

Dubai, UAE

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Introduction

Overview of Education System

The Emirate of Dubai has a unique, rich, and highly diverse education landscape, offering a complete education system for all from Kindergarten through higher education that is free for residents of Dubai through public schools, colleges, and universities. In addition, the Emirate licenses more than 210 private schools, which implement 18 different international curricula. Within Dubai itself, more than 50 languages are commonly spoken. English is the most common, whereas Arabic remains the national language and is used by local citizens and other residents of Arab heritage.

The Ministry of Education is responsible for regulating both the licensing of and the standards within Dubai public schools. The Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) organization, established in 2007, is responsible for the same across all private schools, the 200 private early childhood centers, and the many private higher education establishments.

In 2008, KHDA launched the Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau to define and measure education quality in order to support the improvement of education at the school and policy levels.^a

Use and Impact of PIRLS

In 2011, Dubai's public and private schools participated in PIRLS for the first time. Over the next five years, private school students exhibited significant gains in achievement. The average reading score of 490 in 2011 increased to 527 in 2016, with consistent progress across each subdomain of the assessment.

Across the different private school curricula, students from National Curriculum for England schools scored most highly on average in 2016 (555). Students attending International Baccalaureate (IB) schools (554) and Indian curriculum schools (537) followed. Only students attending schools delivering a United States (US) or United Arab Emirates (UAE) Ministry of

^a For details, see <https://beta.khda.gov.ae/en/Resources/KHDA%E2%80%99s-data-statistics>

Education curriculum scored, on average, below the international benchmark center point (500) at 466 and 428, respectively.

Effective school use of PIRLS data and other international assessments to support student achievement and enhance teaching and learning is encouraged by KHDA and, until 2020, has been monitored through its annual inspection of schools. Over the two years leading up to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the KHDA-mandated school assessments also have contributed empirical data to reflect the range of reading skill across schools. When seen alongside PIRLS data, the results show a similar pattern. Many students demonstrate good reading and literacy development, but groups of students in some schools have skill levels in reading several years below their reading age. This demonstrably limits access to higher-order thinking and learning for these students and makes rapid and sustained progress across an entire curriculum highly challenging. Significant and interrelated outcome differentials in reading literacy are associated with gender and curriculum, and between Emirati and non-Emirati students.

Dubai is committed to continuing to improve schools and to working with the community to enable a better future for all citizens and residents, and to achieve the individual and national goals outlined in UAE Centennial Vision 2071.^b Education and policy regulators recognize that reading as a lifelong learning skill, both in English and in Arabic, is the primary key to achieving the ambitious targets set out in this new vision.

The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades

Reading Policy

When launching a focus on reading as a national priority in 2016, His Highness Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, President of the UAE, reminded the country that the first verse in the Holy Quran is “Read.” He said:

“As a nation, we have a goal to create and strengthen a generation of lifelong readers, who enjoy books and contribute to a knowledge-based society. Supporting such a high ideal requires both skills and positive attitudes to reading.”

In the same year, coinciding with the UAE National Year of Reading, the federal government launched a 10-year National Plan for Reading intended to encourage children and adults to make reading a habit and a lifestyle by 2026. Public and private schools are expected to drive this national agenda over the 10-year period.

^b For more information, see <https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/strategies-initiatives-and-awards/federal-governments-strategies-and-plans/uae-centennial-2071>

The National Plan for Reading^c has six objectives:

1. Place importance on the role of the family and society in improving the reading behavior of individuals.
2. Upgrade academic and evaluation systems and practices to fully support the promotion of reading.
3. Effectively utilize the media to disseminate information about the national reading strategy.
4. Provide an environment that is conducive to reading at work.
5. Build the right systems and infrastructure required to boost learning.
6. Improve the quality of reading materials in the UAE.

The plan continues to be a national priority, embedded as it is within the regulatory evaluation and support frameworks overseen by both the Ministry of Education and KHDA.

Inspections of private schools in Dubai from 2016 until the pandemic in 2020 presented reading as a learning skill. It was evaluated as a comprehensive, stand-alone project across all phases and in all key subjects. Over those four years, inspection reports and school documentation clearly illustrate a more coherent and strategic approach to improving reading in schools evaluated as “good,” “very good,” or “outstanding.” This approach was seen across all phases from enhanced and impactful learning in the use of phonics and early reading in early years to post-16 (Years 12 and 13) library provision and use.

In 2018, KHDA published an early review of the National Plan for Reading, *An Overview of the Development of Reading in Private Schools in Dubai*,^d with five key foci. The following three are especially pertinent to primary education:

- How well are schools assessing reading?
- Are schools explicitly teaching reading strategies and skills to empower young students’ independent reading development?
- What are student skills, habits, and perceptions about their own reading?

