

Muslim Educators in American Communities



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Introduction

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Katherine Meyer Moran

The study of seven Islamic secondary schools is one of the products of the far-ranging *Case Studies in Character and Citizenship Education Project*. This ambitious research was designed and launched by the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia, directed by sociologist James Davison Hunter (2000b), the author of *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age Without Good or Evil* and other influential books. The overall study was intended

to systematically explore distinctive approaches to *character* and *citizenship* education across nine school sectors: traditional public, charter, Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, elite independent, pedagogical, and home-schooling. The larger purpose of this project is to understand competing institutional settings and ways in which personal and public virtue is formed within American children. This project will attempt to fill lacunae in the scholarship on the relationship between schooling and the formation of moral sensibilities and habits among the young. (Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, 2013, p. 1)

A tenth sector, rural public schools, was added subsequently as a result of discussions among the researchers.

The study of Islamic secondary schools was entrusted to Professor Charles Glenn of Boston University, who had carried out historical and comparative studies of the role of and controversies over faith-based schools in North America and Europe, and had participated for a number of years in European policy debates over the growing Muslim presence in society and schools. He in turn recruited a research team including four Boston University graduate students and one postdoctoral university administrator to carry out interviews and observations and assist with the analysis of the results. Three of these are credited as coauthors (see biographies at the end of this volume), but it is important also to acknowledge the valuable assistance of Boston University graduate students Amna al-Eisaei and Rukhsana Nazir.

School visits, observations, interviews, and focus groups took place during the 2014–2015 and 2015–2016 school years (with some exploratory visits in 2013–2014), and resulted in nearly half a million words of transcripts which form the primary basis for this book. School administrators and teachers were interviewed alone or in focus groups, as were students; parents were interviewed either in person or by telephone. In some cases the parent interviews were conducted in Arabic. Subsequently, Munirah Al-aboudi and Richard Fournier carried out additional interviews as part of their dissertation research on the roles of teachers and of school administrators, respectively.

The seven schools included in the study are located in the Southeast, Southwest, Midwest, mid-Atlantic, and New England areas. Several draw predominantly from South Asian immigrant families, others from Middle Eastern immigrant families, with in all but one case some of the other group as well as usually a few students of other origins: African American, West African, and so on. A significant proportion of the parents (as well as school staff) came to the United States as graduate students, and they tend to be professionals or own small businesses.

Our study did not include any of the schools created by native African-American Muslims (see Rashid & Muhammad, 1992); though these are very interesting in their own right, they raise very different issues from those of schools created by immigrant Muslims.

The white paper which forms the base for the ten parallel studies defined their purposes by pointing out that previous

research suggests that the sources and settings for moral and civic education matter—that the thickness of cultural endowments and the density of moral

community within which those endowments find expression are significant in the formation of personal and public virtue in children. Yet the research begs other questions. What is it about these schools that are most germane to character and citizenship formation? Is it the school's formally articulated beliefs or moral commitments? Is it the daily social rituals? Is it high expectations placed upon academic performance and behavioral propriety? Is it the size of the school and the relative involvement of parents and other adult authority to it? Or is it something else altogether? Do intellectual, civic and moral expectations, ostensibly de-coupled in many public schools, actually reinforce one another in powerful ways? And what are the salient differences that might exist among schools *between* the sectors? (Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, 2013, p. 2)

To shed some light on these issues, we have focused on the *sector* of Islamic schooling rather than seeking to provide thick descriptions of individual schools. There would certainly be much to learn from individual case studies, of the sort of which Gerald Grant (1986), Mary Heywood Metz (1986), and Alan Peshkin (1978, 1986, 1991, 1997, 2001) have provided such engaging examples. That was not our assigned task, however, and we have instead sought to emulate the late James Coleman and Thomas Hoffer (1987), Paul Hill and his team (1990), Peter Mortimore and his (1998), and Arthur Powell, Farrar, and Cohen (1985), in seeking to draw valid generalizations from a number of generally similar schools.

