

INSPECTION REPORT

GEMS Dubai American Academy

Report published in April 2014

GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT GEMS Dubai American Academy

Location	Al Barsha
Type of school	Private
Website	www.gemsaa-dubai.com
Telephone	04-3479222
Address	P.O Box 32762 Dubai UAE
Principal	Robin Appleby
Curriculum	US/IB
Gender of students	Boys and Girls
Age / Grades or Year Groups	3-18 / KG 1-Grade 12
Attendance	Good
Number of students on roll	2285
Largest nationality group of Students	US
Number of Emirati students	25 (1%)
Date of the inspection	11th November to 14th November

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The context of the school

The Dubai American Academy is situated in Al Barsha. The school opened in September 1998. It had an enrolment of 2,285 students, aged three to 18 years at the time of the inspection. The students represented 99 nationalities and although English is the language used for teaching, English is not the first language of a significant minority of students. The school had identified 124 students as having a special educational need.

The school followed a US curriculum. Students were entered for the International Baccalaureate Diploma (IBDP) in Grades 11 and 12. Students in Grades 3 through to Grade 9 participated in Measures of Academic Progress (MAPS) assessments. High school students took the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT) and the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) in the appropriate grades.

There were 192 teachers and all had teaching qualifications. They were supported by 57 teaching assistants. Fourteen staff members were deployed for learning support and counselling. Students were grouped into four phases: Primary (pre-KG to Grade 2), Elementary (Grades 3 to 5), Middle (Grades 6 to 8) and High (Grades 9 to 12). However, this report classifies students according with the accepted US phases, which are Kindergarten, Elementary (Grades 1 to 5), Middle (Grades 6 to 8) and High (Grades 9 to 12).

Overall school performance 2013-2014

Outstanding

Key strengths

- Due to outstanding teaching, students' made excellent progress in English, mathematics and science and their attainment was well above international expectations;
- Students' exemplary behaviour and extremely positive attitudes made a significant contribution to the harmonious atmosphere and strong sense of purpose throughout the school;
- The highly effective use of assessment to track students' progress and set challenging targets underpinned the high quality teaching in English, mathematics and science;
- Parents were almost entirely positive about the school, and were entirely confident that their children were well cared for and supported;
- School leaders and governors shared a relentless determination to provide the best possible education for all students.

Recommendations

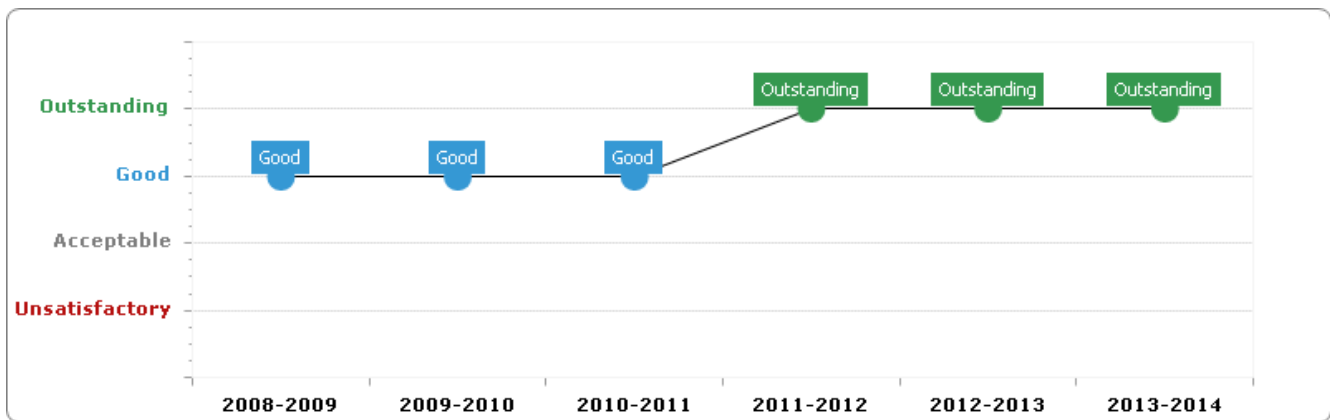
- Strengthen the leadership of Islamic Education and Arabic and continue to improving the quality of teaching and accelerate students' progress;
- Build further on the good progress made in promoting students' critical thinking and inquiry skills;
- Use the highly effective assessment and curriculum review processes creatively and wisely to design learning programmes for all students.

