Weekend Islamic Schools:
Are They Preparing Children for Life Ahead?

On July 25, 2017, the Institute *for* Social Policy *and* Understanding (ISPU) hosted a one-day convening in partnership with the John Templeton Foundation (JTF) to identify the needs, opportunities, and challenges for weekend Islamic schools as they relate to character development in students between the ages of 6 and 18.

Conference Team

Host and Co-Convener

Institute *for* Social Policy *and* Understanding

The Institute *for* Social Policy *and* Understanding (ISPU) is a nonprofit research and education organization. ISPU conducts objective, solution-seeking research that empowers American Muslims to develop their community and fully contribute to democracy and pluralism in the United States. Since 2002, ISPU has been at the forefront of discovering trends and opportunities that impact the American Muslim community. ISPU's research aims to educate the general public and enable community change agents, the media, and policymakers to make evidence-based decisions. In addition to building in-house capacity, ISPU has assembled leading experts across multiple disciplines, building a solid reputation as a trusted source for information for and about American Muslims.

Co-Convener and Funder

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The John Templeton Foundation serves as a philanthropic catalyst for discoveries relating to the deepest and most perplexing questions facing humankind. JTF supports research on subjects ranging from complexity, evolution, and emergence to creativity, forgiveness, and free will. JTF encourages civil, informed dialogue among scientists, philosophers, and theologians, as well as between such experts and the public at large. In all cases, their goal is the same: to spur curiosity and accelerate discovery. In order to catalyze such discoveries, JTF provides grants for independent research that advances the mission of the Foundation. And their grants for public engagement help people worldwide engage the fruits of that research and explore the Big Questions.

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Weekend Islamic Schools:

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Executive Summary

On July 25, 2017, the Institute *for* Social Policy *and* Understanding (ISPU) hosted a one-day convening in partnership with the John Templeton Foundation (JTF) to identify the needs, opportunities, and challenges for weekend Islamic schools as they relate to character development in students between the ages of 6 and 18. A total of 14 participants presented their research and findings, and engaged in a rich exchange of ideas. The participants included major designers and publishers of Islamic curricula, leaders and teachers of weekend Islamic schools, and researchers and scholar-practitioners with significant experience working with Islamic schools and Muslim communities. Based on the exchange of ideas at the convening, the participants came up with experience and evidence based recommendations that can be implemented by all those working in connection with Islamic schools. Divided into five core areas of focus, those recommendations are listed below.

Weekend School Curricula

The following recommendations would impact the instructional content and approach of weekend schools.

- Expand educational focus from memorizing the Quran and prayers to include behavioral goals regarding Islamic character development.
- Include issues of identity and belonging (particularly to the United States) within the curricula.
- Improve theological literacy among teachers and encourage tolerance of doctrinal diversity.
- Connect curriculum with contemporary issues facing Muslims today and broader social justice topics.
- Bring in guest speakers to delve into contemporary and even sensitive topics.

- Facilitate the development of a standardized test of Islamic studies for weekend Islamic schools.
- Encourage major publishers to focus on character development as a core subject area.
- Develop tools for evaluation of student character.
- Invest in research and development of Islamic books and teaching tools that address the needs of contemporary Muslim students and Islamic schools.

Professional Development for Teachers

Beyond curriculum changes, several recommendations focus on teacher preparation and training.

- Help shift teaching methods to a "student-centered pedagogy," rather than teaching religion disconnected from student context and experience.
- Mandate online video modules to train teachers and have them earn Islamic education certification.
- Encourage community service projects as a teaching tool.

Weekend School Administration

Several recommendations focus on strengthening weekend schools' administrative practices.

- Help weekend schools utilize available quantifiable measures for student application of character education, rather than only assessing students' comprehension of the religious studies curriculum.
- Help schools adopt the "eight strengths of character" identified by the Smart and Good High Schools study.
- Create "professional ethical learning committees" (PLEC) where parents, community members, teachers, and students meet regularly, share expertise, and collaborate to improve teaching skills and students' academic performance.
- Facilitate the development of a board of education for weekend Islamic schools.
- Help schools create teacher policies to ensure that teachers are consistent and that there is no conflict in how individual teachers interpret Islamic teachings and impart knowledge to students.
- Lead efforts to foster women's leadership, as most weekend schools are led by women.
- Encourage teachers and leaders from weekend schools to be on mosque boards, since most schools are a part of mosques, so they can play a role in the decision-making process.
- Encourage schools to set aside a budget for teacher's professional development.

Interfaith and Inter-organizational Learning

Weekend Islamic schools can learn much from other faith-based instructional approaches if they embrace interfaith collaboration, specifically in the following areas:

- How do other faith-based schools attract, retain, and train teachers?
- How do other faith-based schools teach character?
- How do other faith-based schools track students' progress on character growth?

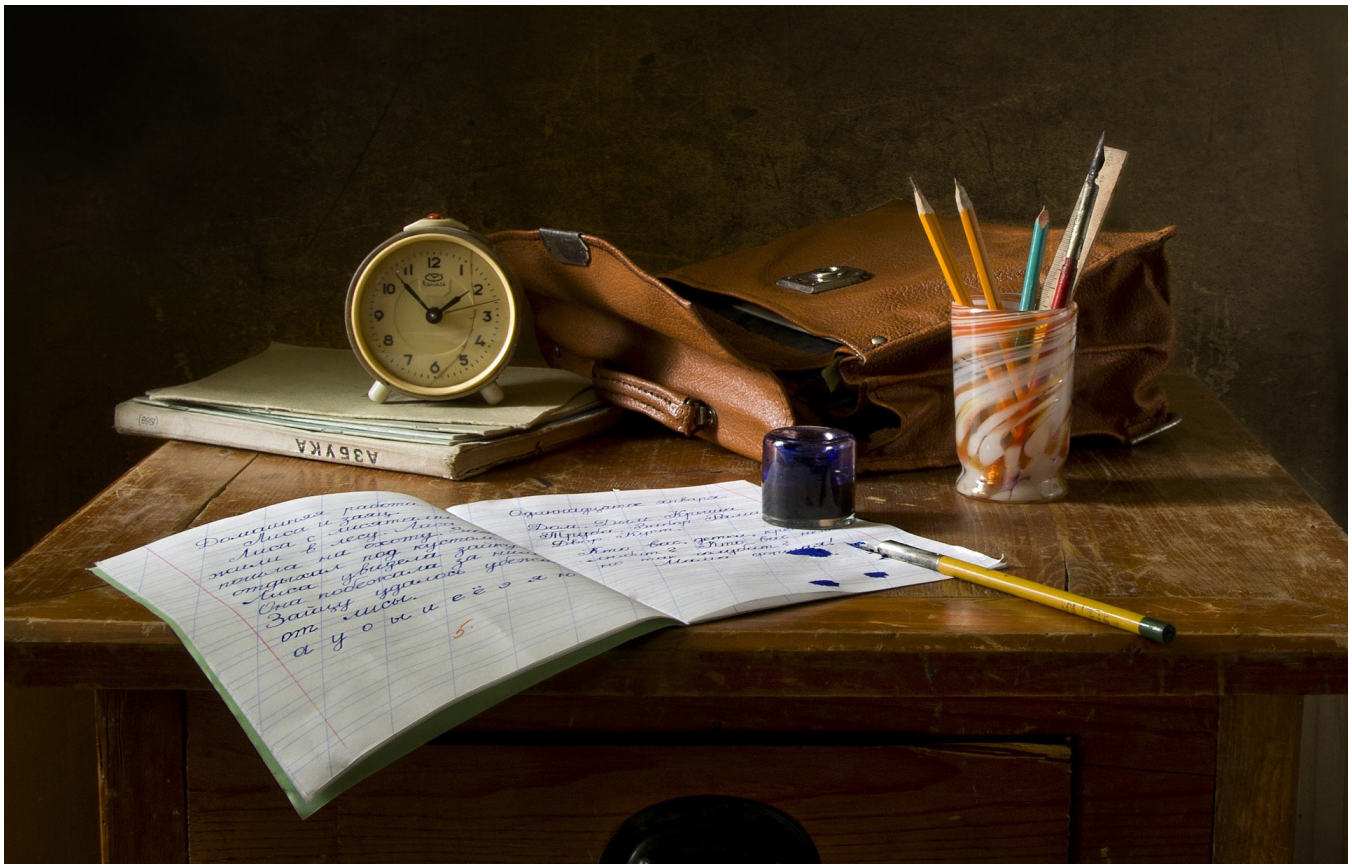
Similarly, weekend Islamic schools can adopt relevant practices from state schools and other organizations, tailored to the Islamic school context, such as the "character growth card" developed by Character Lab.

