ISPU

ISLAMIC SCHOOLS OF THE UNITED STATES:
Data-Based Profiles

Karen Keyworth
ISPU Research Associate

Institute *for* **Social Policy** *and* **Understanding**

About The Author

Karen Keyworth is a research associate at the Institute for the Social Policy and Understanding. She is the co-founder and Director of Education at the Islamic Schools League of America.

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Introduction

The very essence of Islamic schools is the teaching of Islam. It is what defines us. We have many Islamic curricula that fulfill the cultural and traditional needs and expectations of parents and communities; however, we continue to desire more spiritual content and real-life applications. We realize that if we want a curriculum for our children, we must look at Islamic curricula through the lens of our *children's* needs. What we teach and how we teach are of deep concern, and the need to take up this challenge is now a top priority.

Though such talk has been bubbling up for years, it is only now that educators have the capacity to act in a meaningful and connected way. The Islamic Schools League of America (ISLA) is facilitating this national dialogue on school leadership as it relates to spiritual curricula in K-12 Islamic schools and the curricula's impact on the future of American Muslim children through research, conferences, and online discussions.

Questions persist: What are the Islamic schools of the United States? How many are there? How are they structured? What stage of development are they experiencing: growth, plateau, reduction? How "connected" are they to the larger society and to each other? This essay will provide the major findings of primary research related to full-time K-12 Islamic schools in the United States, helping thereby to create a more accurate data-based profile of them.

Data on Islamic schools are very difficult to obtain. A previous, and the only other known, primary research survey was published in 1989 by the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) in an obscure booklet entitled *In-Depth Study of Full-Time Islamic Schools in North America: Results and Data Analysis.*[1] In that booklet, the number of full-time Islamic schools was established at approximately fifty; today, there are approximately 235 such schools. However, no national studies other than the ISNA study and this study are known to have been conducted. This research is critical for establishing and identifying community, professionalism, standards, and shared educational philosophies, as well as for providing the American Muslim community and the larger American society with a crucial understanding of full-time Islamic education based on fact rather than conjecture.

What we teach and how we teach are of deep concern, and the need to take up this challenge is now a top priority.

Establishing an Accurate List of Schools: Creating a Protocol

Before any research can occur, an accurate and current list of the schools needs to be created. As late as 1998, no such list of full-time Islamic schools in the United States existed. The only lists that did exist were primarily voluntary lists on which a school could self-register. No mechanism existed to ascertain an entry's accuracy or follow up on that information over time. Consequently, the initial step of this research was to accurately identify the schools and obtain their contact information. This undertaking began in 1998 and continued until 2004. Current systems in place with the ISLA now accurately maintain up-to-date information.

Step 1: Consolidating Online Lists

The various online regional and national lists used were available for free, and all of them were mined for contact data. The majority of listings obtained in 1998-2000 came from the "Islamic School Addresses in North America" section of the Muslim Student Association (MSA) Web site:

• The online lists were consolidated into one major list of over 600 school listings.

• Duplicates were eliminated:

Duplicate entries, defined as those having the exact same name and street address, were eliminated.

Variations of spelling were considered a "match" when determining duplicates if other information, such as street name, closely matched. For example, "Al-Huda" and "Alhuda" would be considered duplicates if they also carried the same street name.

No variations of actual *names* were considered duplicates or eliminated, however, even if the street name was similar or identical. For example, if one list presented "Alhuda School, 123 Main Street, New York, NY 12345" and another list presented "Universal School, 124 Main Street, New York, NY 12345," both entries were retained, listed separately, and evaluated as possible schools.

This undertaking began in 1998 and continued until 2004. Current systems in place with the ISLA now accurately maintain up-to-date information.

Entries were eliminated if any information indicated that the school was part-time, unless the information also indicated that it was planning to become a full-time school.

Step 2: Verifying the Information

Initial verification followed a specific protocol: Telephone contact was attempted first. If that failed, then an attempt was made to obtain more information about the school telephone number via the Internet. Next, a query about the school would be sent to the Islamic Educators Communication Network (IECN).[2] In 2004, a land mailing was made to each school; any mail returned as "undeliverable" was set aside for further investigation. In a final step, online registration was established on the ISLA Web site for self-registration:

• Telephone: All schools with listed telephone numbers were called during normal school hours of operation. Many of them were reached quickly; overall, however, this was not as fruitful as expected because:

> No one answered the phone, there was no answering machine, and messages left were not responded to.

