy allows schools to provide safe in-person learning for students under the Green, Yellow, and Orange Alert Levels. Under the Red Alert Level, all educational institutions must transition to remote learning.

Under the Green Alert Level, 100 percent of students are allowed to attend in-person lessons. Maximum capacity is reduced to 50 percent under the Yellow Alert Level and to 30 percent under the Orange Alert Level, with consistent use of social distancing of at least 0.5 meter under the Green Alert Level and 1 meter under the Yellow and Orange Alert Levels.

The number of staff permitted to return to work in person depends on the staffing levels required to ensure a continuity of operations. The staffing levels of private educational institutions are subject to their discretion.<sup>19</sup>

**Exhibit 4: COVID-19 Alert Level Traffic Light System**

	Red Level	Orange Level	Yellow Level	Green Level
In-person attendance	All educational institutions must transition to remote learning.	An optional decision to return to in-person learning is left to the discretion of students' legal guardians with consistent use of social distancing of at least 1 meter.		An optional decision to return to in-person learning is left to the discretion of students' legal guardians with consistent use of social distancing of at least 0.5 meter.
Maximum capacity	—	Maximum 30%	Maximum 50%	100%
Number of staff permitted to work in person	Public educational institutions	Depends on the staffing levels required to ensure a continuity of operations.		
	Private educational institutions	The staffing levels are subject to their discretion.		

Adhering to the necessary COVID-19 prevention and mitigation measures at all levels of the 'COVID-19 Alert Level Traffic Light System' reduces transmission rates and safeguards public health.

### Impact of the Pandemic on PIRLS 2021

During the originally scheduled time for PIRLS main data collection, the number of COVID-19 cases increased dramatically, and parents refused to send their children to schools. Hence, only a few private schools were able to administer the assessment during the original time frame (March–April 2021). Since most schools were not able to follow the original schedule, the study was postponed to the beginning of the new academic year (September 2021). The Ministry ensured that students of the sampled classes were kept in the same group and in the same school with the same teachers. Parents were informed of this process during the summer and were encouraged to agree on the arrangements done to facilitate students' presence on assessment day. Antigen tests were administered to students before entering the assessment hall, and makeup sessions were allowed for students who were infected with the virus and were not able to attend the main assessment session. It is also worth noting that some students were out of the country and attended their classes solely online, while others moved to their home country and left their school in Bahrain. This happened more in private schools and thus impacted the overall response rate.

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