Data Collection and Resource Dissemination

- There is an urgent need for gathering demographic data about weekend schools, as well as gathering information to get a clearer picture of the weekend Islamic school landscape nationally.
- Find and learn from success stories.
- Collect "best practices" for weekend Islamic schools.
- Promote and disseminate existing resources to weekend schools.

Room for Innovation and Technology

- Create online spaces for like-minded Islamic school principals, leaders, and teachers where they can share ideas.
- Create a neutral online space for Islamic school practitioners to upload information and resources, collaborate, and share best practices.
- Help develop a high-quality magazine at the intersection of mosque, youth, and family.
- Help young Muslims find and connect with role models.
- Utilize online tools for visual storytelling.



Introduction

On July 25, 2017, the Institute *for* Social Policy *and* Understanding (ISPU) hosted a one-day convening to identify the needs, opportunities, and challenges for weekend Islamic schools as they relate to student character development. The convening was funded by the John Templeton Foundation (JTF), an organization that seeks to engage faith communities with the science of character development. The event aimed to learn from voices working in the weekend Islamic school sector and to understand how initiatives involving the science of character development could address their needs and opportunities.

A total of 14 participants presented their research and findings, and engaged in a rich exchange of ideas. The participants included major designers and publishers of Islamic curricula, leaders and teachers of weekend Islamic schools, and researchers and scholar-practitioners with significant experience working with Islamic schools and Muslim communities. A full list of the participants and their bios are included at the end of this report.

Participants attended three one-hour sessions, with each session followed by 30 minutes of participant discussions. The topics of the three sessions were "Education," "Publishing," and "Community Engagement." Each participant was asked to address a series of questions (see Appendix 2). This report presents the participants' combined responses to those questions, as well as the insights that emerged from the discussion sessions.

Why this convening on weekend Islamic schools?

ISPU's mission is to conduct and widely share objective, solution-seeking research that empowers American Muslims to develop their community and fully contribute to democracy and pluralism in the United States. As such, ISPU's work aims to safeguard American pluralism, build understanding, and catalyze American Muslim community development. Since 2002, ISPU has been at the forefront of exploring the trends, challenges, and opportunities that impact the American Muslim community and offering evidence-based solutions to community leaders, practitioners, educators, religious leaders, and other change makers.

Sir John Templeton, the philanthropist who established the John Templeton Foundation, was deeply moved by the wisdom he found within Islam and other faith traditions.[1] One of Sir John's hopes in establishing the foundation was to help build stronger relationships between faith and scientific communities. One specific topic of interest for Sir John was character development. Although all of the world's major religions speak to issues of character, few faith-based schools actively incorporate the latest research on character. In order to effectively engage faith communities with the science of character development, JTF seeks to know more about how the foundation can best address the opportunities, challenges, and needs of Islamic weekend schools with an interest in integrating the science of character into their curriculum.

JTF aims to support research, programs, and resources that spur on the development of the virtues that Sir John identified in the foundation charter as being of particular value to him, including (but not limited to) love, purpose, humility, forgiveness, thanksgiving, generosity, honesty, joy, thrift, diligence, creativity, curiosity, awe, future-mindedness, reliability, and communication.

The foundation seeks to engage with Islamic education generally and weekend Islamic schools more specifically for several reasons. Sir John encouraged the foundation to engage with all major faith traditions, and this convening was one step toward achieving that goal of working across a diversity of faith traditions. JTF is interested in weekend schools specifically due to their broad reach. The foundation's focus is on children and adolescents because early childhood and adolescence are critical periods of development for both virtue and faith formation.

The primary goal of the convening was to identify the needs, opportunities, and challenges within the weekend Islamic school context, especially as they relate to character virtue development, and to brainstorm how initiatives involving the science of character development can address these needs and opportunities. To this end, all participants were presented with a series of questions. The following section looks at the participant responses as they appeared in their presentations and in the group discussions.

What the Experts Say

How can the science of character benefit the good work already being done in weekend Islamic schools?

Character Development as a Core Islamic Value

There was unanimous consensus among all participants that the development of a good character is one of the goals, if not the central goal, of an Islamic education. In a famous *hadith*[a], Prophet Muhammad told his followers: "I have been sent to perfect character." The roots of character development in Islamic pedagogy can also be found in an event from the life of Prophet Muhammad where his companions witnessed Angel Gabriel question Prophet Muhammad about faith. The incident was narrated by one participant as follows:

> Multiple versions of the hadith exist and the most common version recounts that the stranger [Angel Gabriel] asked [Prophet Muhammad] about what constitutes *Islam*, *Imaan*[b], and *Ihsan*[c], and then asks the Prophet to recount the signs of the Day of Judgement. The Islam question is responded to by articulating the five pillars,[d] the imaan question with the articles of faith, and the ihsan question with the statement that one lives out ihsan by acting in the world as though one can see God watching over them. On this basis of this hadith, scholars have enumerated the essential sciences that comprise "Islamic" instruction. . . . [Prophet Muhammad's] response to the question about ihsan refers to an inner disposition that is reflected in one's external actions, and thus the sciences of spirituality and of virtue development become part and parcel of an Islamic education.[2]

[a] *Hadith*: A collection of traditions containing sayings of the prophet Muhammad that, with accounts of his daily practice (the Sunnah), constitute the major source of guidance for Muslims apart from the Quran.

