

Qatar's Influence in U.S. K-12 Schools

Executive Summary

The State of Qatar has invested significant resources in recent years in an effort to influence K-12 education in the U.S., primarily through financial contributions, the support of programs aimed at advancing Arabic language education, and teachers' training programs on so-called "cultural understanding."

The **Qatar Foundation International (QFI)**, the key tool of Qatar's efforts, has allocated millions of dollars to schools, districts, institutions and programs across the U.S. This financial influence raises questions about the role of foreign government funding in shaping educational curricula for American children. It also highlights the potential for such contributions to introduce foreign policy agendas and narratives into American classrooms, necessitating a careful and transparent evaluation of such "partnerships."

Key Findings

- Qatar Foundation International (QFI) has developed a comprehensive funding system, offering scholarships, awards, and programs capable of supporting any type of initiative of educational institution in the U.S., including schools, school districts, private cultural centers, and teachers' organizations.
- The formal primary focus of the funding is on developing Arabic language and teachers' training programs.
- Significant QFI funding targets states such as California, Texas, Minnesota and New York, with notable grants to school districts and specialized schools.
- QFI tends to provide support to school districts and institutions located in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods, predominantly inhabited by **blacks, Hispanic and/or immigrants** (often of Arab origin).
- QFI's funding initiatives, often framed as cultural or linguistic enrichment, have been criticized as embedding narratives aligned with Qatar's geopolitical interests, subtly influencing students' perceptions of the Arab world and Middle Eastern politics.
- QFI gave at least \$12.5 million to K-12 schools between 2014-2017. QFI gave more than \$1 million to the New York Department of Education alone.
- Like its parent organization the Qatar Foundation, Qatar Foundation International (QFI) **must register as a foreign agent under the FARA law due to its direct ties to the Qatari government and its involvement in U.S. education system.** In addition, all QFI-funded K12 program and initiatives must be published to the public, including their funding data and curriculum.

Background: The Importance of External Funding in U.S. Education

External funding serves as a lifeline for many underfunded school districts across the U.S., providing essential resources for specialized programs and initiatives that would otherwise be unattainable. Beginning in 2009, the flow of foreign money, especially from instrumentalities of the governments of **Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and China**, rose massively. Simultaneously, higher education institutions increased their financial partnerships with foreign governments, including repressive regimes hostile to American interests.¹

However, the acceptance of external funding often comes with conditions that may shape the focus, content, and delivery of educational programs. Donors may influence the curriculum, select instructional materials, or dictate the scope of professional training for educators.²

External funding, while beneficial, has also been the subject of controversy. For example, some foreign-funded programs have faced allegations of promoting political agendas or cultural biases, leading to public scrutiny and legal challenges. The U.S. Congress has debated and enacted laws, such as the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), to increase transparency in foreign funding of educational institutions.³

Qatar Foundation International (QFI) and Its Role in U.S. Education

The Qatar Foundation (QF) and its subsidiary, Qatar Foundation International (QFI), represent a multifaceted force in the global educational landscape. Established by the Qatari government, QFI has invested heavily in K-12 education in the U.S. Sources report that that QFI gave at least \$5.5 million in the 2014-2015 school year; \$3.8 million in the 2017-2018 school year; and \$3.2 million in the 2016-2017 school year to US public schools.⁴ While Qatar Foundation, QFI's parent organization, is registered under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), there is no explicit evidence that QFI itself is registered under FARA.⁵

QFI provides scholarships, awards, and annual grants available to schools, school districts, teachers, and even individual students. The initiatives eligible for funding include:

- 1. Language and Curriculum Development:** Programs focused on Arabic language acquisition often come with pre-designed curricula, instructional materials, and recommended teaching methodologies.⁶
- 2. Teacher Training:** QFI organizes workshops and professional development programs for educators to enhance their Arabic language proficiency and cultural competency.⁷

