

The Universal American School Inspection Report

Kindergarten to Grade 12

Report published May 2010

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Explanation of the inspection levels used in the report

Outstanding– exceptionally high quality of performance or practice.

Good – the expected level of quality for every school in Dubai.

Acceptable – the minimum level of acceptability required for Dubai. All key aspects of performance and practice in every school should meet or exceed this level.

Unsatisfactory – quality not yet at the level acceptable for schools in Dubai. Schools will be expected to take urgent measures to improve the quality of any aspect of their performance or practice that is judged at this level.

The Universal American School was inspected in October 2009 as part of the regular inspection of all schools in Dubai. The inspection covered key aspects of the work of the school at all stages. It evaluated students' achievements, the effectiveness of the school, the environment for learning, the school's processes for self-evaluation and capacity for improvement. There was a particular focus on students' progress in Islamic Education (for Muslim students), Arabic, English, mathematics and science.

Basic information about the school

Located in Festival City, The Universal American School is a private school providing education for boys and girls from Kindergarten (KG) to Grade 12, aged three to 17 years. The school was organised into sections including KG, elementary and secondary. For reporting purposes the secondary phase was divided into two sections; middle (Grades 6 to 8) and high (Grades 9 to 12). The school followed an American curriculum and International Baccalaureate (IB). The new Director and the new Head of Secondary School had recently taken up their posts at the start of the academic year. At the time of the inspection, there were 1,036 students on roll. The student attendance reported by the school for the last academic session was good.

Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau analysed responses to on-line questionnaires completed by parents. Almost all parents were positive about most aspects of the school's work. All confirmed that their children enjoyed being at school and almost all believed that the school encouraged students to become independent learners and responsible citizens. Parents were positive about the school's high expectations and the quality of teaching. They stated that their children were treated fairly and that behaviour was good. They appreciated the wide range of activities available to their children. Parents believed their children were kept safe and healthy in a caring environment. The school's communication with parents was generally considered to be good, although a minority of parents did not know of any links by the school with the local community and whether or not the school had addressed the recommendations in the previous report.

How well does the school perform overall?

The Universal American School was a good and improving school. Resources for learning had increased significantly since the school's opening in 2005 and the number of students on roll had grown rapidly. The majority of students in the school had not, therefore, been in the school for the whole of their education and their background experiences were varied.

Attainment and progress in Islamic Education were acceptable in the elementary and secondary school and acceptable in Arabic in the secondary school. In the elementary school, attainment and progress in Arabic were good, as a result of the improved teaching methods in that age phase. Progress in English was good across the school. The majority of children entered the KG with literacy skills below expectations. From this low starting point, students made good progress and attainment levels increased as the students moved through the school. In mathematics, children's attainment on entry to the KG was as expected for their age and they made good progress. In all other grades, students made acceptable progress overall in mathematics and attained broadly age-appropriate standards. In the KG, children made acceptable progress in science. However, in the elementary school, progress and attainment in science were unsatisfactory because there was no sequential development of science skills. In the secondary school, students' attainment and progress improved. In the high school particularly, attainment and progress were good because the school had reviewed the science curriculum and teaching methods, and students were well prepared for the IB Diploma years. Students' attitudes and behaviour, and their economic and environmental understanding were outstanding throughout the school. Their civic and Islamic understanding was outstanding in the high school and good in the rest of the school.

The standards of teaching and learning were good overall with some examples of outstanding teaching. Teachers had good subject knowledge. In the majority of lessons, planning was clear and teachers made good use of information and communication technology (ICT) to enhance learning and stimulate discussion. Teachers regularly planned together, identifying learning objectives but, in some cases, the objectives were not clear regarding what the students should achieve in lessons. Although teachers regularly assessed and kept records of students' work, the data were not always used efficiently to promote learning. Consequently, the work was not always matched to students' capabilities. The curriculum reflected the school's mission statement. It was broadly based and regularly reviewed and offered a wide variety of extra-curricular activities. Provision for student's health and safety was outstanding and the school provided a secure and safe environment for everyone. The quality of support was good. Students' welfare was a high priority. Good tracking of students' learning styles contributed to their outstanding personal and social development. However, the tracking of their academic skills was less thorough. Good support was provided for students with English as an additional language and for those with special educational needs but there was less support to extend higher attaining students.

The Director and the senior managers shared a clear vision for the school, and had made good progress in addressing the recommendations of the previous report. Good systems of governance held the school to account for all aspects of its work. Relationships between the school and parents were outstanding. The accommodation and resources were of high quality.

