Three Things Every Parent Should Know About American Curriculum Schools In Dubai

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Introduction
School shopping in Dubai can be a daunting task for parents. The private school sector dominates the education landscape, with 243,715 (over 89%) of Dubai’s students enrolled in private schools. Private schools provide K-12 education to the majority of expatriate students, as well as 59.8% of the Emirati student population. The growth of this sector has expanded rapidly, in tandem with the recent exponential population growth the emirate has experienced. By 2020, the number of students in private schools in Dubai is expected to reach 360,000.1

Dubai schools are regulated by the Government of Dubai Knowledge & Human Development Authority (KHDA), and inspections by the Dubai School Inspection Bureau (DSIB) provide parents with school performance data to help them make informed choices as education consumers. Parents have fifteen educational curricula choices in Dubai. The United Kingdom (UK), United States (US), Indian, and United Arab Emirates (UAE) Ministry of Education (MoE) curricula cater to 90% of the private school population. The “other” category includes Japan, Russia, Iran, German, Pakistan, and Philippines curricula.

Often, parents select the same curriculum they experienced as a student. Currently, out of 158 private schools in Dubai there are 31 that feature an American curriculum, due to the large number of Americans living and working in Dubai, though other nationalities prefer American schools because of the quality of the curriculum.

Visualization:
- Students In Dubai Private Schools
- Students in Dubai Private Schools by Curriculum
  - French: 1.9%
  - IB: 2.8%
  - Indian: 30.8%
  - UAE MoE: 6.5%
  - UK: 32.2%
  - US: 20.9%
  - Other: 4.9%

In this brief, we will explore the following questions:
- What is American curriculum?
- What is American curriculum in Dubai?
- What three things should every parent know if his or her student is attending an American curriculum school in Dubai?
What is American Curriculum?
The word curriculum derives from the Latin word for “a race” or “the course of a race,” which has its etymological roots in the verb “currere,” meaning to “run” or “proceed.” In 1918, American university professor John Franklin Bobbitt published the first textbook on the subject, entitled The Curriculum, which conveyed that curriculum is the course of deeds and experiences, both in school and out-of-school, through which children form into adults and become successful in adult society.

In formal education, curriculum at a school or university includes two components: (i) the set of courses and content from which students choose in their subjects of study, and (ii) a specific learning program. In the latter, the curriculum collectively describes the teaching, learning, and assessment materials available for a course of study.

Simply put, curriculum defines what students should know, understand and be able to do in each grade level and the content of study. As such, curriculum provides direction to teachers on what to teach, how to teach it, when to teach it, and how to assess instruction. This is aligned to standards, assessments, and instructional practices. Modifications are made as needed for special populations. A comprehensive curriculum may also include model lesson and unit plans.

While a US Department of Education (ED) does exist, establishing curriculum is not in its mission. The mission of ED is to “promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access.” This means that individual states are left to decide how to build their curricula, although the ED serves as a focal point for academic subjects. Therefore, for most of the history of the US public educational system, curriculum was regulated independently by school districts in each US state and the curriculum varied widely in terms of topics and quality.

In the US, standards, from which curriculum is derived, were interpreted in different ways by individual US states. In an effort to ensure all states are providing the same quality education to their students, in June 2009, the US National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), in partnership with a team of nationwide educators, announced the Common Core State Standards Initiative, which is a US educational initiative that details what K-12 students should know in English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects at the end of each grade. The initiative strives to establish consistent education standards across all US states, as well as ensure that students graduating from high school are prepared to enter credit-bearing courses at two- or four-year college programs or to enter the workforce.\(^v\)

The Common Core initiative was developed as a call to action partially in response to an alarming 2004 report entitled Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma That Counts, which found that American high school graduates were not provided with the skills and knowledge they needed to succeed in college and careers. The report stated that a diploma lost its value because graduates could not compete successfully beyond high school, and that the solution to this problem is a common set of rigorous standards.\(^v\)
As of April 2014, forty-four US states, the District of Columbia, four territories, and the Department of Defense education system have adopted the Common Core State Standards. The Common Core State Standards do not cover science and social studies content standards, so the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) were developed by the National Science Teachers Association, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the National Research Council, and a consortium of 26 US states. A draft of these standards debuted in April 2013, and their content can be cross-linked to the English language arts and mathematical standards of the Common Core. Over 40 states have shown interest in the standards, and as of April 2014, ten states had adopted them.