> Educators were sometimes surprised by the call, unused to receiving calls other than from parents or local community members, and were initially suspicious and hesitant to provide information, particularly post-9/11.

> School had moved its physical location.

> School had closed.

> School had a new telephone number or area code.

• Online: After exhausting the phone search, an extensive Internet search was conducted via Google (www.google.com) and Langenberg Reverse Directory (http://reversedirectory.langenberg.com).

The first step was to google the school's name. Results were cross-checked with the school's name, street address, city, and local mosque.

The second step was to conduct a reverse directory search on the old phone number, which would often yield a portion of the school's name or a city.

The third step was an attempt to contact or identify a mosque in the area to inquire about the school, thus narrowing the search by helping to identify the current area code.

One of the greatest barriers to contacting the schools was the area code changes. This was severely problematic because new area codes were being added very quickly and most of these schools are in urban areas, where area codes were most likely to be added. Simply identifying *which* area codes had been changed was problematic. Furthermore, some school phone numbers had experienced more than one area code change during 1998-2003, making initial contact difficult. For example, Michigan had increased its three main area codes to *twelve* by 2006. To complicate matters further, the *overlay* method of area code assignment "places a new area code 'on top of' an existing one. Both area codes serve the same location."[3]

• IECN: The third part of the verification protocol was to query the IECN listserve about the school in question. Some of the more stubborn cases were solved that way because oftentimes a school would be known by at least one other Muslim educator outside the school's local area. Schools on the listserve would share contact information about other schools in their state that were not yet connected via the IECN or other virtual means.

• Mail: A forth verification measure was to send mail via the U.S. Postal Service, that is, snail mail. In 2004, an initial mailing to all schools for which there was contact information was conducted. When an envelope was returned as "undeliverable," all previously mentioned measures in this protocol would be repeated in one last effort to contact the school. If this proved unsuccessful, it was removed from the list. All schools are contacted on a yearly basis.

Online Registration: In 2002, the ISLA created an online database for school registration that requests basic contact information and asks schools to answer a questionnaire.

Step 3: Keeping the List Current

The protocol's final step is to keep the list both accurate and current by periodically verifying and culling the collected information. ISLA continues to employ its verification protocol, keeping in mind that several factors can lead to inflated and inaccurate counts of schools in established lists.

• Double listings are the result of

Similar name but different address because the school grew and moved. For example, Al-Huda at 1234 No Name Street in East Lansing, MI, builds a new and expanded school 1½ miles away. When it moves, the new location is reported as "Alhuda" at "4567 Yes Name Street" in "Lansing, MI." But because both the name and the address are different, it wrongly appears as two schools.

Spellings of the school names, usually transliterations of Arabic words, often vary: for example, "Dar Ul Uloom," "Darul Uloom," "Dar ul-Uloom," and so on.

Schools with more than one name—for example, the School of Knowledge is also listed as Madrasa-Tul-Ilm.

• Charter schools (independent public schools). Although these are not parochial schools, they frequently have a religious flavor because their student body is oftentimes as much as 99 percent Muslim.

• Schools that have closed or merged with another Islamic school but are not removed from the list.

• Schools that have closed (and are not removed from the list) and then reopen a year or two later under a different name but in the same location.

Unless the list is constantly verified and culled, it can lead to some of the highly inaccurate numbers quoted in the media by both Muslim and non-Muslim organizations.

After eight years of following these protocols, a verified list of 235 schools in the United States and the U.S. Virgin Islands has now been built. But even this number is neither absolute nor concrete because some schools are so young that they are not yet known. In addition, some schools might have closed, yet another element that is also not yet clear. Nevertheless, the likelihood of there being 100 such unknown schools is extremely small. The number of missed schools in either direction of 235 is likely to be no more than ten to fifteen. Overall, it is reasonable to rule out the larger numbers of 300, 400, 500, and 600 that have been erroneously, but routinely, quoted in the media. Furthermore, as a verified list of schools now exists, claims of other numbers need to meet or exceed the previously articulated level of assurance.

