Qatar

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Introduction

Overview of Education System

Education is one of the most critical pillars in Qatar's vision of a diversified, knowledge-based economy and a prosperous future for its citizens. The Ministry's goal is to produce confident, self-reliant, and hardworking critical thinkers. Students will graduate with 21st-century skills and values, and will be prepared to succeed in higher education, in the workforce, and in life.

The Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MOEHE) is the government entity charged with supporting and regulating education in Qatar. That includes a full array of K–12 public and private schools and high-quality institutions of higher education. The Ministry is led by Her Excellency Ms. Buthaina Bint Ali Al Jabr Al Nuaimi, Minister of Education and Higher Education appointed in 2021. Major Ministry responsibilities are as follows:

- Develop education policies to achieve success
- Continuously monitor and incorporate best practices and evidence-based research—within the Qatari cultural and social context—to improve teaching and learning
- License private schools
- Provide a variety of scholarships to qualified Qatari students attending colleges and universities
- Qualify institutions of higher education eligible for Qatari scholarships
- Recruit, train, support, and license public school teachers
- Set curriculum standards for mathematics, science, English, Arabic, and Islamic studies for all public K–12 schools[1]

Because reading is one of the most important skills, students receive formal reading instruction as part of the Arabic language curriculum beginning at age 6 during the first grade of primary school and throughout compulsory schooling (through the preparatory stage). Arabic is taught using an integrated curriculum to ensure the unity of the language and to achieve balance across various language skills.

Use and Impact of PIRLS

The main contribution of PIRLS to education in Qatar has been informing the Ministry of Education and Higher Education about the reading achievement of fourth grade students. Data

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from PIRLS 2006, 2011, and 2016 have provided evidence for focusing on an early start for reading instruction, early interventions for struggling learners, and emphasizing reading throughout the primary level. Supported by PIRLS data and frameworks, the International Assessment Section at the Ministry of Education and Higher Education developed a plan to define, classify, and compare international standards with national standards or educational reality, students' levels, and the effectiveness of educational resources used in the field.

Because PIRLS is conducted every five years, Qatar's participation in PIRLS 2006, 2011, and 2016 enabled the country to track its progress in fourth grade reading performance over time.

The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades

Summary of National Curriculum Covered in Fourth Grade

The Curriculum and Learning Resources Department is responsible for reviewing and developing K–12 curriculum that enables students to pursue higher education or enter the global labor market without the need for additional supporting programs. The Curriculum and Learning Resources Department supports the achievement of Qatar National Vision 2030 in areas of research, creativity, and innovation through devising a well-developed curriculum that aligns modern teaching strategies and pedagogy with content and e-learning methods to support student learning. The Department maintains close contact with the different departments of the Ministry to develop K–12 curriculum content. The Department, in collaboration with other authorities, promotes the values and culture of Qatari society.[2]

The Curriculum and Learning Resources Department has developed the content for the fourth grade Arabic curriculum building on content provided for Grades 1 to 4. The curriculum comprises the following strands: listening and responding, speaking to communicate and interact, reading strategies and responding, and writing strategies and composing. In addition, word knowledge is taught by integrating vocabulary into the main strands. The curriculum standards are grouped into topics within each strand. National tests devote different levels of emphasis to different topics. Exhibit 1 shows the distribution of emphasis given to topics in the Arabic curriculum for fourth grade.

Exhibit 1: Arabic Curriculum Content and Assessment Weightings for Grade 4

Content	Assessment Weighting
Listening and responding	15%
Speaking to communicate and interact	20%
Reading strategies and responding	25%
Writing strategies and composing	25%
Word knowledge (taught by integrating it into the main strands)	15%

The Arabic curriculum is divided into three major domains: Words and Sentences, Listening and Speaking, and Reading and Writing. The Reading and Writing domain aims to develop students' silent and oral reading abilities, allowing them to express their ideas fluently. Qatar's curriculum standards for Reading and Writing performance for students in schools state that by the end of fourth grade, students should be able to:

- Scan texts to identify key sections, paragraphs, and words
- Identify connective words that signal time and indicate sequence
- Read correctly, adding or deleting words, or changing the emphasis on letters of a word
- Read a variety of texts comprehensively and fluently using the rules of Arabic phonetics, a clear voice when reading aloud, and a reasonable speed when reading silently
- Perform tasks that promote the acquisition of a broader vocabulary and linguistic understanding
- Recognize and understand the roles of theme, plot, setting, dialogue, direct and reported speech, rhyme, rhythm, assonance, emotive language, and similes in prose and poetry
- Identify instructions or procedures, typical language, and organizational features
- Read, understand, and discuss a variety of nonfiction texts
- Retell stories or relate information from reading
- Write continuous texts that link purpose to form, story openings, portraits of characters, short sequences of dialogue, and longer stories
- Locate, extract, evaluate, and synthesize information within a text
- Identify the main idea of hard copy and electronic texts

According to the curriculum standards for the Arabic language reading strategies and responding strand, at the end of fourth grade, students should be able to:

- Develop reading strategies:
  - Use various strategies to correct mistakes (e.g., intonation, spelling, grammar, context) during reading
  - Read aloud using punctuation (e.g., full stops, commas, question marks) to deliver the intended meaning of a text
  - Scan a text to identify key sections, paragraphs, vocabulary, and information
  - Read texts using a computer and the internet
  - Use alphabetically ordered vocabulary located in dictionaries
  - Identify linking words and understand their purpose (i.e., to link sentences and show sequence)
- Develop reading comprehension strategies:
  - Identify the key topic in a text
  - Identify the plot and general atmosphere of texts, including poetry

- o Identify dialogue type, the imperative tense, questions, and exclamations
- o Identify direct and indirect style
- o Identify rhyme and the use of metaphorical language
- Read nonfiction texts:
  - o Identify and distinguish instructions or procedures in a text (e.g., directions)
  - o Understand that a clear title may reveal the aim of instructional texts
  - o Organize a text in its logical order and use linking words that show the sequence of actions
- Read and comprehend informational texts:
  - o Expand upon knowledge gained in previous classes regarding the features of the informational text
  - o Compare texts that provide similar information from different points of view
- Explain and interpret texts:
  - o Read various texts regarding common topics
  - o Use cause and effect and related vocabulary (e.g., "because," "so," "that is why")
  - o Read and understand key ideas and details in age-appropriate texts[3,4]

(For more details, please review the Arabic and English student textbooks, student exercise book, and teacher manuals.[5,6,7,8,9])

The Ministry of Education and Higher Education provides teachers with educational resources related to teaching reading, including newspapers, magazines, tape recorders, and televisions in addition to a range of reading texts, workbooks, and other learning materials and supplementary resources. In addition to reading books in school, students have opportunities to read and view texts through modern means of communication such as interactive whiteboards, data show screens and projectors, televisions and computers that are available in all schools, and the internet.

Students identified as having reading difficulties may receive support from a special needs educator or teacher, depending on the severity of difficulty. Schools specifically employ teachers for students with reading difficulties because teachers with special education training are not likely to be trained as reading specialists. Special education teachers are expected to collaborate with general classroom teachers to best meet these students' needs. In schools that administer individualized diagnostic reading assessments, general classroom teachers collaborate with the school-based individual needs coordinator to implement the primary service delivery system, which identifies strategies for differentiated reading instruction. If this system does not meet students' needs, the level of service or intervention is increased so the students receive more targeted attention, usually from an intervention specialist. In such cases, an individual education plan specifically describes the services or interventions to be provided.

Parents' Integrated Role

To complete what teachers start at school, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education expects parents to further support their children's learning by:

- Becoming familiar with the learning resources for each subject, especially reading, reviewing them with their children and pointing out the advantages and benefits of their use, especially in the elementary stage
- Encouraging their children to read their textbooks at home and to complete exercises and activities included in the books
- Reviewing the reading passages and the pages that have been assigned as homework
- Providing an environment that encourages reading at home by reviewing texts and reading them with their children

Professional Development Requirements and Programs

Holding teachers to high standards is at the heart of successful schools. The Ministry recruits, licenses, and supports teachers in a variety of ways, including investing substantial resources for teacher education and development. Qatar is committed to continuous improvement of education by incorporating best practices and standards from around the world—while always ensuring these improvements are compatible with Qatari values and culture.[10]

