

Al Arqam 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 Arqam Private School was inspected in February 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 Barsha, Al Arqam is a private school providing education for boys and girls from Kindergarten (KG) to Grade 12 aged four to 17 years. The school follows a Ministry of Education curriculum. The girls section of the school had experienced a period of disruption due to the lack of an effective leader. This situation was being addressed at the time of the inspection. At the time of the inspection, there were 871 students on roll. The student attendance reported by the school for the last academic session was good.

Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau (DSIB) analysed responses to on-line questionnaires completed by parents. Parents were very supportive of the school and appreciative of its strong Islamic values which were evident in the school's ethos and curriculum. They felt that communication was a key strength of the school and valued the positive relationships and caring attitude shown towards their children. The parents believed the school provided a positive environment for learning and was well led. They particularly praised the school's approach to discipline within Islamic values and the promotion of high standards of respect and behaviour. Most parents were happy with the information they received on student progress and they found the regular consultation meetings helpful. A few parents would like to be more involved in decisions which affect their child at school. Parents were mostly unaware of the school's actions in response to the last inspection but felt that standards were improving.

How well does the school perform overall?

The school provided an acceptable standard of education, overall. Response to the previous inspection report was positive and progress had been made in the area of self-evaluation and improvement planning. Attainment and progress in Islamic Education, Arabic and English were good across all phases with the exception of English attainment in KG, where it was acceptable. In mathematics, attainment was good in Cycles 1 and 2. Students' personal and social development were good. Almost all students showed positive attitudes to learning, behaved well in lessons and around the school. Students' civic understanding was good. They were responsible and showed strong respect for and appreciation of Islam. Their knowledge, understanding and appreciation of local traditions and cultures were strengths and were embedded in the ethos of the school. Similarly, students' economic and environmental understanding were good with many able to discuss Dubai's economic situation and local and global environmental issues in some depth.

The quality of teaching was acceptable. However, there were too many lessons in which teachers used a limited range of styles and strategies and did not provide enough challenge to students, despite efforts to develop teaching across the school. Assessment strategies to inform teaching were inconsistent across the school. The school followed the Ministry of Education curriculum, and the school had been successful in their efforts to enrich the curriculum with a range of visits and visitors which the students enjoyed immensely. The quality of protection for students was good with school staff taking collective and individual responsibility to protect students; they knew and adhered to the policies for health and safety. The arrangements to support students' welfare and positive personal development were also good. Tracking of student progress was strong in Arabic but inconsistent in other subjects.

The Principal was committed to improving the school and had worked hard with his team to address the recommendations from the previous inspection. These efforts were beginning to impact on students as was shown by improved attainment in key subjects. Nevertheless, a stronger strategic overview of the school was needed to ensure good practices were developed throughout both girls' and boys' sections. The weak leadership in the girls' section had led to confusion and a lack of direction. The school had the capacity to improve further with a more cohesive approach to improvement. The school delivered well on its promise to parents; the governing body played a strong accountability role and provided effective support to the leadership. Staffing was adequate but second teachers in KG were not utilised effectively. Facilities were acceptable but resources for learning generally and in specialist areas were lacking, especially those for information and communications technology (ICT).

Key features of the school

- The positive response to the previous inspection and the effort of staff towards addressing the recommendations;
- Well behaved students with mostly positive attitudes to learning;
- A strong and positive school ethos based on Islamic values;
- Positive relationships which led to a caring, safe environment for learning;
- Inconsistent quality of teaching, learning and assessment practices;
- The lack of a strategic overview of attainment and progress and skilled data analysis to inform improvement planning;
- Supportive parents and governing body;
- A lack of cohesion between the boys and girls sections in terms of leadership and planning to ensure whole school consistency.

Recommendations

- Improve teaching, learning and assessment further by:
 - identifying and agreeing, as a school, what characterises a good lesson, drawing on the best international practice;
 - train subject co-ordinators to monitor teaching and learning and ensure feedback is given to teachers using agreed criteria;
 - Devise more effective systems for sharing best practice and developing the strategies of teachers.
- Resolve the leadership issues in the girls/primary section and ensure that links between the girls and boys section are developed to ensure consistency of practices across the whole school;
- Ensure that data is analysed effectively so that all teachers understand strengths and weaknesses of individuals and groups of students and use this information to plan teaching and raise standards further, especially in science.