Key features of the school

- The clarity of vision of senior managers who had the capacity and determination to lead school improvement;
- Good tracking of learning styles that contributed to students' outstanding personal and social development;
- The outstanding relationships between the school and parents;
- The high quality of the accommodation and resources and the provision for students' health and safety;
- The thorough systems for holding the school to account for its work;
- The use of ICT to promote teaching and learning;
- The elementary curriculum did not provide for the sequential development of students' scientific skills.

Recommendations

- Review and improve the curriculum;
 - for science in the elementary school to help raise attainment and progress
 - for the high school to enhance progression opportunities for all students
 - to ensure compliance with the current requirements for Islamic Education in Grades 1 to 3;
- Improve teaching and learning of Arabic in the secondary school to match the improving quality in the elementary school;
- Make more focused use of available data to inform strategic planning.

How good are the students' attainment and progress in key subjects?

Attainment and progress in Islamic Education were acceptable in all stages. In the lower grades, the majority of students adhered to Islamic principles such as the ethics of recitation and veneration of the Prophets. The majority of students could memorise a short Surah of The Holy Qur'an with only a few errors. In higher grades, the majority of non-Arab students could understand the importance of Hadith and its use as a source of Sunnah. With the teachers' support, they could also explain short Surahs of The Holy Qur'an. The majority of Arab students had acceptable knowledge of Islam and adhered to the expected standards of politeness and manners.

Attainment and progress in Arabic ranged between good and acceptable. In the lower grades, students made good progress. Most recognised the verbs and nouns in sentences and some aspects of grammatical construction. Most non-Arab students could name colours and count accurately from one to ten. In higher grades, students made acceptable progress. With the teacher's support, the majority of non-Arab students could read paragraphs and stories.

Attainment in English improved from acceptable to good as students moved through the school and progress was good. Results of standardised tests indicated that students were attaining broadly average levels by Grade 7. In literacy, children's attainment in the KG was below expectations. For example, children made slow progress in letter formation, and did not progress beyond writing single letters. Grade 3 students made good progress in developing literacy skills and were working close to the level expected in US schools. In the middle stages, students developed good speaking and writing skills. This was reflected, not only in their classroom performance, but also in standardised tests. Examination scores in Grades 7 and 8 showed attainment to be average. Students in Grades 10 to 12 demonstrated above average skills in speaking and writing.

Attainment and progress in mathematics were good in KG. Children entered the school with expected levels of attainment and made outstanding gains in their knowledge and skills in measurement. They made least progress in numeracy. In the elementary school, students made acceptable progress. They made better progress in numeracy than they did in data handling because numeracy was taught every day and data handling was repeated at intervals throughout the school. Students in different grades practised the same skills. International test scores showed students' attainment to be around average for their ages. Overall, attainment and progress were acceptable in the middle stages. Higher attaining students demonstrated good mental agility with number but a minority of students relied too much on calculators. At times, they were unaware when incorrectly entered numbers produced implausible answers. Attainment and progress in the high school were acceptable, overall. Students made acceptable progress but others found difficulty with the work set, particularly when teachers' expectations were too high.

Attainment and progress in science were acceptable in KG, where science was embedded within topics and activities. However, in the elementary school, attainment and progress were unsatisfactory. This was because students learned about science through topics that were often based on developing skills in literacy and information retrieval. Students did not learn how to think scientifically or develop their practical skills because there was no sequential development of science skills in the curriculum. In the middle school, students made acceptable progress and attained acceptable levels. They continued to develop their information research skills and could present information clearly and argue logically about science topics. Students in the high school made good progress and attained good standards, particularly in Grade 11 because the pre-IB year had been revised and students had been fully prepared for the first year of the IB Diploma course.

How good is the students' personal and social development?

Attitudes and behaviour were outstanding. Children in KG, and students in all grades, had positive attitudes towards learning. In lessons, they often concentrated on their work for extended periods. Significant numbers of students enthusiastically attended after-school classes to develop sporting and environmental interests. Students arrived punctually at school and overall attendance was good. Behaviour was usually outstanding in lessons and in the open areas of the school. Relationships were outstanding between students, and between students and all adults. Students were confident that the school's counselling services would support them in any difficulty, at school or in wider society.

Students had outstanding attitudes to civic responsibility. They supported numerous charitable activities, at home and overseas, and respected the fine condition of the school building and grounds. Non-Islamic students had a good understanding of Islam and of local traditions and culture. Secondary students described in detail the impact of Islam on everyday life. They had particularly good knowledge of the history of Dubai. Through the student council, they influenced the school community to support charities. Secondary students understood how cultural exchanges between Emirates residents and visitors enriched all communities.

Students actively supported the 'Dubai Cares' project and, in all grades, were aware of Dubai's extraordinarily rapid development. Secondary students described in detail the local effects of the global credit crisis. They knew how to sustain a healthy lifestyle and they actively supported recycling projects and other environmental initiatives.

