

Al Mizhar American Academy for Girls 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 American Academy for Girls was inspected in December 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 Al Mizhar, The American Academy for Girls is a private school providing education for girls from Kindergarten (KG) to Grade 12, aged three to 18 years. The school is licensed to follow an American curriculum. At the time of the inspection, there were 606 students on roll. The student attendance reported by the school for the last academic session was acceptable.

Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau (DSIB) analysed responses to on-line questionnaires completed by parents. Almost all parents reported that they were satisfied with the quality of the school's provision; their daughters liked the school and the range of stimulating activities available. Parents reported that they were happy with the progress in English, mathematics and science, but were less satisfied with their daughters' achievements in Islamic Education and in Arabic. Almost all parents felt that the teaching was good, that staff expected the students to work hard and that they were being encouraged to become independent and responsible people. Almost all agreed that behaviour was good. Most thought that their children were treated fairly at school and that staff showed good concern for their care and welfare. The majority of parents agreed that the school was good at consulting them on decisions affecting their daughter and that they felt comfortable about approaching the school with a question or complaint. Parents were vocal in their support of the school's 'open door' policy enabling easy access to teachers and senior school leaders at all times. Almost all parents agreed that the school was well led, that their children were safe at school and that links with parents were good. Most, however, were unsure about the quality of links with the local community and almost all were unsure about the school's response to the previous DSIB inspection.

How well does the school perform overall?

The school provided a good quality of education. The greatest strength of the school was the quality of students' conduct and their excellent personal demeanour. The girls were self-confident and considerate, with excellent oral communication skills. The school measured its success through comparison with educational standards and expectations of the United States of America (USA) and regular testing took place to compare standards with the Iowa tests for basic skills (ITBS) from the USA, though these standards did not apply in Islamic Education and in Arabic language teaching. In general, in all subjects, the standards achieved were broadly in line with the international benchmarks and age-related expectations. In Islamic Education and Arabic, attainment was good in the elementary phase. This achievement was noteworthy given that the great majority of students were receiving instruction in English, which was not their mother tongue. Students' progress, therefore, was good across the school in all subjects, except in Arabic where progress slowed in the middle and high school phases, and in Islamic Education, where it slowed in the high school phase. Students' attitudes, their behaviour and their personal development were good throughout the school, though attendance and punctuality were issues, and this was particularly pronounced amongst the most senior students. Their civic awareness, their sense of personal responsibility and their understanding of Islam in the modern world were, however, outstanding at all ages.

Teaching was of good quality, with very few unsatisfactory lessons observed and most judged as good or better. Teachers were skilled and expert practitioners who knew their subjects well and understood how children learnt. The quality of learning was good, with the girls showing good application to their work and the effective development of study skills as they got older. The school had worked hard to address issues relating to assessment identified in the previous inspection report, and assessment procedures were now good. Expectations and quality were aligned with North American standards so that achievement was verified internationally, and provided opportunities for further study anywhere in the world for the successful students. The curriculum was rich and varied, and it had breadth, balance and challenge. The range of elective subjects enabled students' interests and talents to be developed appropriately. The Advance Placement programmes for the most able senior students, although currently few in number, gave the opportunity for the most able students to gain accreditation at the highest level for their future progression to university. The arrangements to guarantee the health, safety and security of the students were outstanding. The classrooms were well maintained, record keeping was excellent and regular emergency evacuation procedures were followed. Safety arrangements on the school buses were excellent and there were safe and dependable systems for meeting and greeting students and the youngest children from their parents' cars.

Leadership and management were good. The senior leaders, particularly the Principal, were passionately committed to the achievements of the school. They were successful in realising the school's mission to develop self-reliant global citizens, committed to community leadership and environmental awareness.

Key features of the school

- The outstanding attitudes, behaviour and personal development of the students, coupled with their self-confidence and excellent oral communication skills;
- The high quality teaching and professionalism of the teaching staff;
- The strength and passionate personal commitment of the senior leadership team;
- The excellent relationships throughout the school amongst staff and students.