The methodology underpinning the review used case studies from 30 Dubai private schools representing seven of the key curricula. It also included quantitative data from a reading study across both public and private schools, quantitative data from KHDA inspections of private schools, and summative data from well-being surveys from students in Grades 6 to 9.

Many schools are using external or standardized reading assessments, some of which are commercial products that include books and reading checks, online or in print. Others are standardized assessments of reading or phonics that may or may not have been explicitly linked to the school’s curriculum. Almost all schools make purposeful use of the reading component of the

^c For more information, see <https://www.moec.gov.ae/en/-/%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A1%D8%A9>

^d Knowledge and Human Development Authority. (2018). *An Overview of the Development of Reading in Private Schools in Dubai*.

KHDA-mandated international benchmark assessments, although the effective use of bespoke external or standardized reading assessments are far more prevalent in schools evaluated during inspection as “good” to “outstanding.”

“Learning to read” software was available to students in a majority of the Grade 1 to 3 schools surveyed. E-readers were found in many schools, either in class or in libraries, and sometimes were used to meet the developmental needs of individual students. Designated class time for teachers to read to students and to model reading fluency, prediction, and diction appears to be well-established at the early years and early primary levels. This simple practice both nurtures fluency in reading for native speakers and greatly benefits students reading in another language.

Parent and student surveys illuminate some interesting differences in perception about reading habits and skills. While a majority of older students report that they read regularly for pleasure, a much higher proportion of parents believed that their children did this. Ninety-six percent of students reported that they read, with understanding, very well in English, with no significant gender or group differences. Parents also felt that reading English as a skill was promoted well, especially in National Curriculum for England and IB schools, but did not feel efforts to read in Arabic were promoted as well.

Overall, the review found that school leaders are almost unanimous in their pledge to build on early successes in their own schools, PIRLS, and other international benchmarks to promote reading effectively. The case studies were particularly insightful with their opportunities to engage with school leaders and fully understand their drive and practice for reading instruction.

School leaders in Dubai see the value of the following:

- A culture of reading that is not event based, but a daily practice for enjoyment and academic purpose in both English and Arabic
- Systematic reading development within a specific, targeted policy
- A commitment to literacy development schoolwide
- A structured approach to early literacy, decoding, phonics, and comprehension in the first four years of schooling
- Provision for second language learners and for dyslexia
- Assessment using the right tools, giving students a real chance of making rapid progress from the correct starting point
- Purposeful planning and time-bound interventions with specific goals, using correct and evidence-based strategies
- Valid monitoring of progress in reading through different and appropriate means
- Training staff in literacy teaching strategies including that of motivating children to enjoy reading
- Appointed experts in language, literacy, and library studies
- Fully resourced provision for both English and Arabic

It is through the awareness, commitment, and dedication of Dubai school leaders that the National Plan for Reading will continue to result in authentic, rapid gains in reading literacy for children.

At the time of writing, both KHDA and the Ministry of Education are reflecting upon how best to move forward, in a postpandemic era, with respect to both engagement with and evaluation of schools. There is no doubt that reading as a lifelong learning skill, both in English and Arabic, will remain high on the agenda. Indeed, at the time of writing, the education community is looking for any learning gaps (including reading skills) that might be a direct or indirect result of the pandemic. When such a review is completed, all policies, including the National Plan for Reading, will be examined thoroughly to better serve the agenda of improving reading and general literacy across the landscape of the new normal.

Summary of National Curricula in Fourth Grade

Private schools use different curricula to teach English language and reading. The diversity of more than 18 curricula in Dubai private schools leads to an equal diversity in their respective approaches for teaching English language, and to developing reading specifically. By contrast, the teaching of Arabic and reading in Arabic is similar across the public and private school systems.

For the four most prevalent curricula in Dubai private schools, relevant standards for English language in fourth grade (Year 5) are outlined below.

- National Curriculum for England (NCfE) schools—The reading program for Year 5 (fourth grade) in private schools implementing the NCfE includes knowledge, skills, and understanding in the following areas: reading with fluency, accuracy, understanding, and enjoyment; developing phonemic awareness and phonic knowledge to decode and encode words; using grammatical understanding and knowledge of the content and context of texts; reading for information; reading texts with greater accuracy, understanding, and familiarity with the characteristics of different types of text; developing understanding of a wide range of literary genres; and reading nonfiction and other nonliterary texts, including print and Information and Communications Technology-based informational texts, dictionaries, encyclopedias, and other reference materials.^e
- International Baccalaureate (IB) schools—Expectations for achievement in reading at IB schools consider the range of language learning situations that exist in IB Primary Years Programme schools, which include fourth grade.^f The reading strand of the language curriculum is summarized through a list of overall expectations comprising generic statements that broadly encapsulate the expected learning. Like the other strands, reading is

^e For more information, see https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/335186/PRIMARY_national_curriculum_-_English_220714.pdf

^f For more information, see <https://www.ibo.org/programmes/primary-years-programme/>

considered from both the receptive aspect (receiving and constructing meaning) and the expressive aspect (creating and sharing meaning).

