

Qatar's K–12 Education Reform Has Achieved Success in Its Early Years

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In 2001, the leadership of the State of Qatar asked the RAND Corporation to examine the nation's kindergarten through grade 12 (K–12) education system and to propose a strategy for reform. This request was based on concerns that students were leaving Ministry of Education schools without the academic proficiency necessary to achieve success in post-secondary education or in the expanding Qatari labor market.

Of the three options RAND presented, the leadership selected the Independent School Model, a system-wide structural reform plan that encouraged qualified persons with innovative ideas (including noneducators) to apply to run new Independent schools under contracts with the government. This model focused on the development of curriculum standards that specified desired educational outcomes in Arabic, English, mathematics, and science. School and student performance would be systematically tracked through national assessments aligned with the new standards, and a range of professional development opportunities would be provided for teachers and administrators.

The first generation of 12 Independent schools opened in 2004; by fall 2006, 46 Independent schools were operating alongside the more traditional Ministry of Education schools and the private Arabic schools.

Evaluating the Progress of the Reform

In 2005, RAND was asked to monitor, evaluate, and report on the implementation of the reform in the Independent schools. From November 2005 through May 2007, the RAND team conducted a case-study analysis of 12 Independent schools and four Ministry schools. Data were drawn from extensive classroom observations; interviews with principals and administrators; and focus groups with teachers, students, and parents. The team looked for evidence that key school-level reform elements had been implemented, including

Abstract

To evaluate progress made in the first years of Qatar's implementation of K–12 education reform, RAND analyzed data from school-level observations, national surveys, and national student assessments. The study found that students in the new, Independent schools were performing better than those in Ministry schools, and there was greater student and parental satisfaction. Independent school teachers reported increased opportunities for professional development. However, much work remains because most students are still not meeting the new, higher curriculum standards.

student-centered classroom instruction; efforts to promote students' critical thinking skills; implementation of curriculum standards in Arabic, mathematics, and science; use of English in mathematics and science classes; and support for teachers' professional development. RAND used national survey data to compare school characteristics, teacher characteristics, and instructional practices in Independent and Ministry schools. RAND also analyzed student performance data from the 2005–2006 Qatar Comprehensive Education Assessment.

Despite Many Positive Effects, More Change Is Needed

Independent schools differed markedly from Ministry schools in their recruitment and professional development practices. Operators of Independent schools had more autonomy to direct teacher recruitment, hiring, and retention than was the case under the Ministry system. However, these decisions were constrained by the introduction of targets that specify a minimum

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percentage of Qatari teachers. Hiring was further constrained because Qatari teachers perceived working conditions in Independent schools to be less favorable—for example, longer hours and more demanding tasks. Independent school teachers more often reported engagement in professional development activities consistent with reform goals—for example, emphasis on instructional methods and curriculum planning—than did Ministry teachers.

The move to a standards-based curriculum produced both difficulties and rewards for Independent schools. The transition from the Ministry's entirely predetermined course of study to a standards-based instructional program selected or developed by principals and teachers was not easy. Independent school teachers noted the extra workload required for curriculum development and materials selection. Nevertheless, these collaborative efforts were cited by many as a positive feature of their work in Independent schools. Independent school teachers were also much more satisfied with the physical environment and available resources than were Ministry teachers.

Independent schools were more student-centered than were their Ministry counterparts. Teachers in Independent schools were more actively trying to engage students than were Ministry teachers. But while the content of the curriculum standards was being conveyed through new pedagogical approaches, demands for higher-order thinking were still relatively limited. Materials that teachers were selecting and developing were not always completely aligned with the curriculum standards. The use of English in mathematics and science classes was uneven because of a lack of English proficiency among teachers and students.

Students and parents demonstrated a higher level of satisfaction with the Independent schools. During these early years of the reform, students in Independent schools were more interested in and prouder of their schools than were Ministry students. Independent school teachers reported that the students seemed to be more motivated to learn. Parents reported higher levels of involvement in Independent schools and greater satisfaction with them than did parents of children in Ministry schools.

Students in Independent schools generally outperformed their Ministry peers, but overall achievement was low. RAND's detailed analyses of student achievement in grades 4–6 indicated that students in Independent schools outperformed students in Ministry and private Arabic schools

in both Arabic and English. They also outperformed Ministry students in mathematics and science when the assessments were conducted in Arabic. However, when assessed in English, they tended to receive lower math and science scores than did their Ministry peers. While Independent school students performed better, it is important to note that most students were not yet meeting the reform's new, higher standards.

Actions to Strengthen the Reform

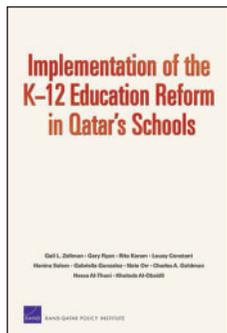
Qatar's K–12 education reform effort achieved important successes in its early years. The recommendations highlighted below are intended to more firmly establish the reform on a positive course for the future.

Limit the frequency of policy changes. Frequent policy changes resulted in a climate of uncertainty that sometimes had deleterious effects on motivation and innovation. RAND therefore suggests limiting policy changes as much as possible. When they are necessary, we advise carefully considering, *in advance of their implementation*, how they are likely to affect current practice and system performance.

Increase support for schools and teachers. Independent schools need help in identifying materials that align with curriculum standards, and teachers need help in translating standards into practice. To do this, School Support Organizations could be assigned to new Independent schools for longer than their usual one-year tenure. Independent schools would also benefit if incentives were developed to keep highly competent and experienced Independent school teachers in the classroom rather than rewarding them with administrative positions.

Review and improve policies related to student assessment. The performance of Independent school students assessed in English may have suffered because of insufficient language proficiency. This suggests that policies linking language of assessment to language of instruction need review. Assessments also might be revised so that students' scores affect their grade retention and promotion. Currently they do not.

Adopt approaches that encourage parents to support high-quality education for their children. Qatar's school-reform initiative sought to help parents make informed choices about which schools would best serve their children's needs. Ranking schools according to student performance and other valued outcomes would inform these choices and might inspire healthy competition among Independent schools. ■



This research brief describes work done within RAND Education under the auspices of the RAND-Qatar Policy Institute and documented in *Implementation of the K–12 Education Reform in Qatar's Schools*, by Gail L. Zellman, Gery Ryan, Rita Karam, Louay Constant, Hanine Salem, Gabriella Gonzalez, Nate Orr, Charles A. Goldman, Hessa Al-Thani, and Kholode Al-Obaidli, MG-880-QATAR, 196 pp, \$29.50, ISBN: 978-0-8330-4736-6 (available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG880/>). This research brief was written by Judy Larson. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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