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

Attainment and progress in Islamic Education were good in all stages. Most students memorized and recited chapters and verses of The Holy Qur'an making only a few errors. In the lower grades, most students knew the Faith Pillars and Islam Pillars. They knew details about the lives of the messengers of Allah, and their characteristics. They could discuss the ranks of the angels and their nature. In higher grades, most students understood Islamic principles. They discussed positive criticism and negative criticism from an Islamic perspective and could discuss the impact of wrong doings on human life. Older students discussed the relationship between one's actions and the results in this life and the hereafter.

Attainment and progress In Arabic were good in all stages. Most students in all grades demonstrated good speaking, reading and writing skills. In the lower grades students could read short paragraphs and short stories accurately. They understood the basic grammatical rules applying to verbs and nouns in sentences. The majority of students could distinguish between different types of nouns. In higher grades, most students could read poetry and drama expressively. They could compile short pieces of dramatic text and used the dictionary to find the meaning of unfamiliar words.

Attainment and progress in English were acceptable in KG and good in the rest of the school. KG children quickly developed the ability to speak and write simple words and numbers. Cycle 1 students were able to assimilate vocabulary, hold conversations, take part in role play and write simple sentences. Students in Cycle 3 could use increasingly complex vocabulary and, by the end of Cycle 3, the majority of students could discuss difficult issues in accurate English. A few older students could write fluently in a variety of genres. However, throughout the school, a minority of students experienced difficulty in reading fluently and with full understanding.

Attainment in mathematics was acceptable in KG and Cycle 3 and good in Cycles 1 and 2. Most students showed a good understanding of number and calculations. Grade 1 students used flash cards to sort numbers into tens and units and most Grade 4 students could explain basic workings of division calculations up to hundreds. The majority of students responded to mathematical questions and followed instructions well and could explain their reasoning. Grade 8 students accurately drew individual angles on graphs. Grade 9 students demonstrated good progress when they calculated the volume of pyramids and cones using formulae. Most Grade 10 students confidently explained workings of quadratic equations. However, across all stages of the school, students' problem solving and investigative skills were weaker.

Attainment and progress in science were acceptable across all phases. Students showed a sound knowledge of the subject content and attained broadly in line with international age-related norms. Progress was acceptable against school benchmarks. Children in KG explored aspects of the world around them and could describe different textures and materials. Grade 1 students were keen learners, having knowledge of the weather and its impact on the world. Students in Grade 5 were able to provide facts about the environment and how weather patterns affected our environment. Grade 12 biology students had an acceptable level of

understanding about hormones and endocrine glands. The majority of students made good progress in their knowledge of the scientific world. However, they had insufficient opportunities to develop their empirical skills. There was little evidence of practical, independent investigation and this resulted in the underdevelopment of the higher order, critical thinking skills.

How good is the students' personal and social development?

The behaviour and attitudes of the students were good. They behaved well in lessons and enjoyed good relationships with each other and with adults in the school. Students responded positively to teachers and exercised self control when learning independently, showing positive attitudes to learning in most cases. They were confident and communicated well with visitors, keen to share their love for their school. Almost all students cared for each other and showed high levels of respect to all members of the learning community. Students showed responsibility in school and the student council met regularly to discuss issues and plan events. Attendance was good; however, a few students regularly arrived late for school.

The students' civic understanding was good throughout school. They took responsibility in many ways and were involved in decision-making through the school council and school self-evaluation processes. Their respect for and understanding of Islam was good, as exemplified in assemblies, during lessons and in their daily behaviour. They had a strong understanding of the history, culture and traditions of Dubai and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and many showed good knowledge of the cultures of expatriates living in Dubai.