- United States schools—Based on the English Language Arts (ELA) standards of the state of California, the fourth grade reading program for US schools focuses on the following areas: word analysis, fluency, and systematic vocabulary development; reading comprehension; and literacy response and analysis.^g Schools in Dubai following a US curriculum may use the standards of a state other than California, but each school uses the same core reading competencies. Many schools in Dubai still base their reading curricula on selected textbooks rather than on specific and defined state reading standards.
- Indian schools—The reading program for fourth grade in Indian schools aims to develop students' communication skills and improve their command of language. In addition to classes in English (language and literature), students also may study Arabic, French, and Hindi. The curriculum, considered both from a receptive and an expressive aspect, focuses on the following areas: word analysis, fluency, and systematic vocabulary development; reading comprehension; and literacy response and analysis.^h

Professional Development Requirements and Programs

Teacher Preparation

For teachers in public schools, teacher education in Dubai follows the national model provided by the UAE Ministry of Education. Teachers in public schools must complete an average of four years of university level study at an education college or a specialist college. Studies in education colleges are largely pedagogical; therefore, graduates may teach Grades 1 to 6 only. For teachers in private schools, core expectations are similar.

In 2017, the UAE introduced the pilot phase of the Teachers' Licensing System (TLS), which was codeveloped by the National Qualifications Authority, the Ministry of Education, KHDA, the Department of Education and Knowledge, and the Abu Dhabi Centre for Technical and Vocational Education Training. Intended to become a requirement by the end of 2020, the teacher's license must be held by all principals, vice principals, managers, and teachers working in any UAE school. To obtain the license, candidates must complete an online profile and upload their relevant attested documentation, then pass two tests, one in pedagogy and the other in the specialization of the applicant teacher.

The optimal pedagogy associated with the development of reading skills in students, particularly in young learners, is addressed in Standard 3 of the TLS assessment. There are also assessment items even more explicitly linked to the UAE national agenda priorities, including reading and national outcomes in international benchmark assessments.

^g For more information, see www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/documents/elacontentstnds.pdf

^h For more information, see <http://cbse.nic.in/newsite/index.html>

Teacher Professional Development

Professional development requirements for reading teachers vary depending on which curriculum is used by the school. Private and public schools that invest in ongoing professional development secure higher rates of student achievement in all communication skills.

Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

Public schools follow the UAE national system of assessment, which includes midyear and end-of-year examinations in Grades 1 to 12. End-of-year examinations are taken throughout Dubai and are linked to the Ministry of Education’s objectives. Most of these examinations are in print or electronic format for Grades 9 and 10, and only a few schools require performance assessments. Beyond the national examination system, public schools in Dubai do not have a formal process for monitoring student progress in reading.

According to the Ministry of Education examination system, students in Grades 1 to 9 are promoted to the next grade automatically. However, students who do not achieve 50 percent of the total examination score are enrolled in a remedial program after diagnostic testing. Students who fail again after completing the remedial program enroll in another remedial program at the beginning of the following school year to support their learning in the next grade.

Private schools throughout Dubai adopt the monitoring and assessment procedures that pertain to their curriculum to suit the needs of the student population. For example, most schools implementing the National Curriculum for England (NCfE) adopt the associated curriculum’s assessment processes.

NCfE, International Baccalaureate, and Indian schools also participate in external national or international examinations based on the curriculum they offer. US schools use a range of internal assessment tools, and the upper grade levels at some schools participate in international benchmark tests for further and higher education placement. Since September 2021, KHDA has been actively promoting a recognized reading program and assessment process to develop and track reading skills in private school students in primary and secondary grades.

Special Reading Initiatives

Beyond the UAE Year of Reading

On the directive of the United Arab Emirates president, His Highness Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Cabinet approved the declaration of 2016 as the UAE Year of Reading because “reading is the basic skill for a new generation of scientists, intellectuals, and innovators.”ⁱ The

ⁱ For more information, see <https://www.uaecabinet.ae/en/details/news/mohammed-bin-rashid-on-presidents-directives-2016-is-uae-reading-year>

Cabinet also issued directives to prepare for an integrated national literacy strategy and a framework that will help produce a generation of readers.

