

Al Maaref Private 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.

Al Maaref Private School was inspected in March 2010 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 Qusais, Al Maaref is a private school providing education for students from Kindergarten (KG) to Grade 12, aged three to 18 years. The school follows a United States of America-based curriculum. At the time of the inspection, there were 1,408 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. Most parents believed that their children liked the school and made good progress in all the key subjects. The majority of parents reported that students' behaviour at the school was good and that the staff expected their children to work hard and become independent and responsible people. The majority also believed that the school had good links with parents and was well led. A minority of parents said that the school was good at consulting them on decisions which affected their children. Most parents believed that the school kept their children safe and healthy. There was some uncertainty about links with the local community and about whether the school had responded positively to the recommendations of the previous inspection. A few parents expressed concern at the quality of the school's communication in English and the lack of teacher expertise in the English language.

How well does the school perform overall?

Al Maaref Private School provided an acceptable quality of education for students. Students made acceptable progress in Islamic Education and Arabic from Grade 1 to Grade 12. In English, the attainment of children in the KG was acceptable but progress was unsatisfactory. Attainment in the elementary, middle and upper grades was unsatisfactory but progress in the middle and upper grades was acceptable. Students' attitudes and behaviour were acceptable, with girls displaying more maturity than boys. However, a minority of students was less self-controlled and this prevented them from learning. Students' understanding of Islam and local traditions was acceptable but they had very limited knowledge of the economic development of Dubai.

Most teachers demonstrated secure knowledge of their subjects, although their capabilities in spoken and written English were inconsistent. Teaching across the school was acceptable but relied too much on textbooks, which resulted in a lack of challenge. The majority of students were keen and willing learners. However, they had only limited opportunities to apply their learning or to develop creative, critical and analytical skills. Information and communication technology (ICT) was underused as a teaching tool. Assessment strategies were acceptable across the school but the progress of individual students was not analyzed consistently by teachers to plan formally the next steps in learning for all students. The curriculum was unsatisfactory overall. At all stages, teachers were still over-reliant on textbooks and material was not amended or enriched to meet the students' learning needs or engage their interests. The USA textbooks were often adhered to rigidly without teachers taking their students' life experiences into consideration. Although there were a few extra-curricular activities, they were not rich or broad enough to support adequately and enhance students' learning. The school's arrangements for protecting its students were acceptable. The premises were well maintained and the procedures required to keep students safe were in place. Students had access to advice on their personal and academic development, although there were weaknesses in the support for boys and for more vulnerable students.

Whilst the new owners showed great determination to improve outcomes, the school lacked strategic direction and there was no shared vision that focused upon learning across the school. A senior leadership team with the capacity to improve outcomes was emerging after recent changes in its structure. Planning relied on long action lists and had not yet established priorities, timelines and criteria by which they could measure success. There were some well-established links with groups of parents but there was only limited contact with the community. The school had made progress in developing a governing body. An advisory committee included parents and business representatives, and had begun to contribute to planning. It did not have a formal constitution and was not fully representative of all stakeholders. The staffing, facilities and resources had improved in certain areas and were judged to be acceptable overall. Additional investment in computers and library stock provided students with facilities for research. There were sufficient qualified staff to teach the curriculum and the premises offered a clean, safe learning environment.

Key features of the school

- The new school owners showed a commitment to improving outcomes and had made considerable investments in developing the infrastructure of the school;
- Most students were keen to learn;
- The teaching had improved to an acceptable level in the majority of lessons but was still text book based and often unchallenging;
- The attitudes and behaviour of the girls were good;
- The lack of understanding across the school about what constituted good practice in teaching.

Recommendations

- Improve the quality of teaching across the school, including the quality of teachers' expertise in English;
- Teach at appropriate levels of challenge for all students and ensure that the needs of the low-attaining students are met;
- Improve the curriculum to ensure that it meets the needs of all learners;
- Ensure that behaviour management strategies are clear and consistently applied across the school;
- Strengthen leadership and management to provide a clear direction which is shared by teachers, students and other stakeholders;
- Produce a strategic school improvement plan that has clear, measurable priorities, time lines and responsibilities.

