

Cultural Sociology of the Middle East 1920 to the present

School Day

The school day in the MENA region mirrors that in many other regions, with age-grade classes and large lectures teaching a standardized national curriculum. Primary schooling is free and compulsory in all MENA region nations. However, only 86% of boys and 81% of girls of the relevant age are enrolled in primary education in Arab States.

Educational systems in all MENA countries tend to be highly centralized. All MENA region nations begin primary schooling at age 6, with most requiring 9-10 years of compulsory schooling. Low-end outliers are Iraq, Mauritania and Saudi Arabia, which each only require 6 years of compulsory schooling, and at the high end is Qatar, which requires a full 12 years. Although the structure of the school systems varies across the region, most MENA nations follow a 6-3-3 system, corresponding to 6 years of primary schooling and 3 years each of middle and high school.

The MENA school year is approximately 180 school days, running from mid-September to mid-June. However, outliers include the United Arab Emirates, with only 150 days, and Libya, which mandates 200 days of primary school and 230 in high school.

Core courses in MENA schools include Arabic, Mathematics, Science, Religious Education, Geography, History and Social Studies. In line with the ambitious Arabization policies in many MENA nations, all core subjects are taught in Arabic through high school. Nonetheless, nearly all MENA region nations also emphasize foreign language instruction. English as begins in elementary for most students in the Gulf and Levant. In the former Francophone countries of North Africa, students begin French in elementary school, although English language teaching is now required in middle school.

Religion is also a required class at all stages of the public school system in most MENA region nations. In most countries, this takes the form of Islamic education, including study of the Qur'an and Hadith. However, in most countries with Christian minorities, including Egypt, Syria and Jordan, religious education is offered for Christians as well.

Class sizes in MENA schools, even at the elementary level, tend to be very high, ranging from a low of 25 students to a high of 60 in densely populated regions. Gender segregation in primary schooling is the norm in many MENA nations, and in the Gulf, even secondary schools are gender-segregated. However, co-education is common in francophone North Africa.

Pedagogical practices in MENA region nations tend to be very didactic, with students expected to copy notes word-by-word from teachers' lectures into copybooks. Exercises and examinations tend to stress the importance of memorization over understanding.

Most MENA region nations require end-of-year exams to advance, and repetition rates can be very high. In secondary school, students pursue either a literary or scientific track, which lead to separate university majors and careers. Most MENA region nations require students to take a graduation exam, known as the Baccalaureate (in North Africa, Syria and Lebanon) or the Tawjihi (Jordan, Palestine) to graduate high school.

Most students in MENA nations attend public schools, with enrollments in private primary schools accounting for less than 10% of all enrollments in most MENA countries. Nevertheless, attendance at private primary schools is growing rapidly, particularly in Jordan (33%), Kuwait (29%), Qatar (50%) and the UAE (67%). Lebanon's schools have always been highly privatized, and more than 70% of Lebanese are in private primary schools.

See also: Educational Reform

Further reading:

Massialas, Byron and Samir Ahmed Jarrar. *Education in the Arab World*. New York, NY: Praeger Publications. 1983.

Ofori-Attah, Kwabena Dei. *Going to School In the Middle East and North Africa*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2008.

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