

# Universal American School Inspection Report

Kindergarten to High

Report published May 2011

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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.

Universal American School was inspected in October 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 Festival City, Universal American School is a private school providing education for boys and girls from Kindergarten to high, aged three to 18 years. The school follows a US and International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum. At the time of the inspection, there were 1186 students on roll. The student attendance reported by the school for the last academic session was good.

As part of the inspection process, Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau analysed responses to on-line questionnaires issued to parents. Almost all of the respondents to the pre-inspection questionnaire felt the quality of education was good or better. Satisfaction levels reported for progress in Islamic Education and Arabic, both as a first and an additional language were high. Similarly, in English, mathematics and science, parents were happy with the progress being made. Almost all reported satisfaction with the quality of teaching and learning. Most parents said the behaviour of students and the resources were good or better. A majority said the support for students with special educational needs was good. Most respondents felt that the school promoted a healthy lifestyle and stated that students were safe. Almost all parents were very happy with home-school communication and homework although a few respondents reported their children needed extra support at home with their school assignments. Parents found the reports and meetings helpful and that the school was well led. A majority felt the school had responded well to the recommendations from the previous inspection and almost half said the greatest strength of the school was the teaching while extra-curricular activities and the emphasis on the Arabic language were identified as areas for improvement.

## How well does the school perform overall?

The Universal American School provided a good quality of education. Changes in curriculum and teaching methods had resulted in a marked improvement in student achievement from the time of the last inspection.

Students' attitudes and behaviours were outstanding throughout the school. Teaching for effective learning was good across the school. Teachers knew their subjects well and students' learning was also good in all phases. The school provided outstanding health and safety measures for its students. The quality of support across the phases and the quality of leadership was judged as outstanding. An ethos of caring for all children and staff was evident and began with the leadership team. Self-evaluation and improvement planning was good and reflected efforts of the leadership team and governing body to effectively respond to the previous school inspection report.

## Key features of the school

- Outstanding attitudes and behaviour of the students were supported through a very caring and supportive school community;
- The appropriate focus on teaching practice; curriculum and professional development has resulted in an improving picture of student attainment;
- Skilled practitioners in effective school leadership have embedded a culture of collegial effort focused on raising standards;
- The assessment data generated by the school did not accurately reflect students' achievement;
- Effective self-evaluation measures had resulted in significant improvement in most recommendations made in the previous report.

## Recommendations

- Raise the standard of Islamic Education by developing an appropriate balance between skills and knowledge;
- Make Arabic a living language in the school by developing cross-curricular activities and co-teaching opportunities;
- Ensure the summative assessment data accurately reflects classroom achievement at all grades.

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

Attainment in Islamic Education was acceptable throughout the school. Progress was good in elementary but acceptable in middle and secondary schools. Grade 2 students could make good links between Islamic concepts studied and their daily lives. They could also demonstrate their understanding by making some illustrations. By Grade 6, students made good progress in the recitation of the Qur'an. However, this progress did not remain consistent in the middle and high schools. In Grade 9, students demonstrated understanding of the Islamic rules of identifying the lawful and unlawful foods but they could not apply these rules consistently. By Grade 12 students' recitation was in line expectations but the majority of students made errors, particularly the non-Arabic speaking students. In general, students' understanding and knowledge of Islam was better than their skills of reciting the Qur'an.

Attainment in Arabic as a first language was acceptable throughout the whole school. However, progress in elementary was good while it remained acceptable in the middle and high schools. In the elementary school, students' listening oral skills. In Grade 5, most students had acceptable understanding of grammar and could identify types of verbs. Grade 6 students could read and write short paragraphs about familiar topics and made quicker progress than students in the upper grades. Grade 8 students' reading was in line with expectations but their knowledge of grammar was below average. Grade 12 students' reading and writing abilities were below average. Almost all of the students at this stage were able to read and write short paragraphs though they made frequent grammatical mistakes.