Recommendations

- Take all necessary measures to improve attendance and punctuality at the beginning of and throughout the school day;
- Strengthen the procedures for the monitoring and evaluation of teachers, especially in the elementary phase, to achieve greater consistency within and between year groups;
- Raise attainment in all subjects, especially in Islamic Education and Arabic in the middle and high schools, through use of effective benchmarks to refine lesson focus and verify standards of attainment.

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

In Islamic Education, overall progress was good across the school. While attainment was good in the elementary school, it was only acceptable in the middle and high schools. Elementary school students understood the verses they memorised from The Holy Qur'an. By the end of the elementary phase, students understood the Pillars of Islam, they had a good knowledge of the daily prayers to be said at specific times and they understood some of the significant lessons to learn from the life of the Prophet (PBUH). In the middle and high school phases, students understood the stages of the pilgrimage to Mecca, and the older students had an acceptable understanding of Islamic manners in public places. By Grade 12, they understood marriage and divorce in Islam. However, their understanding of how what they had learnt from The Holy Qur'an could be applied in the community was underdeveloped.

In Arabic, both attainment and progress were good in the elementary school; attainment in the middle school was acceptable but progress was good. Attainment and progress were acceptable in the high school. By the end of KG, children could read all of the Arabic letters in single words and had a good grasp of pronunciation, so that by the time they started elementary school they could write short sentences. Progress through the elementary phase was good, so that when they moved into the middle school, students had a good understanding of grammar and they wrote well; they understood the main ideas in a variety of texts and distinguished between figures of speech and formal language. In the high school, students could write poetry and effectively research topics. However, by the end of high school students' critical thinking skills in analysing and developing topics were relatively weak.

At all ages and phases throughout the school attainment in English was acceptable and progress was good. Most students were successful on local assessments and their oral skills were strong. However, in the ITBS the average scores were generally below grade level. Most students were skilled speakers and listeners. By the end of KG most children could copy words, and write sentences using available key words. Most elementary students read at a level appropriate for their age and wrote paragraphs. Most high school students read challenging literature with support and wrote acceptable two-page papers. Progress was generally good and the progress of those with additional learning needs was well supported. The new writing program enabled students to improve their written work with a framework and rubric for development.

Attainment in mathematics was acceptable and progress was good throughout the school. Most students in KG understood foundation concepts such as "more" and "less," counting, comparing, and grouping of objects. Elementary students were developing age-appropriate skills of addition and subtraction, multiplication and division, although attainment was somewhat uneven. Middle school students deepened basic operational skills, extending their competence in operations with decimal fractions, probability, and positive and negative integers. High school students were developing algebraic skills appropriately, and advanced seniors were attaining well in pre-calculus concepts and operations. Students effectively applied mathematics to questions and problems which were presented in the textbook, but infrequently applied mathematics to practical, real-world situations.

Attainment in science was at the acceptable level as measured against international expectations. Progress was good and was improving year on year . Across all grade levels students exhibited knowledge and understanding of the key concepts, theories and ideas in science which were appropriate for their age. Students were able to reason, observe and competently conduct investigations and transfer learning in increasingly complex situations. From KG to Grade12, students could articulate the value of science in society especially as it related to conservation and its positive impact on environmental conditions. While there was not a great deal of integration of information and communication technology (ICT) into the programme, the students could manage well when presented with ICT opportunities.

How good is the students' personal and social development?

Student attitudes and behaviour were good. The girls were mature, respectful and friendly. Relationships between staff and students were positive and supportive. However, average attendance barely reached an acceptable standard and the poor punctuality of a minority interfered with classroom learning. Attendance was a particular issue in the high school. Punctuality was frequently unsatisfactory at the beginning of the day and persisted throughout the day with students not always arriving at lessons in a timely fashion.

Students' civic understanding, their understanding of Islam and their appreciation of local traditions and culture were outstanding. They assumed responsible roles in student government, the house system, and clubs. The school exposed them to local and global issues and they participated in community service and internships. Students valued the role of Islam in their own lives and in society and discussed recent international incidents of intolerance toward Muslims. They appreciated the varied national backgrounds of their fellow students and had a good understanding of the extent to which Dubai was a multi-cultural society.