A Data-based Profile of Islamic Schools in the United States

U sing 235 as the definitive number of Islamic schools in the United States, the ISLA has gathered information on and analyzed two of its own data sources, collected since 2004: the ISLA's *online registration survey* (106 schools = 45 percent of all schools [excluding ISLA member schools]) and the ISLA's *membership application survey* (32 schools = 13.6 percent of all schools; see table 1.1). These two surveys are essentially the same; however, some minor changes were made when preparing the survey to distribute as part of the membership application process. For example, in an effort to elicit more accurate information about accreditation, the relevant question was expanded in the membership version. In the few areas where the survey was changed, the data are *not* presented in this report. In addition, data belonging to an information source known as Edustarz is used with its publisher's permission (97 schools = 41 percent of all schools). Although input from this third source is not being presented as research data, it will appear in the discussion as valuable anecdotal information. A summary of the data collection and its limitations is given below.

For example, in an effort to elicit more accurate information about accreditation, the relevant question was expanded in the membership version.

Goals of Data Collection

• Provide a definitive profile of full-time schools based on data
• Determine trends
• Identify areas of concern

Limitations of All Data

• Self-selected: Only interested and willing schools are represented.
• Connectedness: If a school is not actively online and interacting with the Muslim educator community, it will not know of the league, the Web site, or membership or be able to share its information.
• Self-reported: The data are self-reported information, not observations.
 • Limited scope: The survey tools are limited in length, and questions are focused on obtaining basic information (e.g., growth, size, governance, budget, and educator certification).

Table 1.1

League Members	Online*		Edustarz
32	106*	Number of Schools Answering Questions	97
3,567	14,163*	Number of Students	14,663
111	134*	Average per School	151
26,085	31,490*	Extrapolated/Estimated Total Students based on 235 schools	35,485

* Online & League Members source data are exclusive of each other. Edustarz numbers include some schools from both groups.

League Membership Data (separate from Online League Data)

• Only schools applying for membership are represented in these data. Given that membership fees are tied to the number of students, larger schools are less likely to join. This could result in the member schools' data being more representative of a profile for smaller schools.

The information from Edustarz is not being presented as research data because it was created as a for-profit publication: a booklet intended for school fundraising entitled "Schools4Us." Despite the inability to use this data for research, when weighed against the dearth of information available anywhere on Islamic schools, it is simply too valuable to be discarded. Therefore, it is included in parts of the discussion so that it might provide additional insight. It is *not* included in the data, but it *is* included in the data discussion.
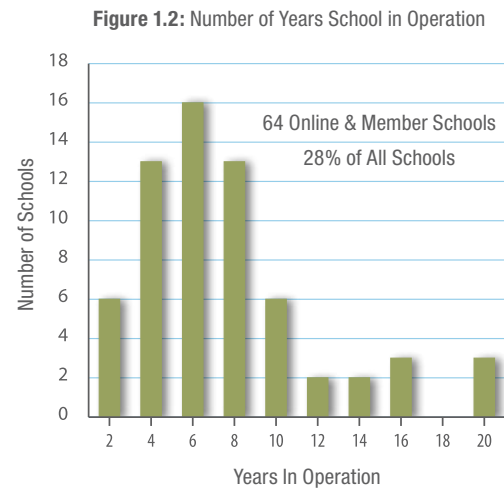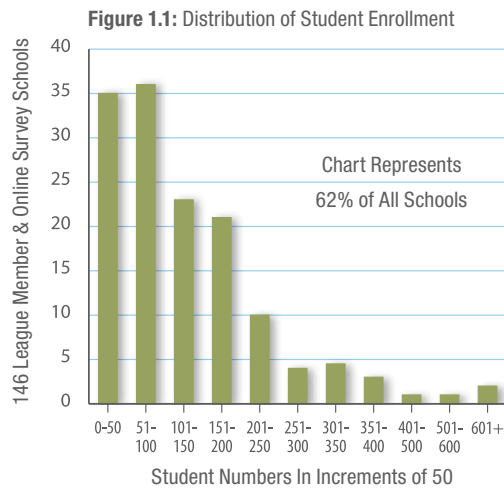
The Private/Parochial School Milieu

According to the National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education, Teachers College, Columbia University, "Approximately 5,953,000 students attend 27,223 non-profit schools. This comprises 11% of all students and 23% of all schools in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). Most non-profit schools are small, located in urban centers, and possess a religious affiliation. About 80% of non-profit schools enroll less than 300 students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000)."[4] Approximately 93 percent of private Islamic full-time schools enroll 300 or fewer students *(figure 1.1, next page)*. Although this is higher than the figure for nonprofit schools in the United States, given the relatively young age of most Islamic schools, this is not surprising. Furthermore, one would expect that over time this percentage will decrease and come closer to the average of other parochial schools as the age and quality of the Islamic schools increase and the population of Muslims increases. The Edustarz schools indicate a very similar percentage: 91 percent.