Attainment and progress in Arabic as an additional language were acceptable across all stages. By Grade 6, most students had developed good listening and speaking skills. They could understand few words and phrases. They could respond to questions using single words or short phrases. Their writing was limited to copying words from the board. Their understanding was also limited to few familiar words and phrases. By Grade 8, students could recognise Arabic words when visual prompts were provided to them but their writing was underdeveloped. They could form simple sentences consisting of three to five words. In the upper grades of the high school, most students could read a few lines though making common mistakes. Throughout all stages, student's linguistic skills were limited to building up isolated vocabulary instead of focusing on the functional aspect of the language.

Attainment in English was acceptable at Kindergarten and elementary levels and good at middle and high school levels. Progress was good at all levels. Most students demonstrated well-developed receptive and expressive oral language skills. Most middle and high school students spoke on complex issues with facility. Most Kindergarten students could read a number of sight words and demonstrated early phonics skills. Students in middle and high grades typically demonstrated good understanding of literature in class discussions and could give high quality speeches. Written expression in Kindergarten was age-appropriate. Students in elementary grades and higher wrote with confidence and fluency across a wide range of subjects. Written expression in elementary grades and higher reflected strong levels of expression, grammar and spelling.

Attainment and progress in mathematics were good throughout the grade levels. Changes in curriculum and teaching methods resulted in a marked improvement in student achievement from the time of the last inspection. Students in Kindergarten could write numerals beyond 10 and, in Grade 1, students could make simple graphs. By Grade 6 students could find the mean, mode and range of a set of data and could produce the accompanying graphs. Students were able to competently apply mathematics concepts to real-life situations as was evidenced when Grade 6 students used their understanding of mean, mode, and range to enhance a trade show booth. The same pattern of good attainment and progress was present in secondary education. Given the inclusive practice of having almost all Grade 12 students write the International Baccalaureate (IB) mathematics examinations, school scores compared well with world averages.

Attainment and progress in science was good. Across all phases, students used scientific methods, inquiry and science terminology accurately. Kindergarten children could describe the properties of everyday materials and they could identify each of the five senses and explain how each one helps interpret the world. In Middle school, students could accurately explain the impact of erratic particle movement, understanding and independently implementing experimentation protocols. They role-played enthusiastically to gain deeper understanding of interdependence. Almost all high school students collaborated to measure voltage with potential dividers, conduct titrations, found polarity values and describe electron configuration. Students self-designed off-site laboratory work deepening their understanding of cardiovascular measurement.

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

Students' attitudes and behaviour were outstanding throughout the school. Almost all students displayed consistently high levels of engagement and commitment to their responsibilities and their work. Students were courteous, positive and proactive in their communication with adults and each other. Relationships with their teachers were almost always positive and when dealing with challenging social situations, the students chose mature and effective resolution techniques. The students understood and promoted healthy living and spoke confidently about the ongoing work of ensuring healthy choices in the canteen. Attendance was good and students were rarely late for classes.

Students throughout the school showed good civic and Islamic understanding. They showed good care for the school and community. Students had good knowledge about life and traditions of Dubai and appreciated living in a multi-cultural society. They provided good examples of the impact of Islam on the world by making it a peaceful place. Muslim students used the three prayer facilities regularly. All students demonstrated high awareness of their civic responsibilities and there were many opportunities for them to express this awareness both as part of in-school and out of school programs.

Economic and environmental understanding was outstanding across all phases. Students had a well-developed understanding of Dubai's development, its current profile in the world and they had a range of imaginative plans for its future. As they got older their capacity to



understand their potential contribution to the future was enhanced through their excellent understanding of economics and environmental management. Students consistently showed care for their immediate environment and liaised with the wider community to promote and manage greater environmental awareness.