Progress since the last inspection

School leaders and staff had worked hard to improve students' progress and raise their attainment in Islamic Education and Arabic. Cross-phase teams had shared ideas and devised plans to promote students' engagement and enjoyment of school. The teachers had a greater awareness of successful teaching strategies but many lacked confidence in implementing them routinely in their day-to-day teaching.

The drive to increase students' critical thinking skills had successfully established expectations and many teachers were providing opportunities for students to reflect, make choices and suggest their own approaches to solve problems. These strategies were a strong feature of most lessons in the high school, for example in mathematics, science and theatre studies. This goal was seen, rightly, by the school as an on-going priority as the approach was not fully established across all phases and subjects.

Trend of overall performance



How good are the students' attainment progress and learning skills?

	KG	Elementary	Middle	High
Islamic Education				
Attainment	Not Applicable	Acceptable	Good	Acceptable
Progress	Not Applicable	Acceptable	Good	Acceptable
Arabic as a first language				
Attainment	Not Applicable	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable
Progress	Not Applicable	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable
Arabic as an additional language				
Attainment	Not Applicable	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable
Progress	Not Applicable	Acceptable	Good	Acceptable
English				
Attainment	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding
Progress	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding
Mathematics				
Attainment	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding
Progress	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding
Science				
Attainment	Good	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding
Progress	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding

[Read paragraph](#)

	KG	Elementary	Middle	High
Quality of students' learning skills	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding

[Read paragraph](#)

How good is the students' personal and social development?

	KG	Elementary	Middle	High
Personal responsibility	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding
Students' understanding of Islamic values and their local, cultural and global awareness	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding
Community and environmental responsibility	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding

[Read paragraph](#)

How good are teaching and assessment?

	KG	Elementary	Middle	High
Teaching for effective learning	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding
Assessment	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding

[Read paragraph](#)

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

	KG	Elementary	Middle	High
Curriculum quality	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding
Curriculum design to meet the individual needs of students	Good	Good	Good	Outstanding

[Read paragraph](#)

How well does the school protect and support students?

	KG	Elementary	Middle	High
Health and Safety	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding
Quality of Support	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding

[Read paragraph](#)

How good are the leadership and management of the school?

	Whole school
Quality of leadership	Outstanding
Self-evaluation and improvement planning	Outstanding
Parents and the community	Outstanding
Governance	Outstanding
Management, including staffing, facilities and resources	Outstanding

[Read paragraph](#)

How good are the students' attainment and progress?

In Islamic Education, students had an acceptable range of knowledge and understanding of most aspects of the subject across the elementary and high phases while their attainment was higher in the middle phase. However, students' skills in Qur'an recitation skills and the application of its rules across the school were not always secure. Attainment in Arabic as a first language was acceptable throughout the school. Students had appropriate listening skills. Their speaking skills were largely within the expected level although this was frequently dominated by the use of local dialects. In Arabic as an additional language, attainment levels across the phases were in line with expectations in relation to the number of years of study, with speaking and writing being the least well developed. Attainment in English and mathematics was outstanding in all phases. Students' speaking and listening skills were extremely strong. They were able to express their points clearly, using rich language. Most students demonstrated skills in both reading and writing which were at a high level. Throughout the school, their mathematical understanding was extremely well developed, with students exploring concepts and ideas confidently. Similarly, students routinely and skilfully used and applied their mathematical knowledge to real life and undertook mathematical investigations confidently from a very young age. Good attainment in science in Kindergarten was evident in children's knowledge and understanding, for example of the five senses and of the characteristics of living and non-living things. Outstanding attainment in the older phases was exemplified in students' detailed and wide ranging knowledge of scientific principles and concepts and in their excellent investigative skills.

In Islamic Education, students made better progress in the middle school because the age-related expectations were relatively higher than in the other phases. Students studying Arabic as a first language were making acceptable progress in listening, speaking and reading. Their writing skills were less well developed. The progress of students studying Arabic as a second language was more rapid and therefore good in the middle school. Across the phases, students made better progress in developing their Arabic vocabulary, but lacked confidence in applying and extending it in everyday language situations. Progress in English, mathematics and science was outstanding in all phases. Students' progress was consistently strong in speaking, reading, and writing as they considerably enhanced their skills through each grade. From simple counting in Kindergarten, students' progress accelerated rapidly through the school, with high school students developing considerable insights into advanced numerical concepts and calculations. The wonder of science intrigued the younger students, and they increasingly questioned and explored the world around them. Students rapidly gained confidence in drawing on their scientific knowledge to hypothesise, investigate and draw conclusions. This was a strong feature of the wide ranging skills student gained in the high school.