[b] *Imaan* denotes a Muslim's belief in the metaphysical aspects of Islam, and the articles of faith are: belief in one God, belief in angels, belief in holy books, belief in the prophets, belief in the Day of Judgment, and belief in God's predestination (qadr).

[c] *Ihsan* denotes a Muslim's responsibility to obtain perfection or excellence in faith

[d] The Islamic five pillars of faith are: declaration of faith, obligatory prayers, compulsory charitable giving (*zakah*), fasting in the month of Ramadan, and pilgrimage to Mecca.

This hadith, known as the Hadith of Gabriel can form the fundamental framework of character development in Islamic pedagogy. However, while it was agreed that character development is an essential goal of Islamic education, most participants held the view that a vast majority of weekend Islamic schools in the United States fall short of meeting this goal. In their discussions, participants identified some key ideas of how the science of character can benefit weekend Islamic schools.

From Rituals to Character Development

A central theme that emerged from the discussions was the need for weekend Islamic schools to expand their educational focus from rituals and memorization of the Quran to include an emphasis on developing a strong Islamic character. In the words of one participant, "there is a need for a paradigm adjustment from *Huqooq Allah* [the rights of God] to *Huqooq ul Ibad* [the rights of fellow humans]."[3] A focus on nurturing strong character traits must begin at an early age, as extensive research on character development shows that the early years are critical in the moral and emotional development of children. Specifically in the context of weekend Islamic schools, character development must be prioritized in young students (kindergarten and first grade students) because attendance at weekend Islamic schools decreases after elementary school years and drops dramatically during the high school years.[4]

To instill positive character traits in young and older students alike, it is imperative to have a "shift in perspective to a student-centered pedagogy that takes student experiences and student context into deep consideration when teaching."[5] This shift entails understanding the identity and concerns of students, particularly adolescents. Since faith and character are deeply personal matters, any effective weekend school must make a concerted effort to have teachers that truly understand and engage with their students as individuals.

Character and Identity

One area where the science of character can have a particularly strong impact in weekend Islamic schools relates to notions of belonging and identity. According to Amin Aaser, founder of the Islamic educational program Noor Kids, the greatest opportunity for weekend Islamic schools is related to the idea of belonging. In a recent study, Noor Kids found that one in two Muslim children between the ages of five and nine years feel a lack of compatibility between being Muslim and American.[6] In addition to the usual challenges associated with childhood and adolescence, American Muslim students also deal with negative media images and narratives that can confuse and dishearten them about Islam and their Muslim identity. Moreover, a majority of students attending weekend Islamic schools are enrolled at public or private schools where they are in a small Muslim minority. In this role, many of them often face bullying and/or the added burden of having to "represent" Islam for their teachers and peers. In fact, according to ISPU's American Muslim Poll 2017, 42 percent of Muslim families had at least one child (K-12) who had been bullied because of their faith in the past year. These factors have serious implications for American Muslim children's sense of belonging to the United States, their character development, and the roles they envision for themselves in society.

One in two Muslim children between the ages of five and nine years feel a lack of compatibility between being Muslim and American.

Addressing issues at the intersection of identity and character among American Muslim children is an area ripe for collaboration between weekend Islamic schools and practitioners of the science of character. According to Amin, "weekend Islamic schools have an opportunity to play a critical role in building congruency between American and Muslim identities among children. We believe that this can be accomplished through citizenship education, that is, a discussion of how we as Muslims are taught to interact with the world around us (e.g., social justice issues, animal rights, respect for the environment, etc)."

Specifically, weekend Islamic schools are primed to benefit from efforts in character development that focus on the following:[7]

- Security: Security is the foundation for any kind of development and contributes to a positive sense of self, self-control, and virtuous decision-making skills.
- Identity: Identity is the cornerstone for positive self-image and requires a moral system of belief.
- Belonging: Developing a sense of belonging will nurture a sense of societal connectedness, positive engagement, and moral obligation, and it is crucial to promoting future leaders.

It Takes a Village

Participants came up with some recommendations on how this can be achieved. For example, Tasneema Ghazi recommended that an effort should be made to help weekend Islamic schools adopt the "eight strengths of character" identified by the Smart and Good High Schools study.[8] Similarly, efforts can be made to create a professional ethical learning committee (PELC) by involving parents, community members, teachers, and students, with the intention of getting to know each other as individuals and striving to respect and affirm one another. (More details of suggestions by participants are provided in the "Recommendations" section of this report.)

One participant, Anisha Ismail Patel, provided a valuable example of a weekend Islamic school that has been making effective use of the science of character in its curriculum. The Muslim Leadership Academy (MLA) seeks to cultivate character by promoting empathy and citizenship among its students. Their goal is to develop "the whole Muslim child" through Islamic principles and teachings.[9] MLA does so through numerous efforts. For instance, as part of the family community service program, families of MLA students volunteer together at food banks and homeless shelters, and donate Ramadan care packages. MLA also invites community speakers who can inspire empathy and citizenship, and hosts interfaith gatherings such as "Sadaqah Tzedekah[e] Night" and collaborative services.

What are the core components of an Islamic weekend school curriculum? How is character integrated into the curriculum?

Weekend Islamic schools are primarily focused on teaching religious education and recitation of the Holy Quran.[10] There is an emphasis on Islamic history, principles, and values. Students are taught the essentials of faith (the five pillars of Islam) and memorize prayers and sections of the Quran. Some school programs also attempt to teach students to speak Arabic fluently.

Character development is the missing link in Islamic studies curricula, with a near complete lack of focus on contemporary social justice issues.

Students are generally assigned to class groups according to their age/grade level. In some weekend schools, students are separated by gender after reaching 12 years old. Although students at the same age often possess significantly different levels of religious knowledge, they are not organized in the weekend schools according to their understanding.

Character education is often intended to be a core component in weekend Islamic schools, though there is a difference in opinions regarding how effective schools are in achieving this goal. Many participants believed that character development is the missing link in Islamic studies curricula, with a near complete lack of focus on contemporary social justice issues.

Many weekend Islamic schools are co-located in mosques to provide opportunities for students to find role models in their mosque. The lessons are taught through direct instruction, using both prophetic examples and references from the Holy Quran as the foundational texts. Character education is integrated into religious education and reinforced in the classroom through teacher expectations. Teachers often emphasize that Islam is a "way of life," and that as such, the demonstration of excellent character is a demonstration of faith. Although there are measures available for Social and Emotional Learning (SEL),[11] weekend Islamic schools do not tend to utilize quantifiable measures for student's application of character education. Rather, they primarily assess students on their comprehension of the religious studies curriculum. This was identified by most participants as an opportunity for improvement.

What role can innovation play in integrating character in the curriculum, for instance, would online video-modules or smartphone applications be useful?

