

# School Excellence Model in Public Schools in the State of Kuwait: A Proposed Model

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## Abstract

This study was undertaken to investigate school excellence models and their applicability to education in the Arab world in general, and in Kuwait in particular. The researcher reviewed and analyzed the literature regarding excellence models and the role they can play in educational institutions. Based on this review, a school excellence model is proposed to improve the status and qualifications of teachers, establish systems of good governance at both the local and central levels, adopt a transformational leadership style, and encourage transparency among all stakeholders. Kuwaiti schools must conduct continuous evaluations to balance the expectations and demands of the local and global environments, students, and all stakeholders on one side with the actual resources that exist within the school environment on the other side. Achieving school excellence in Kuwait will require a culture that encourages creativity, innovation, and thinking outside the box.

**Keywords:** Kuwait, transformational leadership, learning organization, school improvement, teacher learning

## 1. Introduction

Education can be seen as one of the most important dimensions for development and growth in all countries; it is an effective factor in enhancing economic, social, and political development. Because of its importance, many nations around the world seek to ensure excellence at all educational levels in order to improve the quality of education and achieve competitive advantages for their educational institutions.

Like any other system, education affects and is affected by numerous social, cultural, political, and economic forces. There are many interactions that actually differentiate one educational system from the other (Masri 2009). Understanding of what is desirable and worthwhile in education has been a topic of discussion in many studies and researches. Over the past 50 years, excellence has emerged as an educational paradigm that has played a central role in educational policy making and reform attempts (Bruno-Jofré & Hills 2011).

*Excellence* has many definitions, which in fact vary according to the cultural, social, professional, scientific, or research context in which the term is employed. Excellence includes different faculties—mental, physical, creative, and intellectual—oriented toward leadership or management for the improvement of the educational system (Lador 2010).

An excellence model in schools has many different connotations. Despite the variation in meanings, all excellence models revolve around the embedding of high quality in all processes taking place within the system—for example, development of curriculum in such a way that it supports professional learning of students and encouragement of positive communication among all stakeholders, especially parents (ACT Department of Education and Training 2012).

Adapted originally from quality models successfully and effectively applied in many business organizations, the school excellence model is a comprehensive one that can be used in the self-assessment process of schools (Ng and Chan 2008). One can say that the primary aim of the school excellence model is to provide a comprehensive framework for measuring school strengths and isolating areas that need improvement; the framework also enhances all activities that aim to improve the school environment and as a result enhance the quality of all educational outputs.

## 2. Statement of the Problem

Although many organizations exert continuous efforts to achieve excellence in all processes and activities that forward their goals and objectives, they often fail to achieve their defined standards of excellence. This may be attributed to the fact that they don't know what is meant exactly by excellence or how to implement it within different organizational contexts (Dahlgaard-Park & Dahlgaard 2007). As a result a number of challenges have emerged that threaten the effective implementation of excellence within school systems in many countries around the world in general and in the Arab world in particular.

Moujaes *et al.* (2011) showed that the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) school market suffers from many such challenges, as represented by the lack of transparency and consistency in all processes within schools. In addition to the challenges related to funding new schools, fragmented and traditional management structures and lack of information transparency regarding the nature of parental involvement and school quality indicators are factors that may hinder the effective growth of a school system.

Although the State of Kuwait places emphasis on the importance of education in developing its society

(Al-Duwaila 2012), there remain low levels of quality in the educational systems in Kuwait at all echelons. This issue was emphasized by Al Shatti (2011), who demonstrated that the Kuwaiti government schools lack the level of quality found in private Kuwaiti schools, especially in terms of curriculum, teacher support, and educational policies. Also, Barber *et al.* (2007) stated that policy makers in GCC countries have committed a big mistake in spending several years concentrating on constituent parts of the system without giving appropriate attention to students performance levels.

The statement of the problem revolves around the desire to tackle the areas of weakness in the Kuwaiti educational system, especially in the field of problems related to quality issues in school systems, and to reach a proposed model that can be used in improving the quality of Kuwaiti public school systems and paving the way toward excellence in all public educational organizations within the state of Kuwait.

