



THE FIRST ASSALAM SCHOOL

The First Assalam school was established in partnership between the Education Above All Foundation (EAA), Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs, and the Ministry of Education and Higher Education. The school provides free education to address the problem of financial barriers and the age and educational gap faced by children of non-Arab communities in Qatar. There are currently 480 children enrolled in the school; these children are between 5 to 15 years old. The majority are between 5 to 7 years old (approximate 150) while the numbers are lower in older age groups. Most of the students are in the classroom that corresponds to their age. However, due to missed education, some students need to be placed in supported classrooms where they receive extra support to get back on track.

Given country-wide school closures in Qatar and the absence of proper distance learning alternatives, each school had to act on its own to deal with the crisis that led to the disruption of education. In an attempt to understand the best way to communicate with the students, the school conducted two kinds of surveys. The first survey was to assess the level of connectivity, and the second survey was to evaluate the percentage of students /parents that have mobile phones with or without WhatsApp.

The insights have been the basis for developing the Work Pack Practice due to a lack of connectivity. The teachers of the school have designed the work packs based on content from the curriculum unit where the students had left off. These packs include high-standard worksheets with their objectives and a feedback section to be filled by the parents or the students. The school prints, packages, and disinfects the work packs before they are sent for delivery.

The survey also helped to identify WhatsApp and regular SMS as reliable tools to improve communication with students and parents using it as a tool for reminders and interaction.

SOLUTION

Criteria	Category	Details
Technological Readiness	Intermittent Internet-connectivity	The First Assalam school has identified that most of the students' parents have access to WhatsApp or at least basic SMS functionality. Assalam relies on the phone to deliver educational instructions and answer doubts.
Content availability	No	Teachers created 2-week work packs for the remaining school year in alignment with the British curriculum.
Personalization	Yes	The curriculum addresses multiple educational subjects. The school tailored educational materials according to the needs of their students.
Interactivity	No	Once the packs are delivered, the teachers send a video clip explaining the content.
Mode	Medium	Students receive physical packs containing education materials. Teachers send video clips via WhatsApp to explain the lessons.
Feasibility to replicate		
Time	Long	The teachers of the school have designed the work packs based on content from the curriculum unit where the students had left off. They prepare 2-week work packs for each wave of delivery.
Effort	High	Specific educational materials needed to be developed for independent student work. Due to COVID-19, there was a big effort since apart from printing and sending the materials on a bus; the school has had to take additional precautions of disinfecting all materials before sending them to

		the students and again once the materials were sent back to school.
Money	Low	The school reported minimal costs that include: photocopy costs, training for staff, etc. Transport is the highest cost item in this whole process.

FOLLOW-UP AND IMPLEMENTATION

The school uses the service of the same bus company that was used to pick up students and drop them off during regular days to ensure the delivery of the work packs to all of the students at their homes. A text message is sent to the students or their parents the day before to notify them about the pack delivery, which usually takes place every 2.5-3 weeks. On the day of the delivery, the busses pick the packs up from the school, distribute to the students, and collect the completed packs. If the pack delivery is missed, the parent can come to school and pick up their child's pack. On average, 100-150 packs are distributed per delivery day.

Once the packs have been distributed, the teachers send to the student's parents cellphones a broadcast message in the form of short video clips to provide information on the pack and provide the students with some instructions. The students or their parents interact with their teachers and can always contact him/her via WhatsApp messages (as most of the parents have smartphones) or text message for any clarifications on the content of the work pack or in case they face any problems.

The completed work packs are picked up and returned to the school for correction. These work packs are sanitized and left for three days, to ensure a high level of hygiene and avoid the risk of any infection spread through these packs. After that the teachers check and grade the student's packs, also taking relevant precautions, including using facemasks, gloves, and abiding by the general hygiene protocol provided by the school. The teachers are also instructed to sanitize when they return home.

Criteria	Category	Details
Preparedness of teachers to design	High	Teachers show high readiness in preparing the content and facilitating it to students.

and facilitate learning		
Availability and ability of parents or caregivers to facilitate effective home-based distance learning	Available for guidance but not as an educator	Most parents are available for guidance, however, nearly 35% of them are illiterate. Therefore, some parents will face difficulty assuming the role of the educator for their children.
Monitoring and evaluation capacities		
Monitor distance learning processes	Yes	The Admin team/teachers send messages to all parents before the materials are delivered to ensure that they will be at home to receive the materials.
Track the access to courses and engagement	Yes	Teachers review and correct homework once the materials are sent back to school.
Assess learning outcomes	Yes	The response of the students is monitored, work packs completed by the students are checked and marked by the teachers, and reports with the feedback is handed over to the parents.
Sustain immediate distance learning responses for achieving long-term goals	Yes	The work packs were a temporary solution to address the lack of distance learning solutions in Qatar. The school intends to use Google Classroom to strengthen distance learning.

IMPLEMENTING CHALLENGES

The First Assalam School identified that the lack of technology at the student's homes would impact the school's ability to interact with parents and students. Additionally, the outbreak of COVID-19 has increased these difficulties since the world was not ready to face an epidemic of this magnitude. One of the main challenges for Assalam School has been reaching students at the

lower age range (5-7 years old). Students at this age need to be physically taught; they need more assistance from teachers and parents. Parents' inability to educate their children is considered an ongoing issue by the school. The school has partially solved the problem by sending short videos via WhatsApp with instructions.

TAKEAWAY LESSONS

The First Assalam school is an example of the high level of commitment that educational institutions are putting into place to try to ensure continuity in children's education. Its success in keeping students on track during the academic year was due to the speed of developing materials that were delivered to students' homes. The commitment of the whole community was another factor to the success of the solution, starting from teachers who were available to all students for any potential query; to parents that, despite their low level of literacy, make an effort in keeping their children on track.

The First Assalam school used the pandemic as an opportunity to improve its education delivery to take learning beyond the school building. The pack distribution system was a reactive solution to an unexpected problem. However, the school is exploring ways to integrate distance learning in an effort to avoid future disruptions and design alternative models of education that can help reach learners across all contexts.