Participants agreed that the use of innovative technology can be helpful, as it is appreciated by students. However, the effective use of technology would depend greatly on the teacher's knowledge and ability to introduce it in the classroom.[12] Technology would need to be carefully calibrated for each individual student group. According to Reem, "use of technology can be useful. But a state of presence is required for the development of character virtues, and use of technology can often take away that state of presence (...). According to the documentary *Screenagers*, for example, even pro-social games can have an addictive quality which can be harmful to character virtue development."[13]

[e] Sadaqah: Islamic/Arabic term for "charity." Tzedakah: Jewish/Classical Hebrew term for "charity."

Technology in the Classroom

One area where technology can be particularly useful is in training and empowering teachers. One participant suggested utilizing online video tutorials on basic teaching principles such as classroom management. Requiring all volunteer teachers to watch a set sequence of such tutorials before they can begin teaching could greatly enhance their ability to effectively share knowledge and character virtues with their students. Although no such material has been produced in the United States, the School of Education at the University of Toronto offered a one-year certification program comprised of three courses on this topic. Although no longer active, the program could provide useful insights for creating a similar resource for American teachers.[14]

Innovation is often met with hurdles at weekend Islamic schools. In their research on 75 weekend schools in North America, Noor Kids has found that innovation is hindered by entrenched practices, multiplicity of decision makers, and the volunteer-run nature of Islamic schools. Adoption of innovative practices is often slow because decisions to change policies occur very infrequently, especially if a school and/or mosque's leadership does not understand best practices in educational pedagogy, curriculum, or instructional design.

Who are the major publishers or players within the curriculum space?

The following are the leading publishers of English language Islamic studies textbooks in North America:

1. IQRA' International Education Foundation (Chicago, since 1983)
2. Islamic Services Foundation (Dallas, since 1989)
3. Weekend Learning (Ohio, since 2008)
4. Noor Art (Texas, since 1997)
5. Fons Vitae/Ghazali Project (Kentucky)

Many of the major publishers do not pay significant attention to character development. According to research by Tasneema Ghazi of IQRA' International Education Foundation, the table below summarizes the attention given to character development by the three leading Islamic textbook series:[15]

The IQRA' Approach

IQRA' International Foundation, perhaps the most widely distributed of these publishers, focuses on the core subjects taught in most Islamic schools, as well as character development. IQRA' views the teaching of character development as the key subject around which all other

	IQRA'	Weekend Learning	I Love Islam (ISF)	Al-Ghazzali (FV)
Elementary	✓	✓	✓	✓
Junior High	✓	Only 2 out of 85 lessons deal explictly with character	0	n/a
Senior High	✓	Only 2 out of 53 lessons deal explictly with character	0	n/a

Table 1: Summary of the attention given to character development by the three leading Islamic textbook series, according to research by Tasneema Ghazi of IQRA' International Education Foundation

Islamic subjects should revolve. Therefore, IQRA' has integrated character development (cognitive [thinking] and affective [emotional/feeling] skills) into nearly every aspect of its curriculum. The curriculum places particular emphasis on certain character traits drawn from studying the life and sayings of Prophet Muhammad. IQRA' curriculum also includes topics of character development in Quranic studies. Figure 1 is a sample page from IQRA's Islamic studies syllabus for second grade:[16]

IQRA's manuals for teachers include various activities to monitor children's progress in the affective domain, as well (games, stories, discussions, role plays, songs, etc.). In addition to publishing textbooks, IQRA' has also developed a standardized test of Islamic studies in consultation with Islamic studies teachers, school administrators, Islamic scholars, and expert test-item writers. The test has been field tested for five years and is currently utilized by at least 40 to 45 full-time Islamic schools. However, there is a need for a similar tool for weekend Islamic schools as well.

Bringing Ghazali to the Classroom

Fons Vitae, a publishing house devoted to world spirituality, is another major publisher in the Islamic school curriculum space. With international support and a grant from the John Templeton Foundation, Fons Vitae launched the Ghazali Children's Project, which is currently translating and publishing the beloved Imam al-Ghazali's eleventh-century, 40-volume magnum opus, *The Revival of the Religious Sciences (Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din),* into an educational package re-crafted for families and schools. The *Ihya* lays down practical teachings and explains how the outer aspects of Islam can, through their inner, spiritually transformative meanings, change every situation into one that strengthens the innate human nobility of character. This project has been underway for five years, has 132 pilot schools worldwide, has been translated into 13 languages including Arabic and Urdu for Pakistani/Afghan rural schools, and is supported by an international team of recognized scholars.[17] In South Africa, a Ghazali Festival has been planned, with teacher workshops in three cities.

IQRA' Program of Islamic Studies
Aqidah, Fiqh & Akhlaq Studies Syllabus
Elementary Grade 2

BEHAVIORAL OBJECTIVES CHART

1.1 COGNITIVE

S/N	OBJECTIVES	E1	E2	E3	E4	E5	E6
1	Develop a clear sense of identity as Muslim citizens of the United States.				•	•	•
2	Learn some of the responsibilities of being a Muslim citizen.	•	•	•	•	•	•
3	Understand and appreciate the similarities and differences between themselves and their neighbours.				•	•	•
4	Learn their responsibilities towards their fellow citizens.	•	•	•	•	•	•
5	Gradually develop a schema of the concept of *Tawhid*, the Oneness of Allah.	•	•	•	•	•	•
6	Learn many of the attributes of Allah and develop an understanding of the Power and Glory of Allah.	•	•	•	•	•	•
7	Know and comprehend the importance and role of Allah's messengers to mankind.		•	•	•	•	•
8	Develop a clear schema of Adam as the first man (and messenger) created by Allah.	•	•	•			

Figure 1: IQRA' Aqidah, Fiqh and Akhlaq Studies Syllabus Elementary Grade 2 Behavioral Objectives Chart

Fons Vitae's Ghazali Children's Project aims to establish, from the start of a child's life, reflexive habits such as humility, patience, love, altruism, gentleness, forbearance, and respect for other faiths while providing children with real and effective tools to address such failings as selfishness, backbiting, arguing, laziness, envy, bragging, hypocrisy, greed, wasting time, and pride. Regular social service is a key aspect of the Ghazali curricula. Fons Vitae set about creating educational packages of the *Ihya* for parents, teachers, and children. This includes storybooks and companion workbooks, curricula, and www.ghazalichildren.org, a website for children and parents featuring interactive videos and activities. *Ihya* is broken up into book sets, each set contains a complete translation, in plain-language English, of Ghazali's original text for parents and teachers accompanied by an illustrated version with stories adapted for children ages 6–13 years. It is also appropriate for other ages and for parents. The accompanying workbook includes activities and even comics, designed to reinforce Ghazali's teachings, as well as a full school curriculum.

Fons Vitae's Ghazali Children's Project aims to establish, from the start of a child's life, reflexive habits such as humility, patience, love, altruism, gentleness, forbearance, and respect for other faiths.