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

Attainment and progress in Islamic Education were acceptable from Grades 1 to 12. Most students in the lower grades could name the Pillars of Islam and the Pillars of Faith. They were able to memorize Prophet Mohammed's sayings which they had learnt. They had basic knowledge of how prayers were performed and of basic facts about the Prophet's life and leadership. Older students knew the miracles of The Holy Qur'an and the prophets, and knew the signs of the Day of Judgment. They understood and discussed the need to seek paradise, the verses of the Holy Qur'an and Hadith they learnt. Most students' recitation skills were well developed, particularly in the middle years.

Attainment and progress in Arabic were acceptable from Grade 1 to Grade 12. Students' performance in the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing showed some improvements and they made acceptable gains, particularly in their listening and speaking skills. Most students could express themselves clearly in their lessons and had regular opportunities to practise their listening and speaking skills in classical Arabic in group activities, which they did with enthusiasm. In Grades 1 to 8 students' attainment was better for their ages than in Grades 9 to 12. In Grade 3 students' handwriting and spelling was of a good standard. Most students showed good co-operation in their classes as they worked together on group tasks.

Attainment in English in the KG was acceptable, but progress was unsatisfactory. Attainment and progress at the elementary stage were unsatisfactory. In the middle and upper schools attainment was unsatisfactory but progress acceptable. In the KG, children found listening difficult but a few understood some spoken words and phrases. By Grade 2 students spoke simple words and made brief responses to questions. In Grade 4 a few students asked simple questions and listening had improved. Reading skills were slow to develop. However, by Grade 7 students could read age-appropriate texts haltingly. Most students in Grade 2 wrote a few short sentences with support. Writing was slow to develop compared with other English skills and often it was formulaic and teacher-led. However, there were a few examples of good writing in Grade 12 where girls wrote well-structured and accurate essays.

Attainment in mathematics was acceptable and showed continuity between all phases. Most students responded to questions well and supported each other when asked to explain their work to peers. Most students showed a good understanding of number and calculations. Grade 1 students used flash cards to sort numbers into tens and single units and most Grade 4 students could explain the basic processes of division. The majority of students responded to questions and followed instructions well. Grade 8 students drew individual angles on circle graphs. Grade 9 students demonstrated good progress when they used formulae to work out the volume of pyramids and cones. Most Grade 10 students could confidently explain how to do quadratic equations. However, students were not adequately developing their problem-solving or investigative skills. Progress was acceptable overall and in line with expectations.

In science, attainment and progress were acceptable in the KG, elementary and middle schools but unsatisfactory in the upper school. As they progressed through the school students made effective gains in the acquisition of scientific knowledge and facts in line with expectations for their age. However, older students were frequently studying at levels below international standards. Whilst students could readily recall scientific concepts, their application of them in new contexts was not well developed. Students were not developing their investigative and practical skills; their scientific projects having a research rather than an experimental basis. As a consequence, experimental techniques were learned theoretically rather than practised. Nevertheless, when observed, students were able to use equipment safely.

How good is the students' personal and social development?

Students' attitudes and behaviour were acceptable. Generally, girls displayed more maturity in their attitudes towards school than boys. Good relationships between students and staff were built on mutual trust in the majority of classes and students displayed good behaviour. However, in a few lessons students showed less self-control and this prevented them from learning. The majority behaved well between lessons and at the end of the day, although a minority showed a reluctance to obey their teachers' instructions. Attendance for the last term was acceptable but students were not always punctual to lessons.

Students' understanding of Islam was acceptable. They showed good knowledge of the Prophet Mohammed's life and his miracles. Most students showed commitment to the Islamic faith as they regularly recited and memorized verses of The Holy Qur'an. They demonstrated awareness of the values of Islam and knew the importance placed upon traditions of prayer, the Haj and fasting during Ramadan. Students showed a good awareness of the special characteristics of Dubai, such as its architectural variety. However, their knowledge of Dubai's traditions and its journey to the present level of development remained superficial. Since there were few opportunities for students to get involved in community projects their sense of civic responsibility was underdeveloped.

