We must build a generation of avid readers

A national strategy to promote a love of books will help build a knowledge economy

The Ministry of Cabinet Affairs and Future’s National Strategy for Reading crystallises a serious intent by the government to build a solid reading culture in the country. As The National reported yesterday, the 10-year policy was announced on Tuesday by the President, Sheikh Khalifa, to “prepare our future generations to achieve developmental leaps, underpin our national leadership goals, strengthen our competitiveness and achieve our future vision”. The plan includes the National Reading Law and a Dh100 million National Endowment for Reading overseen by Shamma Al Mazrui, the Minister of State for Youth Affairs.

Having an official law to support reading may seem unusual, but it will send a clear and loud message that reading is essential for the development of society. As the Cultural Personality of the Year, Lebanese-born French author Amin Maalouf told the audience at the Sheikh Zayed Book Award ceremony on Sunday, the future belongs to those who value books and those who love and seek knowledge. A society that reads is a society that thinks, innovates and progresses.

But there are some challenges that we need to overcome first. One important question is: how do we inculcate a love of reading books in the very young at a time when social media and other fast and short ways of communication dominate information consumption? How can we get children to read long books when technology is making their attention spans shorter and shorter?

It’s good to see that the plan includes educational, health, media and content creation programmes. But setting a policy is only a start. We need to make books available and easily accessible for everyone. We need to have high-standard public libraries in schools and neighbourhoods with large numbers of books in many different genres and at different reading levels. We also need more bookstores selling high quality new and second-hand books. We need to make reading both a core part of the school curriculum and an everyday leisure activity.

Most importantly, parents must take an active part in this project. Learning to love reading starts at a very young age, so parents must make time to read to their children even before they reach school age. They should also have well-stocked home bookshelves and set an example by reading in front of their children. Parents are the ultimate pillars in building a generation of avid readers.