The schools that we visited were by no means identical, not least because each is independent though loosely associated with various national networks. There is among Muslim-American educators nothing like the religious orders that did so much to promote common models of Catholic schooling, models that persist to some degree today. It is up to the local board of each of these Islamic schools to recruit and supervise an administrative team, and to work with them to find the necessary funding for physical facilities and other expenses. The administrators, in turn, must recruit teachers and other staff and, given the fairly rapid turnover of staff, to do so again and again in a context largely lacking in norms for the distinctive qualifications to teach in Islamic schools.

And, of course, they must satisfy parents willing to sacrifice to keep their children in an Islamic school, and teenaged students who may be lured by the superior facilities, course selection, and extracurricular offerings of local public high schools.

For all these reasons, and because the distribution of Muslims in the United States is by no means uniform, there are some significant differences among the schools in our study; one, "school G" is a particular outlier. More significant, however, are the similarities, which we will consider

before turning to the differences. These observations are based upon six of the seven schools we studied, since the seventh was added late in the process and we did not collect all the same background data in that case; we have no reason to believe, however, that it was notably different from the others.

First, as noted, each of the schools is independent, under its own local board and only loosely linked to broader networks. All are accredited by regional associations of schools of which the great majority are not Islamic. The boards of each of our schools is deeply involved, and indeed in some cases perhaps too much engaged, with administrative details.

Each of the schools includes the elementary and intermediate grades, which are significantly larger than the high school grades in schools E, F, and G. In fact, a common pattern for Islamic schools (and for many other faith-based schools as well) is to start with the primary grades and then gradually expand upward as resources allow in order to continue to serve the same students. The great majority of Islamic schools in North America, in fact, serve only the elementary grades at present. Providing a full high school program for students whose parents have high academic ambitions for their children is an expensive proposition, and it is common for students living in communities with good public schools to transfer out of their Islamic school as they enter 9th grade. As we will see, the clientele of School G have especially high academic expectations and that school places a correspondingly strong emphasis on its academic quality.

	Total	Grades 9–12
School B	528	195
School C	570	200
School D	100	35
School E	468	60
School F	600+	80+
School G	741	80+

Each of the schools places substantial expectations on parents, including that of volunteering at the school on a regular basis. Most students commute to each school from beyond walking distance, in some cases from a significant distance reflecting the dispersion of the local Muslim population and the scarcity of Islamic secondary schools.

Faculty salaries are modest—between \$25,000 and \$35,000 for new teachers in five of the schools, between \$35,000 and \$45,000 in school G—and turnover is fairly frequent. We were told that, for two of the schools, 1 to 4 years was the typical term of employment, while for the other four it

was 5 to 9 years. In each case there are non-Muslim teachers, though between 85 and 95% were reported to be Muslim.

Five of the schools reported that virtually all of their students participate actively in religious activities outside of school, while school G estimated this at 60%.

One of the striking—and we believe highly significant—similarities is that all six schools have daily assemblies with what was reported as well as observed by our team to be enthusiastic and respectful participation by the students. These sessions had a religious character but served also for regularly reinforcing moral norms, promoting solidarity, commenting on national or world events, and providing opportunities for student leadership as well.

Another common feature of the schools is an explicit honor code of behavioral norms, including strict rules for dress and for relations between boys and girls, with a judicial system to enforce them. Students are expected to abide by these norms outside of school and even over the summer vacation. As we will see, our student interviews revealed some discontentment with these rules, and they were a focus of much discussion in Islamic studies' classes.

The schools all reported strong academic goals, though these varied somewhat.

At five of the six, 100% of the students take AP placement texts before graduating. This should be considered in the context that between 30 and 40% of the students at each school are not native speakers of English, and many others come from homes where languages other than English are spoken.

For each of the six schools, "diversity" was stated as an important goal, reflecting the fact that Muslim families in the United States come from many different countries and from different Islamic traditions. Taking that into account, there was strong agreement on emphasizing the religious mission of each school, and recalling the founding purposes of the school. Acceptance of Islam's basic statement of faith is required for both students and their parents.

It was reported to us and we also observed that students in each of these high schools had a strong interest in public affairs, and saw themselves as patriotic Americans.

Finally, staff and students of all six schools perceive their school as morally superior to the surrounding culture . . . and to the public schools that are the alternative. In three of the cases they also believed strongly that

their school is academically superior, though in the other three cases that sense of academic superiority, while present, was more moderate.

