

# Al Safa Private School Inspection Report

Foundation Stage to Year 6

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.

Al Safa Private 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 Al Safa, Al Safa Private School provides education for boys and girls from the Foundation Stage to Year 6, ages three to 11 years. The school follows the English National Curriculum. At the time of the inspection, there were 352 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. Most parents were supportive of the work of the school, especially about the family ethos. They expressed positive views about the quality of education provided, the level of care afforded to each student and the range of facilities available. Parents raised concerns about the quality of provision in Islamic Education and Arabic. Some concerns were also expressed by a minority of parents about the clarity of information provided by the school regarding students' progress.

## How well does the school perform overall?

Overall, Al Safa Private School provided an acceptable quality of education. It had some strong features but also some significant areas requiring development. Attainment and progress in English, mathematics and science were good, but in the other key subjects of Islamic Education and Arabic, students were not making sufficient progress and levels of attainment were unsatisfactory. Children in the Foundation Stage made good progress in their social development and in learning early language, mathematics and scientific skills. Students' attitudes and behaviour were outstanding. Relationships were exemplary. Students were keen to learn and took great pride in their achievements. Students from a wide range of cultural and faith backgrounds worked and played together in a harmonious and supportive environment. Their understanding of Dubai's development was advanced. Older students talked knowledgeably about the impact of the current economic climate on local building projects.

The quality of teaching was acceptable overall. Almost half the teaching observed was good. However, in too many lessons across all key subjects the pace and levels of challenge were unsatisfactory. In these lessons, students did not make sufficient progress. When given the opportunity, students worked independently, showed initiative and reviewed their own work. In the most effective lessons, teachers made good use of students' skills, resulting in outstanding learning. In contrast, in other lessons, students were passive learners, listening attentively to the teacher but not benefiting from hands-on activities to deepen their understanding. Procedures for assessing students' work had improved since the previous inspection. Some teachers consistently gained a good idea of students' knowledge and understanding through the skilful targeting of questions to individuals rather than taking the first answer offered. However, this was inconsistent across the school. Also, the quality of marking of students' work was variable. The best marking was based on the specific criteria of the task in hand, praised success and identified the next steps for further improvement. Other marking was more cursory. Nevertheless, assessment strategies were acceptable overall. The curriculum was acceptable. There were effective links between subjects and students benefited from a variety of extra activities. However, the school was not compliant with Ministry of Education regulations in Islamic Education and Arabic. Planning for the progressive development of key learning skills was at a very early stage and was acknowledged as a whole school priority. The arrangements for the health and safety of students were outstanding and child protection arrangements were excellent. The quality of support was acceptable. Tracking of students' achievements in English and mathematics was good but there were no systems to track progress in the other key subjects.

The quality of leadership and management of the school was acceptable. The Headteacher and her senior colleagues had both vision and a strong personal commitment to the health, welfare and success of the students but self-evaluation was not yet systematic or rigorous enough. Some good progress had been made in addressing the recommendations from the previous report, but further work was necessary to improve the standards and quality in Islamic Education and in Arabic.

### Key features of the school

- Attainment and progress were good in English, mathematics and science;
- The strong family focus and good relationships contributed to the exemplary behaviour and attitudes of all students;
- There was a strong inclusion programme;
- The learning environment was attractive and stimulating, and celebrated students' work;
- Self-evaluation was not carried out through systematic monitoring and review procedures;
- There were no systems for reliably tracking students' progress in Islamic Education, Arabic and science;
- The provision for Islamic Education and Arabic did not comply with Ministry of Education requirements.

### Recommendations

- Improve strategic planning by establishing effective self-evaluation procedures through rigorously and systemically monitoring the quality of provision;
- Extend tracking to all key subjects and use this information to help improve teaching and learning;
- Build on the school's vision to create a curriculum around key skills, by providing more opportunities for students to learn through first-hand experience and open-ended tasks;
- Ensure compliance with Ministry of Education requirements for Islamic Education and Arabic, and improve the quality of teaching and learning in these subjects.