An estimated number of students—between 26,000 and 35,500 students—in Islamic schools can be extrapolated from the actual number of students reported in the data. After taking into consideration other factors, the most *probable* number of children in Islamic schools is approximately 32,000 students. Although this information indicates fairly clearly the actual number of children attending full-time Islamic schools, it does not, however, indicate the *percentage* of the Muslim school-aged population attending Islamic schools because the numbers for the Muslim population in general are still not well determined. Nonetheless, the Muslim community needs to know how it behaves regarding private schooling. Based on a conservative estimate of 850,000 Muslim children under the age of eighteen, one can estimate that the percentage of Muslim children attending full-time Islamic schools is, at the very most, 3.8 percent.[5] This is well below the national figure, approximately 10 percent, of American children attending private schools.[6] There is no evidence to indicate whether a large percentage of Muslim children attend private secular or non-Islamic schools.

Most Islamic schools are very young. Fully 85 percent are ten years old or younger (28 percent, 65 of 235), and 55 percent are six years old or younger *(figure 1.2, next page)*. Even Edustarz information shows that almost half of those schools are ten years old or younger. This would indicate that many, if not most, will require a few more years before they reach that ten-year mark that is so indicative of quality and stability and offers students a proficiency advantage.

An estimated number of students—between 26,000 and 35,500 students—in Islamic schools can be extrapolated from the actual number of students reported in the data.

Figure 1.1: Distribution of Student Enrollment

Figure 1.2: Number of Years School in Operation

According to Caroline Hoxby in a Harvard study of charter schools, "[C]harter schools may do better as they become more experienced. ... For instance, in reading, the advantage is 2.5 percent for a charter school that has been operating 1 to 4 years, 5.2 percent for a school operating 5 to 8 years, and 10.1 percent for a school operating 9 to 11 years."[7] Clearly, new schools need time to organize themselves before they can produce the quality education that is so important to building a solid reputation in their community.

When people in a community decide to start an Islamic school, they have no idea that the most important issue they will have to face is the physical space. Lack of sufficient and attractive physical space will present a larger barrier to a school's growth than even its actual academic performance. No matter how many students a school is able to attract, if it does not eventually acquire sufficient space for the children to run, play, conduct science experiments, and so on, the school cannot grow.

The data indicate that slightly under half of the schools are in fairly young buildings: ten years or younger *(figure 1.3)*. However, slightly more than half of them are in buildings ten years or older, and approximately 25 percent are in buildings of 30 years or older. The most telling statistic regarding the future of the schools is that fully 66 percent of these schools either are currently involved in building improvement or have *written* plans to do so. This indicates a willingness and ability to invest in the school's future. If these schools were not growing, there would not be such a large percentage of community members making such capital investments.