The Training and Educational Development Center

The Training and Educational Development Center seeks to invest in human resources as the cornerstone for sustainable development through the implementation of the second goal of the Ministry of Education Strategic Plan, "enhancing the professional development of highly qualified and trained workforce for the education sector," and through meeting the second strategic objective of said goal, "enhancing the efficiency of teachers and school leaders."[11]

Requirements for Ongoing Professional Development in Language and Reading for Teachers

Language teachers must have a bachelor's degree in language to teach reading to fourth grade students. While Qatar has no specific requirements or preparation for teaching of the reading curriculum as part of teacher preservice education, language teachers are provided with special training to teach reading. In addition, the professional license is an oriented system to develop teacher performance. To obtain the professional license, the teacher should participate in professional development regularly.[12]

Teachers go through a series of training programs that aim to strengthen their abilities in teaching and delivering information. The Training and Educational Development Center plays a major role in designing professional development workshops, allowing teachers to keep up with the latest teaching, school leadership, and management techniques. The center also advises school

administrators on the design and content of their own professional development plans, approves schools' plans, and provides support as needed. Also, teachers from different schools make classroom visits to enrich their experience.

Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

Evaluation is a critical process to building a world-class education system that meets the growing needs of the country. High standards and guiding capacity are integral to a growing and robust system. In Qatar, all aspects of the education system are evaluated—students, teachers, and schools.

The evaluation process is based on predefined criteria established by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education. Parents depend on the evaluation of schools to make decisions regarding the education of their children. Schools rely on this evaluation to improve deficiencies. Decision makers, education researchers, and investors rely on evaluations to make informed decisions.[13] The Ministry of Education and Higher Education deploys a number of systems to assess students' performance throughout their academic journey. These systems include formative classroom assessment, midterm and final examinations, high school examinations, and national and international assessments. The aim of these integrated assessments is to identify students' academic achievement levels, deficiencies, and remedial plans based on well-established scientific fundamentals.[14]

Teachers continually assess reading progress in fourth grade students with quizzes, participation, projects, presentations, and oral and written work. In addition, teachers use an informal observation process with feedback to develop the performance of themselves and the students. They use the results of classroom tests and national or regional assessments in identifying students' performance levels to develop lesson plans and design examinations and other educational materials.

Special Reading Initiatives

Based on the students' assessment results, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, in cooperation with school language teachers and librarians, has implemented a range of reading initiatives that include the following:

- The My Library Is the Heart of My School program, adopted as part of the reading program by the Office of Her Excellency Shiekha Hind Bin Hamad Al-Thani, aims to foster the value of books and to promote the culture of reading by providing students with two special reading classes per month. The coordinators of the Learning Resources Centers at schools cooperate with Arabic teachers to select the stories for the program, conduct analyses of them, and organize appropriate activities for students based on them.
- The annual Spelling Bee competition aims to enable students to use Arabic vocabulary correctly when writing, reading, and speaking. The competition is aligned with the national

curriculum standards, with seven standards selected from the third grade and nine standards from the fourth grade.

- Reading Olympiad is considered one of the most important national activities to spread the culture of reading among students in Qatari schools.
- Effective participation in annual book fairs.

Schools organize regular visits to Qatar National Library (QNL), which provides an inspirational learning space for children to not only fall in love with reading but also explore their curiosity by engaging with the library's space and collections. QNL Children's Library offers the following:

- A collection of more than 100,000 children's books
- Ebooks and electronic educational games available through QNL's online resources[a]
- Educational toys that develop children's sensorimotor skills by getting them involved in fun activities

QNL hosts numerous activities for children and their families, such as:

- Interactive story time
- Creative workshops
- Early literacy programs
- Book discussions
- Science, arts, literature, and theater programs
- Workshops for parents, educators, and caregivers on child development and learning, among many other topics
- Programs and activities for children with special needs conducted by experts and specialists

QNL librarians are dedicated to serving the needs of children and their families by being available to answer any questions related to the collection and other library resources. QNL also has an excellent collection of resources for parents, caregivers, and educators dealing with various aspects of childcare.[15]

Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

During the spread of the COVID-19 virus, Minister of Education and Higher Education H. E. Dr. Mohammed Abdul Wahid Al-Hammadi sent a message reassuring teachers and all members of the education system in Qatar about the efforts made to develop a distance learning plan so students would not be affected by the closure of schools and universities and could complete the school year.