### **3. Objectives of the Study**

The aim of the current study is to shed light on the nature of school excellence and its importance for educational institutions. It attempts to provide information regarding the nature of educational institutions in the Arab world in general and in Kuwait in particular and identify the levels of quality in these educational institutions. Finally, a proposed model is introduced that can be implemented in Kuwaiti public schools to improve school performance and enhance productivity and quality in all processes performed within these schools.

### **4. Significance of the Study**

The significance of the study stems from its intention to provide a practical model that can be implemented within Kuwaiti public schools. Through this model, Kuwaiti schools can improve their performance and upgrade the teaching and learning processes, which can have a significant potential impact on the quality of the overall educational process. We can say that providing a proposed model may represent the first attempt to help Kuwaiti educational institutions engage with the educational excellence movement taking place in many countries around the world.

### **5. Methodology of the Study**

The researcher first reviewed and analyzed the literature regarding identification of the nature of excellence and the role it can play in different educational institutions. This analysis was effective in helping the researcher to formulate and introduce the model for improving the quality of education in Kuwaiti public schools.

### **6. Literature Review**

No one can deny the potential role played by schools around the world in preparing students to function as good citizens who can effectively participate in building their nations and who have the ability to work in innovative and creative styles. Thus, stressing a high-quality school environment becomes a must to update the infrastructure and improve ways of managing financial issues and human resources within schools; all these issues lead to the desire to search for effective strategies to reform school systems and improve their performance.

As a result of education reform efforts in various countries, schools are no longer expected to restrict their mandate to students' acquisition of knowledge and intellectual development. The roles of schools have evolved to include enhancing social and emotional development of all students, in addition to the responsibility of school systems in fostering good citizenship principles among students through the development of a positive climate within schools (Faour 2012).

Excellence is perceived as a holistic approach that offers a systemic view of an organization as a whole, enabling self-improvement and constant change in all processes in accordance with the requirements of new situations and the standards of quality that govern all activities within the organization (Anninos & Chytiris 2011).

Mok (2003) showed that one of the different approaches that can be taken to enhance quality education is the introduction of a school excellence model to engage schools in self-improvement and self-assessment exercises. The school excellence model is considered to be a mechanism to promote quality in school systems (Tee 2003). The model proposed here is a self-assessment model adapted from various quality models employed by business organizations, namely the European Foundation of Quality Management Excellence Model, the SPRING Singapore Quality Award model, and the educational version of the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award model.

The school excellence model doesn't stem from a vacuum; it is based upon certain core principles that define the purpose and form of the model, including an emphasis on the importance of having a wise and visionary leadership and a view of teachers as essential keys to the educational process. This model also puts great stress on different processes related to ensuring the achievement of sustained results for students. This model concentrates more on issues beyond academic performance, such as school climate, management

exercises, and so on. Excellence is defined as meeting the target goals and objectives predetermined by educational policies and modeling the positive experiences that have proven effective (Tee 2003).

Feedback plays an important role improving the performance of any organization. Excellent schools do their best to make all quality dimensions consistent with the organizational culture of the school (Fisher 2012). The most important characteristic of excellence in schools is the existence of a clear plan. Here, planning requires establishing a well-defined vision formulated through school values, identifying priorities, and specifying the expected outcomes that will lead to improvement in the performance of all learners (HM Inspectorate of Education 2007).

School excellence isn't a random process; it is the result of the interaction of different factors, including leadership practice, quality of teaching, and stakeholder involvement in the teaching and learning processes. For example, the leadership of principals in forming a learning organization for every individual in a school in general and the teachers in particular is crucial in meeting the goals and achieving the objectives of school excellence (Hamzah *et al.* 2011).

Planning for excellence is an issue that needs to be considered while talking about school excellence, and a key part of such planning is changing the school climate. The school climate affects everyone involved in the school environment, extending to cover all students, staff, parents, and the community.

