



Interview: Sheikha Al-Mahmoud

Minister of Education and Secretary General of the SEC

A Pioneering Educator Reflects on the Present and Future of Qatar's Schools

Sheikha Al-Mahmoud is Qatar's Minister of Education and Secretary General of the Supreme Education Council, making her a central figure in the country's public school systems.

Mrs. Al-Mahmoud holds a Bachelor of Arts in the Arabic language and began her career as a teacher.

With three decades of experience in the education field, she was appointed Minister of Education in 2001, the first woman to be appointed minister in Qatar.

In this interview with "Education for a New Era" magazine, Mrs. Al-Mahmoud discusses the complementary relationship between Independent and Ministry of Education schools, what she sees as the main accomplishments of the country's education reform initiative, and how she envisions the future of the country's public schools.

Q: Qatar's education reform is a comprehensive system that begins with preschool and ends with post-secondary study. How do you view the role of the different institutes within the Supreme Education Council (SEC) and Ministry of Education (MOE) in the context of this integrated system?

Education efforts are primarily based on a collective vision that shuns the monopolization of decision-making. They are based on the philosophy of the society itself, which views education as the motor behind overall development efforts. As such, the role of the different institutes and MoE complement one another. The institutes supervise the implementation of the vision (Education for a New Era), ensuring all parties are abiding by its system, rules and strategic objectives, in coordination with the MoE, which, for its part, facilitates the mission of the institutes and assists them.

Q: The philosophy of the Education for a New Era reform differs from that of the MoE. How do you juggle your leadership roles in both, and can two such philosophically different entities be coordinated?

Evolution is part of life and no real development can be achieved without the support of a strong base and a firm foundation. The SEC reform initiative marked a new beginning, but when we mention reform, we are not referring to two separate entities that need coordination. Instead, we are talking about one model that served its purpose for the time it was developed for, and another model molded to achieve the objectives of a new phase. This is a kind of progressive development where one model complements the role of the other rather than contradict it.

To fulfill the requirements of the reform, we need to build on previous successes. Most of those implementing the current reform policies are nationals who acquired their experience and expertise within the frame of the MoE. What we need now is to extend bridges between

by the members of the profession themselves. Should teachers manage to form their own association, then I believe its role would be to coordinate their viewpoints with regard to education issues and revitalize the education movement through collaboration and communication with different institutes inside and outside Qatar. It would support education efforts worldwide and work for the common interest of all its members. The association would be part of the fabric of civil society and would be expected to positively serve its purpose.

Recently, a new internet site called Global Gateway was inaugurated to serve as a forum to exchange information, thoughts and opinions with regard to education issues.

Q: The start of the year witnessed many complaints about transportation, especially with regard to the quantity and quality of buses, despite the substantial funds dedicated to the education sector.

The MoE signed contracts with the transportation company Karwa to provide 400 school buses to be distributed among MoE and IS and gradually all the Independent Schools will have their needs met.

Q: The absence of textbooks is one of the parents' main concerns as they find it difficult to follow up with their children. At the same time, it puts much stress on the school teachers who work to prepare curriculum to meet the national curriculum standards. Is there any trend to adopt books for primary schools? Is there a trend to unify curriculum as per the national curriculum standards?

Based on the philosophy of the Independent Schools and the existence of validated curriculum standards at the SEC, I believe using unified books contradicts the very essence of the initiative and hinders the role competition and creativity play in

achieving academic excellence. Added to that, there are numerous references available for teachers and students that are rich in scientific information.

The Office of Curriculum Standards is working on preparing a comprehensive list of education sources as references and work has started with the adoption of the e-schoolbag in some Independent Schools. More efforts are underway with ICTQATAR to provide more Independent Schools with e-schoolbags.

Q: What are the principles of assessment followed to ensure quality education outputs in Independent Schools?

The assessment process is the primary way to ensure the quality of school performance. Therefore assessment must be based on a number of principles, including transparency during the assessment process to guarantee credibility, accountability, objectivity, methodology and continuous monitoring.

Q: Some criticize the annual Qatar Comprehensive Educational Assessment, saying that students are not taking it seriously enough. What is your opinion and how can we overcome such negativity?

This is true for some but not all students. The majority take these assessments seriously. To overcome such negativity, we must increase awareness with regards to the importance of the assessment, its objectives and expected outcome after its implementation and clarify the role played by parents, students, school administrators and teachers in this assessment. This should be accompanied by media work and we are now working on that. As for the results of the assessment, everyone -- the SEC, Independent Schools, parents and students -- can benefit from them. It could have greater impact through the early announcement of results, and by incorporating part of the assessment into students' annual

performance results. A system for that will be discussed and activated as well as another system of accountability for both teachers and students based on the results of the assessment.

Q: Where does the reform initiative stand both regionally and globally?

The Qatari initiative is unique both regionally and globally. This uniqueness stems from the four principles: Autonomy, Accountability, Diversity and Choice. The reform depends on the moral and material support of the highest decision-making levels, on informed societal participation, on distinctive infrastructure and on qualified staff. Having said that, we believe the real success of the initiative is founded upon the strong base of values and ideals and our success is the success of all in the Gulf States and the Arab world.

Q: In your view, what are the ways to raise trust in the reform initiative and what is the future strategy for coming years?

What boosts trust in the initiative is the presence of a clear vision of the quality of output we want. The continuous support at the highest decision-making levels combined with societal participation are also of great importance in boosting trust. We need to continue with the constructive dialogue among all stakeholders, invest in national senior staff, and adopt the principles of institutional work in terms of planning, evaluating, and technical development.

As for the strategy itself, it revolves around four main – and related – segments: improving inputs and processes and outputs, enhancing societal participation, investing in human capital and developing infrastructure.