3. **Cultural Exchange Programs:** Student and teacher exchange initiatives are billed as an opportunity to foster cross-cultural understanding but also introduce opportunities for Qatar to shape perceptions and narratives about its culture and policies.
4. **After-School Programs and Summer Schools Programs:** QFI funds extracurricular activities supporting so called “Arabic language excellence.” In this way, QFI extends its influence beyond the traditional classroom setting, creating an environment where its narratives have broader reach.⁸
5. **First Year University Awards:** QFI initiatives provide financial support covering a portion of first-year university tuition for high school seniors planning on continuing Arabic studies at university.⁹
6. **Arabic Honor Society (AHS):** With chapters in schools offering Arabic language program, the AHS supports an extracurricular program including Arab culture nights, concerts, and service-oriented volunteer opportunities.¹⁰

Qatar Foundation’s extensive network and broad reach underscore the complexity of its influence, as this multifaceted approach makes it more challenging to discern the boundaries between educational support and strategic influence.

QFI Donations Focus on Schools with Blacks, Hispanic and Low-Income Neighborhoods

Data highlights that QFI distributed grants across many U.S. states, with a higher concentration to schools and/or school districts in California, Texas, Minnesota, and New York.

The funds appear to be allocated based on two criteria: high student density and economically disadvantaged school districts with diverse student populations and a high “minority enrollment” rate.¹¹

For instance, QFI awarded a grant of \$80,250 to Kelly Miller Middle School in Washington, D.C., where 99.4% of students fall under the “minority enrollment” category.¹² Similarly, Bell High School in Los Angeles, California, which has received funding for several years, reportedly has 95% of its students from economically disadvantaged families. In 2017, Bell High School received a \$15,000 grant for each graduate who chose to continue studying Arabic at university, and in 2024 received a grant to support a workshop for welcoming students from immigrant families.¹³

Likewise, during the 2022-2023 school year, QFI allocated \$37,137 to Wilbur Cross High School in New Haven, Connecticut, where **76%** of students come from economically disadvantaged families, and the participation rate is 23%.¹⁴ Similarly, in 2017, QFI provided \$68,305 to three schools in Minneapolis—Washburn High School, Justice Page Middle School, and Lyndale Elementary School—known for having a majority of Black students from disadvantaged families and lower student-teacher ratios compared to other schools in the same district.¹⁵ Additionally, QFI granted \$241,000 to Public School 30 Mary White Ovington in Brooklyn, where 82% of students reportedly come from economically disadvantaged families.¹⁶

Curricula and Areas Influenced

QFI's funding supports 2 main initiatives: Arabic language programs and Arabic teacher training. Grants include provisions for curriculum design, instructional materials, and teacher workshops that align with QFI's objectives.

Arabic Language Programs

QFI's main project is the implementation of Arabic language programs in K-12 schools across the U.S. Over the last five years, QFI allocated \$241,000 in 2019 and 2020 for dual-language Arabic programs in public schools such as New York's elementary school PS 261 and PS 30.¹⁷ The total grew to \$275,000 in 2021 and then reached \$513,000 in 2022 for initiatives like the Arab Culture Arts Program.¹⁸

Funding to Arabic language programs has been the subject of controversy, facing allegations that they are used by Qatar to promote political agendas or cultural biases. For example, schools adopting QFI's Arab Culture Arts curricula in New York and Texas reportedly began using maps of the Middle East that omit Israel, with some classrooms displaying materials that replace Israel with Palestine.¹⁹ In Texas, Dallas Independent School District and Manara Academy in Irving received QFI-funded resources and adopted mapping resources for lessons that, like those in NYC, misrepresented the Middle East, labelling Israel as "Palestine."²⁰

Arabic Teachers Trainings and QFI's Arabic Teachers Council

QFI defines Arabic teachers' trainings the "core" of its activity, as a demonstration of the pivotal role that teachers play in Qatar's assault on US K-12 education.²¹ QFI offers so-called "Professional Development grants" for primary and secondary educators wishing to teach Arabic language or courses on the Arab world.²² In 2020, QFI also inaugurated its "Classroom Resource Enrichment Grant," allocating \$1,000 individual grants to Arabic

teachers across the US, aimed at supporting the cost of teaching materials.²³ Previously, in 2015, QFI allocated a \$85,000 grant to Houston Independent School District to help teachers develop an Arabic curriculum. In 2021 QFI also funded the organization of a cycle of “Assessment Workshops” for K16 Arabic instructors at Atlanta Global Studies Center, instructing teachers on rating scales and techniques for oral proficiency tests. In addition, QFI’s website has a dedicated blog – The Journey of an Arabic Educator – where it publishes monthly spin pieces on the teaching experience of Arabic educators who received a QFI’s grant.²⁴