## How good are the teaching and learning?

Teaching for effective learning was good across the school. Teachers knew their subjects well and most understood the most effective teaching strategies for their students. Teachers generally questioned well, supported the less able and challenged effectively. Where teaching was good, active learning through appropriate tasks was promoted. Resources were managed to facilitate independent, collaborative and cross-curricular work. Teaching was consistently targeted to develop learning skills in a graduated and structured manner. In a few classes teaching did not permit independent and creative learning to occur. In these lessons, teaching was excessively content orientated and prioritised topic completion rather than understanding and skill enhancement.

Learning was good in all phases. Most students were committed to the development of their independent learning skills. They collaborated at all grade levels, questioned and answered purposefully and when appropriate, they developed hypotheses, used resources, especially information and communications technology (ICT) and completed assignments enthusiastically. Students' engagement with teachers and topics was good in almost all classes. When given the opportunity to work using the materials imaginatively students' work was of a high quality. Learning was less successful when students did not have the opportunity to be independent and active.

Assessment was good. The school collected a large amount of data using external and internal measurement tools. Students contributed to this work, understanding their own success criteria across all phases. Teachers used the data to create relevant objectives that met the needs of most students. The school knew its students well, tested in a variety of ways regularly and collated the data at clear intervals to ensure that the next steps were relevant and achievable. External testing tools were not always in line with the attainment and progress information gathered through class and project work. Therefore, the overall analysis undertaken was less effective in understanding the needs of the school as a whole. Marking, though regular, was not always constructive in informing students and parents of the next level of challenge.

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

The curriculum was outstanding in Kindergarten and good at all other levels. In English, science, and mathematics, at all levels, the curriculum had a clear rationale based on shared values based on principles of the International Baccalaureate Programs. Kindergarten and elementary grades had a well-developed, detailed curriculum, the Primary Years Program

(PYP), which had been appropriately adapted to local needs. For Grades 7 to 10, the school had developed a comprehensive, conceptual learning curriculum related to the Middle Years Program. At Grades 11 and 12, the school implemented the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program. In the English, mathematics and science, the curriculum promoted challenge and enjoyment, progression and relevance. The delivery of the Islamic Education curriculum, Grades 1 to 12, did not provide appropriate balance between recitation and knowledge development. The curriculum in Arabic, Grades 1 to 12, provided little support for listening and speaking skills, particularly for non-Arabic speaking students. The curriculum in English, science, and mathematics was frequently reviewed and updated as part of the school's ongoing monitoring of student attainment and progress. Teachers and school leaders evaluated transitions and adjusted the curriculum to ensure that students make successful transitions across levels. Cross-curricular themes were systematically planned within the PYP program, to a lesser extent in middle grades, and were key features in the IB program in Grades 11 and 12. A wide range of extra-curricular activities was offered to students, and participation was high. All students regularly participated in learning activities at sites within the community. Additionally, the school offered opportunities for students to travel abroad on service projects.

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

The school provided outstanding health and safety measures for its students. Specialty areas such as laboratories, the gymnasium, swimming pool, playground, and athletic fields were safe and well maintained. Fire safety and other emergency measures were clearly explained in teacher and student handbooks and appropriate drills were carried out. The cafeteria provided healthy food and the building was decorated with reminders to students about healthy living practices. Also, teachers incorporated health education into their regular subject lessons. Many staff members were trained in aspects of first aid and had proper certification if they were involved in supervising the swimming pool. Bus safety measures were stringently followed and parent pick-up and drop-off were managed well.

The quality of support across the phases was outstanding. Staff-student relationships were very positive and procedures were in place to deal with and track behaviour issues. Comprehensive counselling, learning support and other services to support and track students' well-being and academic progress was being provided and effectively managed. Another counselling service program to support students with special educational needs was in place. Counselling for post-high school education was in place for upper grade students. There was a well-defined process and procedures in place to manage student attendance and punctuality.

