



Steering Dubai's Education Reform through Incentive and Accountability Drivers

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Introduction: As Dubai has grown over the last two decades, the demand for private education has grown with it, a reflection of the number of expatriates settling in the city and the various curricula on offer to cater to expatriates. Today, 88% of all students attend private schools. Recognizing the need to establish a specific governmental entity to oversee the sector's expansion, the authorities moved to create the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) in 2007.²

Given the city-state's unique context (in which a majority of the population are expatriates, not Emiratis), the immediate challenge for this new public institution was to identify an appropriate approach for regulating a private education sector.

About that time, the *Road Not Travelled* (2008), the World Bank's Education Flagship for the Middle East North Africa, was published. It put forward the hypothesis that education systems in the region could be improved by promoting better governance, the idea being that effective and efficient national policies, programs and services require the improved interaction between government and constituents based on transparency, accountability and participation. It was the central tenets of this approach, dependent essentially on oversight rather than intervention, which appealed to the KHDA and so the policy framework from that report was adopted, adapted, and put into place in Dubai.

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² The Ministry of Education of the UAE remains in charge of the public provision of education.



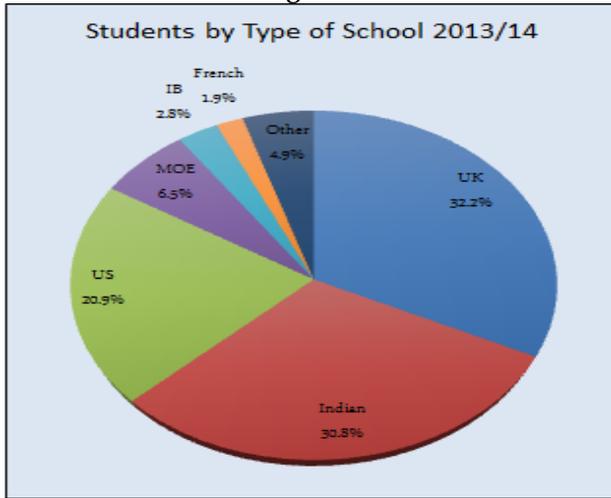
Dubai School Children in Class (2013)

Now, some five years later, the KHDA has returned to the World Bank requesting a review of these governance initiatives. A World Bank team, working in close collaboration with counterparts in the KHDA, and in consultation with the wider stakeholders in question (private school owners, heads, teachers, and parents), has now completed that review and their findings are presented in this report.

An Overview of Dubai's Private Schools: Today, Dubai's private school students (both Emiratis and non-Emiratis) are enrolled in 158 private schools offering a mix of 15 different curricula including for example the Indian, UK, US, UAE, International Baccalaureate, Pakistani, and others (fig.1). The share of students in private education has been increasing steadily (fig.2) -- a trend which is perhaps most surprising for Emirati students -- and will likely continue to remain constant, as private school student numbers in Dubai are increasing at a long-

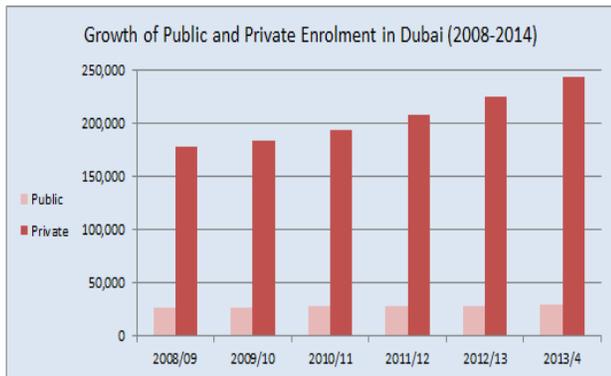
term annual rate now estimated at between 7 and 8 per cent.³

Figure 1



Source: KHDA, March 2014

The Challenge: In the meantime, Dubai’s participation in TIMSS and PIRLS 2007⁴ showed that although student learning was rated higher than other participating MENA countries, it was below the international average in grades 4 and 8 in mathematics and science and reading in grade 4. The results also showed that there was wide variation and disparity across schools offering different curricula and between public and private schools. These results were similar, too, for PISA scores for 15 year olds. Quality, in other words, would be improved in the sub-sector.



³ Estimate from KHDA

⁴ TIMSS stands for *Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study*. It is an internationally comparative assessment of student learning in mathematics and science for students around the world which provides data about trends in mathematics and science achievement over time. It is carried out every four years in Grades 4 and 8. PIRLS stands for *Progress of International Reading and Literacy Study* and is conducted every five years on Grade 4 students.

Ensuring that children in Dubai have access to high quality educational institutions and that they graduate with the knowledge and skills needed for their active participation in a high-value, knowledge-driven economy are two strategic impulses guiding the education initiatives of the KHDA in support of the Dubai Strategic Plan 2015.

The Objective of the World Bank Review: The main objective of the review was to understand what has motivated KHDA’s policy initiatives, what principles have guided design, how they were operationalized, and how they function in real life situations today.

Conclusion: The KHDA has put in place a system that is uniquely adapted to the private education landscape in Dubai. In a sector that includes fifteen distinct curricula, the design of the inspection framework is both generous enough to successfully capture all aspects of the rich diversity of the city-state’s schools, and yet able at the same time to focus attention on the importance of improving education quality across all these kinds of schools. The KHDA approach is entirely transparent, openly accountable, and has strong stakeholder participation – all hallmarks of good governance. It has not only stirred public discussion about the importance of school quality but also more significantly created higher expectations among education consumers and providers.

After just five years in operation, 51% of students are now in good and outstanding schools, compared to 30% at inception, and steady improvement has been seen in overall student achievement in TIMSS and PISA results. There is nevertheless much to be done. Many schools still remain only ‘acceptable’ and so KHDA must continue to work to refine the system to help incite them to improve. How can KHDA do this? How can KHDA continue to enhance the accountability mechanisms and procedures in play?

The findings reveal that the complex, interrelated elements of the KHDA approach, while working, could be leveraged to greater advantage:

- Disseminating information on all aspects of the system has generally had the intended result of improving accountability: school ratings, in particular, one of the key

elements in the KHDA approach, are useful when they focus attention on, and drive, improvements in quality; policymakers, however, cannot rely exclusively on these means alone because very real constraints, technical or material, may prevent certain schools from improving.

- The incentive mechanism in place, where schools may increase their fees if they receive better ratings, might be nuanced: at the moment, it serves only as an incentive to those schools near the cut-off for a higher rating. This is why we suggest that other kinds of incentives might be explored.
- Competition between schools has increased, which is in turn promoting some school improvement, but incompletely: schools that have failed to progress over several years are expressing some discouragement with this aspect of the system.

The road KHDA is traveling is a very significant one because it is demonstrating how innovative governance designs can help a public institution steer an expanding private education sector towards quality improvements. In this respect, there are valuable lessons emerging from Dubai. KHDA's approach represents a new best practice, a solid model worth replicating in other private education markets. As demand for private education increases in many countries around the world, Dubai's experience shows that incentives and competition in a governance-oriented approach to regulation need supplementary measures to ensure that all schools are sufficiently incentivized to participate in the drive towards better quality. Governance reforms rank high on the development agenda of many countries, particularly in regard to service delivery in education, and so KHDA's undertaking stands as a significant venture for Dubai, the Region, indeed all countries interested in the governance of the private provision of education.

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