

Parents voice concerns during the COVID 19 health crisis



E-LEARNING

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INTRODUCTION

The health crisis changed dynamics, with parents working from home and children being taught virtually online, at home. Challenges arose from: working in the same space, finding a quiet space, having sufficient technology, devices and connectivity for each family member. Additionally, supervising, supporting and teaching their own children challenged some households. Once the 'Learning from Afar' initiative began operation, virtual teaching was running smoothly, parents were ensconced in working from home and parents were teaching their children.

Recognising the challenges for families, the government of the United Arab Emirates reacted quickly, and by the end of the third week, announced that all working women, with children under the age of 16, senior staff over 60 years old, pregnant women staff, staff with Determined (disabled persons) dependents, and staff with chronic disease were allowed to work from home. (HRA, 2020). Thus, families were less pressured, and mothers could look after the household and parent-teach their children.

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As the lockdown progressed, it became apparent that the home situation would last longer than a few weeks. Parents started to ask questions of the school system about: how long the virtual online teaching last, what would the arrangements be for Ramadan, how would student year work be assessed for progress and how could shared devices be used more efficiently in the home.

On hearing of the challenges and the concerns of the parents, H.H. Sheikh Mohammed Bin Zayed AlNahyan the Crown Prince of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, immediately directed the Ministry of Education to provide: every student, in every school throughout the UAE, whether public or private, or a UAE national or a non UAE national, an iPad, free of cost.

On learning of the extent of the parents' questions, the Director General of the regulator, Abu Dhabi Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and



Training (ACTVET), decided to hold a virtual meeting for the parents of the Grade 6, 7 and 8 students. Invited were two schools in Al Ain, 170 kilometers and one in Baynounah, 221 kilometers from the regulator in Abu Dhabi, that offer Grade 6 to 8 schooling. The Director of Schools informed parents there would be a scheduled online meeting to clarify the lockdown situation.

In order to give all parents, the same information, the virtual meetings were held online. To capture the main points of the meetings, the meetings were recorded. Parents were informed of the recording and asked that those who did not wish to appear on camera to switch the camera off and remain in the conversation by voice only. Such was the success of the Grade 6, 7 and 8 meeting that a Grade 9, 10, 11 and 12 meeting was held three days later to service thirteen schools.

The afternoon sessions began with the temporary 'Head Master' giving the conditions for attending the virtual meeting. Parents had to switch their microphones off when they were not speaking, they had to use the 'raise your hand' button to indicate they wanted to speak, and had to follow the theme of the discussion led by the Director General, who would indicate when a new subject for discussion was open.

In addition to the Director General, Managing Directors, the Director of Schools, Director of Student Services, Director of Support Services and Head of IT, Principals and Deputy Principals of all schools were there to answer the parent's questions.

One hundred and eighty-four parents (184) attended the one hour scheduled virtual meeting for Grade 7, 8 and 9. At the end of the hour, the meeting closed but parents could remain if they had questions. One hundred and thirty six (136) parents remained. Even larger, was the meeting for Grade 9, 10, 11 and 12 Parents. Seven hundred and forty four (744) parents, attended the virtual meeting, an unexpected number.

Many parents mentioned they did not get the opportunity to attend such meetings in the past due to work commitments and working in different cities. This was their first time to attend because it was virtual. Some said it was an honour to be able to discuss directly with the highest government officials and would like the practice to continue. The Director General immediately supported the request, announcing the launch of the rotating one hour 'A virtual hour with the Principal' weekly meetings, where parents from selected school are invited to meet their Principal and teachers.



Parents asked many questions covering many areas particularly: class work, examinations and timing for virtual classes. The main questions were:

- **How long the lockdown would continue during the health crisis?**
- The government would make the decision.
- **What can be done for families with poor internet connections and many family members accessing devices at the same time for work and study.**
- Parents were advised to maintain the maximum speed and capacity of their internet and reduce the number of additional persons on the internet during school and work hours. Those in outlying areas were advised that they may have to take separate data packages for individual devices.



- **How would projects, assessment and examinations be conducted?**
- Projects are to be submitted online using written work, photographic and video evidence. Assessment and examination to be conducted on the learning management system. Failing students to have online re-sit examinations. Practice examinations to be circulated to assist student's examination preparation. All grading would be as normal. Second term certificate would be issued within two days.
- **What kind of support is available for my child?**
- Teachers are recording classes and the videos are available online. Additional support is available by prior arrangement between the teacher and the child but should not be used as a route for private tuition.
- **What will the timing be during Ramadan?**
- Normal virtual schooling would continue until Ramadan. Then, during the holy month of Ramadan, when fasting, 40 minute periods will

be in operation from 10:00 am to 13:55 pm.

- **How do teachers react when experiencing interruptions from undisciplined students?**
- Virtual teaching possess many issue surrounding control. Teachers are taking attendance at the start, middle and end of each lesson to ensure the students are present and participating in class. Teachers have been issued with Virtual Teaching Standards for guidance on best practice. Working on iPads has reduced the skill of students writing in English and Arabic. Therefore, developing and maintaining handwriting skills will be a focus.
- **What was the plan for the next academic year?**
- The plan was circulated to all parents after the meeting.
- **How were the different school systems to be judged?**
- The universities and colleges were using a system which equated student results from different school systems for university acceptance selection.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the virtual meeting facilitated the parents' expression of their issues during lockdown and the health crisis. Additionally, it enabled the ACTVET school system to understand the parents' concerns and to learn and adjust provision during 'Learning from Afar'. In general, all parents were happy with the virtual schooling and many enjoyed supporting their children at home. All parents' issues were addressed and explanations given for each scenario. Where issues were raised that had not been addressed, the ACTVET school system became more aware. Where possible, additional provision was being made to make the home schooling, parent-teacher experience more relevant. One parent asked if her daughter who previously failed and was transferred to a government school could return to the ACTVET schools system? The Director General permitted the mother to transfer her daughter back to the system, such was the detail of individual parent's concerns. It is considered that the weekly 'A virtual hour with the Principal' will continue to assure parents during the health crisis.

References

(HRA, 2020), Procedures and control guide for distance work, for Government Agencies in the emirate of Abu Dhabi, during emergency conditions. Human Resource Authority Circular, Published March 19th 2020, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.



In total, nine hundred and twenty eight parents of children in Grade 8 to 12, from seventeen schools, in seven emirates attended the Virtual Parents meeting.

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