So how do the schools differ? Demographically two of the six schools serve a predominantly South Asian (Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Indian) immigrant population (74% at School E and 70% at School F) while the others serve primarily families from the Middle East and North Africa, though only School G reports no South Asians at all. Each school has students reported as “black,” though whether of American or immigrant origin is not clear; only at School D is this a significant proportion of the students, 35%.

Social class and parental education level is another distinction among the schools; most families at schools B, C, and E are middle-income and the parents have completed 4 years of college, while at schools D and F most are upper middle income with parents who have graduate or professional degrees. Parents of students at School G have similar advanced education and tend to be wealthy.

The statements through which the schools present their mission to the public and to prospective parents, and which (we were told and observed) serve as the basis for continued team-building efforts among staff and students, differ in some significant ways.

School B declares that it seeks to foster leadership, academic achievement, moral and social responsibility, and to make its students “well-equipped to interact with the world at large”; goals that could be advanced by any school. Their primary appeal to parents is “the family environment; strong faith emphasis coupled with extensive college preparation; and the International Baccalaureate program adding competitive educational advantage.”

School C wants its graduates to be “learners of the principles and practices of Islam, and academically successful.” It presents itself as “an extension of parents’ efforts to instill Islamic practices/values into an impressionable and formidable mind, offering a learning environment safe from unacceptable values and practices with extensive college preparation.” Like schools B, D, and E, it has students take courses for credit at local colleges as a way to supplement the rather thin advanced offerings that the school itself can provide compared with better-resourced public high schools.

The mission statement of School D makes a more explicit connection with Islamic themes, promising to provide students with:

1. **‘i/m:** knowledge that embraces worldly and spiritual phenomena
2. **‘ibadah:** ordering all aspects of one’s life as different forms of worship of Allah

3. **'ihsan:** worship Allah as if you see Him, for if you do not see Him, He sees you
4. **'ad/:** justice and proportion in all relations, as willed by Allah

It adds that the "school guides the young adults to lead decent contemporary lives, enrich their families, serve their community, tolerate difference, think critically, promote collaboration and respect others." The leadership promises parents a "small family community, the individualized focus of staff on each student," as well as a dual enrollment program in a prestigious local college.

School E stresses nurturing "committed balanced Muslims" and "knowledgeable scholars" as well as "contributing citizens and community builders," and cites the following core values:

- Importance of Faith (*Imaan*)
- Purpose of Prayer (*Salah*)
- Strong Moral Character (*Akhlaaq*)

It seeks to appeal to parents with its "diversity of school staff and students and the small family community," the "individualized focus of staff on each student," and the "strong focus on college preparation compared to other schools in the area."

The mission statement of School F is simple: "integrity, empathy, and kindness." It appeals to parents on the basis of the "clearly defined Islamic identity of the school, the individualized focus of staff on each student, academically and emotionally, and the school's comprehensive athletic program." This last item was not cited as a "selling point" by any of the other schools, though in each case they reported that between 30 and 60% of students remained after school for athletic and other activities.

School G, as we have seen, is something of an outlier, seeking to attract affluent Muslim parents by an approach similar to that of private independent schools. Reported tuition, at \$15,000, was about twice that of the other schools in our study. We found a strong focus on the International Baccalaureate program (IB), with the school reorganizing its curriculum and instruction and even its mission statement on the IB model. It now presents itself as "where students can achieve their highest potential while exhibiting civic responsibility and multicultural appreciation." Its appeal to prospective parents is based on "the abundance of the school's resources, the progressive approach to education through a customized International Baccalaureate program utilization, and the competitive qualifications and skills of school staff."

As we have noted already, this was the only school in our study whose students are not necessarily involved in mosque-based activities outside of school, and while the political culture of the other schools was described as “somewhat conservative,” that of School G was described as “somewhat liberal.”

These differences of emphasis and of clientele among the schools, while by no means insignificant, should not prevent us from drawing conclusions about how Islamic secondary schools in the United States are seeking to form character and the virtues essential to good citizenship. On the other hand, it seems likely that the schools whose leadership allowed us to visit and interview are among the more open, which is a reminder not to over generalize from our findings.