

Reimagining Learning in Saudi Arabia

How Maarif Education Is Shaping the Future of Student Development

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In a country undergoing one of the world's most ambitious national transformations, the launch of Sherborne School Jeddah marks a turning point for education in Saudi Arabia. Developed by Maarif Education, the Kingdom's largest education company, this new institution is the first British school to open in Jeddah. At the heart of its creation is a partnership with Steelcase, whose expertise in learning environments helped translate a forward-thinking idea into reality.

“Saudi Arabia is undergoing one of the most significant national transformations in modern history. Education and human capability development are at the heart of this change.”

IHAB OSMAN, CEO OF MAARIF

VISION MEETS OPPORTUNITY

For Maarif, Sherborne School Jeddah was never just another project. “Our ambition is to set a new benchmark for learning, leading by example and helping shape the future of the sector in line with the country's bold objectives,” adds Osman.

Inspired by Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, Maarif set out to create a school that would unlock every child's potential – not just academically, but in whatever field excites them. “It's a place where children can discover what drives them, what they excel in, whether they want to be a top scientist, an Olympic champion, an executive chef or a radio host,” says Osman. “We hope the school will help uncover that, develop it, nourish it, and instill the required skills and confidence in students to pursue what really drives them.”

Steelcase was brought in from the earliest stages, working directly with the CEO and project team. “From the very beginning, we were welcomed as true collaborators,” says Claudia Rus, Regional Business Manager & Design Consultant at Steelcase.

“Being involved at such a strategic level meant we could really listen, understand the vision, and help address the challenges together.”

CLAUDIA RUS, REGIONAL BUSINESS MANAGER & DESIGN CONSULTANT AT STEELCASE

BREAKING THE MOLD

Designing a school that blends international best practices with local needs was a challenge that required innovation at every step. The team faced the task of transforming a building abandoned for 20 years into a vibrant, sustainable learning environment.

“We were lucky to find a building that we could completely remodel and bring back to life,” says Osman. “Sustainability was a priority for us. We made a conscious effort to preserve as much of the original structure as possible, minimizing waste and reducing our environmental footprint.”

“By designing the space efficiently and reusing existing elements, we’ve created a building that’s energy efficient and future ready.”

IHAB OSMAN, CEO OF MAARIF

But the real innovation was in the educational approach. Sherborne Jeddah draws inspiration from the long-standing traditions of Sherborne schools in the UK, yet it was designed to meet the specific needs and aspirations of students and classrooms in Saudi Arabia. “We’re proud to be part of the Sherborne family,” says Joe Paget, Founding Head of School. “But this project gave us complete freedom to create something new.”

“We could design every aspect of the school to reflect our vision for learning and community in Jeddah. There’s no way to replicate a 500-year-old school with its own history and traditions; instead, we’re building something for the future.”

JOE PAGET, FOUNDING HEAD OF SCHOOL

The curriculum and pedagogy focus on flexibility, collaboration and lifelong learning. “We worked closely with Sherborne to co-design spaces that truly support the curriculum and teaching methodologies - integrating active learning, flexibility and team-based learning at every step,” explains Claudia Rus. One of the most distinctive features of Sherborne Jeddah is the abundance of learning commons: open, shared areas throughout the school where students and teachers can gather and explore beyond the traditional classroom. This innovative approach strengthens a dynamic culture where learning is constantly in motion.

Reinforcing this idea, the school's design emphasizes how learning extends into every corner of the campus. "I didn't want people to be confined within four walls," explains Joe Paget. "I wanted the corridors to become part of the classroom." Glass partitions allow students and teachers to see into adjacent spaces and learning commons, creating a sense of openness and connection. The result is an environment where students are empowered to learn in ways that suit their individual needs and interests.

A SCHOOL DESIGNED FOR THE FUTURE

Sherborne Jeddah stands as a campus that redefines what a school can be in Saudi Arabia. Steelcase delivered a comprehensive design package, from co-developing the pedagogical approach to classroom space planning, furniture selection, and finishes. Every element was chosen to support flexibility, peer-learning and wellbeing. It's a place where collaboration and creativity are part of everyday life.

"Walking into Sherborne Jeddah, there's an immediate sense of energy and possibility. You notice how the open, light-filled spaces encourage students to interact, experiment, and take ownership of their learning."

JOE PAGET, FOUNDING HEAD OF SCHOOL

"We've made use of every square meter to create bridges between classrooms and age groups," adds Rus. "We designed a mix of settings: soft seating, flexible tables, and even standing areas with natural elements. These spaces encourage connection and allow students to experience different postures and activities appropriate to their stage of learning."

The school's approach to furniture is as progressive as its pedagogy. "We moved away from traditional teacher desks to create a more dynamic role for educators," Rus notes. "Classrooms feature mobile setups and storage units, with ergonomic seating tailored to each age group. Every element was selected to support learners, from scaled seating to soft, reconfigurable pieces that educators can adapt throughout the day."

The design team opted for a calming, neutral palette that helps children feel grounded and focused. Soft, light tones reduce visual overstimulation, support concentration, and create brighter, more open spaces that feel inviting and comfortable throughout the day.

A BLUEPRINT FOR TRANSFORMATION

Sherborne School Jeddah is a leader in educational excellence and innovation in Saudi Arabia. The partnership between Maarif and Steelcase has set a new standard for what is possible when vision, expertise and shared ambition come together. "We started with the educators' vision and built everything around the learning process and the needs of the children. That shift put students and their experience at the very center of our work."

“What truly set this project apart was the spirit of collaboration - bringing together educators, designers, architects and contractors, all working as one team.”

IHAB OSMAN, CEO OF MAARIF

Sherborne Jeddah is a testament to the power of design to transform learning and to the impact that true partnership can have on shaping the future.