In support of this directive, the Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and ruler of Dubai, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, issued orders to implement immediate preparations for an integrated national literacy strategy and a framework to produce a generation of readers within the UAE. This was done by a committee who also managed and supervised the efforts of the Year of Reading.

The 10-year National Strategy for Reading program aims to raise reading participation rates to 80 percent for students and 50 percent for adults. A commitment of AED 100 million supported a reading festival in October 2016 and the first UAE Month of Reading in March 2017.

Promoting Early and Accurate Identification and Appropriate Intervention for Students with Special Education Needs

Identifying and providing for students with special education needs has been embedded in policy frameworks since 2018, making it one of the highest priorities across Dubai private schools. This includes using diagnostic testing to identify students with general or specific learning difficulties that are associated with reading as a skill. It is clear that the more successful private schools, typically those evaluated as “very good” and “outstanding” during inspection, use diagnostic testing results to establish focused support for students with reading difficulties from the early primary grades onward.

Resources for Students with Reading Difficulties

KHDA promotes an inclusive, equitable model of education. Therefore, in almost all schools, students with reading difficulties participate in mainstream classrooms, supported by an assistant where required. In early years and in lower primary grades, this may be supplemented by more intensive separate one-to-one support by a teacher suitably qualified in literacy and language development. Some private schools implement early identification procedures and provide individual education plans to support students. Where provided, specialists from outside the school may be consulted and engaged to help students with reading difficulties in a setting outside of the classroom. In public schools, students who fail internal tests may receive additional support in preparation for Ministry examinations. Repetition of failed years is still common practice in some public schools, particularly at the end of Cycle 2 (Grades 6 to 9) and the early stage of Cycle 3 (Grades 10 to 12).

Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

To ensure student and staff safety at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the UAE Cabinet announced that all schools in the country should switch to online delivery of lessons for the remainder of the 2019–2020 academic year, with the aim of ensuring that student learning continue uninterrupted.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, KHDA has aimed to provide clear communication and ongoing support for the education community as it came together to help all families access distance learning. Through the InThisTogetherDubai initiative, public and private sector organizations united to provide resources to support parents’ and teachers’ mental health, as well as help with student learning. What Works, the KHDA-run collaborative professional development program for leaders and teachers, switched to online delivery under the new moniker of What Works X.

The updated What Works X format featured teachers and school leaders from across Dubai keen to share their best practices and engage with others on similar topics. Online positive parenting workshops helped parents support their children’s at-home education while helping them to focus on their own mental and physical health. Inspectors at the Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau contacted schools to learn more about their readiness for distance learning and to lend support where needed. These and other initiatives were aimed at ensuring schools remained supported and connected to KHDA and to other schools and practitioners in Dubai.

In March 2020, private schools in Dubai switched to distance learning and gradually blended distance and in-school learning. Students returned to full-time face-to-face learning at the beginning of the following academic year in September 2021. Although almost all students opted to return to school at that time, a small number chose to continue with distance learning.

Engaging with KHDA, schools prioritized additional support for the youngest children, for whom screen-based distance learning offered the greatest challenge, and in primary and secondary settings for students who had moderate to high special education needs (identified as students of determination in Dubai).

Enthused by the sharing of best practices through What Works X and other platforms, schools adopted a range of supportive measures to ensure that the most vulnerable children and students receive appropriate well-being and academic support while learning from home. This included:

- promoting nonscreen, kinesthetic, and creative activities for children and students to align more appropriately with their learning styles;
- ensuring that relevant staff maintain their focus on supporting the well-being of students and working very closely with their parents;

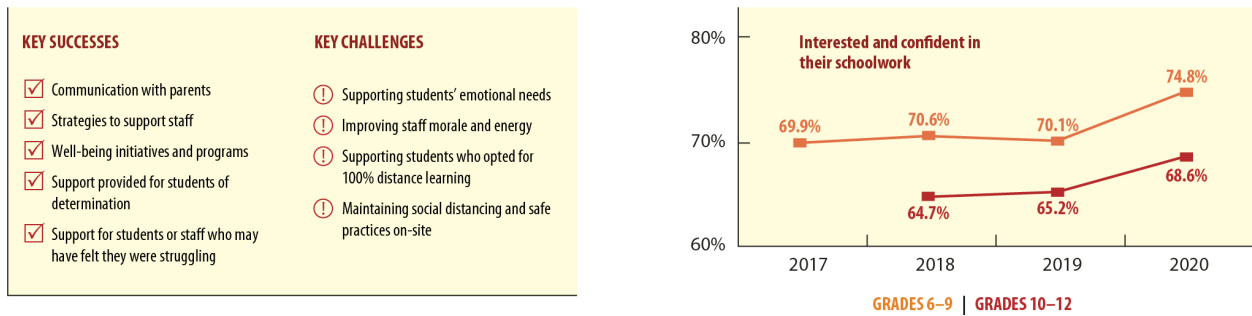
- recording and sharing lessons with children and students so that they are able to learn and practice skills at their own pace; and
- providing and enabling the use of online tools such as Immersive Reader.