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

Attainment and progress in Islamic Education were unsatisfactory throughout the school. In Years 1 and 2, students' memorisation of The Holy Qur'an was poor. In Years 3 and 4 only a few students could name the five daily prayers and their timings. They did not link their knowledge of Islam to their daily lives. They had very limited knowledge about the main events in the Prophet's (PBUH) life.

Attainment and progress in Arabic was unsatisfactory throughout the school. Almost all students studied Arabic as a second language and overall progress in acquiring the key skills of talking, reading and writing was poor. In Years 1 to 4, students listened attentively to their teachers' instructions in Arabic, followed simple directions and responded accurately to simple greetings. In Years 5 and 6, they had made acceptable progress in acquiring listening skills. Most students were able to repeat and pronounce correctly. They were able to copy simple Arabic words. However, in general, students' speech was limited to single words and phrases.

In English, attainment and progress were good. In all year groups, students spoke confidently and clearly to teachers, visitors and each other. Their listening skills were outstanding. After making a good start in the Foundation Stage, students in all year groups read enthusiastically for pleasure. Students' handwriting was formed correctly in most classes. In Year 2, students learned to spell by using personalised lists of 100 words to learn, allowing each student to continually build their vocabulary. In Year 6, they understood inference and personification. Throughout the school, writing skills developed well from year-to-year and, by Year 6, students could write extended detective stories using alliteration and onomatopoeia.

In the Years 1 to 6, progress in mathematics was good and by the final year most students were attaining above the level expected for their age. Children in the Foundation Stage made a good start in numeracy and students across the school were able to use number at levels appropriate to their age. Younger students used practical approaches to investigate shape and number and most could correctly identify and describe the properties of regular shaped solids. By the final year, nearly all students were confident with number applied to everyday life. They could draw and interpret simple charts correctly, add fractions, draw and measure angles accurately, and calculate money problems correctly. They were able to generate their own questions, and they worked well independently and collaboratively. Their work was presented systematically and with care.

Attainment and progress in science were good overall. In the Foundation Stage, children were actively engaged in first-hand exploration to understand the world around them. By the end of Year 2, students could pose questions to help set-up an experiment and could talk about a range of scientific knowledge expected at their age. Year 6 students knew and understood key principles of scientific enquiry such as fair testing, making predictions and key scientific concepts such as the process of evaporation, reversible changes and how to separate different materials. However, students' evaluative and investigative skills across the school were underdeveloped.

## How good is the students' personal and social development?

Students' personal and social development was outstanding. All students had positive attitudes to learning. They willingly applied themselves to class work and homework, taking care to complete tasks on time. Behaviour was outstanding in lessons and assemblies, and in the open areas of the school. Students were very supportive of each other. In peer assessments, they gave accurate evaluations of their work. Students understood that their teachers valued their contributions to lessons and other activities, and were confident that they would receive support if they had concerns at school or at home. Through the programme for personal, social and health education, they gained outstanding knowledge of healthy lifestyles. For example, Year 2 students produced attractive wall displays illustrating good practices in eating and drinking. Attendance at school was also outstanding.

Students' respect for the Islamic faith was outstanding and they had a very good understanding of local traditions and cultures. In Year 2, students accurately described the UAE flag and their own national flags. In Year 6, as school councillors, they contributed to the school community by raising money for a class outing. All students appreciated the multicultural aspect of living in Dubai and many had friends of different nationalities.

Students' economic and environmental understanding was outstanding. Students talked about developments in finance and construction, and understood how the current situation had been changed by the global credit crisis. They were aware of global and local environmental issues and participated in recycling in school and the community.

## How good are the teaching and learning?

The quality of teaching and learning was good in the Foundation Stage and acceptable in the primary phase. A few lessons were outstanding and almost half were good. However, the quality of teaching was inconsistent. There were too many lessons where students made insufficient progress because the pace of learning was slow and the work lacked challenge. There were strengths in the Foundation Stage, where adults created a stimulating environment based on their understanding of how young children learn through play and first hand experiences. Elsewhere in the school, the most effective teaching took advantage of students' excellent attitudes and willingness to learn. Students of all abilities responded positively to the different tasks set for them. However, in some other lessons, students had too few opportunities to work independently. The work set was repetitive, which meant that progress was slow. Teachers used interactive whiteboards well to stimulate and sustain students' interest. They successfully encouraged students to use computers to present their work and students increasingly used the internet to find information.