According to director Virginia Gray Henry-Blakemore, "Fons Vitae is experiencing the global Muslim community coming together [and] enthusiastically endorsing and supporting this series. A major grant from the John Templeton Foundation has contributed to the publication. The Ghazali Project has been officially launched in Morocco, Indonesia, Great Britain, Canada, and the U.S. It is becoming part of imam training programs and is now used in prison outreach. Currently, translations are underway in Arabic, Urdu, Bosnian, Persian, French, Norwegian, German, Swedish, Malay, and Dutch."[18]

Noor Kids

Another up-and-coming player in the Islamic school curriculum space is Noor Kids (not to be confused with Noor Art). Founded in 2011, Noor Kids is a Harvard-supported Islamic educational program that seeks to build confidence in the identity of young Muslims. Each month, members of Noor Kids receive a new activity book delivered directly to their home. Noor Kids utilizes a holistic, 36-module curriculum consisting of education focused on character, citizenship, and Islamic knowledge. Noor Kids titles utilize an evidence-based instructional design, consisting of role models, critical thinking, and parent engagement. Since launching, Noor Kids activity books have been distributed to over 50,000 homes across 25 countries.[19]

Establishing Standards

During the discussion, the question of the possibility of a centralized Islamic school curriculum was addressed. Participants agreed that the field of weekend Islamic schools in the United States is very decentralized and is likely to remain that way. Many argued that in this context, decentralization is a positive thing and that there is much room for improvement within this model. According to Tasneema Ghazi, rather than a standard Islamic school curriculum, there is a need for a board of education for weekend Islamic schools, to monitor and guide individual schools in their unique contexts. For instance, weekend Islamic schools in every state have a website, but most schools have no stated behavioral objectives or goals. An education board could help schools articulate and focus on behavioral goals, as well as recommending educational materials and evaluation methods. One organization, the Council of Islamic Schools in North America (CISNA) currently works in this sphere, but their focus is broader and more diffuse. A dedicated board of education would be more helpful in meeting weekend schools' curricula needs.

How does a weekend school know if it is being successful in reaching its goals, especially for character development?

At present, evaluation procedures in most weekend Islamic schools include a written or oral final examination, as well as quizzes, class discussions, and games. The students are tested on the materials they were taught, which in many cases don't focus on character development. Tasneema Ghazi noted that, as such, there is little attempt to develop tools for evaluation of character, except for the most recent work by Fons Vitae.

Tracking Learning Outcomes

During the convening's discussions, one participant noted how many well-intentioned programs had in the past failed to have an impact because of their inability to track if their goals were being met. This led to further

conversations on the question of how to evaluate progress of weekend Islamic schools. Another participant noted that evaluation and assessment are tricky in most areas of religion, science, and health, due to the possibility of confusion between causation and correlation. This problem is even more acute in character development. A participant with significant teaching experience mentioned how children in most situations know the right thing to say, even if they haven't internalized the lesson, making an accurate evaluation of character development very difficult. In the absence of effective evaluation tools, it was agreed that the best outcome for educators would be that a child has multiple opportunities to have meaningful contact with institutions and organizations interested in character development.

Children in most situations know the right thing to say, even if they haven't internalized the lesson, making an accurate evaluation of character development very difficult.

Given this context, an opportunity for interfaith and inter-organizational learning was identified. Weekend Islamic schools could look to other faith communities to learn how they track character growth among their students. In addition, one participant pointed out that in some public schools, there is now more interest in the development of social and emotional skills. For instance, the state of California has adopted learning social and emotional skills into their public school learning guidelines. Weekend Islamic schools could study California as an example of how secular schools monitor and evaluate success in reaching goals related to character development.

Similarly, Character Lab has created a "character growth card" (distinct from a report card) that could be utilized by weekend Islamic schools. One participant suggested developing "Choose Your Own Adventure"-type storybooks to present different situations and ask young readers how they would respond.

What are the primary challenges, needs, and opportunities for teachers in weekend schools today?

Preparing Young Muslims for the Real World

The biggest challenges for weekend Islamic schools identified by all participants were related to teaching methods and the curricula. At present, weekend Islamic schools focus mostly on memorization of chapters of the Quran, prayers, and basic Islamic doctrine, without much attention on character or any diversity in theological perspective. The material and the manner in which it is taught is not relevant to student's lived realities, particularly older students. As noted above, Muslim students in America often face friction based on their faith and identity due to topics around Islam in the media and contemporary world affairs. Often students are expected or even forced to represent Islam in their public schools and speak for all Muslims. Any effective weekend school must address this reality and help students in expressing their identity outside of the Muslim community. According to Susan Douglass,

> Major elements of the weekend school curriculum reflect the characteristics of a conversation among Muslims—an insider discourse. Students are not expected to question the material, but to accept and absorb it as 'the truth.' This training does not prepare them for the questions people outside the Muslim community may raise about Islam because of what they hear in the media or because of what they learn in public school. The questions may be directed to our students for answers, and sometimes in the form of false assertions, misunderstandings, or pejorative comments. Being thrust into a public role surely affects character development.[20]

Weekend school curriculum and pedagogy should not be telling students what to think, but teaching them how to think.

Space for Exploration

Douglass went on to quote recent work by Ahmed Sahin in *New Directions in Islamic Education*, in which he has created a typology of identity formation for young Muslims, "from diffused and detached, to exploratory and inconsistent, to 'foreclosed' or fortress-like, making

them susceptible either to assimilation away from Islam or to the attraction of extremist ideas." Sahin stresses that Islamic education venues must create a safe space for students to explore their questions about the received Islamic knowledge and process them so as to become comfortable with their Muslim identity. When Islamic education fails to provide room for such exploration, it results in cognitive dissonance that may yield a diffuse Muslim identity or acceptance under a rigid, authoritarian attitude. Neither stance reflects sound character development. In contrast, a weekend school curriculum that allows creative exploration of Islamic knowledge will also help prepare students to critically assess what they are being told and to make it a secure part of their identity.[21]

Douglass argued that weekend schools are tasked with conveying a lot of information in a very limited time, but often, for the sake of saving time, students are treated as passive vessels for a fixed, unquestioned body of knowledge. Such "insider knowledge" may equip a child to practice Islam and may teach Islamic morals and conduct, but it will not enable them to fulfill the public roles that will be thrust upon them whether they are prepared or not. Muslims often take a defensive posture in talking about Islamic civilization, culture, and teachings, even in teaching youth. At extremes, it tends toward a "fortress Islam" mentality. According to Douglass, "weekend school curriculum and pedagogy should not be telling students what to think, but teaching them how to think. It must not be considered a sin to question doctrine, but a virtue to reflect upon it, examine its implications for the child's life and course of action, and learn to express it as a part of identity formation."[22]

Other participants agreed on the need for weekend Islamic schools to provide a safe space for Muslims students to explore and understand their identity. Indeed, as noted above, Amin Aaser identified character development around the idea of "belonging" as an area of particular opportunity. In a recent study conducted alongside San Francisco State University, Noor Kids discovered that one in two Muslim children between the ages of five and nine feel a lack of compatibility between being Muslim and American. These results have critical implications related to the American Muslim child's feeling of belonging in the United States and their character development.[23] Islamic school curricula can effectively address this unmet need by focusing on citizenship education in Islam, i.e., character traits that teach Muslims how to interact with the world around them, whether it be social justice issues, animal rights, or respect for the environment.