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[a] See https://www.qnl.qa/en/children-and-teens/children/online-resources for more information.

Since the announcement of the closure of all public and private schools and universities due to the COVID-19 pandemic on March 10, 2020, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education has been working on effective plans and alternatives for various levels and classes to ensure that all students continue their education and complete their school year. In this context, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education has provided a distance learning platform for students and parents in government schools.[16]

The Ministry launched a Distance Learning Portal to facilitate and support all distance learning services, enable students to access sample questions in an audited question bank, and enable students to send inquiries directly to teachers and receive answers in addition to detailed explanations of the study material.

Through its collaborations with the telecommunications networks in Qatar, the Ministry has provided computers, tablets, laptops, and hundreds of broadband devices for internet access to students who needed them for home-based learning. In addition, two free-to-air educational television channels were set up in affiliation with Qatar TV—Education 1 and Education 2. This was made possible under Qatar Media Corporation's (QMC) social responsibility initiative to help ease students' transitions from learning in a physical classroom to online learning.

One of the first major initiatives introduced by the Ministry to support students' distance learning was the establishment of a new educational channel on YouTube titled "Qatar's Distance Learning," which serves Grades K to 12. This channel is divided into 19 YouTube subchannels, providing educational material for all subjects and grades, as well as material for adult learners and students with special needs or disabilities. To support further communication among teachers, students, and parents, the Ministry has instructed schools to utilize Microsoft Teams (MS Teams), which allows immediate and direct contact.

During this exceptional period, the Ministry has maintained its continual institutionalized system of school evaluation from Grades 4 to 11. That includes final examinations for twelfth grade students in public schools as well as students enrolled in adult and evening classes.

Final examinations for academic year 2019–2020 were conducted under special arrangements to ensure the safety of all students, teachers, and other staff members. Preparations were made by the Ministry to maintain over three meters between each person. Accordingly, examinations were held either in classrooms that allowed only eight students inside at one time or in big halls such as indoor sports venues, where only 40 students were seated at one time. Medical personnel ensured each student underwent a physical examination upon entering the classroom. Health observers and supervisors were on-site to ensure social distancing. All staff wore masks and gloves as a precautionary step for the duration of the tests. The Ministry also provided isolation rooms at examination sites in case any student showed any symptoms.

The Ministry of Education and Higher Education announced changes to its previous back-to-school plan for the 2020–2021 academic year. The new plan applied blended learning during the first semester of the academic year. A combination of online and classroom-based learning was

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implemented in all stages of education across preschools, public and private schools, and higher education institutions. This move came after close coordination with the Ministry of Public Health (MOPH) on the necessary precautionary measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, as well as on the virus infection rates in Qatar. It also aimed to mitigate the academic consequences of the school closures and the delayed start of the academic year.

Based on the new approach, students attended school one to three times a week, with a maximum attendance rate of 30 percent of school capacity per day. This allowed students to attend basic classes and conduct laboratory experiments and tests. To comply with health and social distancing requirements, schools separated students into groups of no more than 15 in each classroom. Desks were arranged to keep a safe distance of 1.5 meters between students in the classroom. Distance learning has occurred on the days when students do not attend school based on each school's schedule.

According to the blended learning model, students take the mid-semester and end-of-semester examinations on school premises. Schools are responsible for planning the examination schedules to ensure that physical distancing is maintained.

During the first three days of the new school year (September 1–3), schools should introduce students to the precautionary measures that must be observed while on the school campus. It is important for all schools to comply with the instructions issued by the Ministry's Health and Safety Department on COVID-19 precautionary measures. Relevant leaflets and brochures should be distributed to students and parents at the beginning of the academic year.

Moreover, schools should arrange to provide students with the rotational attendance schedules for the first semester, which should clearly set distance and classroom-based learning days. Students also should be educated about the remote learning system and how to use it smoothly.[17]

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