

## Public Versus Private

*Summary: One of the concerns that Muslim parents and communities have is addressing the spiritual, emotional, and intellectual needs of younger generations throughout their education. Concerns about students' spiritual formation in an environment that does not emphasize religious practices led to the creation of independent Islamic schools, often affiliated with mosques.*

There is a great deal of debate in the American Muslim community about how best to educate the next generation. The issues are complex, as parents attempt to balance concerns for their children's spiritual, emotional, and intellectual development. Public schools may present value systems that conflict with that of Islam, as well as a less desirable social environment; private schools may be too expensive, or not available; homeschooling may not be adequate to prepare children for higher education and adjustment to American society. In addition to a concern for quality education all parents share, Muslim parents often find that a public school environment presents unique challenges to their attempts to raise their children within the Muslim faith.

Parents of young Muslim children are often concerned that the environment of American public schools is overly permissive, including dating and sexual experimentation, drug and alcohol use, gangs and violence, and the vagaries of peer pressure. Some Muslim parents also object to their children participating in dance and music classes, mixed social events, or the observances of certain popular holidays that have non-Islamic religious roots or are in conflict with Islamic teachings. Further, parents are concerned about their children having to contend with stereotypes in textbooks, classrooms, and on the playground. Girls have a particularly difficult time: those who wear the *hijab* to school often report that they have to defend this practice to their teachers, explain it to their friends, and suffer repeatedly having their scarves ripped from their heads by classmates.

The school system sometimes exacerbates, rather than alleviates, these problems. Teachers and administrators, lacking information about Islam, are sometimes insensitive to Muslim religious observances. Many parents have struggled to get cafeterias to accommodate Muslim dietary restrictions; Muslim parents wishing to have their children excused for afternoon or Jum'ah prayers often face great

difficulties. In some extreme cases, parents have even been accused of child abuse by teachers unaware of the significance of the Ramadan fast.

One of the most significant problems with enrolling Muslim children in American public schools is that children often face a disjuncture between the values of their home and those of the school. To some degree, Muslim parents today are facing problems similar to those of Catholic and Jewish parents in the late 19th century whose children faced discrimination in a predominantly Protestant school system. One solution has been similar to that of Catholics: to create independent schools. As of 2020, there were over 200 full-time Islamic schools in the United States, from Alabama to Arizona, from Wisconsin to Washington.

Ten of these institutions are Sister Clara Muhammad Schools, named after the mother of Imam W. Deen Mohammed and wife of Elijah Muhammad. Sister Clara Muhammad schools are often located in poorer neighborhoods with inadequate public education, and offer a positive alternative for both Muslim and non-Muslim parents alike. At the Sister Clara Muhammad School in Oakland, California, as many as 50% of the students enrolled at the school are from non-Muslim homes. Parents recognize that these schools may be able to provide their children a better education, as well as offer solid values and discipline.

Islamic schools are often affiliated with, and situated near, the community mosque. The Granada School is located in the Islamic Center of the Muslim Community Association (MCA) of Santa Clara, California. *Salat* is performed in the adjacent prayer hall as a part of the daily school schedule. The establishment of this full-time school has led many young Muslim families in the Bay Area to buy homes in Santa Clara; there is often a significant waiting list for children wishing to attend the Granada School.

Other communities with large Muslim populations, such as Detroit, Michigan, have established large private Islamic schools with independent campuses. The Crescent Academy International established its \$2.4 million facility in suburban Canton, Michigan, in 1991. Crescent Academy enrolls students from kindergarten through high school, and offers a comprehensive curriculum which includes academic and religious subjects. As the school's flier explains, "Crescent Academy International is committed to

developing students who are empowered by their Islamic faith and practice to live as effective and upright citizens in this society and contribute to its betterment in accordance with their Islamic values.”

Home schooling is also becoming increasingly popular. In many areas Islamic schools do not yet exist, or they are too far away, too expensive, have long waiting lists, or are of questionable quality. Some parents are using the internet to share online resources, lesson plans and course materials, as well as offer advice, support, and even a social network for those interested in homeschooling their children.

However, most young American Muslims continue to be educated in American public schools, for many parents are concerned that their children not be isolated from the larger society. Some parents decide to keep their children in the public schools and endeavor to improve the quality of public education, especially as it relates to Islam. For example, Shabbir Mansuri, a concerned Muslim parent, established the Council on Islamic Education (CIE) after seeing the way in which his daughter’s public school textbooks presented Islam. Mansuri’s organization, which became the Institute on Religion and Civic Values in 2007, is based in Fountain Valley, California, and offers a variety of publications, participates in ongoing meetings with textbook publishers, provides in-service workshops for teachers, and facilitates a speakers bureau.

In other ways, Muslim students in American public schools have played an active role in transforming how mainstream society sees their community. In 2009, when Ramadan fell during September, Muslim student-athletes and their coaches in Dearborn, Michigan ran high-school football practices late at night in order to ensure the health and safety of fasting students. Their story was the subject of a documentary film, *Fordson: Faith, Fasting, Football* (2011).