School principals need to work constantly toward improving their school climate, culture, and conditions in an attempt to improve students' learning, upgrade the learning environment, and move toward excellence in all school processes (Osman 2012). Empowering is another issue that must be taken into consideration while discussing the idea of excellence (Rabie 2010). Everyone wants to feel empowerment in the work he or she does and in the life he or she lives; but most educators face disempowering forces in the form of organizational norms and standards, social constraints, fears and anxieties about principals' reactions, school board regulations, and so forth. In the current competitive educational environment, wherein accountability has become a watchword, one has to learn to empower oneself and empower one's team members to achieve a school's goals (Rogers 2004)

School excellence is manifested in personal growth of the students and staff, including their characters and capabilities (Fong & Yenming 2013). Transformational leadership practices and teacher learning organization practices are two identified determinants in ensuring continuous school improvement and excellence (Yakop & Hamzah 2011).

School excellence has many facets: for example, it can be expressed in terms of personal growth as represented by the capabilities and characters of all people involved in the school environment, including students and staff (Fong & Yenming 2013). Leadership plays an important role in the process of excellence within different organizations (Sergiovanni 2006). School excellence is also related to teachers and their teaching practices. The concept of school excellence is closely related to effective teaching; the degree of teacher expertise within the teaching field wields a direct impact on student outcomes (Tuggeranong ACT 2004).

There are many other indicators of excellence within schools. Among them is an effective communication process that engenders and maintains excellence in the school environment (Rafferty 2003). Other indicators include teachers' attitudes and behaviors (Mehdipour and Balarmulu 2013). If they have positive perceptions regarding the excellence process, they will encourage all initiatives for change within the school environment; on the other hand, if they have negative attitudes regarding excellence they will prefer the status quo strategies in teaching and managing the school environments and resist all attempts for change.

There are many models of school excellence within the literature. Tee (2003) has provided a model for school excellence comprising nine quality criteria against which schools can be assessed: leadership, strategic planning, staff management, resources, student-focused processes, administrative and operational results, staff results, partnership and society results, and key performance results.

Varner (2002) provides three broad categories of school excellence: classroom, including teaching and learning processes; school context, including professional development, collaboration, leadership, and organizational culture; and external environment, including community organizations, external standards and expectations, university professional associations, and the school district.

Many countries around the world seek to implement the school excellence model in their educational institutions. Hong Kong, for example, depends on a policy of annual assessment and ranking; all secondary schools and junior colleges have been ranked annually since 1992. Ranking and assessment processes are conducted based on three main criteria: overall results in the national examinations, "value-added-ness," and students' performance in the National Physical Fitness Test (Ng & Chan 2008).

In the United States, the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award was introduced first for companies that achieved better quality management in American industries. In 1995, the award program was expanded to include healthcare and education. The framework of excellence was based on seven categories: leadership; strategic planning; student, stakeholder, and market focus; measurement, analysis, and knowledge management; faculty and staff focus; process management; and organizational performance (LaChance 2007).

In Texas, Brazosport Independent School District has been an exemplar for bringing about effective change. In 1998 the institution became the first public-education recipient of the Texas Quality Award. This award recognizes organizations that are outstanding role models for performance excellence and application of quality management principles (Goldberg & Cole 2002). Osters (2007) showed that the Texas Award for Performance Excellence in Education Criteria serves as a useful basis for a comprehensive program review and as a management strategy for senior leadership.

In the Malaysian context, the experience of the “learning organization” is considered as one of the most critical steps in moving toward excellence in education, as this approach is capable of making an organization more competitive and adaptive to any change. Teacher practices within Malaysian schools are conducive to the establishment of a strong learning organization supported by transformational principals who enable schools to achieve continuous improvement and excellence in terms of teacher and student learning (Hamzah *et al.* 2011).

In Australia, the idea of excellence is based on principles represented in promoting the culture of whole school change in an attempt to fulfill the diverse needs of students through such practices as high-quality curriculum, enhanced teacher expertise, fostering positive partnerships, and communication among different stakeholders involved in the educational process (ACT Department of Education and Training 2012).

In Israel, the Department of Science Teaching at the Weizmann Institute of Science and the Davidson Institute of Science Education have initiated an initiative to develop a model of “Excellence Promoter.” This vision is based on the assumption that promoting excellence in schools will help to bridge the gap between students, teachers, and school principals and help them to implement various activities that help in activating the idea of excellence (Eylon *et al.* 2007).

## 7. Analysis of Current State in Arab Schools

GCC countries have acknowledged that proper educational systems are primary steps in building the pillars of economic progress, and as a result many Arab countries have made serious attempts to improve the quality and quantity of education over the last two decades (Alpen Capital 2012).