Students' economic and environmental understanding was unsatisfactory. However, they understood the importance of environmental sustainability and they cared about environmental needs. Most tried to contribute by saving water and not littering. Students showed concern about the traffic situation in Dubai and described the new metro system as an important improvement. Their understanding of the links between Dubai's development and the current global financial climate was weak.

How good are the teaching and learning?

The quality of teaching was acceptable overall. Most teachers demonstrated a secure knowledge of their subjects but their capability in spoken and written English was inconsistent. As a consequence students were often provided with poor role models for their own development of English skills. Teachers planned lessons with activities which allowed progress in the acquisition of knowledge through repetition and practice. Such lessons were often dependent on text books and completion of tasks in work books. In a few lessons the

objectives were actively shared with students, a good pace was maintained, and a range of collaborative teaching strategies were employed. Learning was held back where teachers had poor management of their students' behaviour. A few teachers gave individual attention to students with additional learning needs but overall there was little evidence of teachers planning lessons to meet the needs of all students. Teachers used questioning to confirm understanding but rarely challenged students to think more deeply. ICT was underused as a teaching tool.

The quality of learning was acceptable. The majority of students were keen and willing learners and even those with behaviour problems showed positive attitudes to work when well managed. They readily took on the role of teacher in the lesson. This led to effective consolidation of previous work through interaction with the rest of the class. They showed enthusiasm for group work but opportunities were infrequent and rarely planned to promote additional learning. A few students developed as independent learners through project and presentation work which extended their knowledge. However, in general, they had insufficient opportunities to apply their learning to real life situations or to develop creative, critical and analytical skills.

The assessment of students' learning was acceptable across the school. Records were kept of students' progress and regularly updated. However, even though there was an understanding of how well students were progressing, information was not analyzed consistently by teachers in planning the next steps in learning in order to meet the needs of all students. Most teachers had some knowledge of individual students' strengths and weaknesses and created time in classes to offer additional help and advice. In lessons, informal assessments through questioning, worksheets and quizzes added to the overall picture of students' attainment and progress. Most teachers marked work regularly but this was frequently "tick" marking. Praise was given often but students were offered little advice about how to improve.

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

The curriculum was unsatisfactory overall. At all stages, teachers were over-reliant on the textbooks and lessons were not enriched with other resources to meet students' learning needs or engage their interests. The curriculum had been reviewed as part of the post-inspection improvement plan arising from the previous inspection report. Skills and knowledge outcomes were identified for certain subjects and certain phases of the school. However, there were several areas where the content of the curriculum was repeated from stage to stage; therefore students' learning was not continuous or progressive. Cross-curricular links were few, incidental and not well planned. The curriculum for students in early years lacked planned provision for children's personal and social development or physical education. There were insufficient opportunities for the younger students to be active in their learning. Kindergarten teachers made better use of activities, including drama and role play, but only a few children participated whilst the majority of the class sat and watched. The curriculum for science and mathematics lacked well-planned and regular opportunities for students to investigate, solve

problems or complete experiments. The school used textbooks from the USA but there were insufficient links made in the curriculum to local and national topics of interest to students. There were very few instances where teachers or students used ICT to support learning across the curriculum, although ICT was taught in discrete sessions. There were a few extra-curricular activities. Links with the community, including the use of visits and visitors, were improving in quality and increasing in frequency. However, this remained an area of weakness in the curriculum.

How well does the school protect and support students?