While all these funding options ostensibly promote language learning and cultural exchange, critics view them as vehicles for advancing Qatar's political and ideological agendas under the guise of educational support. For example, in January 2018 QFI sponsored an event titled “Middle East 101” for public-school teachers in Phoenix, Arizona. It was hosted by the Arizona Department of Education, which received a \$450,000 grant from QFI.²⁵ Sources claim that the event had “a large helping of Islamist propaganda” and was ultimately designed to “advance Qatari propaganda.”²⁶ The main speaker at the “Middle East 101” event was Barbara Petzen, a senior staff member at the Center for Strategic and International Studies who once worked for the Saudi-funded Middle East Policy Council (MEPC), known for her anti-Israel bias in educational contexts.²⁷

QFI also sponsored the establishment of the **Arabic Teachers Council (ATC)**. With 7 main branches in Chicago, New York, Dearborn, Amherst, Atlanta, Los Angeles and Washington, the ATC ostensibly provides a network for training, resources, and curriculum development for K-12 Arabic language educators.²⁸ QFI encourages and funds the opening of local ATCs across the US, indicating Qatar’s broader strategy of expanding its influence in America education.²⁹

Qatar’s Funded K-12 Programs

QFI’s funding includes other initiatives, such as exchange programs for students and teachers.

For example, QFI funds GEEO (Global Exploration for Educators Organization), a non-profit organization based in Norristown (Pennsylvania) that provides travel programs specifically designed for teachers and educators. Namely, QFI allocates a “Teacher Professional Development” individual grant of \$2,000 for K-12 educators in the social sciences/humanities and arts fields, covering GEEO’s trips to Arabic speaking countries (such as Qatar, Oman, Morocco and Egypt).³⁰ In this context, in 2019 QFI funded a trip to Oman and Qatar for 16 K-12 teachers.³¹ GEEO also provides teachers with a reading list to be completed before their “educational trip” to Qatar, which includes apologetic books praising the country.³²

For example, in 2023, students from two Virginia high schools participated in QFI's Classroom Connections exchange program and visited Qatar.³³

Notably, GEEQ provides teachers with a reading list to be completed before their "educational trip" to Qatar, which includes books praising the country.³⁴

QFI is also involved in funding Arabic Clubs nationwide. Over 50 Arabic Clubs have been established in U.S. schools across various states, with the most notable example in Fairfax County (Virginia), where over 25 clubs were funded.³⁵

Several Californian schools, namely La Jolla High School (San Diego), Hilltop High School (Chula Vista), and Sweetwater High School (National City), have participated in QFI-funded field trips such as visits to the House of Palestine Annual Culture Festival.³⁶

QFI's Complementary Education Funding

QFI plays a crucial role in funding not only K-12 public schools, but also organizations and cultural centers that play a fundamental role in shaping the broader educational landscape. Although not directly connected to the K-12 public school system, these entities provide complementary educational services that often include curriculum development, teacher training, cultural and educational services:

Arabic Language Education

- QFI has provided funding to **Concordia Languages Village** (a nonprofit organization based in Moorhead, Minnesota which operates a language and cultural immersion programs, sponsored by the Concordia College) since 2011 with a \$100,000 grant for Arabic language programs.³⁷ In 2015-2016 the cooperation expanded, with grants for Arabic curriculum development and assessment and annual open scholarships allocated by QFI to Concordia Village's Al Waha Arabic summer program for K-12 students.³⁸
- QFI also maintains an ongoing collaboration with **Kalimah Programs**, an educational initiative based at Johns Hopkins University focused on teaching and promoting the Arabic language particularly among non-native speakers.³⁹ QFI provides a \$5,000 individual grant for an intensive summer Arabic Program for high school students and tuition scholarships for STEAM Arabic Summer Camps.⁴⁰
- QFI also funds an ongoing program in collaboration with **NaTakallam**, an online enterprise based at **Columbia University** offering a platform for virtual language sessions. Namely, QFI offers a **\$1,000 individual grant for K-12 educators** interested in improving Arabic language and culture.⁴¹

