

Executive Summary

K-12 Reform in the Gulf Corporation Council (GCC) Countries: Challenges and Policy Recommendations

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In an age of global connectivity in which knowledge and information are the currencies of individual success, education is among the best investments and a cornerstone of a nation's long-term economic health. Among the Arab Gulf countries, governments acknowledge the rising expectations and aspirations of their youthful populations for transformation through quality education. In the three Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations that are the subject of the case studies in this report, closer linkages to global economic flux and uncertainty has added to the pressure for change in education priorities and systems.

In this context the report examines education reform efforts over the last 15 years in Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). While there were unique aspects to the reforms in each of the three countries, the commonalities of experience were more prominent, and reflect a general portrait of education change in the GCC. The structure of each reform, its approaches and context are considered, the challenges and outcomes described. Through the lens of current thinking and concepts of change and change management, recommendations are offered at various levels of the reforms –in policymaking, school leadership, among teachers, and in the broader community and society.

While the reforms examined appeared to reflect twenty-first century skills and practices such as student-focused, problem-based learning and teamwork, collaborative approaches to learning were often found to be new to GCC educators. Reform fundamentally shifted the roles and relationships in school communities. The following were some of the specific school-based challenges that emerged in the reform process: pressure to show quick results; gaps in leadership skills among principals; stress due to lack of clarity on methods; lack of student motivation; increased drop-out rates and teacher turnover. In some communities, attachments to traditional ways reflected mistrust around the use of the Internet.

Most, if not all, of these outcomes were found to stem from a single, underlying response to the reforms being introduced: resistance to the change. Although resistance was expressed in various ways, it revealed a fundamental truth: when the principals, teachers and others are not actively engaged and enrolled as partners and collaborators in the enterprise of reform, the whole plan is in jeopardy. In general, efforts to inform and educate participants in the benefits of the changes well in advance of implementation were inadequate or absent. They were not given enough time to study and to fully understand the changes, or to discuss and comment on the plan or the process.

Successful change requires concise, measurable, and achievable objectives. Change is particularly complex because it involves individuals with unique perspectives and temperaments. There must be key leaders and others who are genuinely interested, engaged in, and committed to the reforms, and who are able to create school-level ownership and accountability to help manage the challenges and seize the opportunities of change. These take time; change is a slow and dynamic process, not an event; it may be ongoing over many years.

At the policy level in the GCC, reform should help students develop Arabic and English proficiency and strengthen cultural identity. It should integrate continuing professional development for teachers, robust teaching resources, and curriculum guides. Teachers should encourage critical thinking, collaboration, and other skills through consistent, relevant pedagogy that produce clearly defined learning outcomes. A spirit of collaboration among principals and teachers is needed; principles should support and empower their staff in developing new practices.

The three GCC governments have formally and explicitly created strategies to support improvements in the structures, processes, and outcome of education systems. The goal is to produce a strong, highly skilled and knowledgeable workforce that can compete globally. But beyond a clear vision and aspiration the leadership holds for the achievements of the young, policy-makers and implementers should grasp the full range of complexity that accompanies any reform effort. They should further understand that it will be counter productive to attempt control over such a dynamic process in which diverse stakeholders have important roles to play for ultimate success.

Conducting and disseminating reliable research, facilitating open debate around ways of improving education quality and outcomes, and careful planning of reform are among the keys for building effective education systems. A serious limitation to this investigation is the lack of solid research on the outcomes and results of reforms: to what degree (if at all) student learning improved. The GCC countries have implemented many education reforms, but

empirical evidence evaluating their tangible impact is scarce. Education reform in the region remains relatively unexplored in formal research. The lack of data is an impediment for policy-making and leaders who plan further reform.

This report aims to collate existing research and raise additional questions for policy and research toward improvement of the reform efforts and process. Based on further data collection in a second phase of this research, specific recommendations for each of the three GCC countries can be presented, and will serve as a concrete foundation for future and ongoing findings.

There have been substantial efforts toward improved outcomes in these countries. They have made some progress, and they are capable of much more. The governments would all benefit in their common economic strategy initiatives from strong collaboration among schools, universities and the private sector. All reform must have a solid foundation that, once implemented, can support ongoing development and adjustment. Results should be easily tracked and meaningfully assessed.

Building lasting standards and structures, encouraging proven practices such as collaboration, student-focused learning environments, and valuing diversity are all worthy and valuable undertakings. The way ahead in education reform can never be fully defined, but in facing the challenges together and finding solutions, all the players on the stage will benefit. Engaging young people in the success of the enterprise will have the best returns; it is their character, aspiration, and talents that are the source of transformation and future direction.