

# Closure of villa schools to affect 45,000 pupils

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Abu Dhabi: Over 45,000 pupils must be moved from 71 schools using villas as their premises in Abu Dhabi, authorities revealed yesterday.

Of this number, at least 25,000 are enrolled at schools whose premises put their lives at risk, officials said.

The announcement follows close on the heels of the decision of the Abu Dhabi Municipality on Sunday to shut down six schools, with an enrolment of 2,291 pupils. Their enrolment includes 157 Emirati pupils.

The state of the premises in which some of the schools are based was shocking. Most of the schools were found to be in gross violation of an endless list of health and safety standards.

One of the schools, located in the heart of the city, appears to be no more than a makeshift accommodation from the outside.

"[The] Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC) is completely committed to finding educational opportunity for all pupils," Dr Mugheer Khamis Al Khaili, ADEC director-general, said referring to the 2,291 children who will be left without a school from next September, since their schools have been already ordered shut.

The ADEC is providing two vacant government schools — Sa'ad Bin Obaidah School in Bani Yas and the August 6th School in Muroor — to accommodate these pupils on a priority-registration basis.

## **Beneficial transition**

"We will ensure that this will be a beneficial transition for pupils. And will supervise and track the process of admission of each of the displaced pupils," Al Khaili said.

ADEC invited private operators to submit proposals to open and manage these schools.

"Operators will have to maintain school fees in the same range of those applied by the closing schools."

The closed schools may also apply for fresh licences to operate in new school facilities that adhere to requirements of building regulations and are in line with ADEC health, safety and academic standards.

The closing of villa schools was actually initiated more than a decade ago through a Federal Law (No 28 of 1999), which requires all private schools to be on appropriate facilities, officials said.

"We have 45,000 pupils in 71 villa schools now. It's a big number," Al Khaili added.

However, five out of the six closed schools are in the city and one is in Musaffah, about 40 minutes away. One of the vacant schools provided by the ADEC to accommodate 1,500 pupils is hundreds of kilometres away in Bani Yas city.

Paul Andrews, manager of private schools at the ADEC, said the closed schools were full of "risks for children and adults working in them."

"They had very serious fire hazards, serious traffic hazards just outside the school since they were mostly in residential areas and many electrical hazards," he said.

"There were hygiene hazards, which we wouldn't want to describe and poor academic programmes."

Andrews said the situation had gotten out of hand to the extent that hundreds of children were attending classes in a space designated for one large family.

He added that the licences of ten schools were revoked by the municipality. However, four of the schools did not have any pupils yet.

Dr Daniel Sistona, principal of the Pioneers International Private School, said they were trying to explain the situation to the Filipino community.

"Filipinos usually want to stick together as a community, so most are worried. But we are trying to relieve them by explaining the situation," Sistona said.

The school was established in 1990. It now has 490 pupils and 41 staff members.

On Sunday, the school was served with the order to close down. Its pupils were given application forms to help them gain admission elsewhere with ADEC's help.

"It's very sad that this is happening, especially because it is the first Filipino school here. I was surprised when I heard it," an engineer, whose daughter is studying in grade 10 at the school, said.

When asked if he did not notice the issues pointed out by ADEC, he said: "This is not just in this school. It's across villa schools and most schools are in villas."

**Categories: Three types of schools**

The villa schools where 45,000 students study, fall into three categories:

**Category 1:** Schools with potential — ADEC will support these operators in the development of new schools

**Category 2:** Schools planning to relocate — ADEC will monitor these schools closely

**Category 3:** Schools that have taken no action — ADEC will stimulate the development of replacement capacity. Six closed schools fall in this category.

- Over 25,000 students are enrolled in villa schools that fall under Category 3, hence moves by the ADEC to increase the emirate's enrolment capacity by 25,000 soon as possible

- Over 20,000 students fall in Category 2 schools. These students can continue with their same schools if the school authorities decide to move to purpose-built premises.

**Source:** *ADEC*

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