Cultural Exchange

- In 2020 QFI partnered with **Global Nomads Group**, a New York City-based NGO specializing in cross-cultural exchange and education,⁴² to facilitate a virtual exchange program between American and Qatari students.⁴³
- QFI offers a **\$5,000 individual School Break Arabic Program Grant** to students attending an exchange program or an intensive Arab Language program either at **Teens of Color Abroad** (a nonprofit organization dedicated to offering students of color language learning and cultural exchange opportunities), **Culturingua** (an organization focused on student exchange programs) or **One World Now** (a Seattle- based NGO focused on providing high school students with access to world language learning).⁴⁴

Educator Support

- QFI provided a grant to **Five Colleges Incorporated** (a nonprofit educational consortium based in Amherst, Massachusetts), for the establishment of New England’s Arabic Teachers Council, which represents K-12 teachers in the New England’s area.⁴⁵

Community Initiatives

- QFI provided financial support to **Global Education Excellence (GEE)**, a charter school management company headquartered in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Between 2021-2023, QFI funded GEE’s research and its program for the integration of first and second-generation Arab immigrants and refugees from the Middle East and North Africa in the Detroit metropolitan area.⁴⁶
- In 2021 QFI provided a grant to **SIMA Studios**, a production and media company dedicated to creating documentaries and films that address global social justice, human rights, and sustainability issues, to allow high school students to produce multimedia projects on the “Arab World View.”⁴⁷
- In 2019 QFI provided a grant to **Green Bronx Machine** (an NGO focused on sustainability) to translate its curriculum to Arabic and in the creation of a multilingual portal to access teaching materials.⁴⁸
- Between 2012-2016 (at least), QFI financially supported the **Global Language Project (GLP)**, which equips public-school students with comprehensive language programs in New York City.⁴⁹

Conclusions

The report underscores the deliberate strategy employed by Qatar, through the Qatar Foundation International (QFI), to influence the U.S. K-12 education system. This influence is largely facilitated by substantial financial contributions that target programs such as Arabic language education, teacher training, and cultural exchanges.

QFI's approach to funding has had a pronounced impact on underfunded schools, particularly in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods with high minority enrollment rates. However, this targeted funding strategy may also be used to advance biased geopolitical and cultural narratives in vulnerable communities. The integration of QFI's pre-designed curricula and instructional materials into U.S. classrooms highlights how such funding can shape cultural perceptions and educational narratives.

Concerns over transparency and the potential for agenda-setting are central to the discussion of QFI's role. Allegations that instructional materials promote controversial geopolitical narratives, such as maps excluding Israel, suggest that these programs may embed biases that align with Qatar's foreign policy objectives.

The influence of QFI extends beyond the classroom. Initiatives like the Arabic Teachers Council exemplify Qatar's broader efforts to shape teacher competencies and pedagogical practices, further embedding its influence within the educational system. Cultural exchange programs, such as student and teacher visits to Qatar, enhance global understanding but also serve as platforms to project Qatar's narratives and policies.

Recommendations

1. Qatar Foundation International should be required to register under FARA, like Qatar Foundation.
2. Authorities should enforce stricter reporting requirements on any state-controlled entities funding K-12 programs to ensure that parents and the public are aware of this funding and the content of the programs.
3. School districts or states' Departments of Education should implement mandatory evaluations of foreign-funded curricula to ensure alignment with American educational values, including neutrality and accuracy in presenting geopolitical topics.
4. Authorities should encourage schools to seek funding from a variety of domestic sources to avoid reliance on foreign entities with potentially slanted agendas and should increase public funding for language programs and cultural initiatives to meet demand without relying on external support.

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