In many Arab countries, there is a large debate among journalists, academic scholars, and policymakers regarding the issues of school quality and education reform. Unfortunately, these debates and discussions suggest a discrepancy between the skills workers possess on one side and job and market requirements on the other, or what economists usually call an imbalance between the supply and demand for human capital. In other words, there is disparity between graduates’ skills and the actual skills needed in the job market (Jelili 2010).

There are many factors that negatively affect educational performance in Arab countries, such as the relatively high population growth rate, the phenomenon of mass education, and the lack of resources in the majority of Arab countries. All of these factors have resulted in poor educational outcomes (Masri 2009).

In addition to the factors mentioned, one must admit that the negative school climate in many Arab schools has a bad effect on the quality of education within these schools; many students don’t feel safe within schools, whether physically, socially, or emotionally. Also, poor academic preparation of teachers and inadequacy of teacher-training programs badly affects the quality of education within these schools. Finally, the problems connected with emphasis on rote memorization over understanding, absenteeism of both students and educators, overcrowded classes, and limited resources have had dire consequences on the educational processes (Faour 2012).

Manochehri *et al.* (2012) showed that the challenge of applying a Total Quality Culture model to education in the Arab world involves several critical steps, most of which have not been properly implemented. This includes such processes as clearer interpretation of quality, customers and their needs; clearer interpretation of institutional mission; and greater leadership support and teamwork. The annual report of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia issued in 2003 showed that education in GCC countries suffers from a lack of quality, manifested through graduates’ inability to find jobs within private sectors because of lack of essential skills.

Alkharang and Ghinea (2013) identified specific hindrances to effective implementation of e-learning strategies in Kuwait: lack of management awareness and support, technological barriers, and language barriers. The idea of inability to implement e-learning strategies in Kuwaiti schools reflects in fact the inability to completely implement the excellence model in schools, a process that depends heavily on different technological processes.

One can conclude that many schools in the Arab world in general and in Kuwait in particular suffer from a variety of difficulties revolving around their inability to implement the different concepts and principles of quality in their schools, which has led to such problems as high dropout rates, lack of marketable skills and capabilities, and lack of balance between the skills students attain in comparison with the actual levels of skill required by the labor market. These factors compound to frustrate all attempts for excellence in school environments.

### 8. Suggested Solutions

The governmental structures of the educational systems in the Arab world have been characterized by many areas of weakness that have inspired ongoing efforts to improve the relevance of education to developmental needs and labor market requirements, enhance the decentralization of school empowerment, and develop the technical and vocational education systems (Masri 2009).

Arab governments should play more effective roles in upgrading their educational systems and enhancing all quality processes embedded within them through encouraging change, rewarding effective reform attempts, and applying strict sanctions toward those who don't implement such reforms (Masri & Wilkens 2011).

One can't talk about strategies used in improving the educational systems without mentioning efforts exerted by policymakers to upgrade the effectiveness of teachers and their teaching practices. All Arab countries must work hard for improving the status, preparation, and qualifications of their teachers. A quality system must include good governance at local and central levels and a proper environment that can help in preparing responsible citizens who encourage change for the prosperity of their nations (Faour 2012).

Shehab (2010) has suggested some strategies that can be used in improving the performance of Kuwaiti schools, such as employing best practices of administration, educational supervision, evaluation, curriculum planning, and other control devices used in educationally advanced countries. Finally, there must be stronger and more enthusiastic motion toward decentralization of public schooling and providing greater freedom for school districts and individual public schools in matters related to curricular and extracurricular provisioning, evaluation policies, enrollment, and so on.

In analyzing the suggestions discovered in the literature review, one can say that for Kuwaiti schools to walk steadily along the path to excellence, certain procedures should be followed: First of all, the school leadership must adopt the transformational leadership style in which school principals seek to encourage the desired performance of followers, instill motivation, and employ teamwork, and use information and communication technologies to improve all processes within the school environment.