How good are the teaching and learning?

The quality of teaching and learning was good. Many lessons were characterised by teachers' good subject knowledge and close rapport with students. Staff made good use of ICT, and particularly interactive whiteboards, to add vitality to their lessons. Almost all teachers planned clearly and used resources effectively. However, teaching assistants were occasionally underused. Lesson objectives were a good feature of most lessons but were not always expressed simply enough to help students understand the purpose of activities. Teachers' evaluations of each other's practice and planning contributed to improvements in the overall quality of teaching. There was a good match of work to the capabilities of most students but higher attaining students were not always adequately challenged. The pace of learning was good in KG and acceptable in most other grades. However, sometimes it was too slow to promote faster progress. Teachers often gave a strong lead when encouraging students to share their ideas and experiences.

Students were generally well motivated and keen to do their best. They engaged in their learning well and sometimes extended it for themselves. They accurately evaluated their own progress in learning behaviours. They made good use of ICT for self-study and inquiry. When working with their teachers the interactive whiteboards maintained interest and stimulated dialogue. Children in KG made informed choices about their learning activities. Occasionally, teaching styles did not allow students to use their initiatives or make full contributions to lessons.

Assessment was acceptable. Teachers regularly assessed students' work and moderated their judgements with colleagues. Routine end of module assessments were analysed to show where future planning could be improved. Record keeping was well organised but information was not consistently used to promote faster progress. Students received regular feedback on their work, both orally and in writing, but the variable quality of marking limited improvement. Teachers had good knowledge of students' strengths and weaknesses in learning styles but rarely of their development of subject skills. However, this was improving and good examples were seen in the teaching of students with English as a second language. Teachers encouraged students to self-evaluate their learning approaches but students sometimes lacked a clear view of how to improve their work.

How well does the curriculum meet the educational needs of all students?

The curriculum was broad, balanced and challenging, especially at the secondary stage and closely related to the aims and mission of the school. However, in Grades 1 to 3 it was not compliant with the current regulations for the number of Islamic Education lessons for Arab Muslims. Preparation for participation in the IB programmes influenced the development of the curriculum and the process of curriculum revision was well defined. Many children entered the school with weak English language skills. There was good support for these students, particularly in the early grades. Teachers were assisted by additional specialised staff and special educational needs teachers, as well as through professional development activities, to provide a greater range of instruction methods. This support in the early grades enabled students to meet the demands of the curriculum. The curriculum in the elementary grades had some gaps and repetition in similar teaching units. By the end of the elementary years, students were gaining independence. Teachers provided good advice for students on the transition from the elementary to the secondary school. Middle school teachers and administrators were aware of the demands of the IB Diploma course and were working towards curriculum improvements to prepare students for the challenges of high school. Students in Grade 10 were prepared for the demands of the IB Diploma curriculum in Grades 11 and 12. Extra-curricular activities were numerous and diverse and some had been established at students' requests. Students expressed pride in the opportunities for fund-raising and humanitarian projects, such as 'Dubai Cares'.

How well does the school protect and support students?

The school site and buildings provided a secure and safe environment for students and staff, and were maintained to a very high standard. The swimming pool was fully secured and play areas were adapted to minimise risk of injury. Fire drills were practised regularly. At morning break, and at lunchtime, students in the playgrounds were adequately protected from the sun. School buses were of high quality and supervision of students was well managed. The school's spacious clinic displayed many guides to healthy living and the nurse offered students valuable advice regarding healthy lifestyles. Child protection arrangements were effective and plans were in place to ensure that procedures were formally recorded for the information of future staff.

The quality of support was good. Staff-student relationships were almost always excellent and these were characterised by a relaxed informality and clarity of shared expectations. The school's management structure, the counsellors and support staff gave students' welfare a very high priority. An example of this was the way in which staff tracked students' personal development. The system for tracking learning styles and attitudes was thorough and comprehensive and had a positive impact on students' personal development. The school had recognised the need to improve its systems for tracking academic progress and the development of students' subject-specific skills. The school had begun to analyse information already held on an individual student basis. Some examples of these developments were in KG in English and mathematics and, in the elementary school, in reading. As a consequence, a clearer picture of students' achievements and progress was emerging. Attendance was closely monitored and staff ensured that parents were contacted about unexplained absence.

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How good are the leadership and management of the school?

The quality of leadership and management was good throughout the school. The newly-appointed Director and other senior staff shared a common vision for the school. They were receptive to proposed changes that would contribute to raising standards. All staff showed commitment to the ethos and values of the school and they benefited from a system of teacher observation by senior and middle managers and exemplification of good practice.