Published in 2013 as a result of a three-year, state-led collaborative effort, the College, Career, and Civic Life Framework for Social Studies State Standards, known as the C3 Framework, is an inquiry-based framework developed for states to upgrade social studies standards and for teachers and practitioners to strengthen social studies programs. It emphasizes disciplinary concepts and practices that support students as they develop the capacity to know, analyze, explain, and argue about interdisciplinary challenges in the social world. Guidance includes the application of knowledge within the disciplines of civics, economics, geography, and history as students develop questions and plan inquiries; apply disciplinary concepts and tools; evaluate and use evidence; and communicate conclusions and take informed action. The standards align with the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy.

**What is American curriculum in Dubai?**

American curriculum in Dubai mirrors American education in the US, but varies between schools, sometimes significantly. Since 2008, DSIB has conducted inspections of private schools in order to identify successful practices and areas for improvement. These inspections reveal critical information about the quality of schools, their performance in key aspects of their work, and the performance of private schools offering different curricula. The inspections rank on a scale of outstanding, good, acceptable, and unsatisfactory. The research on inspections in this brief derives from the most recent inspection report published by KHDA and compiled from the inspection of 143 private schools that existed in Dubai between October 2012 and April 2013.

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<th>Outstanding</th>
<th>Exceptionally high quality of performance or practice.</th>
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<td>Good</td>
<td>The expected level for every school in Dubai.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acceptable</td>
<td>The minimum level of quality required for Dubai. All key aspects of performance and practice in every school should meet or exceed this level.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unsatisfactory</td>
<td>Quality not at the level acceptable for schools in Dubai. Schools will be expected to take urgent measures to improve the quality of any aspect of their performance or practice that is judged at this level.</td>
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DSIB inspections are structured around the following seven questions:

- What is the level of the students’ attainment, progress, and learning skills?
- How good is the students’ personal and social development?
- What is the quality of the teaching and assessment?
- How well does the curriculum meet the educational needs of all students?
- How well does the school protect and support students?
- How is the quality of the leadership and management of the school?
- How well does the school perform overall?

“While students and their parents may still believe that the diploma reflects adequate preparation for the intellectual demands of adult life, in reality it falls far short of this common-sense goal.”
In the 2012-13 school year, KHDA inspected 31 American curriculum schools that catered to a total of 46,711 students. Of the twelve schools ranked outstanding in 2012-13, one was an American curriculum school. Twenty-eight American curriculum schools were in the good and acceptable range according to KHDA assessments. Two schools were found to be unsatisfactory. DSIB school ratings of American curriculum schools in the 2012-13 academic year are as follows:

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<th>Dubai Schools Offering American Curriculum 2012-13</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Schools</strong></td>
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<td>Students</td>
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These ratings indicate that the majority of American curriculum schools in Dubai are acceptable, meaning they meet the minimum level of quality required by the KHDA authorities. A full list of DSIB ratings of all American curriculum schools in Dubai is available on page 23 of the KHDA Inspection of Private Schools 2012-13 report.

The overall performance of the 31 American curriculum schools remains largely unchanged since the previous cycle of inspections. One school’s overall performance declined. Over five cycles of school inspections, the proportion of American curriculum schools performing at an unsatisfactory level declined from 20% to 5%. The proportion of good and outstanding schools is similar to what it was in 2008-09. DSIB assessed that the curriculum is of good or better quality in around 60% of American curriculum schools and of acceptable quality in the rest.