Impact of the Pandemic on Student Learning

KHDA actively encouraged schools to partner with families throughout the pandemic. Many schools now report that parental engagement has never been stronger or more effective in ensuring that everyone has been working toward the well-being and rapid developmental progress of children and students. Furthermore, KHDA conducted a survey of all parents with children enrolled in Dubai private schools to get their opinions on their children’s education. Nearly 74,000 parents completed the survey between January and May 2021.

In March 2021, KHDA organized focus group interviews with school owners, principals, and parents on how they see the future of schooling in Dubai. Guided by the outcomes of the focus group meetings, KHDA conducted a reflection and review exercise that comprised a questionnaire for all 210 Dubai private schools and follow-up discussions with a sample of 50 schools. Exhibit 1 shows the key successes and challenges that the reflection and review exercise identified.

Exhibit 1: Reflection and Review Exercise Findings



Interestingly, in spite of the many challenges caused by distance and blended learning over an 18-month period, the percentage of students who remained interested and confident in their schoolwork in the annual survey actually increased in the first year of the pandemic.

Policy and Practice Changes^j

During the height of the pandemic, many schools took it upon themselves to ensure that access to a distance or blended learning experience was equitable. Government-approved telecommunications companies also supported this goal. Furthermore, in some situations, schools were given funds for additional technology infrastructure (networks, tablets, and laptops) to ensure 100 percent access by children and students. This especially helped large families whose

^j For more information, see https://beta.khda.gov.ae/getattachment/73bfe2df-acc7-4768-ad8b-04557f5293db/20211013102107_Community_First_En.pdf

children attended relatively low-fee private schools and who were themselves struggling financially.

Most schools took regular surveys of parents, students, and teachers and used the findings to fine-tune their strategies to support student learning. Results suggest that many schools were also highly effective in supporting students who were feeling they were struggling in the new paradigm.

During the early days of distance learning, teachers reported that students were missing out on interactions with their peers and extracurricular activities and were spending too much time in front of screens. Since then, schools have made considerable efforts to address these and other matters through several strategies such as the following:

- Developing innovative ways to promote students' engagement in their learning. An example is a peer teaching program in which older students provide support to younger students.
- Ensuring that students have access to different types of support. These include peer-led "first aid" in well-being, availability of school counselors, personal time with teachers, and a variety of well-being-based initiatives and programs.
- Providing time for online student interaction outside lessons and offering online programs that promote physical activity.
- Providing struggling students with one-to-one academic support or afterschool support classes.
- Encouraging and following up on attendance and engagement for students doing distance learning.
- Preparing students to reintegrate with each other on their return to the classroom by doing project work and team exercises.

Since March 2020, schools have become even more central to their communities, especially in the ways they have promoted and enhanced the well-being of students, staff, and parents. Several important considerations have arisen from the experiences of the past 18 months:

- Going forward, schools could envision how some of the well-being practices that have developed during the pandemic might be woven into the daily fabric of school life, regardless of the modality of learning chosen. A well-being-enabled learning community is more likely to be a resilient and happy community.
- Parents are now more involved in their children's learning. Schools could find ways to ensure that this positive involvement is maintained and developed.
- The wider education community needs to reflect on the structures and practices that have supported school leaders' and teachers' well-being during the pandemic to maintain and develop further opportunities.

The significant and often innovative steps taken by schools in the use of distance learning have accelerated progress in this field. In many cases, professional development was provided to teachers in a "just in time" mode to cope with rapidly changing expectations. Teachers responded

positively to the challenges, and they are now far more confident in their ability to use distance learning.

Schools now have an opportunity to further develop and refine the use of distance and blended learning to enable students to make greater progress in all areas of the curriculum. Educators can maintain the momentum and positive energy around teachers' professional development and how leadership is distributed within schools. They can consider how distance learning can be planned as a bespoke practice, using artificial intelligence and other technologies to support teachers' work and ensure a more engaging learning experience. Finally, they can reflect and build on the significant learning acquired during the pandemic to provide more equitable access to students and enhance the financial resilience of schools.

Suggested Readings

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