Next is the issue of teacher certification. Schools were to select the most appropriate response to the survey statement stem: *Our teachers are all state certified (to teach) in the United States*. In addition to indicating overall certification percentages, the response choices also allowed the schools to indicate whether all academic teachers were certified and Arabic/Islamic studies teachers were not certified—a very common occurrence. According to the data, in 10 percent of schools *all* teachers are certified, and in 36 percent of schools all *academic* teachers are certified *(figure 1.4)*. Thus, in 46 percent of Islamic schools, all academic teachers are certified. On the one hand, this is very positive in that academic teachers constitute the vast majority of teaching staff in the schools, and the data show that these teachers are certified. On the other hand, a troubling figure for Islamic schools is that 36 percent indicated that the Arabic/
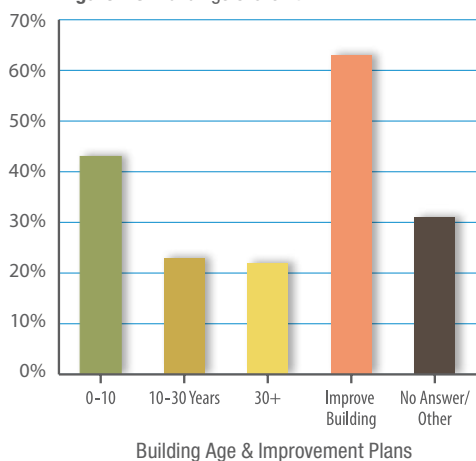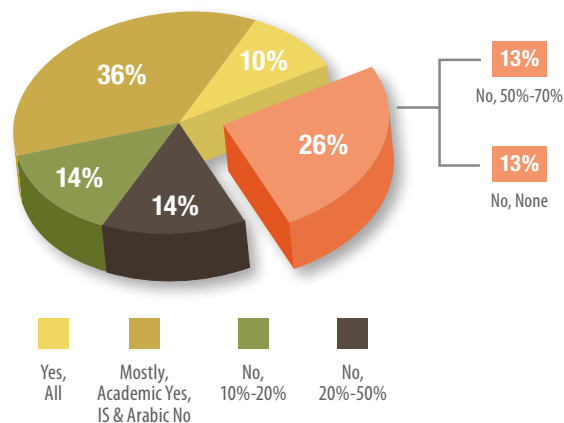
Figure 1.3: Buildings & Growth

Building Age & Improvement Plans

Figure 1.4: Teacher Certification

13% No, 50%-70%

13% No, None

Yes, All | Mostly, Academic Yes, IS & Arabic No | No, 10%-20% | No, 20%-50%

Islamic studies teachers are not certified. When that figure is added to the 13 percent of schools indicating that *no* teachers are certified, the number of schools with uncertified Islamic studies and Arabic language teachers increases to 49 percent. As these teachers help define the very essence of an Islamic school, their lack of certification or the resulting perception of being somehow less professional than their colleagues becomes more significant.

The issue of uncertified Arabic/Islamic studies teachers notwithstanding, when looking at overall certification figures for Islamic schools, 60 percent have a teaching staff where 80 percent of teachers are certified. Interestingly, this demonstrates a higher level of professionalism in Islamic schools than is popularly believed by the Muslim community. Thus, given that enrollment relative to population is low, one might deduce from this information that schools would benefit from conducting public relations programs to inform their communities about this unexpected fact. Contrarily and interestingly, in 25 percent of schools, most to all of the teachers are not certified. There is likely a variety of situational reasons for this, for it is not often that a school chooses to hire only uncertified teachers.

It is important to note that *uncertified* does not mean *uneducated*. Anecdotal information indicates that uncertified teachers have B.A., M.A., and even Ph.D. degrees, but they lack teacher certification for K-12. Furthermore, to paint a more accurate picture, it is useful to place Islamic schools into the national context, where hiring uncertified teachers occurs more often than most people think: "Private schools routinely hire unlicensed teachers. ... The rate [of uncertified teachers] for the public sector is 89.8 percent, whereas the rate for private schools is much lower, particularly in non-religious schools, where just 48.8 percent of teachers are certified."[8]

Further study is necessary to determine these figures more precisely and what impact—negative, positive, or none—this might have on students. The issue of certification is being hotly debated across the United States (regarding public schools), and attitudes are beginning to shift. Studies suggest that other factors are more predictive of student learning: "Simply put, a teacher's certification status matters little for student learning. We find no difference between teaching fellows and traditionally certified teachers or between uncertified and traditionally certified teachers in their impact on math achievement. ... To put this in perspective, the advantage
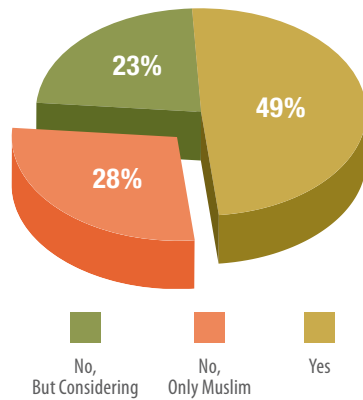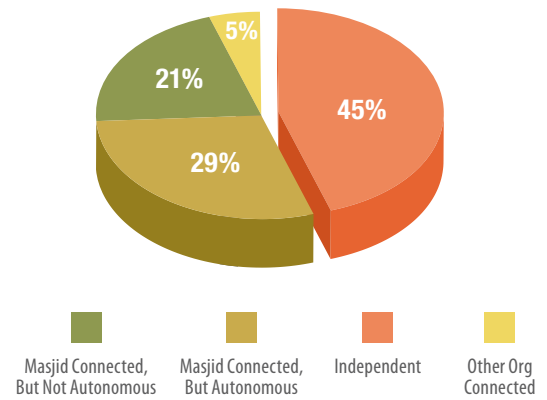
Figure 1.5: Non-Muslim Teacher Hires