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<th>What is American curriculum? KDSL elicits responses from stakeholders in the US and UAE.</th>
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<td><strong>US – Educational Administrator</strong></td>
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<td>“An American curriculum should be one that emphasizes the ideas of the quest of freedom, the need of justice, the struggle to imagine and believe in something deeper and fitting for all of humanity, and the desire to innovate systems for a greater good. Of course, this appears to bend heavily on the humanities, but I think all disciplines, when taught and explored in its most intuitive sense, are based on these underpinnings of an American curriculum.”</td>
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Students’ attainment in relation to American curriculum standards in five key subjects is broadly acceptable and is largely unchanged in 2012-13. Attainment is strongest in English and weakest in Arabic. Arabic writing skills remain generally weak and the ability to write independently in English needs improvement. The skill of applying mathematics to real-world problems remains underdeveloped among many students, and there were a noted lack of opportunities for students to perform investigative science.

Teaching in the majority of American curriculum schools continues to be of an acceptable quality overall. Around one-third of the teaching is good or outstanding, and there is less unsatisfactory teaching now than in the past.

The overall leadership remains acceptable in the majority of American curriculum schools, with the proportion of good or better leadership is slightly higher than last year.

Almost all American curriculum schools now comply with the Ministry of Education’s requirements for teaching time to be allocated to Islamic Education and Arabic.
With these assessments from the 2012-13 report in mind, KHDA summarized the following recommendations to American curriculum schools in Dubai:

Reduce the significant proportion of students under-achieving in key subjects, especially math and science.

Provide teachers with relevant, high quality professional teacher training to ensure knowledge of how students’ learning benefits from the use of a broad range of teaching strategies.

Ensure that curriculum and assessment are aligned to internationally recognized American curriculum standards.

Provide Kindergarten students with a wide range of purposeful, hands-on learning and play experiences, tailored to their stage of development.

Increase efforts to graduate students with internationally recognized qualifications, which will enable them to join top global universities.

**Questions Parents May Want To Ask Schools**

- Tell me about your school's curriculum. What is your curriculum review process?
- How would you describe your Kindergarten program?
- What intervention programs are available for students?
- How do you and your staff stay current in the education field?
- How are students assessed internally and externally?
- In what types of projects and programs do students at your school participate?
- Which universities do your graduates attend? How do they perform after leaving your school?

The aforementioned information should prepare parents with baseline information of what comprises an American curriculum and lines of inquiry one can pursue to elicit critical information to inform your decision to select an American curriculum school in Dubai.

**What three things should parents know if their student is attending an American curriculum school in Dubai?**

1. Parents should familiarize themselves with the new standards in core subjects. These standards identify what your student should know, understand, and perform at various grade levels. Please visit:
   - **Common Core State Standards**: [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org)
   - English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects: [www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy)
   - Mathematics: [www.corestandards.org/Math](http://www.corestandards.org/Math)

2. Curriculum is more than textbooks and courses. It is also about **instructional strategies and assessment** approaches. Learn more about Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), which represent an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively via collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. Instruction and assessment conversations take place in these collaborative meetings. Many American curriculum schools have been implementing this framework for years. There are four primary questions to PLCs, which are as follows:
• What do we expect students to learn?
• How do we know students are learning?
• How do we respond when they don’t learn?
• How do we respond if they already know information?

Visit www.allthingsplc.info for more information.

ASCD published Classroom Instruction that Works, a revolutionary book that links classroom instructional strategies to evidence of increased student learning. Again, these are teaching strategies that many American curriculum schools have been trained in and are implementing worldwide. http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/classroom-instruction-that-works.aspx

Assessment in American curriculum schools is not exclusively limited to standardized tests. Parents should know exactly where their learner is as an individual and in comparison to other students in his or her grade level. Assessments include: self, peer, diagnostic, formative, and summative. Visit http://www.edutopia.org/assessment-guide-description for more on types of assessments.