Teaching Methods Must Shift

In order to meet these goals in character development, participants agreed that a major shift in teaching methods is needed. In her presentation, Madiha Tahseen from the Family and Youth Institute (FYI) outlined four basic psychological needs that must be satisfied for children to be emotionally healthy: belonging or connecting, power or competence, freedom, and fun.[24] Weekend Islamic schools can play a key role in meeting all these needs. Madiha highlighted research by William Glasser to point out that students are much more likely to learn and internalize an idea if they discuss, experience, or teach it to someone else, rather than passively receiving information, making it even more critical for weekend Islamic schools to be safe spaces of exploration and varying perspectives. According to Madiha,

Muslim weekend schools must find a balance between curriculum-based instruction and open-ended spaces for their youth, to build a sense of connectedness and belonging among youth.

> Indeed, the largest challenge that is faced by weekend schools is the difficulties teachers face in addressing the unique needs of Muslim youth who attend weekend schools. Due to their more frequent exposure to non-Muslim influences in their daily lives (i.e., attending public school), many of these youth are dealing with existential and philosophical-type questions, rather than questions about the basic rituals underlying Islam. In other words, questions about drug use, premarital relations, and the purpose of life, for instance, are more central to their struggles than how to engage in various rituals. As a result, teachers face the challenge of providing room for addressing these off-curriculum questions and discussions. Muslim weekend schools must find a balance between curriculum-based instruction and open-ended spaces for their youth, to build a sense of connectedness and belonging among youth.[25]

Upgrading Educational Professionals

Participants agreed that in this context, problems related to school administration, lack of teacher training, and professional development in particular pose a major problem. In the last 18 months, Noor Kids visited 75 weekend Islamic schools across North America. They found that less than 10 percent of weekend Islamic schools are led by individuals with formal experience in education. Educators were also mostly absent from the boards of these organizations. A majority of weekend Islamic schools do not have a formal governing structure. Instead, most are structured as a "sub-committee" of a local Islamic center. As a result, often, there are no formal roles (e.g., secretary, treasurer) for individuals on the board of a weekend Islamic school. Additionally, there often are no formal policies related to elections or terms. Noor Kids asserts that there is a significant opportunity for building the administrative acumen among weekend Islamic schools. These recommendations specifically relate to (a) governance and structure, (b) metrics and evaluation, (c) teacher administration, and (d) parent communication. They have developed a two-hour introductory course for administrators of weekend Islamic schools related to these topics and have delivered it with success.[26]

Additionally, Noor Kids found that less than 10 percent of Islamic schools provide professional development opportunities for teachers. Because they are run by volunteers, weekend schools can struggle to recruit teachers and tend to get only get week-to-week commitments from staff. This unstable staffing makes it challenging for weekend Islamic schools to require professional development, as volunteer teachers do not tend to opt in at high rates. Still, Amin believes that opportunity exists in developing teacher training for weekend Islamic schools. The Noor Kids team has successfully created and delivered teacher trainings. However, difficulty incentivizing participation among teachers and a general lack of funding among weekend Islamic schools continue to be barriers.[27]

To make matters worse, most weekend schools struggle with diversity in religiosity and in interpretation among students and teachers. Weekend school teachers generally are religious and consider Islam to be a critical part of their daily lives. Students, on the other hand, come from a variety of backgrounds and many may not share the level of religiosity of their teachers. Noor Kids observed that administrators of weekend Islamic schools often have difficulty catering to the needs of the diverse the students who attend. Specifically, an unintentional bias often manifests itself against those students who are perceived as non-religious, and as a result, these students may feel alienated and unwelcome.[28]

Additionally, most weekend Islamic schools do not have a formal policy related to teacher recruitment. Specifically, these organizations do not have a formal policy that constitutes what is required of teachers. As a result, administrators of weekend Islamic schools often struggle to deal with differences in interpretation of Islam shared by teachers.[29]

Overcoming Obstacles

Attempts to innovate and improve entrenched practices are met with hurdles specifically because of the volunteer-run nature of schools and the multiplicity of decision makers. Organizations such as Noor Kids have developed tools to address some of the problems noted above. But still adoption has been a challenge, because the decision to change, adapt, or incorporate additional content to a curriculum occurs very infrequently, especially if leadership does not understand best practices in educational pedagogy, curriculum, or instructional design. Additionally, incorporating new material to the curriculum generally requires approval from a broad group of decision makers. Often, such decisions also require approval from informal decision makers, such as community presidents and various community leaders. Finally, because weekend Islamic schools depend broadly on volunteers, few administrators actively seek out new and innovative approaches for Islamic education.[30]

Another challenge faced by weekend Islamic schools relates to time: one participant noted how the weekend school where she teaches had to go from a weekend school to an evening school with classes three days a week, since once-a-week classes did not provide enough time to meaningfully cover material or engage with students. Another participant noted related problems including that weekend classes were overcrowded and that meeting students once a week creates a challenging loss of instructional momentum.

An overarching challenge shared by all participants relates to data: there is sparse demographic information on students of weekend Islamic schools and little longitudinal data on how Islamic schools are developing and evolving in the United States. There is an urgent need for data that can help practitioners understand the

weekend Islamic school landscape and enable a thorough needs assessment of the schools. This data could also facilitate collaboration between schools, parents, students, and other relevant organizations.

What are the basic demographics of the youth within North American Islamic schools?

There are no national statistics on the weekend Islamic school population. Anecdotally, the exact demographic makeup of a weekend Islamic school seems to vary by location (for example, urban vs. suburban environments), although participants stated that weekend Islamic school students predominantly come from one of three ethnic backgrounds: Arab, South Asian, or African American. Urban weekend Islamic schools see more diversity in students' backgrounds, whereas suburban weekend Islamic schools tend to be more racially and ethnically homogenous. However, more data is needed to assess accurately the nationwide weekend Islamic school demographics.

Students range in age from 3 to 18 years, with both boys and girls. A majority of students are in elementary school, since there is a significant attrition rate after the age of 12. Most students are enrolled at their local public schools for their secular education and rely on the weekend school for their religious education.

Who leads the Sunday schools?

Leadership at teacher training was broadly identified as one of the major challenges facing weekend Islamic schools today. A vast majority of Sunday schools are led and managed by volunteers. The teaching staff and administrators are well-intentioned, often highly educated and accomplished professionals, but with little to no training in classroom management or educational techniques. Moreover, in their role as volunteer Sunday school teachers, individuals seldom receive any professional development by the schools. As mentioned above, according to one estimate, fewer than 10 percent of weekend Islamic schools have provided professional development for their teaching staff.[31]

Most schools function as theological and often ethnic enclaves, where only one theological school of thought is taught.

Because weekend Islamic schools tend to be run by volunteers, schools struggle with teacher recruitment. Additionally, teachers often commit only to their role on a week-to-week basis. For this reason, providing teacher trainings and other professional development remains a challenge, as volunteer teachers have low opt-in rates for training. Noor Kids have created and delivered teacher trainings, but they continue to face challenges related to a need to incentivize participation and a general lack of funding among weekend Islamic schools to support professional development.

