

Parents, leaders, peers

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The phenomenal growth of international schools across the Gulf region has been well documented.

With Dubai and Abu Dhabi home to close on eight million people and expanding rapidly, expats from across the globe are busy seeking schools for their children. Dubai alone hosts 180,000 Brits (the population of Oxford) and predicts it needs 100 new schools over the coming decade - and schools in the UAE are frequently 3000+ in size.

Yet in tandem there is a quiet evolution in the government schools in the region, led impressively by Emirati and international educationists shaping new ways of doing.

[Khalid Bin Zayed Al Awal School](#) (KBZA) opened three years ago. Established in long-standing school premises in the traditional design, the building has been imaginatively transformed for 21st century schooling. Girls and boys from 3 - 18 are being educated in the same classrooms - a first in the UAE public system.

The school's core mission is 'to pilot a distinctly Emirati approach to public education, that develops Emirati students who are globally competitive and rooted in their national identity'. Further, there is a curriculum to enable all students to be bilingual in Arabic and English, orally and in writing.

This is both ground-breaking and ambitious, set against a backcloth of English squeezing out heritage languages across the globe. Talk to leaders in French, German and Spanish schools locally, and they testify to their students needing to study their first language ever more assiduously, given the 'invasion' of English into both the home and the wider society.



Three years after opening, KBZA has been judged a good school, with very good elements, benchmarked independently against the international inspection framework that operates in the UAE. Rooted in Ofsted, the framework's six performance standards are: students' achievement; students' personal and social development and their innovation skills; teaching and assessment; curriculum; the protection, care, guidance and support of students; leadership and management.

What are the ingredients of the school's success to date, mindful that the challenges of growing student numbers will inevitably arise?

To begin at the beginning: the early years classrooms, indoor play and outdoor garden areas provide a gloriously resourced learning environment in which the fun and fundamentals of foundation learning are taking firm roots. All classes are taught in both Arabic and English, with bilingual support staff. Creative curriculum materials are home-grown.

Moving through the primary years, the classrooms 'sing' bilingualism and celebrate a character curriculum which has been imaginatively embraced by students and staff: the Palm Tree of character values is ubiquitous. Students' attitudes to learning are second to none, their dress-code immaculate.

Currently being grafted on to CUSP and White Rose materials with which UK readers will be familiar, the school is introducing the International Baccalaureate (IB) learner profiles into every classroom, in anticipation of the IB being the eventual examination goals for students. This is similarly ambitious and plays to the school's core mission.



Distinctively and enjoyably, students of all ages do not have to wait until after school for 'extra-curricular' activities: within the main timetable there are slots to attend violin and cello classes, public speaking and Quraan reading sessions, picture-book publishing, chess and jiu-jitsu.

The truisms of school improvement prevail. No school is better than its teachers – the recruitment of excellent Arabic and English speaking practitioners has been key. Their commitment to the cause shines through everyday practices in classrooms and corridors.

A climate of mutual accountability and highly professional teamwork permeates. All staff are valued. All children are known as individuals. And everyone eats together, every day, in a canteen providing healthy food ‘from farm to fork’.

Emirati families have moved their children out of prestigious international and other government schools to be part of what they see as the future of publicly funded education in the region. They are unanimous in their applause for the way in which the stated mission is being delivered. The full attendance by mothers and fathers at school events tells its own tale.

Singularly striking in talking to KBZA students - of all ages - is their optimism and sure sense of self. Questioned on who shapes their values, with one voice they cite their parents, the nation’s leaders, their peers - in that order.

One calls to mind Mahatma Ghandi’s words when asked for his thoughts on Western civilisation: ‘I think it would be a good idea’.

Roy Blatchford’s forthcoming book is [\*The A -Z of Good Governance\*](#)