[View judgements](#)

Quality of students' learning skills

Students had outstanding learning skills across all phases. They were keen, mature and self-reliant learners. They enthusiastically responded when teachers provided opportunities for them to lead learning, not simply to cover familiar material, but to extend themselves and their peers. Collaboration was commonplace across all phases. Students used dialogue, questioning and independence to apply their understanding in contexts real to them. They were always eager to establish a fact, construct a hypothesis and experiment independently or collectively. Particularly commendable were the students' capacities, in most grades, to make links across their learning. Middle school students applied their understanding of the evolution and failure of ancient and modern civilisations in Social Studies when producing excellent writing in English Language Arts, for example. The routine intrinsic use of information technology (IT) by senior students was supported through the high-quality capacity building through earlier grades. This meant that they effectively used their IT skills to enhance the opinions they formed and to express themselves imaginatively.

[View judgements](#)

How good is the students' personal and social development?

Students' personal and social development was outstanding. Students willingly took responsibility. Their attitudes and behaviour were exemplary. Mature, age-appropriate relationships among all were the norm, with students being mannerly, respectful and natural in a welcoming environment fostered by all for all. In lessons students were confident participants in activities, exhibiting tolerance and enthusiasm for those around them. Making healthy lifestyle choices was accepted practice. Students were keen sports enthusiasts, ate sensibly and participated enthusiastically in several whole-school programmes promoting health awareness. Attendance was good overall.

Students demonstrated a very strong understanding of Islamic values. They understood and appreciated the relevance and impact of these values on everyday life in Dubai and reflected upon key messages in relation to their own lives and experiences. Where appropriate, students diligently put into practice what they learned from their awareness of these values. Students were able to describe clearly the main features of the UAE, such as the presence of oil and its role in the development of the country. Local traditions and cultural heritage were well known and understood by students who recognised their importance, relevance and value to people in the UAE. Students fully appreciated and celebrated their own cultures. They also expressed that they loved Dubai and considered it a unique city because of its cultural diversity.

As active members of the community, students had ample opportunities to develop productive ideas aimed at school improvement. They were involved in initiatives across the phases that had a positive impact on the local and global humanitarian causes, displaying excellent work ethics throughout. Students were active

in understanding and working on environmental issues. They promoted practical solutions to environmental challenges in school and in Dubai, linking governmental development with labour, tourism, trade, and relationships with the rest of the world.

[View judgements](#)

How good are teaching and assessment?

Teaching was outstanding across the school. Most teachers were very familiar and up-to-date with their subjects. They understood well how children and students learn in individual contexts. Their lesson preparation, attention to detail regarding learning objectives and design of highly engaging activities were of a very high standard. Where teaching was outstanding, a stimulating and open-ended dialogue between students themselves and teachers was commonplace. In high school lessons, students regularly led group discussions, for example in physics where the process of arriving at an outcome was analysed at different levels depending on the expectations for the group. Thus teaching was based on ensuring that effective learning to meet the different needs was the greatest priority. Appropriate and, quite often, innovative strategies around reasoning and application of learning to the world outside school ensured that most students found relevance and purpose in the tasks. In Elementary for example, students applied their learning in mathematics to differences between various currencies. An excellent collective professional discussion, thought and sharing of best practice was the basis for clear teaching strategies in most lessons. Teachers' commitment to the use of IT in the senior grades was commendable and produced excellent benefits for students. The promotion of critical thinking and genuine enquiry-based, independent and collaborative learning was firmly established in some phases and subjects more than others. Where this was less developed, for instance in Arabic and Islamic Education, teachers did not involve students as leaders of their own learning. There was an inconsistent level of effective teaching of specific scientific skills for the youngest children where activities with little purpose, such as jigsaws, did not further the development of strong scientific skills.

Assessment was efficient, comprehensive and detailed in almost all aspects of the school's work. International benchmarks such as MAP, TIMSS and PISA were used beside internal school assessments to identify the skills being developed and any potential gaps in learning. Teachers knew their learners well. Students brought excellent analysis and understanding when identifying their own next learning steps because data were continuously processed across phases and subject departments. Teachers were committed to some highly effective strategies within lessons to understand and respond to students' work. This was key to the appropriateness of levels of challenge, support strategies and review of programme content. They used IT and school-specific software to enable easy access to students' work responding, in real time in some instances, to give students valuable instant feedback targeting a higher-quality outcome.