How broad is the theological diversity at weekend Islamic schools?

Most schools function as theological and often ethnic enclaves, where only one theological school of thought is taught, often in line with the ethnic culture of the majority of students. This relates to the fact that most schools are subsets of mosques, and mosques in the United States tend to be homogenous. Thus, a mosque where the majority of attendees are Indonesian is most likely to have a weekend school that exclusively teaches the version of Islam predominant in Indonesia.

A bigger problem relates to how Islamic school teachers and parents view theological diversity; the widely accepted position is that introducing multiple perspectives is bound to confuse young Muslim students in their belief and practice of religion. Discussing doctrinal diversity also often upsets parents who may only wish for their children to learn their way of practicing religion. As a result, Sunni parents only send their children to Sunni weekend schools and children of Shia parents only attend Shia schools. Interviews with students conducted by Zahra Rafie suggest that this runs contrary to how the students themselves view their Muslim identity: a majority identify only as American Muslims, without much emphasis on religious denomination.

At present there is virtually no theological diversity among weekend Islamic schools. There are a number of reasons for this. Parents have a particular mindset about what religion is and what they want their child to learn. There is also a desire among parents to prevent their child from learning about a different sect. This poses a challenge for weekend school educators: how can they teach doctrinal diversity while being authentic to the particular tradition, without ruffling parents' feathers and causing confusion among their students? As one

participant pointed out, as soon as multiple opinions regarding Islamic teachings are introduced, there is a cost; students feel less obliged to adhere to any one ruling. Thus, introducing theological diversity can cause much friction with parents, which can explain why many schools choose to teach only one particular school of thought.

Still, some participants argued that starting from the age of 14, weekend Islamic schools should begin introducing multiple perspectives, since by this point in their development, students have the capacity for critical thinking. However, Tasneema Ghazi noted that student attendance at weekend schools drops after elementary school years and is reduced dramatically during the high school years. This raises the question of how much actual impact weekend schools could have in their Islamic education for students beyond the age of 14. Aasim Padela also noted that teaching different schools of theological thought is a challenge for even highly trained academics; expecting volunteer weekend school teachers to address such a complicated subject might prove to be an insurmountable hurdle.

Is science addressed at weekend Islamic schools?

Science, as a content area, is not generally a core component of weekend Islamic schools, neither are history, literature, or math.

One participant, Zahra Rafie, researched 37 Islamic studies curricula employed in the greater Washington, DC metropolitan area and in London, England. She systematically evaluated 14 of those curricula and found that science was not addressed as a subject in any curriculum. Scientific concepts are included as a point of discussion when reviewing phenomena as described in the Holy Quran, such as life cycles, earth science, astronomy, and animal behaviors. There is a chapter in the Quran that references many scientific phenomena and asks the believer to testify that God is the Ultimate Creator.[32] In the opinion of Amaarah DeCuir, an experienced Islamic school professional, given the limitations of instructional time and teaching resources, it is not likely that weekend Islamic schools would identify additional opportunities to provide scientific instruction.[33]

How do weekend schools intentionally involve parents in their character development work? How can parents intentionally complement the work being done at school?

The role that parents play in weekend schools was unfortunately identified as another challenge area. Often there is little cooperation between parents and the weekend school administration, as well as insufficient communication from the school administration to the parents. As a result, parents are often unable to complement the work being done at the weekend school, sometimes because they have different expectations of the goals of a weekend school.

One participant helpfully shed light on the history of weekend Islamic schools and how that relates to their functioning today. First-generation immigrants from Muslim-majority schools were concerned that their children would lose the understanding and practice of Islam. Since they had limited resources, the founders of early Islamic schools focused on the very basics: concepts of heaven and hell, how to pray, etc. Now that basic religious instruction is an established practice at weekend Islamic schools, second-generation Muslims are in a position to focus on broader goals such as character development and theological diversity. At present, there are very few examples of weekend Islamic schools where parents are intentionally involved in character development work. According to Anisha Ismail Patel, the Muslim Leadership Academy presents one such example.

Recommendations

Based on the exchange of ideas at the convening, the participants came up with experience and evidence based recommendations that can be implemented by all those working in connection with Islamic schools.

Weekend School Curricula

While it was agreed that the curriculum space is likely to remain decentralized, without a standard weekend Islamic school curriculum, some areas for improvement were identified for weekend schools. Those recommendations are outlined below.

- Expand educational focus from memorizing the Quran and prayers to include behavioral goals regarding Islamic character development.
- Focus curriculum on issues of identity and belonging (particularly to the United States). This can be achieved by including citizenship education by teaching students how Muslims are meant to interact with issues such as social justice, animal rights, and environmental protection, to name a few. Such teachings should aim to develop a sense of security, identity, and belonging by specifically linking the Islamic teachings on character with the students' identity as Americans. To the extent possible, include students in curricula design.
- Improve theological literacy among teachers and encourage tolerance of doctrinal diversity. To address parents' concerns regarding creating confusion in children's minds, multiple perspectives can be introduced starting at the age of 14 when students are capable of critical thought.
- Connect curriculum with contemporary issues facing Muslims today and broader social justice topics. Allocate time for meaningful discussion and exploration of questions such as those Muslim students face in their public schools by peers of other faith backgrounds and/or teachers.
- Bring in guest speakers to delve into contemporary and even controversial topics, such as what a Muslim student should do if their friend comes out

as gay. Weekend Islamic schools are a good avenue for young Muslims to work through sensitive issues and must be fostered as such.

- Facilitate the development of a standardized test of Islamic studies for weekend Islamic schools. A similar standardized test has been created for full-time Islamic schools by IQRA' International Foundation.[34]
- Encourage major publishers to focus on character development as a core subject area.
- Develop tools for evaluation of character. Some work has been done on this by Fons Vitae; it can be helped through broader dissemination among weekend Islamic schools.
- Invest in research and development of Islamic books and teaching tools that address the needs of contemporary Muslim students and Islamic schools, as identified above.

Teacher Professional Development

Participants agreed that volunteer teachers, though well-educated in their individual professional fields, were woefully ill-trained in pedagogical methods and classroom management. The following recommendations are made for schools, to ensure a supported and developed teaching staff.

- Shift teaching methods to a "student-centered pedagogy," rather than teaching religion disconnected from student context and experience.[35] For this to take place, teachers must truly understand and empathize with students' concerns and engage with them. This shift would also ensure that weekend Islamic schools function as safe spaces where students can question, explore, and meaningfully own their Muslim and American identity, rather than being expected to passively receive all knowledge as "the truth."
- Mandate the use of online video modules for Islamic education certification. Many helpful resources are available, but need better dissemination. The University of Toronto previously created an online Islamic teacher certification course. The International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) at the Fairfax Institute developed a curriculum for Islamic teacher training, but it has not been put in practice due to financial constraints. Similarly, the Council of Islamic Schools in North America (CISNA) can also send members of their staff to provide teacher certification for weekend schools.
- Utilize online professional development supports beyond certifications. In addition to teacher certifications, there are numerous resources online that can help train and educate volunteer teachers. For instance, the American Academy of Religion has produced a guideline on "teaching about religion." Similarly, the Religious Freedom Center has numerous resources to help religious instruction. The Common Core State Standards Initiative has produced guidelines on the study of history and social studies, resources which some participants believed would be helpful for weekend Islamic school teachers.
- Encourage community service projects as a teaching tool. This will help bring together students, parents, and community members, while teaching character in a manner that is fun. Teachers should be given the training and tools to make learning meaningful and fun through hands-on learning activities.

