**In Dubai, Plans for Schooling Start at Birth (or Before)**

**By SARA HAMDAN**

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DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — While still pregnant with her first child, Anjum Hatamleh started researching private schools in [Dubai](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/unitedarabemirates/dubai/index.html?inline=nyt-geo).

Facing long waiting lists and high tuition, concerned parents in Dubai begin to plan and save money as early as possible for their children’s education. Mrs. Hatamleh’s son, Adam, was born in mid-March, and he is now registered at the Jebel Ali Primary School for the 2017 academic year.

Yet even though he is registered, enrollment is still not guaranteed. Registration involves paying a fee to be put on a waiting list, and from that pool children are chosen for enrollment. Adding to the Hatamleh family’s anxiety, it must now plan how it will manage the possibility of paying tuition.

If Adam is accepted at Jebel Ali, the fees for his first year will be around 38,000 dirhams, or about $10,345, according to the school’s Web site. If, instead, he enters the American School of Dubai, the fees will be as high as 64,850 dirhams, or about $17,650, excluding the cost of uniforms and charges for extras like transportation, according to school’s Web site.

“In terms of fees, some good schools in Dubai are more expensive than college in the States,” Mrs. Hatamleh said. “Even though Adam was just born, I’ve heard that finding a spot for your kid at a top school is a nightmare, so it’s best to get in line quick and early.”

“Jebel Ali Primary School is one of the few that allow registration at birth, and I was lucky to register Adam for 2017,” she added. “Registration for 2016 was already closed.”

There are schools in Dubai that are more affordable: the international group GEMS Education operates several schools in the United Arab Emirates charging fees that vary widely, starting as low as 3,670 dirhams per year, or about $1,000. Yet competition remains intense for elite, costly establishments like the American School, where fees for a twelfth-grade student are about 82,000 dirhams, or about $22,325 — and more than double that, around 183,600 dirhams, or almost $50,000, for one of the guaranteed places reserved for purchase by American companies to provide schooling for the children of their employees.

The highest tuition, aside from the American School’s reserved places, is 96,140 dirhams, about $26,175, for a twelfth-grade student at the GEMS World Academy.

“The primary difference between GEMS schools with higher fees and those with lower fees is the facilities,” said Dino Varkey, group chief operating officer at GEMS Education.

Some GEMS schools include Olympic-size swimming pools, soccer fields and huge libraries, while others are more basic.

“We focus on teaching quality by offering around 200 courses a year to our teachers, no matter which school they teach in, so they can deliver best practice,” Mr. Varkey said.

For non-Arab expatriates in the United Arab Emirates, private schools are the only option: public schools are reserved for Emiratis and some Arab expatriates. Moreover, the language used in the classroom is often Arabic.

Even for local families, private schooling is often the preferred choice. More than 88 percent of Dubai’s students attend private school, according to a report published this month by the Knowledge and Human Development Authority, or K.H.D.A., the regulatory agency for schools that began operations in 2008. Of Emirati students who have access to free public education, 56.6 percent attend private schools, the report said.

With Dubai’s population rapidly expanding, the growth of the private-school sector has also been swift. The number of students in Dubai’s private schools has doubled in the past decade, to 225,099 this year, according to the authority’s report. Student enrollments for the 2012-13 academic year are 8.7 percent higher than the previous academic year, when there was 7.1 percent growth from 2010-11.

Private education has become a big business. In addition to substantial investment financing that is available from the government, private schools earned an estimated 4.1 billion dirhams, or about $1.1 billion, in total revenues received from tuition fees in the 2011-12 academic year, according to the authority’s report; that figure is up 16.3 percent from the previous year, reflecting rising student numbers and fee increases at many schools.

“For schools with relatively higher tuition fees, parents have the choice to enroll them there or opt for one of the many other schools with lower fees — we don’t place a fee cap on the school itself,” said Mohammed Darwish, head of the authority’s regulations and compliance commission. “There are schools that have been operating for 30 years. We can’t go back and ask them to lower their fees, but we can install a system to regulate fees and fee increases.”

According to the authority’s report, 45 percent of students at Dubai’s 153 private schools pay annual tuition of less than 10,000 dirhams, or about $2,720. The average annual fee is now 18,196 dirhams, or about $4,950, up 6 percent from last year.

In addition to monitoring fees, the authority has been responsible since its creation for educational standards in the private sector, auditing schools and assessing student performance and curriculums. Its findings are published annually to provide parents with guidance in choosing schools. Schools are rated outstanding, good, acceptable or unsatisfactory, based on a variety of criteria and school visits.

The authority approves or rejects proposed fee increases based on these assessments and economic factors, like inflation. For the next academic year, it has rejected almost all proposed increases, with the exception of six schools with special needs.

“New schools are free to set their own fee structure based on market evaluations and their own financial model and payback period to investors,” Mr. Darwish said. “After three years of operation, the K.H.D.A. comes in to regulate fee increases.”

While grateful for the authority’s guidance, some parents remain skeptical of its audits.

Schools “put on a big show when they are being monitored, going to all sorts of lengths to impress, like when a big boss is visiting the workplace,” said Roopa Chan, the mother of an 8-year-old son and herself a former private-school teacher. “Once the performance is over, things calm down. So while reports may not truly be able to reflect realities on the ground, they are still great indicators because they take into consideration elements like facilities, activities, curricula and student results year on year.”

Since the authority took charge of the sector five years ago, 30 Dubai schools have closed, often because parents pulled their children out or they lacked financing to improve after being rated unsatisfactory.

Online forums for expatriates in Dubai are rife with complaints over high school fees and long waiting lists. Still, 12 new schools are set to open in the 2013-14 academic year.

“Fees can really add up and there’s always a risk that you’ve registered a child at a school where he doesn’t end up enrolling,” Mrs. Hatamleh said. “I just want Adam to have a great education. There’s a lot of work that I have to do to ensure that he gets that.”