

# SESRI Policy Brief

## Education in Qatar: the complex reality of citizen satisfaction

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*Qatar's leaders recognize that education is key to economic, social and political progress. Accordingly, Qatar invests heavily in its education sector in order to improve its education system. The "Education for a New Era" reform drove the establishment of independent schools and, more recently, the availability of vouchers for Qatari students to attend private and international schools. Despite the state's prioritization of the education sector, citizens' satisfaction with it remains low. This is especially evident when compared to Qatari satisfaction with other key public sectors. Indeed, a previous SESRI survey revealed that, when it comes to public services, Qataris are most satisfied with the utilities sector and least satisfied with education. Here we find that while Qatari parents are dissatisfied with education in independent schools, they do not appear to be interested in other schooling options offered by the newly initiated voucher system. This illustrates the complex reality of citizen satisfaction in general but more particularly, in the local context where citizen seem to be strongly attached to their traditional values.*

In 2001, the RAND Corporation was charged with the task of assessing Qatar's kindergarten through grade 12 (K-12) education system. The system was highly centralized, lacked a clear education vision and had an outmoded, unchallenging curriculum that often left students with little motivation to excel. Moreover, previous attempts at reform were fragmented and, without detailed implementation strategies, further weakened the system. This undoubtedly caused widespread frustration among parents, students and teachers alike.

Based on insights from RAND's assessment of the education system, the Supreme Education Council (SEC) launched "Education for a New Era." This initiative saw the overhaul of the previous school system, replacing all public schools with a new school model of privately operated, publically funded 'independent schools'. The last phase of this new decentralized education system was completed in

2010.<sup>2</sup> Qatar continues to heavily invest in education, which, along with healthcare and infrastructure, made up 45.4% (QAR 91.9bn) of total state expenditure in 2016. Of this, 20.4 billion Qatari riyals were allocated to the education sector alone.

While Qatar does prioritize education and strives to improve it, the introduction of the 'Education for a New Era' initiative was not without its problems. From the early stages of its implementation, the initiative has raised various concerns among stakeholders. Parents expressed concerns about the quality of education, as well as the reduced emphasis on both the Arabic language and religious studies.

These developments motivated the launch of the voucher system.<sup>3</sup> In 2012, vouchers valued at QAR 28,000 were made available to Qatari nationals to be used to defer the costs of approved private and international schools. The voucher program aims to give

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parents the ability to choose the school that best suits their preferences, regardless of their economic situation. Parents currently have four types of schools available to them: independent schools, private international schools, Arabic schools, and community schools administered by foreign embassies in Qatar. The voucher system is aimed at improving the quality of education and encourages distinguished international schools to operate in Qatar.

## Parents' opinion about their child's school

Given that the state has greatly invested in education, parents' satisfaction with their children's school is an important tool for assessing the effectiveness of the education system. In both 2012 and 2015, SESRI conducted nationally-representative surveys that asked Qatari parents questions related to their child's education. The findings reveal that more than 90% of Qatari parents enroll their children in independent schools. Additionally, Qatari enrollment in international schools has increased from approximately 3% in 2012 to 6% in 2015, but this remains very low compared to enrolment in independent schools.

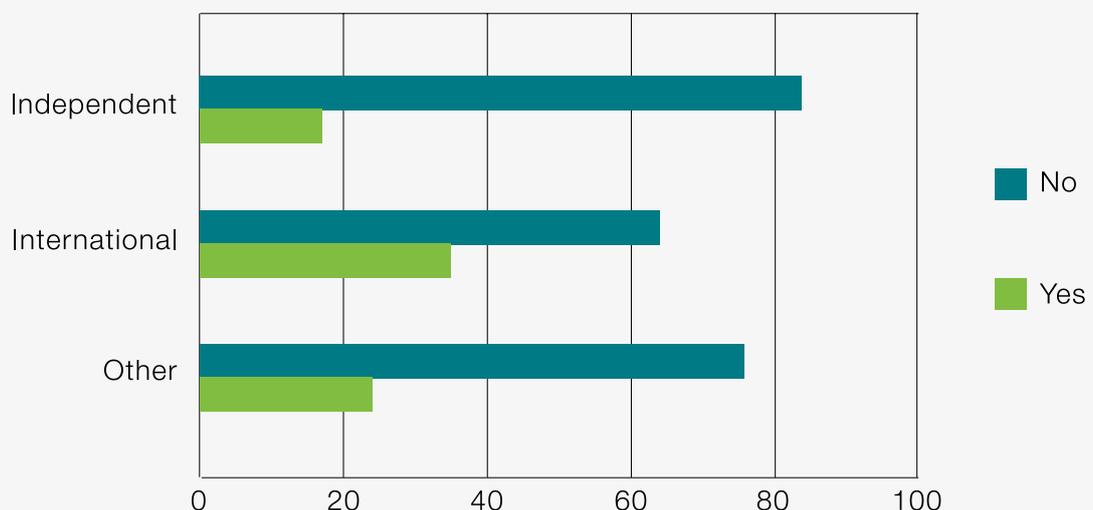
TABLE 1  
School enrollment in 2012 and 2015 (percent)

|   | 2012 | 2015 | Total |
|---|------|------|-------|
| Independent                                 | 93.1 | 91.6 | 92.4  |
| International                               | 2.7  | 6.3  | 4.4   |
| Other (Community, Embassy, Private schools) | 4.2  | 2.1  | 3.2   |
| Total                                       | 100  | 100  | 100   |

Notably, the data show that parental education is not a significant determinant of their choice of school type for their children. From 2012 to 2015, Qatari parents' overall level of education increased, with 40% having completed university degree in 2015 compared to only 27% in 2012. More than 90% of parents who did not complete high school enroll their children in independent schools, and around 80% of parents who have a university degree do the same. Yet, while Qatari parents continue to enroll their children in independent schools, separate SESRI data collected in September 2015 reveal that Qatari citizens are least satisfied with the K-12 education system among all public services provided by the state.