- No, But Considering — 23%
- No, Only Muslim — 28%
- Yes — 49%

Figure 1.6: Governance

- Masjid Connected, But Not Autonomous — 21%
- Masjid Connected, But Autonomous — 29%
- Independent — 45%
- Other Org Connected — 5%

of being the student of a teacher in the top quarter of effectiveness rather than the bottom quarter is roughly three times the advantage of being taught by an experienced teacher rather than by a novice, and more than ten times any advantage created by teacher certification!"[9] Given the uncertain impact of uncertified teachers on schooling, the desire by Islamic schools to hire Muslim educators, and the sometimes serious shortage of available certified Muslim teachers, we can predict that Islamic schools are likely to continue hiring uncertified teachers when they feel it is necessary.

Despite how one might feel about certification, the fact remains that if schools are growing and seeking accreditation, these percentages will quickly change in the direction of greater certification. While the survey's accreditation portion revealed problems too complex to provide reliable data on that subject, other factors and indicators outside the survey show clearly that accreditation is a swiftly developing trend. Given the other indications of growth, this is an important area in which to assist the schools as they grow and develop.

When asked to respond to the statement "Our school hires non-Muslim teachers," almost 50 percent of schools answered "yes," with another 23 percent indicating that they were considering doing so *(figure 1.5)*. The breakdown of the "yes" answers indicates an overwhelming percent of schools saying that approximately 10-30 percent of their teachers are non-Muslim. Curiously, one school indicated that 100 percent of the teachers were non-Muslim. Less than one-third of schools indicated that they do not hire or even consider hiring non-Muslim teachers. That notwithstanding, it is clear that the presence of non-Muslim educators is common in Islamic schools, and as schools move toward accreditation, the need to hire certified teachers combined with the short supply of certified Muslim teachers will likely push this figure even higher.

Finally, the data regarding governance address a misconception about Islamic schools—the assumption being that full-time Islamic schools are controlled by their local mosques. The data show that fully 45 percent are completely independent entities *(figure 1.6)*. Another 29 percent are connected to a mosque but make decisions very autonomously. Only 21 percent of Islamic schools are actually governed by a mosque. Overall, almost 75 percent of schools indicate that they are operating either independently or autonomously. This makes sense if, as has been supposed, schools oftentimes begin as an outgrowth of a mosque or "Sunday

school"-related effort. They need the support of the larger and more established mosque to get them off the ground. Then, as other factors influence them and their needs become more complex and separate from those of the mosque, they move to become independent. Regardless of how or why a school arrives at independent governance, the majority of schools must view it as an advantage, or else they would not leave the financial security of a mosque. One advantage to independence is the ability to respond to parents, the conventional "clients" of private schools and the ones to whom the schools are most accountable. If a school is held accountable to the mosque rather than the parents, the governance dynamics and resulting system behaviors are changed and become more reminiscent of traditional public schools than private schools.

The Typical Full-Time Islamic School

Based on the data, we can now articulate a profile of the "typical" full-time Islamic school:

• Average sized for a parochial school: 100 students or fewer
• Young: six years or younger
• Growing
• Professionally oriented
• Independently governed

Statistics for such a school are as follows:

Most common size: Under 100 students: 55 percent; under 150 students: 85 percent

Average number of students: 121

Age of schools: Six years or younger: 55 percent; ten years or younger: 85 percent

Growth: Buildings currently undergoing expansion or with written plans to do so: 66 percent

Professionalism: Widespread movement toward professionalism - in 60 percent of the schools, 80 percent of the teaching staff is certified

Recommendations

Full-time Islamic schools are in an extremely dynamic as well as precarious position. They are poised to grow if they are willing and able to take the necessary steps.