In a few areas, more remained to be done to link the data to teaching and learning strategies. An inconsistent application of the assessment rationale in kindergarten science and in Islamic Education and Arabic resulted, sometimes, in uneven outcomes across various skills essential to students' improvement.

[View judgements](#)

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

The school's curriculum continued to be outstanding for the great majority of students. It was wide-ranging and balanced. A key factor in the maintenance of the high quality of the curriculum was the thorough review and development process conducted on a regular basis to ensure that the curriculum remained relevant and reflective of school improvement priorities. Curriculum documentation was extensive and clearly articulated, enabling teachers to understand readily what they were to teach and the standards expected. Transition arrangements, carried out in collaboration with KG-12 subject committees, helped to ensure smooth transitions for students through each grade and phase. Clear communication from the teachers ensured that students knew the learning paths they had followed and the next steps in them. There were many examples of cross-disciplinary links, such as connections forged between English language, arts and social studies. The large number of electives including art, music, drama and technology, provided a wide range of opportunities for enrichment both at school and in the community at large.

At the high school level the curriculum design to meet the individual needs of students was outstanding. For the middle, elementary and primary schools it was good. Across the school there was a variety of activities to cater to the interests of all students including a wide range of after-school enrichment opportunities. The high school provided students with a number of electives from which to choose including art, drama, music and technology courses. Teachers were aware of and knowledgeable about how to meet the needs of students through differentiation of the curriculum but in some cases, particularly below the high school level, certain groups of students did not have their needs well met. These groups included students in Arabic as a first language and Arabic as an additional language, Islamic Education, KG science and some with special educational needs.

[View judgements](#)

How well does the school protect and support students?

The arrangements to protect and support the students were outstanding. The school had very effective safety procedures to ensure that students were safe in all school environments. The premises were maintained in excellent condition and students were supervised at all times. The emergency evacuation drills and transport arrangements were very efficient. The clinic provided excellent medical facilities, kept detailed records, and

stored medicines securely. Healthy living was widely promoted through offering healthy food in the two cafeterias and through a regular programme for physical education and sports. In all P.E. classes, for example, all students actively and willingly participated in all the activities. The school's child protection policy was clear to parents, students, and staff, and provided detailed guidance for all school staff to follow to safeguard students.

The quality of support was outstanding across the school. Staff and student relationships were positive and characterised by trust and mutual respect. Students, parents and staff all had a clear understanding of the policy and procedures related to attendance and punctuality which resulted in a very well managed programme. Across the school, students with special educational needs were accurately identified and were making good progress, although some students who were eligible were not yet identified. Support and guidance for the school population as a whole was excellent. The guidance programme at the high school and middle school included activities related to social/interpersonal aspects, academic development and careers. Younger students received excellent support from a team of guidance specialists.

[View judgements](#)

How good are the leadership and management of the school?

The superintendent played a significant role in sustaining the school's outstanding effectiveness. She was extremely well supported by a very effective leadership team. The innovative structure of the management team meant there was a collective sense of purpose and a shared determination to sustain the highly positive ethos in pursuit of the school's overall aims. The leadership team had a wide range of expertise and were relentless in their drive to build on the school's success. Subject teams including staff from all phases and senior leaders worked very well in ensuring continuity in the curriculum, although the lack of subject leaders in Islamic Education and Arabic meant that there was limited sharing of good practice in these subjects.

Rigorous self-evaluation was well established. It was firmly based on the analysis of students' performance, close monitoring of the quality of the teaching and regular review of the curriculum. All members of staff had the opportunity to contribute. Development plans were sharply focused on key priorities, and progress towards these was kept under regular review. The recommendations from the previous inspection had been tackled with determination and improvements were evident, particularly in the promotion of students' involvement in shaping their own learning and in developing critical thinking skills.

The school formed very productive partnerships with parents, based on excellent relationships. Parents felt that teachers knew their children well and provided excellent advice to help them to support their children's

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learning. Staff were very keen to involve parents in the life of the school and valued their support highly. Formal reporting on progress was regular, frequent and detailed. Further information was easily available via email or meetings at parents' request. Partnerships with the community were strong, for example students raised money and organised events for local expatriate workers. Links with other schools were highly productive.

Members of the governing board had an excellent understanding of the schools' strengths and areas for further improvement. They consulted parents and staff regularly, considered their suggestions seriously, and acted on them where appropriate. For example, board members made every effort to ease traffic congestion during major local road works through taking up this issue with the transport authorities. They had taken on board parents' concerns about adjusting the length of some school days to facilitate staff training and had introduced a more convenient schedule. The governors' contribution to school improvement was a major strength. They had introduced a self-review handbook with high expectations for teaching and the impact it had on students' progress. Other innovations included a contract with a web-based information exchange to enable older students to post their portfolios and résumés on line, and arrangements had been made for an independent provider to receive any complaints or grievances from staff anonymously and to pass them on to the board.