Students' economic and environmental understanding was outstanding. They were proud of Dubai's development, and secondary students could discuss Dubai's specific economic strengths. They also understood Dubai's recent economic challenges. The school had helped them understand contributions they could make to Dubai's continuing development. The school's Environment Club had brought about important changes in the school environment, and students discussed, with understanding, the challenges being addressed during the climate change conference in Copenhagen.

How good are the teaching and learning?

The quality of teaching was good in all parts of the school. Teachers were knowledgeable practitioners who understood how students learn. They planned effectively and made good use of time in lessons, with a good balance between instruction and student-centred activities. Teachers made good use of a wide range of resources beyond the textbook to make their lessons interesting and engaging. Many teachers were expert practitioners in the use of ICT to enhance learning through the use of interactive whiteboards or through providing ICT-based research tasks for students. In science, practical assignments were regular features of the programme and these were well organised by the teachers and conducted efficiently by the students. Relationships in classrooms were good with many examples of open dialogue promoted by teachers' good questioning techniques which promoted extended responses from the students. Most teachers had a good awareness of the learning needs of different individuals and groups and they modified their lessons accordingly. Classroom teaching assistants were deployed in KG and elementary classes, but not all teachers were using them as fully effective partners in teaching and learning.

The quality of learning for students and children of all ages was good. Children in KG and students in the elementary, middle and high school sections were, for the most part, fully engaged in their learning. They were responsible learners who were able to find things out for themselves; they worked equally effectively in pairs, as members of a group, or individually. In the best lessons, and these were evident in science and English, students showed how they could apply their learning to give it relevance in the real world, but in mathematics there were too few opportunities for this to happen. Through the successful development of the study skills programme many students' research and higher order thinking skills were being well developed by the school.

Arrangements for assessment were good. Senior leaders and teachers had a good understanding of assessment as a tool to help students understand what they did well and how they could improve their work. Students received regular feedback on their work and achievements were being benchmarked against standardised assessments from the USA. In this way the levels of attainment of the girls was substantiated through comparison with international standards.

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

The quality of the curriculum was good. The curriculum, based on the Michigan grade level content standards, offered breadth, balance, and challenge. A full-time curriculum co-ordinator worked with subject co-ordinators to conduct regular formal review and upgrading of curriculum. The curriculum co-ordinator had trained subject co-ordinators and teachers in techniques associated with the Understanding by Design educational initiative. During the previous school year, managers had implemented a detailed process of revising the curriculum in English and social sciences with a unit planning process based on UBD. The resulting curriculum aligned attainment standards with content, resources and guidelines for assessment. At the time of inspection, teachers in mathematics and science were engaged in a similar process, reviewing curriculum and developing unit plans one-by-one as they prepared to teach them, following UBD guidelines. The curriculum was well-sequenced and provided for appropriate continuity and successful transitions across grade levels. Choice was provided in coursework for secondary students, although the number of options had been recently reduced. Learning was enhanced by inclusion of a large number of extra-curricular opportunities. Formalised cross-curricular links were in the planning stages but had not yet been developed. The school provided a number of opportunities for community and regional involvement, including service projects for students in Grade 11 and internships for those in Grade 12. Participation in these external activities had resulted in students winning a regional exhibition on robotics, prizes in an entrepreneur contest, and successful involvement in speech competitions with other schools. A recent trip to Tanzania enabled students to assist in an orphanage and further extend their horizons.

How well does the school protect and support students?

The arrangements for ensuring students' health and safety in the building were outstanding. Five security guards protected the building. Arrivals and dismissals were safe, including bus transport. The building was well designed, although there was limited space for future expansion. The facility was well maintained and records well kept. The Principal documented regular fire drills. The nurse recorded activity in the clinic and carefully maintained her equipment and medicines. To promote healthy lifestyles, the school changed the food offered in the canteen. Also, each student had eighty minutes of physical education each week and there was an after-school sports programme. The nurse had detailed plans to tackle obesity during this school year. Staffs were well-versed in child protection procedures.

The quality of support was good. Teachers encouraged students as learners and modelled mature behaviour. Students could count upon them for sensitive advice and clear direction. A student counsellor provided individual support for secondary students. She gave strong education and career guidance for Grade 11 and 12 students. Assistant principals enforced the disciplinary code, although incidents were few and minor. They also tracked student academic progress with special attention to secondary students failing two or more courses. Students with additional learning needs were supported and monitored through a language and learning support program. Support staff used technology to maintain accurate attendance and punctuality, though the systems had not been successful in raising attendance to an acceptable level for many students.

