

‘Switching on the Lights’: Access to Information as a Path to Better Schools

By Simon Thacker

There had never been a problem with attendance at the Indian High School in Dubai, the largest school in the city with over 10,000 students. But when a new metro station opened right outside the school in 2009 things changed. Students were suddenly tempted to skip school and head to the largest mall in the world, now just a short hop away.

The school director, however, came up with a simple solution to the herculean task of keeping track of the comings and goings of so many. He addressed the problem with information technology (IT.) Each student was provided with an identity card, and card readers were installed at the school entrance. Now, as students enter or leave, they swipe their card and instantly an SMS text message is sent to parents notifying them of the arrival and departure times.

Anecdotal evidence reveals that the rate of absenteeism has dropped. ‘Naughty boys and girls now find the occasional trip to the mall less amusing when ‘mother finds out.’

Entertaining though it may be, this example touches on a larger question in governance: Does making information available necessarily promote better accountability? Is transparency in itself enough to guarantee improvements?

That was the question the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA), the semi-autonomous body responsible for providing oversight of the private sector in Dubai, tried to answer as it designed a new approach to education reform in the emirate.

Since its inception, KHDA has implemented many initiatives that support schools, monitor their progress and provide a regulatory framework that protects the interests of students, parents, and educators alike. In essence, what it has done is provide information about Dubai’s schools to all stakeholders. Informed by world class best practices, KHDA’s inspection body, the Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau (DSIB), inspects all schools on a yearly basis and publishes its findings online, in printed publications, and even via an ‘app.’ The schools are rated according to eight criteria and then given an overall rating of unsatisfactory, acceptable, good, or outstanding.

Today, almost 90% of students in Dubai opt for private schools, all of which cater to the various communities living in the city. There are in fact 15 curricula available for the British, American, Indian, Pakistani, Iranian, French, German, Filipino, and Japanese students, among others. Emirati nationals, who may attend public schools, are also opting more and more for private establishments.

There is a wide variety of schools in Dubai: schools outside the city center that feel like holiday resorts, schools for the children of Bangladeshi taxi drivers, boutique kindergartens that would not look out of place in Manhattan or Berlin, and even schools with terrific marching bands. They all come under the sway of the inspector and they are all rated. Price is not a factor: For instance, the Indian High School, one of the least expensive secondary schools in the city, is rated ‘outstanding’ while schools ten times the tuition fee might only be rated ‘acceptable.’

Often, parents and educators are surprisingly unaware of the state of schools in Dubai. They are ‘in the dark,’ as it were. However, by promoting a culture of open evaluation, where the data on

the quality of education systems, schools, and student learning outcomes is made publicly available, KHDA has effectively ‘turned the lights on.’ However, is it always true that when people are better informed they necessarily make better informed decisions?

An ongoing World Bank review of KHDA’s approach to reform in Dubai suggests as much. Compared to the pre-KHDA period, there is far more information about all aspects of the private education system in the emirate. As a result, there is now in fact a public debate in the media about it. Our findings also show that this information is being *used* and is therefore *useful*. Parents are asking more questions and are making better decisions when choosing schools, and teachers and school supervisors, when given DSIB feedback, are striving to improve their teaching practices or aspects of their school.

There is, however, one caveat: Schools that do act are those that have the capabilities to take advantage of the information offered to them. As such, schools with financial and technical means are improving, while the less advantaged are getting caught in a low equilibrium trap from which they have neither the technical or material means to escape.

KHDA is aware of this conundrum and goes out of its way to help the parties involved. They have produced guides for parents explaining the criteria for good schools. The DSIB also works with weak schools to help them improve; and events called *What Works*, encouraged by KHDA, help expose teachers and schools to best practices.

The sharing of information has had a significant impact on Dubai’s private schools. After just five years of this approach, KHDA has shown that access to information can improve schools, help parents make better decisions – and encourage students to opt for the classroom rather than the mall!