Individual teachers used information well to help improve their classroom performance. This contributed to improvement planning which, overall, was acceptable. However, the valuable data generated had yet to be fully deployed in a whole-school system of self-evaluation and review. Senior staff were aware of the potential use of internal data in the improvement process, and of the need to incorporate this more fully into the wider planning process. They had also begun to reinforce the process of refining and disseminating strategic objectives to managers at other levels. Whilst the roles and responsibilities of middle managers included the analysis of performance and the planning of strategies of teaching and learning, these areas did not always include specific and measurable indicators of achievement. Overall, both senior staff and middle managers were aware that further improvements could be made. They acknowledged that the overall process of planning and identifying priorities required further clarification. The school action plan focussed clearly on the recommendations of the previous inspection report. Effective actions had been initiated in each of the main areas.

The school's partnership with parents and the community was outstanding. Parents reported good access to class teachers and senior managers. Regular and detailed communication allowed parents to become closely involved in their children's learning. Effective contacts with business, commerce and higher education were used to facilitate students' learning and careers guidance and linked the school firmly to its context in Dubai.

Governance was good. The school's owners and advisory body, Educational Services Overseas Limited, made certain resources from the wider organisation available to the school. For example, the school was able to use expertise from other schools and benefited from a range of informal partnerships, such as that of the Board with the University of Michigan, to enhance advice and guidance services. In all areas of school operations, the board provided a systematic programme of review, challenge and support. The Director was directly accountable to the board through a clear system of performance management. Parents had direct access to board members and their views were regularly represented through the Parent Teacher Organisation and through the annual surveys of parent, student and staff opinion which were regularly required by the board.

The quality of the staffing, facilities and resources for learning were outstanding. There were sufficient well-qualified staff to meet curriculum needs, and the quality of learning was enhanced through the planned use of teaching assistants. Each of the school's two libraries had a wide range of relevant books, periodicals and newspapers suited to curriculum and research needs and were well used by students. The high quality ICT resources within the libraries were extensively used by students for researching projects and drafting and redrafting work.

Summary of inspection judgements

In their evaluation of the overall effectiveness of the school, the inspection team made judgements about the following aspects of the school's performance.

Four descriptors are: Outstanding; Good; Acceptable; Unsatisfactory.

How good are the students' attainment and progress in Islamic Education?				
Age group:	KG	Elementary	Middle	High
Attainment	Not Applicable	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable
Progress over time	Not Applicable	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable

How good are the students' attainment and progress in Arabic?				
Age group:	KG	Elementary	Middle	High
Attainment	Not Applicable	Good	Acceptable	Acceptable
Progress over time	Not Applicable	Good	Acceptable	Acceptable

How good are the students' attainment and progress in English?				
Age group:	KG	Elementary	Middle	High
Attainment	Acceptable	Acceptable	Good	Good
Progress over time	Good	Good	Good	Good

How good are the students' attainment and progress in mathematics?				
Age group:	KG	Elementary	Middle	High
Attainment	Good	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable
Progress over time	Good	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable

How good are the students' attainment and progress in science?				
Age group:	KG	Elementary	Middle	High
Attainment	Acceptable	Unsatisfactory	Acceptable	Good
Progress over time	Acceptable	Unsatisfactory	Acceptable	Good

How good is the students' personal and social development?				
Age group:	KG	Elementary	Middle	High
Attitudes and behaviour	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding
Islamic, cultural and civic understanding	Good	Good	Good	Outstanding
Economic and environmental understanding	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding

How good are teaching and learning?				
Age group:	KG	Elementary	Middle	High
Teaching for effective learning	Good	Good	Good	Good
Quality of students' learning	Good	Good	Good	Good
Assessment	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable

How well does the curriculum meet the educational needs of all students?				
Age group:	KG	Elementary	Middle	High
Curriculum quality	Good	Good	Good	Good

How well does the school protect and support students?				
Age group:	KG	Elementary	Middle	High
Health and safety	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding
Quality of support	Good	Good	Good	Good

How good are the leadership and management of the school?	
Quality of leadership	Good
Self-evaluation and improvement planning	Acceptable
Partnerships with parents and the community	Outstanding
Governance	Good
Staffing, facilities and resources	Outstanding

How well does the school perform overall?
Good

Next Steps

The school has been asked to prepare an action plan indicating how it will address the main findings of the report, and to share that plan with parents. The next inspection will report on the progress made by the school.

**Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau
Knowledge and Human Development Authority**

How to contact us

If you have a concern or wish to comment on any aspect of this report you should contact: inspection@khda.gov.ae.

More information about Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau can be found at www.khda.gov.ae.

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