

# MainGate

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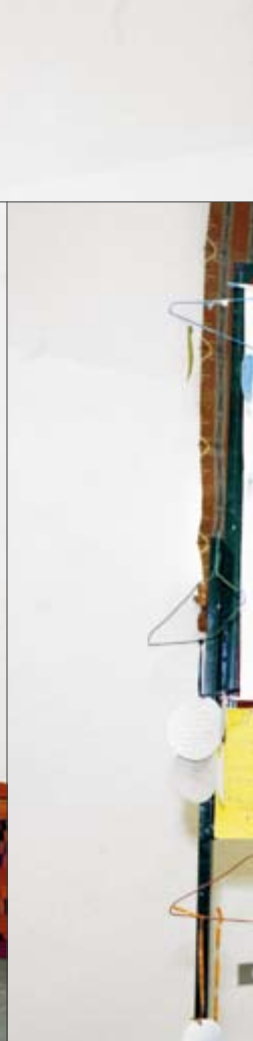
**new energy**



# Top down support for bottom up change in Arab schools

The Arab education system would probably get an F if you graded it based on recent headlines. The news<sup>1</sup> makes for sober reading: “The region has produced fewer educational outcomes than many competitors, as measured by years of educational attainment in the adult population.”<sup>2</sup> It gets worse: “The education systems of the region are not yet fully equipped to produce graduates with the skills and expertise necessary to compete in a world where knowledge is essential to making progress.”<sup>3</sup>

**There is, however, some good news.**



The same World Bank report that warns that too many graduates in the Arab world don't have "the skills and expertise" they need to compete in today's world also notes that most children today benefit from compulsory schooling and that "learning outcomes are much better than they were."<sup>4</sup> The teachers, educators, and researchers involved in AUB's TAMAM project, which the Arab Thought Foundation is supporting with a generous three-year research grant, are working hard to generate some more good news for the region. "I believe that TAMAM offers a rich opportunity for profound and sustainable change in schools in the Arab world—a process that is essential to ensuring a bright future for our region," says Dr. Sarah B. Alturki.

The reason that Dr. Alturki, deputy president of the Dhahran Ahliyya Schools and the Educational Book House in Dammam, Saudi Arabia, believes that the TAMAM project has "the potential to make real, deep change in schools in the region" is that it is "based in schools, which is where school reform actually takes place." This sets the TAMAM project apart from previous educational reform efforts in the Arab world that all too

often, according to AUB Professor of Education Saouma BouJaoude, "are decreed by governments and don't involve teachers, school principals, and other school and local staff." The goal of the TAMAM project, which is derived from the Arabic title of the project ("al-tatweer al-mustanid ila al-madrassa fi al-buldan al-'arabiyya" or "school-based reform in Arab countries") is to provide support and encouragement for educational reform that is initiated by and grounded in schools—what BouJaoude calls "top down support for bottom up change."

Alturki is a member of the TAMAM Project Steering Committee—as are Dr. Sumaya Muhtaseb from Jordan, BouJaoude, and AUB Professor Murad Jurdak. Both BouJaoude and Jurdak, who have been involved with education in the Arab world for decades as students, teachers, teachers of teachers, researchers, and academic consultants, are also members of a team of AUB professors and research assistants including Assistant Professor Rima Karami Akkary that are working on TAMAM.

Teachers and administrators from the nine schools involved in the project—three each in Jordan, Lebanon,

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and Saudi Arabia—are conducting what Alturki describes as “action research” on innovative school-based projects to “recognize needs, discover solutions, and continuously adapt them” to figure out what works and what doesn’t work—and why. (See box on page 30 for a list of the nine original participating schools and their projects. An additional three public Lebanese public schools were added in 2009.)

“We believe,” explains Nasri Tarazi who is a teacher at one of the participating schools, “that empowering women is necessary to achieve change and development in the Arab world.” It is also central to the mission of the Ahliyya School for Girls (ASG) in Amman, Jordan, which Akkary describes as a “school with a long tradition of success and a clear sense of vision” that is staffed with teachers who see themselves “as professionals and as having an active role in improving their schools.” It was at a workshop at AUB that the team from ASG learned the tools they needed to conduct a survey of students and teachers to determine “whether ASG is fulfilling its mission of providing quality education and experiences to its students to help them become empowered human beings.”

Tarazi reports that as a result of the survey, they learned that students and teachers have different perceptions of what empowers students. For example, teachers ranked the school’s philosophy and mission documents at the top of the list while students placed this item in only ninth place. According to the students, participation in community service was the most empowering activity—an item that the teachers ranked in only seventh place. The ASG team concluded that teachers need to be more involved in the activities themselves to gain a better understanding of the students and what matters to them. Tarazi says, “what we are doing here at ASG would not have been possible without the strong support that we received—and continue to receive—from the AUB team.”

Nadya Rizk (BS ’06, MA ’09), who is assisting with the project, explains that this support includes a process of technical assistance, ongoing monitoring, and regular visits by AUB team members to all the schools. In addition, TAMAM provides a mechanism that encourages participating schools to offer each other moral support and encouragement. Alturki notes that this is one of TAMAM’s goals: to develop a community or network

of schools that will provide teachers with access to an unprecedented professional resource network so they can “share ideas, pool resources, and offer encouragement.”

Bilal Basha, who oversees the TAMAM project at Saint Mary’s Orthodox College says, “What we wanted to do is examine teacher and parent perspectives of a new rating system that we introduced to replace the more traditional grading system that is used throughout the region.” As a result of Saint Mary’s new rating system, teachers are assessing the qualitative progress that students are making by focusing on their mastery of competencies, abilities, and skills.

“For us,” says Basha, “this shift from grading to rating has transformed the assessment of learning outcomes so that it now provides meaningful data that both parents and teachers can use.” He goes on to explain that adjusting to this new system has required teachers and parents to change their view of assessment and education. “Genuine educational reform in the Arab world will require a change in mentality—among teachers, students, and parents too,” he says.

School	Project
Saint Mary’s Orthodox College (SMOC) Lebanon	Studying how teachers and parents view the change from a grading system to a rating system as a way to assess student performance.
Hariri High School II (HHS II) Lebanon	Investigating the impact of introducing “professional days” on the professional growth of teachers and the academic environment at the school.
Al Kawthar High School Lebanon	Studying the effect of “cooperative and active learning” on student learning and teacher effectiveness.
The Ahliyya School for Girls (ASG) Jordan	Exploring teacher, student, and parent perspectives of the leadership skills that students acquire as ASG students.
Amman Baccalaureate School (ABS) Jordan	Analyzing the impact of technology on student performance.
Al Asriyya School Jordan	Examining the effect of introducing “the student as an independent researcher” on students’ ability to conduct research and on teachers’ classroom practices.
Dar El Fikr School for Boys (DEF) Saudi Arabia	Assessing the effect of inquiry and project-based learning on students’ motivations and approaches to learning.
Dhahran Ahliyya School for Boys (DAS for Boys) Saudi Arabia	Investigating the effect of an inquiry program on the ability of students to conduct research.
Dhahran Ahliyya School for Girls (DAS for Girls) Saudi Arabia	Examining whether—and how—implementing “cooperative learning” across the curriculum gives students the skills they need to work together.



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—Bilal Basha