First, data indicate that schools are moving quickly toward the standards that parents expect, but their public relations efforts have not kept pace with this improvement. Schools will bring their public reputation into closer alignment with their actual quality if they spend more time communicating the good news of their development to the Muslim community, as this community remains unaware of the positive and recent changes.

Second, the fact that the percentage of Muslim children in private Islamic schools is roughly two to three times less than in the general public indicates there are widespread negative beliefs and attitudes about private Islamic schooling in the Muslim community that Islamic schools and mosques might wish to address jointly. Whether and to what extent this is affected by immigrant-held attitudes toward Islam informed by the social and societal milieu of a history of colonialism in their countries of origin have yet to be studied. Nonetheless, the Muslim community in America is well situated to advocate its own blend of intellect, modernity, and Islam as reflective of the reality in which Muslims live in the United States; Moreover, Islamic schools are the ideal place to promote that model and eliminate negative, self-nullifying stereotypes.

Third, the disproportionate number of uncertified Arabic language and Islamic studies teachers, in conjunction with the trend toward Islamic schools requiring teacher certification, indicate that the community of Muslim educators needs to address this issue. Alternative routes to certification are more available today than ever before, and Islamic schools and Muslim communities must facilitate this need. Islamic studies and Arabic language, it can be argued, are the very definition of an Islamic school. That these teachers are the *most likely* to be uncertified creates an atmosphere in which negative attitudes and stereotypes often held by Muslims about Muslims (i.e., religious people and entities are "backward" or "unprofessional") can be reinforced and perpetuated. As there are no legal barriers or requirements related to how private schools handle Arabic language and Islamic studies, the only barrier to equalizing and ensuring the desired level of professionalism is the community's willingness to do so.

Fourth, most Islamic schools have an independent governance structure. To better facilitate

Islamic studies and Arabic language, it can be argued, are the very definition of an Islamic school.

this, when a school is conceived within the structure of an Islamic center or mosque, the founders (school and mosque) should plan from the very beginning for the school to grow toward independence. Embracing this wholeheartedly and incorporating it into the community's expectations would help define it as a positive change. At times, a school's move toward independence can be misunderstood or mistakenly viewed by the mosque as negative and result in bitter discord. Planning ahead for this natural growth can diminish such problems.

Fifth, given the large number of non-Muslim teachers teaching in Islamic schools, an introductory course that offers these teachers basic information about Islam from a teacher's perspective and containing classroom-related content seems useful. Furthermore, these teachers might serve as important interfaith bridges.

Sixth, Islamic schools and their communities need to deal with the fact that well over half of the schools are currently either building/remodeling their facilities or about to begin such an effort. However, planning for such growth is difficult, in that it requires the community to cooperate along lines that can be very divisive, such as school location, classroom size, playground space, prayer space, parking, and more. These efforts can turn into bitter battles without the help of experienced professionals (e.g., architects, project designers, etc.) who are equally familiar with the dynamics of Muslim communities and how they use physical space.

Seventh, scholarships and trusts need to be established to support and encourage Muslim students to enter academia on all levels—elementary, secondary, college, and university. In particular, Islamic schools need Muslim teachers.

And eighth, further research on *every* aspect of Islamic education is needed. Funding for such research will be equally critical. Small amounts of $2,000 to $5,000 can be extremely effective when directed at graduate students, schools, and organizations. Larger amounts can help fund longitudinal studies that are critical yet absent.

Endnotes

The Islamic Schools League of America wishes to thank the Foundation for the Advancement and Development of Education and Learning for its steadfast support, without which this important research could not have been conducted.

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Institute *for* Social Policy *and* Understanding

ISPU is an independent, nonpartisan think tank and research organization committed to conducting objective, empirical research and offering expert policy analysis on some of the most pressing issues facing our nation, with an emphasis on those issues related to Muslims in the United States and around the world. Our research aims to increase understanding of American Muslims while tackling the policy issues facing all Americans, and serves as a valuable source of information for various audiences. ISPU scholars, representing numerous disciplines, offer context-specific analysis and recommendations through our publications. The diverse views and opinions of ISPU scholars expressed herein do not necessarily state or reflect the views of ISPU, its staff, or trustees.