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

The quality of leadership in the Universal American School was outstanding. All levels of the school's leadership were focused on school improvement and worked collaboratively to raise the standards of teaching and learning within the school. There was a clear focus on collegial



work among staff which was modelled effectively by school leaders. An ethos of caring for all children and staff was evident and this began with the leadership team. Students, parent and staff interviews indicated a high level of satisfaction with the leadership of the school.

Self-evaluation and improvement planning was good and reflected efforts of the leadership team and governing body to effectively respond to areas cited for improvement in the previous school inspection report. There had been significant progress achieved since the last inspection. There was a systematic monitoring of teacher effectiveness by the leadership team and the school was responsive to suggestions and comments by parents and students.

The partnership with parents and the community was outstanding. Almost all parents reported a high degree of satisfaction with all phases of the school and the community was invited into the school to broaden the scope of the learning opportunities for the students at all levels. Satisfaction levels reported for progress in Islamic Education and Arabic, both as a first and an additional language were high. Similarly, in English, mathematics and science, parents were happy with the progress being made. The parent-teacher organisation served as a public relations agent for the school with new and prospective families.

Governance was judged to be good as it had a high level of working knowledge of the school and its programs, including understanding which external benchmarks were used to add value to the students learning and assessments. Parents had direct access to the governing board through the highly effective parent-teacher organisation who represented the families of the school. The governance committee oversaw all compliance issues and developed the development plan with input from senior leadership staff and parents.

Staffing, facilities and resources were judged to be outstanding and the instructional staff were appropriately qualified in almost all instances. Adequate staff had been hired for all key positions in the school. Professional development of staff supported new curricular objectives and needs identified in classroom assessments by leadership team members. School libraries were well supplied and an active part of the learning process within the school. ICT was used effectively in almost all classrooms and the physical plant was maintained and used effectively to support instruction.

## Summary of inspection judgements

In their evaluation of the overall effectiveness of the school, the inspection team made judgements about the following aspects of the school's performance.

Four descriptors are: Outstanding; Good; Acceptable; Unsatisfactory.

### How good are the students' attainment and progress in Islamic Education?

Age group:	KG	Elementary	Middle	High
Attainment	Not Applicable	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable
Progress over time	Not Applicable	Good	Acceptable	Acceptable

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

31% of students in the school studied Arabic as a first language.

Age group:	KG	Elementary	Middle	High
Attainment in Arabic as a first language	Not Applicable	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable
Progress in Arabic as a first language	Not Applicable	Good	Acceptable	Acceptable
Attainment in Arabic as an additional language	Not Applicable	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable
Progress in Arabic as an additional language	Not Applicable	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable

How good are the students' attainment and progress in English?				
Age group:	KG	Elementary	Middle	High
Attainment	Acceptable	Acceptable	Good	Good
Progress over time	Good	Good	Good	Good

How good are the students' attainment and progress in mathematics?				
Age group:	KG	Elementary	Middle	High
Attainment	Good	Good	Good	Good
Progress over time	Good	Good	Good	Good

How good are the students' attainment and progress in science?				
Age group:	KG	Elementary	Middle	High
Attainment	Good	Good	Good	Good
Progress over time	Good	Good	Good	Good

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

How good are teaching and learning?				
Age group:	KG	Elementary	Middle	High
Teaching for effective learning	Good	Good	Good	Good
Quality of students' learning	Good	Good	Good	Good
Assessment	Good	Good	Good	Good

How well does the curriculum meet the educational needs of all students?				
Age group:	KG	Elementary	Middle	High
Curriculum quality	Outstanding	Good	Good	Good

How well does the school protect and support students?				
Age group:	KG	Elementary	Middle	High
Health and safety	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding
Quality of support	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding

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

How well does the school perform overall?
Good

## Next steps

The school has been asked to prepare an action plan indicating how it will address the main findings of the report, and to share that plan with parents. The next inspection will report on the progress made by the school.

Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau  
Knowledge and Human Development Authority

## How to contact us

If you have a concern or wish to comment on any aspect of this report you should contact:  
inspection@khda.gov.ae.

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

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