Many schools use the following external assessments to track student progress:
• International School Assessment: http://www.acer.edu.au/tests/isa
• Iowa Test of Basic Skills: http://www.riversidepublishing.com/products/itbs/
• Measures of Academic Progress: http://www.nwea.org/node/98

3. Professional development is essential for school leaders and teachers in curriculum. Schools should have a comprehensive professional development plan for the entire staff. This plan should be aligned to inspection data, accreditation information, and other sources of information gathered by the school leadership team.

Your learner’s school should be partnering with US-based organizations to connect with current resources, best practices, and research in American curriculum. The following organizations are reliable partners to foster such connections.
• Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD): www.ascd.org
• International Reading Association (IRA): www.reading.org
• National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE): www.ncte.org
• National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS): www.socialstudies.org
• National Science Teachers Association (NSTA): www.nsta.org
• Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL): www.mcrel.org
• Sylvan Learning: www.sylvanlearning.com
• Carian College Advisors: http://www.carianet.com/new/en
• Learning Forward: www.learningforward.org
• Association for Middle Level Education: http://www.amle.org
• National Association of Elementary School Principals: http://www.naesp.org
• National Association of Secondary School Principals: https://www.principals.org
• National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM): www.nctm.org

Summary
There is a great deal more to selecting your student’s American curriculum school than a beautiful campus or hearing word-of-mouth recommendations from neighborhood parents. Parents should foster a deep sense of understanding of what uniquely defines an American curriculum school. These components are manifested in a variety of ways in American curriculum schools throughout Dubai. Fortunately, resources exist like those highlighted in this paper to help parents make more informed decisions. In addition, KDSL is available to liaise with parents, schools, governments, or educational organizations to provide more specialized consultations on American curriculum schools.
References


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KDSL Website, Blog, and Twitter:
http://knowdoservelearn.org
http://kdsl.wordpress.com
https://twitter.com/kdsl07


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Author

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KDSL is an American-owned, global educational consulting company launched by Kevin Simpson in 2007 in the US. In 2013, KDSL set up in Dubai with a new partner, Alison Burrows. KDSL partners with organizations worldwide to increase student achievement, teacher knowledge, and education leadership. KDSL’s primary services are as follows: Quality Assurance, School Accreditation, School Improvement, Curriculum Development, and Professional Learning (Development). Mr. Simpson has served 400+ schools and thousands of educators worldwide. The majority of his work in education has centered on American curriculum schools. Since 2008, he has been focused on education in the MENA region, assisting numerous schools with accreditation, training, and development. He has taught, consulted, and/or collaborated in parochial, public, charter, and international schools in 18 countries. He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Education and a Master of Education degree in Curriculum and Teaching from Michigan State University (US).

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Abigail Swetz serves as an independent consultant to KDSL. Her specialties include written communications, strategic communications, project management, business development, fundraising, and event planning. She most recently served as manager of communications for a Dubai-based global business development consultancy. In the US, she was employed with a government agency that invests in museums and libraries to create informal learning opportunities for Americans. She supported a portfolio of multi-million dollar educational and cultural public/private partnerships that included such partners as the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Salzburg Global Seminar, the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Sundance Institute. Ms. Swetz possesses a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Maryland (US) and a Master of Arts degree from George Washington University (US).

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Kerrin is an educator with more than 20 years experience and leadership in the education sector in the US and in developing nations worldwide. Most recently, Kerrin served as an advisor to the Ministry of Education’s Teacher Training Directorate in Afghanistan where she oversaw training of 100,000+ teachers and school principals, and as a Capacity Building Advisor in Helmand province for a new technical vocational school. Kerrin holds a Ph.D. from the University of New Mexico in Organizational Learning and Instructional Technology with a specialization in Distance Education, and an Ed.M. from the Harvard Graduate School of Education with a focus in Technology in Education. Additionally, she has completed Master’s level coursework at the American University in Washington, DC, in Development Management and earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in Economics from the University of California, San Diego (US).
For more information about KDSL Global Educational Consultancy and how its services can help you learn more about American curriculum in the UAE and greater MENA region, or for permission to reproduce and distribute this white paper, please contact Kevin Simpson at kevin@kdsleducation.org or +971 50 289 8417.

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