



Interview: Sabah Al-Haidoos, Director, Education Institute

A Top SEC Official On New Rules, Replacing Textbooks and Islamic Studies

Sabah Al-Haidoos became director of the Education Institute in September 2004, bringing to the Supreme Education Council nearly two decades of experience in Qatari education. Starting her career as a mathematics teacher, Ms. Al-Haidoos rose to become director of the Al-Bayan Education Complex, one of the country's finest schools. She has been recognized at home and abroad for her contributions to education, carried out important research, and helped in designing curricula in Qatar.

Ms. Al-Haidoos graduated from the College of Education of Qatar University in 1987 and earned a

diploma in school management from James Madison University in the United States. In this interview with "Education for a New Era" she talks about the controversial changes to rules governing the operators, the absence of textbooks, and the presence of Islamic studies in Independent Schools.

Q. The SEC has changed the rules concerning the operators of Independent Schools. Could you comment on this decision?

Firstly, I would like to make clear that the new rules were never designed to squeeze the operators, but rather to give their work legal authority. The operators will still enjoy the four principles of reform

(autonomy, accountability, variety and choice). The decisions about these rules were not taken randomly. They were submitted to study. This is the second year applying the education reform initiative, and we have enough data to evaluate and rectify achievements. These decisions are aimed at putting schools on a path that leads to success.

Secondly, the decisions are not new. The reform was originally designed in a way so that the operator had to direct his school. But because the Supreme Education Council is a state institute, the schools had to be run as LLCs, in order for school operators to be held responsible for the school if any excesses occurred. That was the only legal mechanism available at the time, so we were forced to follow it. However, two years on, the Supreme Education Council has decided to go back to the main rule, since the schools are constant and permanent establishments. Here we acquired the legal mechanisms to issue a law that gives the operator his/her legal rights and complies, at the same time, with the reform. That means the operator has to be someone who is able to manage the academic and the administrative affairs through a non-profit establishment.

Q. How do all of these policy changes affect the schools scheduled to open in the fall?

We were set to open 21 Independent Schools but, complying with this new decision, we will only launch 13 schools. This is not a concern. The main issue was not just to open schools. It is very important for us to have a number of Independent Schools, but we have to be cautious in the beginning. So we evaluate and rectify the policies, the strategies and the implementation processes. Nothing will push us into opening a new school without being sure of its success.

Q. Do the enrollment policies of Independent Schools allow them to select only the top students?

The doors to education were wide open in Qatar, originally. All Qatari children are guaranteed the right



to education so it is difficult to reserve Independent Schools only for top students. Some Independent Schools may have followed these selection practices, but the school has to serve all students, whoever they are. And if we go back to the principles of the reform, one of which is satisfying every student's needs, the student may be strong in some skills and not in others. The school must foster his strengths and work on his weaknesses.

Q. For many people the supervisory role of the Education Institute is not clear. How does the Institute practice its supervisory role without undermining the independence of the schools?

Firstly, we have to explain that there is a fine line between supervision and censorship and between encouragement and interference. We have to respect this line because the schools are independent and have a right to be varied, within the policies of the Supreme Education Council. They have a right to have their special policies, educational procedures, learning practices, teaching methods and learning resources. We don't want to have schools that are copies of each other.

The supervisory role of the Education Institute may not be seen by outside people but it can be felt inside the schools. Teachers, employees, the operator and the boards of trustees can testify to the educational boost and solutions that we offer. The Education Institute's supervision is not aimed at discovering errors but at supporting schools and fostering their positive sides.

“The Curriculum Standards Office makes systematic visits to chosen classes to check the methods of teaching and learning”

We have more than one supervisory department. The Office of Professional Development sends professional development coordinators to Independent Schools on regular visits, holds monthly

meetings and follows professional development plans at schools. The office has to be sure of the training quality and the school support organizations have to send monthly reports. The Curriculum Standards Office makes systematic visits to chosen classes to check the methods of teaching and learning.

School coordinators in the Independent Schools Office arrange regular visits to the Independent Schools to follow up on how much the school has interacted with parents and the board of trustees, besides its compliance with the education plan and the Education Institute and employees' contracts. The purpose of these visits is not to intrude but to ensure that the schools are following the Supreme Education Council's rules and policies.

The Finance Office does the same thing. There are monthly financial reports to be studied and school financial records are monitored. We also have the Information Center which conducts many surveys about the number of complaints and notifications that parents and others may raise about a school. People may not be aware of this sort of follow-up but it exists in the schools almost daily, through the various Education Institute offices.



In addition to all that, these schools are a social partnership and supervision comes from many parts. We do our job but this role is not final. The school's performance will not be developed unless society acts in parallel with the Education Institute's effort. Society, represented by the boards of trustees along with parent councils, should follow the schools and raise issues through the Information Center or through the reports from the boards of trustees.

Q. The issue of learning sources is still a concern for many parents. How do you answer the complaints of parents concerning the absence of unified textbooks?

The Curriculum Standards Office gives the schools the curriculum standards plus annual plans to assist teachers in applying these standards, as each standard has its own learning resource which teachers can use. Also the school is provided with daily teaching plans and a training package. These resources are given to teachers. As for resources, we provide both teachers and students with a list of learning resources and students have to have at least one. But this is not meant to be the only learning source. This system is active now in many schools but starting next year, it will be obligatory in the rest of the Independent Schools.

The important thing is that the student does not get rid of these papers. For these learning documents and papers, we set some rules. Schools are required to produce these copied papers in a perfect way that is suitable for students and parents to deal with in terms of color, quality, etc.

Q. Concerning the Islamic studies curriculum, are the Independent Schools following the Ministry of Education's content?

Since launching the first generation of Independent Schools in the academic year 2004/2005, the Education Institute obliged the Independent Schools to use Ministry of Education textbooks on Islamic studies and the MoE was required to make them available. Although some Independent Schools made efforts to diversify their learning sources, the Education Institute took its decision to apply the MoE's Islamic document as a general reference for Islamic studies in all Independent Schools. Also, we formed a committee of Islamic teaching experts to check the Islamic education curriculum in the Independent Schools to make sure that they teach Islamic studies according to the Ministry of Education document.

Q. Any final thoughts on the upcoming year?

“This is the second year applying the education reform initiative, and we have enough data to evaluate and rectify achievements. These decisions are aimed at putting schools on a path that leads to success”

During the past two years of implementing the reform, we have set a number of policies, strategies and methods which will not compromise the independence and diversity of the Independent Schools. On the contrary, these efforts offer the schools a great chance to progress. We hope that the upcoming academic year will be much easier for us, because we have faced a lot of difficulties during the last two years. Sometimes it seemed we needed a miracle to lay the foundations for the Independent Schools.