Students demonstrated their enthusiasm for learning in most lessons. In English classes, they developed skills systematically, building well on their previous experiences. Because teachers had made learning objectives clear, students were able to evaluate their own writing against specific criteria. In contrast, students in some science lessons often watched the teacher conduct practical investigations. As a result opportunities were missed for students to improve and consolidate their skills in hypothesising, designing fair tests, observing, recording and drawing conclusions practically and independently through hands-on activities. In Islamic Education and Arabic, students were generally uninspired and had too few opportunities to develop their language skills in spoken Arabic, beyond one-word answers to questions.

Assessment strategies were good in the Foundation Stage, where adults systematically recorded children's progress across all areas of learning. The quality of feedback was good in English throughout the school. However, in the primary phase, teachers' questioning often did not provide opportunities for them to assess students' understanding. Frequently, it was those students with their hands raised who were the only ones asked. A whole school assessment schedule had been devised setting out when and how assessments were to be carried out during the year. This helped to identify students who were falling behind and those who had special educational needs. These students benefited from good support by teachers and learning assistants. In Islamic Education and Arabic, assessment was poor; there were imprecise criteria for measuring students' progress.

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

The curriculum was good in the Foundation Stage and acceptable in the primary phase. It was based on the English National Curriculum and offered acceptable breadth and balance. However, it was unsatisfactory in Islamic Education and Arabic. Where continuity and progression across the school were good, they were aided by effective team planning and the use of established schemes of work. A stimulating and celebratory learning environment was provided through colourful displays of students' work and high quality learning resources and prompts. The recent 'Big Write' initiative was having a positive impact on literacy standards throughout the school. The curriculum was enriched by a diverse range of extra-curricular activities, for instance, water polo, science, portraits and comedy club, and the popular skiing trip to Switzerland. Special events developed life skills, such as the Triathlon Day when each child challenged themselves while raising money for Romanian orphans. Year 5 students took part in a 'Leave No Trace' experience in a local wadi. This helped them to understand the impact of human activity on the environment. Teams of teachers reviewed topics regularly, but there was little systematic whole school evaluation of the curriculum. Not enough time was given to science, either discreetly or through topical work. Planning of the Arabic curriculum did not ensure progression and the programme for Islamic Education was not compliant with Ministry of Education requirements because there was no provision for this subject within the school day. The school's mission to focus on key learning skills, such as creativity, reasoning and thinking skills, was not yet embedded across the curriculum.



## How well does the school protect and support students?

Highly effective health and safety procedures ensured a secure and safe environment for students and staff. The site and buildings were clean and the swimming pool was fully secured. Fire drills were regularly practised and evacuation times noted. All staff had good knowledge of the comprehensive policy for child protection. In the playgrounds, where awnings provided limited shade, students without sunhats were not allowed out at morning break or lunchtime. Parents were closely involved in their children's welfare. For example, they were expected to ensure that packed lunches for their children conformed to healthy eating requirements. The small numbers of students travelling by bus were closely monitored at departure and in transit.

All staff had good knowledge of their students' personal development and relationships were outstanding. However, students' academic achievements in Islamic Education, Arabic and science were not adequately tracked. Consequently, their progress could not be closely monitored. Although teachers' written reports to parents were detailed, and included a response section to be completed by students, targets for improvement were not stated. The Headteacher was adept at recommending secondary schools suited to the interests and capabilities of all students. Teachers consistently applied the school's few rules, closely focused on self-discipline. Students' skills in individual and shared responsibility ensured that sanctions were rarely required. Students with special educational needs received good support in class lessons and withdrawal sessions. The school doctor called twice weekly to assess the health of groups of students. The school nurse was a respected informal counsellor for students and she communicated with parents to maintain attendance at high levels.