Students were aware of the main occupations and industries in Dubai, both ancient and modern. They could suggest ways they might contribute to Dubai's future success. Their understanding of the global recession and its impact locally was good. Students showed good understanding of environmental issues and could identify the key reasons for global warming and pollution. They discussed the main environmental issues in Dubai such as carbon emissions, light pollution and energy conservation. Several knew about Dubai's plans to be a sustainable city. Students demonstrated a positive regard for their immediate surroundings and kept classrooms and shared areas clean.

How good are the teaching and learning?

Teaching was acceptable across all phases of the school. Teachers had good subject knowledge but a few lacked knowledge of how children learn. In KG, for example, children were inactive for too long and lessons were often dominated by teachers' talk. In mathematics especially, teachers used a range of strategies that were beginning to ensure that the needs of all students were being met. These were not as well developed in other subjects, for example, in science, where there was insufficient use of investigation to stimulate students and develop enquiry skills. A number of classrooms had data projectors but, in general, there was insufficient use of ICT to support and engage students. Teachers, in too many lessons, over-directed lessons so there were few opportunities for students to learn independently. In these

cases progress and learning were severely restricted by too much teacher talk. Teacher-student interactions were mostly positive but dialogue was often lacking and questions were only well developed in the best lessons.

The quality of learning was acceptable. In some areas, including for example mathematics, students were beginning to take greater responsibility for their own learning. Most students were keen to learn and showed enjoyment in their lessons. They applied their learning in a variety of ways. However, in the weaker lessons there was too much emphasis on worksheets and repetition to reinforce learning and too few opportunities for students to learn together. In the best lessons effective group work developed thinking and learning well. In Grade 1, students developed their knowledge of the elements of weather through working in research groups in the courtyard area. Research and investigation was, however, not well established as part of the learning process.

Assessment was acceptable, overall, with a few examples of effective assessment in later grades which enabled students to understand exactly how to improve. However, despite improvements since the last inspection, assessment still lacked consistency across phases and subjects; this lack of coherence led to variable impact. The quality of marking and feedback to students was limited to ticks and praise and written feedback rarely told students how well they were doing and what they needed to do to improve. Teachers did not always adjust their teaching in the light of assessment information. A few teachers used questioning well to develop thinking and to assess learning. In these examples the staff targeted all abilities and used their good subject knowledge to develop understanding.

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

The curriculum was balanced and provided continuity and progression across the age ranges and was guided largely by text books. A few teachers, particularly in mathematics, planned practical activities and used ICT well to enrich the curriculum. Curriculum review had led to the adoption of a new English scheme which had a positive impact on learning as it provided challenging reading passages, developed writing skills, aided structured planning and met the needs of students well. The curriculum was relevant to the needs of most students but support for the higher achieving students and less able students was limited. The lack of ICT resources overall limited the scope of the curriculum and restricted opportunities for independent enquiry and research. A few links between topics widened students' understanding notably in English, but greater cross-curricular links were needed to ensure students made connections between areas of learning. Appropriate arrangements for transition between the phases helped students prepare for the next stage in their education. The curriculum was enhanced by additional visits and visitors throughout the school year and extra-curricular activities enriched students experiences. However, the school did not plan sufficient opportunities for students to learn within the community.

How well does the school protect and support students?

The arrangements to ensure the health and safety of students were good. The school building was clean, hygienic and secure. Security staff ensured that students were protected within school and when leaving. Students were supervised well on buses. The school premises and equipment were maintained to a high standard but the sand in the KG play area needed replacing. Fire evacuation procedures were in place and drills were regular. The doctor provided health checks and the nurse administered vaccinations and first aid to all students. The nurse maintained records of students' health and the medical rooms were well equipped and medicines were safely stored. The nurse advised on healthy eating and the canteen provided mainly healthy food. The social worker gave useful advice on how to make wise choices and to remain safe.

The arrangements for the care and support of students were good. Social workers in the girls' and boys' sections knew the students well and kept teachers aware of circumstances affecting the students' well-being. The social workers also managed the students' behaviour and advised parents if there were problems with their children as well as providing guidance to students. Staff managed the small number of behaviour issues effectively. Although there were some procedures for tracking students' welfare and attainment, the school was not yet using data systematically to monitor students' academic progress effectively in all subjects. Students' attendance and punctuality were well managed.