The management of resources, including staffing, facilities and educational materials was outstanding. Highly effective strategies for retaining staff meant there was a relatively small turnover each year. This made a significant contribution to continuity. The school took care to recruit suitably experienced staff. For example, additional well-qualified and experienced professional support and counselling staff had been appointed and were proving highly effective. The school was imaginatively designed and generally spacious, with ample space for class lessons, specialist teaching such as drama and swimming, together with extra-curricular activities, breaks and informal gatherings.

[View judgements](#)

How well does the school provide for Emirati students?

Emirati students in each phase made good progress in English, mathematics and science, and in Islamic Education in the middle school. Their progress in Arabic was acceptable. They made similar progress other students with English as an additional language. Some Emirati students were in the top sets, for example they were in the middle and high school mathematics and science programmes. Where Emirati students did well, it was usually due to, high and appropriate expectations of the teachers, outstanding teaching, the relevance of the curriculum to their needs and interests, the students positive attitudes to learning and determination to do well, and the support of parents who had high aspirations for their children.

How well does the school provide for students with special educational needs?

Students with special educational needs were well provided for and made good progress in almost all subjects. A team of special education professionals deployed across the four phases managed the identification, planning, monitoring and reporting effectively. A clear and detailed policy was adhered to by all staff. Parents were very much involved and the school made a special effort to reach out to them. Classroom teachers, in particular, knew their individual students well and worked with parents on strategies to reinforce and assist with lesson content at home. Successful strategies for the support of students who needed additional help included in-class support by additional staff and withdrawal of students to work in a learning centre staffed by specialists. Professional development in designing strategies for differentiation was a regular feature and a majority of teachers were implementing an effective approach to meeting students' individual needs. The whole-school priority was the identification, provision of services and monitoring of progress of students. This was evident in the good progress made by students with special educational needs and the inclusion of these students in all aspects of the life of the school. Extra-curricular activities, for example, were open to all students. The administration and management were highly committed to the education of these students and provided sufficient and well qualified staff and the necessary resources to help ensure their success.

How well does the school teach Arabic as a first language?

The majority of teachers had adequate subject knowledge but their understanding of how students learn was inconsistent across all phases of the school. Most lesson plans showed lesson objectives but not the expected learning outcomes for students. Most teachers were successful in engaging their students. However, the level of challenge in lessons was low in too many instances. A narrow range of teaching strategies was used, with the result of meeting the needs of the majority, but not all, students. In a few cases, teachers' planning and delivery of lessons were driven by the fixed content of the textbooks and there was insufficient focus on filling in the gaps in learning for the underachieving students.

The curriculum was based on the UAE Ministry of Education expectations. It had a clear rationale and was occasionally adapted by teachers to try to make it more accessible to all students. In lessons there were few opportunities for students to speak and write, and use Arabic in practical and meaningful contexts. Although

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the school had revised the curriculum for the subject, the curriculum planning for the oldest students did not provide sufficient opportunities for them to achieve high levels of language proficiency.

What are the views of parents, teachers and students?

Before the inspection, the views of parents, teachers and senior secondary students were surveyed. Key messages from each group were considered during the inspection and these helped to form judgements. A summary of the survey statistics and comments from those who responded to the survey follows:

Responses to the surveys			
Responses received	Number		Percentage
Parents	This year	342	22%
	Last year	221	15%
Teachers	53		29%
Students	167		39%

*The percentage of responses from parents is based on the number of families.

A low percentage of parents responded to the survey. A quarter of the teachers and less than half of the students replied. In all groups, almost all were satisfied with the overall quality of education the school provided. Almost all parents and students thought that students made good progress in English, mathematics and science. Fewer believed that progress was good in Islamic Education, Arabic and knowledge and understanding of Emirati culture. Almost all parents believed that work for their children was interesting and challenging and that their children were well cared for and happy at school. There were high levels of satisfaction among all groups with most aspects of students' personal development. Almost all teachers felt that the school was well led and managed.

What happens next?

The school has been asked to prepare and submit an updated action plan to DSIB within two months of receiving the most recent report. This plan should address:

- Recommendations from DSIB;
- Areas identified by the school as requiring improvement;
- Other external reports or sources of information that comment on the work of the school;
- Priorities arising from the school's unique characteristics.

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

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