

The School Scene:

Al-Khor Girls Elementary Independent School
Girls' School and Community
Adapt to Change



Dr. Hassan Al-Fadala, Operator



When news came last spring that the only public elementary school for girls in the northern coastal town of Al-Khor would be converted into an Independent School, it sent ripples of concern throughout the community.

Parents were wary of an outsider -- the new operator chosen by the Supreme Education Council -- taking over the school, imposing an educational system about which they had little information. They feared Arabic language and Islamic studies would be pushed aside in favor of English. They worried the change would prove to be a short-lived experiment, and that the school would soon be shut down.

And since Al-Khor, a town of around 31,000 residents some 50 kilometers north of Doha, is the sort of place where people know each other, where fathers meet up in the afternoon and mothers talk, the conversion from a Ministry of Education to an Independent School quickly escalated into a community-wide problem.

"In the beginning, it was too much pressure," said Dr. Hassan Al-Fadala, the new operator. That pressure grew throughout the summer and reached its apex in the first week of September 2005, when the school re-opened after the summer break as an Independent School.

More formal systems for picking up students created what one father called the longest line ever seen in Al-Khor. Requiring pre-scheduled appointments with school teachers and administrators prevented parents from informally stopping by classrooms and offices as they had done in the past. The absence of textbooks disoriented parents; a longer school day was not popular.

But the school says that after a rough start, it took less than a month for the situation to stabilize. The number of students is now up to 590, some 200 more than when it was a MoE school, in large part because the school spent about 20% of its SEC start-up funds on developing a pre-kindergarten and kindergarten program which didn't exist previously. That extended the reach of the school from pre-K through Grade 6. The school has a capacity of 625 students, which it hopes to reach next year.

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Parents say the new system has taken getting used to, and that the adjustment is ongoing. In particular, as is the case with many parents of Independent School students, parents struggle with the absence of textbooks. But after a rocky first couple of weeks, they say that most parents -- although not all -- have gotten used to the school.

"In the beginning there was resistance," said Mohammed Abdullah Al-Mohanadi, who has two daughters, one in pre-K and the other in Grade 2, at the school. But he says he and his wife, Fatima, note that their elder daughter is less stressed and happier at school this year, even as she learns more and develops confidence in her own opinions. "Physically even she has changed," said her mother.

On a recent winter morning, the self-confidence and eagerness to learn were apparent in an English

class for first graders. The school places particular importance on early English, since science and math will be taught in English. "What can you see?" the teacher asks, pointing to a poster of people seated around tables eating. Hands shoot into the air. "I can see a chair!" "I can see an apple!" "I can see a fish!"

The main challenge now for the school is attracting and retaining teachers. "Teachers are really hard to find these days," said Dr. Al-Fadala, who holds a PhD in chemical engineering from the University of South Florida and is currently associate dean for the College of Engineering at Qatar University. There are 47 teachers at the school; of 15 teachers who stayed on from the MoE school, only one is left. The location can also make hiring difficult, since the pool of teachers locally is limited and many others are unwilling to travel from Doha.

The school meanwhile has become something of a family affair, which Dr. Al-Fadala considers to be a strength, both because it facilitates communication and reinforces the commitment to the project. Five of his sisters work at the school as teachers and administrators, among other members of his extended family.

And his children, in an indirect way, provided some of the motivation to get involved in such a project. During 14 years living in the U.S., Dr. Al-Fadala witnessed the sort of education they received. Back home, most schools were not as strong, and he also observed gaps in knowledge in the university students he met. Dr. Al-Fadala strongly believes in the need to develop national talent.

"We really cannot waste one single Qatari," said Dr. Al-Fadala. "We really need to develop each one."