

Conclusion

The KHDA has put into place a system that is uniquely adapted to the private education landscape in Dubai. In a sector that includes fifteen distinct curricula, the design of the inspection framework is both generous enough to successfully capture all aspects of the rich diversity of the city-state's schools, and yet able at the same time to focus attention on the importance of improving education quality across all these kinds of schools. The KHDA approach is entirely transparent, openly accountable, and has strong stakeholder participation—all hallmarks of good governance. It has not only stirred public discussion about the importance of school quality but also more significantly created higher expectations among education consumers and providers.

After just five years in operation, 51% of students are now in good and outstanding schools, compared to 30% at inception, and steady improvement has been seen in overall student achievement in TIMSS and PISA results. There is nevertheless much to be done. Many schools still remain only 'acceptable' and so KHDA must continue to work to refine the system to help incite them to improve. How can KHDA do this? How can KHDA continue to enhance the accountability mechanisms and procedures in play?

Our findings reveal that the complex, interrelated elements of the KHDA approach, while working, could be leveraged to greater advantage. First, disseminating information on all aspects of the system has generally had the intended result of improving accountability: school ratings, in particular, one of the key elements in the KHDA approach, are useful when they focus attention on, and drive, improvements in quality; policymakers, however, cannot rely exclusively on these means alone because very real constraints, technical or material, may prevent certain schools from improving. Secondly, the incentive mechanism in place, where schools may increase their fees if they receive better ratings, might be nuanced: at the moment, it serves only as an incentive to those schools near the cut-off for a higher rating. This is why we suggest that other kinds of incentives might be explored. Finally, competition between schools has increased, which is in turn promoting some school