The school's arrangements for protecting its students were acceptable. The premises were clean and well maintained and there was sufficient attention given to emergency procedures with regular fire drills and good signage to guide students. Safe laboratory storage had been installed for chemicals and a safe internet policy had been established. Transport arrangements had been improved with all buses, drivers and assistants fulfilling the requirements of regulations. The school nurse was effective in providing the students with first aid and meeting wider health care needs. Her records were comprehensive and parent contact was made whenever concerns arose or dietary advice was felt necessary. Child protection procedures were in place.

The quality of support for students was acceptable. Female students from Grades 5 to 12 had access to well-qualified advice on their personal and academic development. A system of rewards and sanctions to improve discipline had been set up and was showing some early signs of impact. Overall relationships between adults and students were positive but in a few classes there was a need for more respect. Records of students' development focused on academic results and did not cover aspects of personal development. There was little recognition of the needs of more vulnerable students and students with learning difficulties. Attendance was recorded accurately but students' punctuality was not well-managed.

How good are the leadership and management of the school?

The quality of leadership was unsatisfactory. Although the new owners had a vision for school improvement and the determination to improve standards, this was not yet fully understood and shared across the school. The lack of a strategic overview impeded progress as the abilities and energies of the staff were not harnessed or deployed to develop a more rigorous culture of achievement. There were some pockets of very effective leadership but without a defined structure, clear lines of responsibility and appropriate time allocation, the impact so far had been limited.

The self-evaluation and improvement planning process was unsatisfactory. Systems were not rigorous enough and did not focus clearly on teaching and learning. The action plan created in response to the previous inspection's recommendations included a long list of relevant intentions but these were repetitive, non-prioritized and lacked measurable criteria to indicate

success. There were no clearly assigned responsibilities within the school for implementing plans and monitoring progress.

Relationships with parents were acceptable. There was an active group of parents who regularly met in the school and a few had become enthusiastic members of an advisory committee. Parents attended events throughout the year and they especially welcomed opportunities to come into school to discuss their children's work. There were still some concerns from a number of parents about communication, especially relating to the school's overall progress. Some effective links had been established with business but contact with the community was underdeveloped.

Governance was acceptable. A recently formed school improvement committee had contributed to a review of the development plan and provided a sounding board for new ideas and initiatives. Members of the group represented a number of stakeholders including parents and the school leaders and owners. However, the committee did not fully hold the school to account. Information regarding the performance of the school was not shared in a systematic or comprehensive way with the group to help inform their decision making processes. Although the content of meetings was recorded in an agenda, the decisions made were not widely known by staff and parents and the influence and decision-making power of the group was unclear. The committee did not yet involve a sufficiently wide range of members to be fully representative of all stakeholders.

The staffing, facilities and resources had improved in some areas and were judged to be acceptable overall. There were sufficient qualified teachers and the facility offered a clean and safe learning environment, with most specialist rooms timetabled into full use. The single science laboratory and lack of some facilities across curriculum areas still presented challenges in providing a rich curriculum. Staff deployment was mostly appropriate but classroom assistants were underused in supporting students' learning. There was limited additional help for those with identified special needs. Additional investment in computers and library stock had improved students' facilities for independent research.

Summary of inspection judgments

In their evaluation of the overall effectiveness of the school, the inspection team made judgments 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:	Kindergarten	Elementary	Middle	Upper
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:	Kindergarten	Elementary	Middle	Upper
Attainment	Not Applicable	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable
Progress over time	Not Applicable	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable

How good are the students' attainment and progress in English?				
Age group:	Kindergarten	Elementary	Middle	Upper
Attainment	Acceptable	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory
Progress over time	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Acceptable	Acceptable

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

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

How good is the students' personal and social development?				
Age group:	Kindergarten	Elementary	Middle	Upper
Attitudes and behaviour	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable
Islamic, cultural and civic understanding	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable
Economic and environmental understanding	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory

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

How well does the curriculum meet the educational needs of all students?				
Age group:	Kindergarten	Elementary	Middle	Upper
Curriculum quality	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory

How well does the school protect and support students?				
Age group:	Kindergarten	Elementary	Middle	Upper
Health and safety	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable
Quality of support	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable

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

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.

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