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POLITICS

Rigid Qatar schools undergo radical transformation into modern institutions

Changes include greater autonomy for state-owned places of learning

By Cilina Nasser
Daily Star staff
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DOHA: Schools in Qatar are under radical transformation. The Gulf state is changing its rigid, centralized low-performing education system to one that is far more modern, self-managed and effective, according to senior education officials. Sweeping changes involve greater autonomy to government-owned schools, accountability, diversity and parental choice, explained Adel al-Sayed,

director of the Evaluation Institute at the Supreme Educational Council (SEC), which oversees educational reform in the country.

Schools now are totally under the control of the Education Ministry. "Each grade at every school in the country uses the same textbook and studies the same lesson at the same time," said Sayed in an interview with The Daily Star.

But reform will allow school management to hire and fire its staff, choose the type of teaching material, including textbooks, and emphasize particular subjects, such as fine arts, physical education, computer or others without referring to the Education Ministry or the SEC.

"We will only have to decide on the curriculum standards," explained Darwish al-Emadi, director of the Educational Institute at the supervising body. "But we will not specify how to get there; (that's) their own (the schools') decision."

The standards aim at ensuring that Qatari students are learning at a level comparable to children in developed countries and that Qatari graduates are competitive for college admission and jobs.

Students in all levels will have to take a test every year to assess their skills, knowledge and performance so that the SEC can know if schools are meeting the required standards in English, Arabic, maths and science.

Since benchmarks do not exist for the teaching of Arabic, education officials are hoping that Qatar will be the first to develop its standards.

Openness to the global economy, steps toward democracy and increasing women's role in the highly conservative society require fundamental changes in education, according to the SEC officials.

Emadi said the Qatari leadership recognized the need to prepare its students for a more challenging political and economic future.

"The whole purpose is really to provide the highest possible quality (in) education for the kids in order to get them ready for the changes that are taking place locally as well as globally," he said.

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During the Doha development Forum in February, Dominic Brewer, director of US-based Rand Corporation's education unit who is leading school reform in Qatar, said that changing education alone would not produce the sought societal economic and political changes.

"We should not presume that improving education is a panacea for all of a nation's ills and by 'fixing' it, all else will be well," Brewer said.

Rand along with other educational service providers from New Zealand and the United Kingdom is assisting in revamping primary and secondary schools in the tiny Gulf state.

Emadi dismissed suggestions that Qatar was succumbing to US pressure on Arab countries to reform their education following the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks.

The current initiative for reform, he said, began in May 2001, almost four months before the attacks against New York and Washington took place, and stressed that Western assistance was sought only to serve educational purposes.

"At the end of the day, we have to believe there are certain levels of expertise only available in America and in the West and not available in the Arab world," Emadi said.

While such a total overhaul of educational reform can pass smoothly in Qatar with no apparent opposition, even less bolder attempts cannot be applied in other Arab countries, according to Ahmed Baghdadi, a professor of Islamic political thought at Kuwait University.

"Any kind of corrections to education in Kuwait is faced with severe criticism from Islamists, who would accuse authorities of abolishing religious studies," Baghdadi told The Daily Star.

"Unlike what's happening in Qatar, I think we will be able to get Western assistance to improve our education in specific subjects only, such as in chemistry and maths," he said.

In December, Islamist legislators in Kuwait warned the government against changing "Islamic fundamentals" to please the US, which feels religious textbooks in schools there promote terror and extremism.

"Do you have a new religion you want to teach students? Is it the Western religion? Is it the new American religion?" snapped Islamist MP Abdullah Okash in a debate on Kuwait's education policy in Parliament after the government said it wanted to modify textbooks to promote tolerance.

Abdel-Razzak al-Shayji, a professor of sharia law at Kuwait University, raised concerns that educational reform in Qatar would include religious teachings. "Since Sept. 11, Yemen has closed down around 1,400 religious schools and in Pakistan the government asked religious schools to introduce other subjects to their curriculum," Shayji said in a telephone interview with The Daily Star.

But Emadi said religion was an important part of Qatar's culture. "There will never be reform that ignores this reality," he said.

He did not say whether religious textbooks would be modified to promote tolerance, saying: "Tolerance does not come from what you teach, but from how you teach the thing."

Emadi said Western assistance in changing the education system would not hinder Qataris from preserving their cultural identity. "We are pretty confident this reform will prepare our generation better for what is coming without putting in danger the values we believe in."

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