How good are the leadership and management of the school?

The school was successfully led with passion and a strong personal commitment by the Principal with the support of her three senior colleagues. Together they ensured that the school's vision was realised in the good progress and achievements of the girls and exemplified by their excellent personal demeanour. Broadly effective performance management systems were in place though these were not always completely successful in achieving consistency of professional practice in the elementary part of the school.

The school was a highly reflective place of learning; self-evaluation was a central element in the work of the school leaders and managers. The effectiveness of plans and policies was monitored and evaluated and modifications to plans were enacted as appropriate. The school's senior leaders had endeavoured to provide a rich and varied curriculum experience with positive learning outcomes. The success of the school's capacity to change and respond to challenges was evident in its response to the recommendations from the previous inspection report. All the issues identified had been satisfactorily addressed – good and effective use was now being made of standardised assessments to provide objective measures of attainment; critical thinking and study skills were being addressed through curriculum programmes; successful self-evaluation strategies were leading to evident improvements; transport arrangements were now safe and secure.

The school promoted good links with parents and the local community. Parents greatly valued the open door policy and the easy accessibility of teachers and senior leaders, and their responsiveness to the issues raised. Effective liaisons with the local community enhanced the curriculum provision and the students' experiences.

Arrangements for governance were good and evolving successfully to provide full and appropriate representation of all relevant stakeholders. Under the guidance of the founding and overall group management organisation, Taleem, senior leaders were fully accountable for the school's successes and the issues to be addressed.

The teaching and support staff were of high quality, suitably qualified and experienced. The facilities at the school were extensive and well maintained. There were specialist rooms as necessary to support practical and academic areas of the curriculum including several science laboratories, art and music rooms, ICT suites, a gymnasium and a swimming pool. The school site was, however, tightly constrained and there was a shortage of suitable outdoor recreation and exercise areas. The quality of display in the school was excellent. Throughout there were examples of students' work on display as well as excellent décor resulting in a highly stimulating learning environment. The resources for learning were of a very high order. The library was exceptionally well-stocked and provided an excellent facility for academic and leisure learning as well as reading for pleasure.

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 G1-5	Middle G6-8	High G9-12
Attainment	Not Applicable	Good	Acceptable	Acceptable
Progress over time	Not Applicable	Good	Good	Good

How good are the students' attainment and progress in Arabic?				
Age group:	KG	Elementary G1-5	Middle G6-8	High G9-12
Attainment	Not Applicable	Good	Acceptable	Acceptable
Progress over time	Not Applicable	Good	Good	Acceptable

How good are the students' attainment and progress in English?				
Age group:	KG	Elementary G1-5	Middle G6-8	High G9-12
Attainment	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable
Progress over time	Good	Good	Good	Good

How good are the students' attainment and progress in mathematics?				
Age group:	KG	Elementary G1-5	Middle G6-8	High G9-12
Attainment	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable
Progress over time	Good	Good	Good	Good

How good are the students' attainment and progress in science?				
Age group:	KG	Elementary G1-5	Middle G6-8	High G9-12
Attainment	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable
Progress over time	Good	Good	Good	Good

How good is the students' personal and social development?				
Age group:	KG	Elementary G1-5	Middle G6-8	High G9-12
Attitudes and behaviour	Good	Good	Good	Good
Islamic, cultural and civic understanding	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding
Economic and environmental understanding	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding

How good are teaching and learning?				
Age group:	KG	Elementary G1-5	Middle G6-8	High G9-12
Teaching for effective learning	Good	Good	Good	Good
Quality of students' learning	Good	Good	Good	Good
Assessment	Good	Good	Good	Good

How well does the curriculum meet the educational needs of all students?				
Age group:	KG	Elementary G1-5	Middle G6-8	High G9-12
Curriculum quality	Good	Good	Good	Good

How well does the school protect and support students?				
Age group:	KG	Elementary G1-5	Middle G6-8	High G9-12
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	Good
Partnerships with parents and the community	Good
Governance	Good
Staffing, facilities and resources	Good

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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