Kuwaiti schools also need an educational system that depends on decentralization in planning and decision-making processes; this style of management encourages a wide range of participation from all stakeholders engaged in the educational process, which leads to collecting ideas and suggestions from many different viewpoints and allows flexibility in choosing among the different alternatives. Kuwaiti schools must conduct continuous evaluations to effectively balance the needs of the local and global environments and expectations of students and all stakeholders with the real resources that exist within the school environment. Finally, we must stress that the journey to excellence begins with a culture that encourages creativity, innovation, and thinking outside the box to create learning organizations that have the ability to compete in the light of global trends and provide a generation with the ability to fulfill the needs and expectations of the world around them. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of a school excellence model for Kuwaiti public schools.

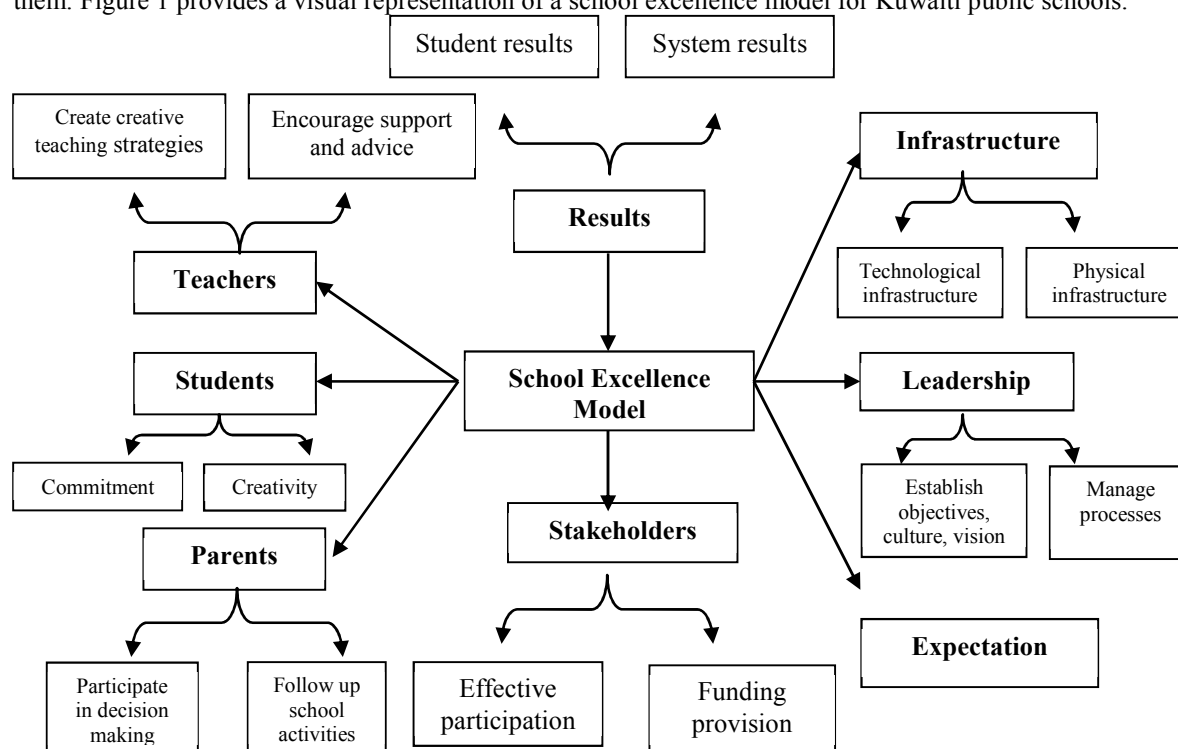


Figure 1. School Excellence Model



## 9. Conclusion

Excellence in educational institutions means creativity, innovation, and thinking outside the box, which requires restructuring all school processes and reorganizing school content in such a way that it offers effective new ways for achieving educational goals. The aim of the school excellence model is to improve the quality of teaching and learning processes in school environments establishing an overall framework through which the organization can achieve its goals. School leaders play an effective role in such a process by providing a plan that guides all excellence processes.

Through this research, the researcher has attempted to propose a model that can be implemented in all public schools within Kuwait. The model proposed here is based on information collected from successful experiences and experiments in the field of excellence around the world. This model can be used by educational specialists and policymakers in instructional entities within Kuwait in an attempt to improve the productivity of the system and encourage creativity and innovation in all processes related to the education system and its institutions.

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