*Independent of their level of education, more than 90% of Qatari parents enroll their children in independent schools*

FIGURE 1  
Parent interest in changing their child's school, 2015



## Financial ability to move from the school

In addition to free enrollment in independent schools, vouchers are now available to all Qatari parents, providing them with more schooling options. Vouchers are available only for enrollment at schools that comply with SEC standards (Education Voucher System Law No. 7 in 2012). These standards include the teaching of Qatari history, Islamic disciplines, and the Arabic language.

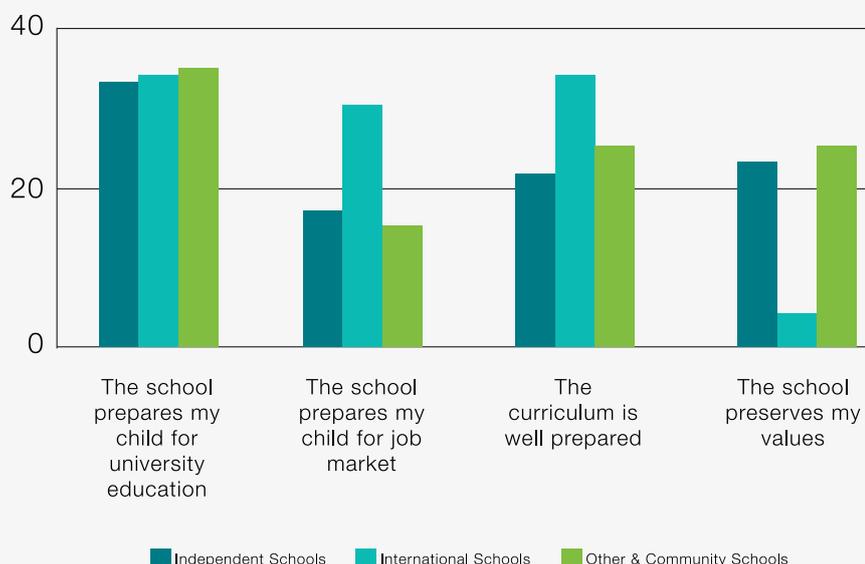
In this context, SESRI asked parents if they would move their child from their current school if they had the financial ability and opportunity. Overall, Qatari parents are not interested in moving their children from their current school. Interestingly, parents of children enrolled in independent schools are the least willing to change their children's school. Respectively, 85% of the parents of children in independent schools, 75% of the parents of children in other schools and 67% of the parents of children in international schools, are not willing to change from their school (Figure 1).

These results entail a contradiction: Qatari parents are not satisfied with independent schools, yet are not willing to move from them even if they have the financial ability. This serves to raise larger questions about the drivers of citizen satisfaction with the education system.

## Impact of traditional values on the satisfaction with education

To understand this tension between low satisfaction with independent schools and unwillingness to move from the school, we examine data from another SESRI survey. The 2011 SESRI Omnibus interviews a large and representative sample of Qatari citizens and resident expatriates about a number of topics of importance to Qatari society. In one section, Qatari respondents with K-12-aged children were asked questions about education. The results point to relative dissatisfaction with independent schools compared to international schools. Among Qatari parents with children enrolled in independent schools, 14.5% were dissatisfied with the school in 2011. Among parents of those attending private Arabic

FIGURE 2  
Qatari parents' opinion of their children's school by type



*Qatari parents remain relatively unsatisfied with independent schools, yet they are not inclined to move their children to another type of school*

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schools and international schools, by contrast, dissatisfaction was 12.1% and 4%, respectively.

This survey also asked parents to select two statements that they feel best apply to their child's school. The data show that Qatari parents with children attending independent and Arab private schools are five times more likely to feel that their school preserves their values than parents of those attending international schools. At the same time, however, these same parents of independent school pupils are less positive about the school's curriculum and ability to help their child secure good employment (Figure 2).

These findings reflect the reality that many parents face a difficult choice between perceived school quality and a school's cultural environment. The data show the tension between parents' desire for an education that will preserve their children's culture and values on the one hand, and one that offers a quality curriculum that will help the child secure a good job on the other hand. Consequently, many Qatari parents feel forced to choose between their values and the school's curriculum, that

is, between their values and the quality of education.

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## Policy Summary

In the space of a few years, and driven by a strong political will and substantial financial resources, Qatar has embraced an ambitious reform agenda to tackle a weak public education system. Yet, while helping to improve overall educational quality, the reforms have also raised citizen concerns over preserving Qatari culture. As seen here, parents' attachment to traditions and values strongly impacts their decision-making in regards to child education. The voucher system approaches the question of school choice in terms of financial means, but its effects on educational mobility remain constrained by parents' perceptions that international schools offer weak instruction in valued subjects such as Arabic language, Islamic studies, and Qatari history. Other aspects of independent schools, such as gender-segregated classrooms, also reflect traditional values. Substantial migration from independent to international schools among Qatari citizens remain strongly attached to traditional values.