How good are the leadership and management of the school?

The leadership of the school was acceptable overall. The Principal and his team were committed and dedicated to improving the school. Together, they provided good direction and support for teachers and co-ordinators. However, despite clear leadership roles for subject co-ordinators, a full understanding of which initiatives would best support students' achievements was sometimes lacking. Most co-ordinators were focussed on raising standards but a few lacked the expertise needed to carry out systematic monitoring and review and so lesson observations and feedback sometimes lacked rigour. Whilst members of the girls section were responding well to the new leadership this role needed to be confirmed publicly to provide greater stability. Liaison between boys' and girls' sections and across phases was developing well but needed further attention to ensure that initiatives impacted on a school-wide basis.

Processes for evaluating the school were acceptable and had improved to include teachers, parents, students and governors. The leadership was aware of the overall strengths and weaknesses of the school. However, data analysis was restricted to pass and fail percentages. Teaching and learning were monitored regularly but whole school monitoring lacked focus and so did not always lead to necessary improvements. Feedback to teachers was not specific enough and so did not impact strongly on student progress. The school had worked very hard to address the recommendations from the previous inspection and better teaching had begun to lead to improved attainment in most key subjects. A more strategic and cohesive approach to improvement was required.

The school had good partnerships with parents. Communication was effective and responsive. The well established parents committee ensured strong involvement of parents in the school. Parents welcomed the opportunity to share successes of the students through the awards ceremonies. Reporting to parents on attainment and progress was regular and ensured that parents understood how their children were doing at school, however, report cards lacked specific targets for improvement. The school involved parents well in strategies to support the lower achievers and challenge the more able. The school had good links with the local community and students benefited from educational visits, field trips, events and charitable projects.

Governance in the school was good. The school benefited from a very supportive governing body which held regular meetings with the Principal. Governors received direct communication from the parents' committee and the student council via an elected representative and through joint meetings. Lines of communication were strong and parents were involved in the decision-making process. The board also held the school to account for standards, provided financial support for the school and families and were involved in developing the school improvement plan. The governors worked closely with the Principal to analyse attainment data but lacked understanding of international expectations in relation to student attainment and progress and so accountability measures were not as effective as they could have been.

The staffing, facilities and resources were acceptable overall. Staffing levels were sufficient and qualifications, appropriate but arrangements for teacher cover at the time of absence needed review. The lack of permanent leadership in the primary and girls' section had contributed to poor continuity and low staff morale. Buildings were adequate, safe and mostly well-kept. There was no gymnasium and not enough laboratories to ensure maximum access to practical science. KG rooms lacked stimulating learning resources. For example, role play areas were limited and ICT equipment was absent. Existing resources were used well to support learning. The library suffered from a lack of attractive and appropriate books and internet access to develop research and enquiry was severely limited. Data projectors were under-used.

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	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3
Attainment	Not applicable	Good	Good	Good
Progress over time	Not applicable	Good	Good	Good

How good are the students' attainment and progress in Arabic?				
Age group:	KG	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3
Attainment	Good	Good	Good	Good
Progress over time	Good	Good	Good	Good

How good are the students' attainment and progress in English?				
Age group:	KG	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3
Attainment	Acceptable	Good	Good	Good
Progress over time	Good	Good	Good	Good

How good are the students' attainment and progress in mathematics?				
Age group:	KG	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3
Attainment	Acceptable	Good	Good	Acceptable
Progress over time	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable

How good are the students' attainment and progress in science?				
Age group:	KG	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3
Attainment	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable
Progress over time	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable

How good is the students' personal and social development?				
Age group:	KG	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3
Attitudes and behaviour	Good	Good	Good	Good
Islamic, cultural and civic understanding	Good	Good	Good	Good
Economic and environmental understanding	Good	Good	Good	Good

How good are teaching and learning?				
Age group:	KG	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3
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:	KG	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3
Curriculum quality	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable

How well does the school protect and support students?				
Age group:	KG	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3
Health and safety	Good	Good	Good	Good
Quality of support	Good	Good	Good	Good

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	Good
Governance	Good
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.

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

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