## How good are the leadership and management of the school?

Leadership and management were acceptable. The Headteacher had a clear vision for the development of the school and the outstanding ethos that pervaded the school was largely a tribute to her commitment to this vision. However, this vision was not made explicit to staff and, as a result, some important aspects relating to achievement and the development of core values and skills were not promoted as effectively as they could have been.

The Headteacher and Deputy Headteacher communicated informally on a daily basis and the day-to-day running of the school was generally smooth. However, there was need for regular and more formal meetings to discuss, plan and record matters concerned with the school's development. Subject coordinators were well motivated and very competent. They knew their work was appreciated and that their views were valued; they were strongly encouraged to continue their professional development. This was starting to have a positive effect on outcomes; for example, on the development of phonics and writing throughout the school.

Self-evaluation was acceptable. Teachers' work was regularly assessed by the Headteacher, Deputy Headteacher and by subject leaders. However, no records were kept of lesson observations and it was therefore difficult to assess strengths and identify areas for further training. The work of students was also assessed systematically and their progress was analysed well in English and mathematics, but it was not clear how the information was used to make improvements. Whilst the areas included in the school development plan were appropriate and designed to address the issues raised in the previous inspection report, the planning for their successful implementation, including who was to monitor initiatives, was unclear.

Partnerships with parents and the community were outstanding. Parents benefited from the welcoming open door policy, the informative newsletters and other communications issued by the school. They were very well informed about the progress their children were making. Parents of younger children were able to communicate daily with the teachers through excellent use of the home-school books.

The governing body of the school, mainly comprising the four owners, provided acceptable and effective support to the Headteacher and staff. The governors visited the school regularly, met teachers and students, and acted as critical friends by reviewing the implementation of agreed policies and by offering advice. They were actively involved in overall strategic planning and assessing the impact of the school's improvement plan. They monitored the school's achievement data annually to check improvement in students' academic achievement. Nevertheless, governors were not monitoring attainment and progress closely enough in Islamic Education and Arabic.

Staffing, facilities and resources were good overall. With the exception of Islamic Education, the school was appropriately staffed with well qualified teachers. The school was very well resourced and its facilities were fit for purpose; the school building was used efficiently to promote learning.

## 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:	Foundation Stage	Primary
Attainment	Not applicable	Unsatisfactory
Progress over time	Not applicable	Unsatisfactory

How good are the students' attainment and progress in Arabic?		
Age group:	Foundation Stage	Primary
Attainment	Not applicable	Unsatisfactory
Progress over time	Not applicable	Unsatisfactory

How good are the students' attainment and progress in English?		
Age group:	Foundation Stage	Primary
Attainment	Good	Good
Progress over time	Good	Good

How good are the students' attainment and progress in mathematics?		
Age group:	Foundation Stage	Primary
Attainment	Good	Good
Progress over time	Good	Good

How good are the students' attainment and progress in science?		
Age group:	Foundation Stage	Primary
Attainment	Good	Good
Progress over time	Good	Good

How good is the students' personal and social development?		
Age group:	Foundation Stage	Primary
Attitudes and behaviour	Outstanding	Outstanding
Islamic, cultural and civic understanding	Outstanding	Outstanding
Economic and environmental understanding	Outstanding	Outstanding

How good are teaching and learning?		
Age group:	Foundation Stage	Primary
Teaching for effective learning	Good	Acceptable
Quality of students' learning	Good	Acceptable
Assessment	Good	Acceptable

How well does the curriculum meet the educational needs of all students?		
Age group:	Foundation Stage	Primary
Curriculum quality	Good	Acceptable

How well does the school protect and support students?		
Age group:	Foundation Stage	Primary
Health and safety	Outstanding	Outstanding
Quality of support	Good	Acceptable

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

How well does the school perform overall?
Acceptable

## 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](mailto:inspection@khda.gov.ae).

More information about Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau can be found at [www.khda.gov.ae](http://www.khda.gov.ae).

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