Weekend School Administration

- Help weekend schools utilize available quantifiable measures for student application of character education, rather than only assessing students on their comprehension of the religious studies curriculum.
- Help schools adopt the "eight strengths of character" identified by the Smart and Good High Schools study.
- Create professional ethical learning committees (PLEC) where parents, community members, teachers, and students meet regularly, share expertise, and collaborate to improve teaching skills and the academic performance of students.[36]
- Facilitate the development of a board of education for weekend Islamic schools. The board can help schools adopt behavioral objectives and evaluation methods, for the students as well as the school, and also recommend good educational materials.
- Help schools create teacher policies to ensure that teachers are consistent and that there is no conflict in how individual teachers interpret Islamic teachings and impart knowledge to students. Help schools adequately incentivize teacher training and professional development, so that there is an increased interest in the teacher training tools that are available.

- Foster women's leadership, as most weekend schools are led by women. Because schools are often subsets of mosques, women face the same issues of being sidelined or undermined in leadership roles as they do on many mosque boards.
- Encourage weekend Islamic school teachers and leaders to be on the mosque boards, so they can play a role in the decision-making process.
- Encourage schools to set aside a budget for teacher's professional development.

Interfaith and Inter-organizational Learning

Participants agreed that there is very little that is unique to weekend Islamic schools and that they can learn much if they embrace interfaith collaboration, specifically in the following areas:

- How do other faith-based schools attract, retain, and train teachers?
- How do other faith-based schools teach character?
- How do other faith-based schools track students' progress on character growth?
- Similarly, weekend Islamic schools can adopt relevant practices from public schools and other organizations, tailored to the Islamic school context.
- The state of California has adopted learning social and emotional skills into their state learning guidelines. Weekend Islamic schools can learn from how California is implementing and evaluating behavioral objectives.
- Character Lab has a "character growth card" that can be utilized by weekend Islamic schools.

Gather Data about Weekend Islamic Schools and Disseminate Available Resources

- There is an urgent need for gathering demographic data about weekend schools, as well as gathering information to get a clearer picture of the weekend Islamic school landscape nationally.
- Find and learn from success stories. Identify schools that are getting things right in the prioritization of character development and conduct case studies. One potential starting example could be the Muslim Leadership Academy.
- Collect "best practices" for weekend Islamic schools.
- Promote and disseminate existing resources to weekend schools. There are many good resources available that address the challenges identified above, for example:
    1. Noor Kids has a two-hour introductory course for administrators of weekend schools.
    2. Noor Kids has developed a 14-page research document, "Educational Imperative," that summarizes their view on what needs to be taught to Muslim children in North America and how it should be taught.
    3. Noor Kids has published a white paper on best practices in Islamic education that covers innovative instructional techniques and key qualities of high-performing Islamic school teachers.
    4. The Family and Youth Institute have lectures, workshops, and relevant research articles on their website.

Room for Innovation and Technology

The following are some ideas that use technology to help further character education.

- Create online spaces, such as a WhatsApp group, for like-minded Islamic school principals and teachers where they can share ideas.
- Create a neutral online space for Islamic school practitioners to upload information and resources, collaborate, and share best practices.
- Help develop a high-quality magazine at the intersection of mosque, youth, and family. For instance, *Relevant* magazine aims to do this in the Christian context through a product that is attractively packaged and revenue driven. In the Islamic sphere, there is *AlJumuah* magazine, but it is geared toward adults. There are many informal blogs designed to meet the needs of Muslim youth, such as the *Muslim Girl* blog.
- Help young Muslims find and connect with role models. JTF has evaluated similar initiatives in other faiths, such as the Inspire Aspire program, and found that they deliver measurable results. Similar initiatives can be tailored to the Muslim context.
- Utilize online tools for visual storytelling. In other faiths, online storytelling, such as thebibleproject.com, have also been found to be particularly effective in teaching character and can be adopted for Islamic character education.

Final Thoughts

With so many valuable and actionable ideas emerging from the participant discussions, the convening ended on a positive note. All participants stressed the importance of adopting sound practices for developing a strong Islamic character in American weekend Islamic schools. Amin Aaser noted that Jordan publishes an annual list of the most influential Muslims in the world, and in 2016, American Muslims were recognized more than Muslims from any other country, and said: "There's something unique about Islam in the United States, it has to do with the way in which Americans experience and look at religion. It is much broader in reach than just the United States. The Islam being taught in the United States, not just in weekend schools but in *khutbas* [Friday sermons] is being streamed across the world. This creates an opportunity and responsibility for American Muslims to share their tools and learning with the rest of the world."[37]

There's something unique about Islam in the United States. It has to do with the way in which Americans experience and look at religion.

Other participants agreed; the practices being put in place by Muslims in North America are seen globally as examples that will soon become the norm and followed in Muslim-majority countries. In this context, taking meaningful steps for the character development of students at weekend Islamic schools is both urgent and important.

Convening Participant Bios

Virginia Gray Henry-Blakemore

Mrs. Virginia Gray Henry-Blakemore is the director of interfaith publishing houses Fons Vitae and Quinta Essentia in Louisville, Kentucky, devoted to world spirituality. She is a writer and film producer under contract with the Book Foundation, as well as co-founder and trustee of the Islamic Texts Society of Cambridge, England. Besides having taught filmmaking at Dalton and Fordham Universities and world religions and art history at the Cairo American College, Cambridge University, Centre College, and the Abbey of Gethsemane, she regularly lectures at such noteworthy venues as the 1995 Conference of World Spiritual Art in Tehran and, most recently, the September 2006 Congress on Islamic Spirituality in Singapore. In 1994, she arranged for His Holiness the Dalai Lama to speak in Louisville, and, in April 2006, organized the Dalai Lama Interfaith Congress in San Francisco in which his main focus was to meet with Muslim dignitaries from the world over.

Anisha Ismail Patel

Anisha Ismail Patel, MEd, is the founder and chief education officer of InnovusED, an education consulting firm. She is dedicated to cultivating global citizenship and makes an impact in the fields of civic education and nurturing youth and women in leadership and service. InnovusED has contributed educational expertise to public and private education institutions. Anisha has over 23 years of experience as a teacher, instructional leader, school- and district-level administrator, professor, and consultant. A participant of the Harvard Global Education Think Tank, Anisha has done extensive work in the areas of religious literacy in public schools, cultural competency, and positive behavior intervention systems, as well as designing service learning and global education curriculum.

Maryam Razvi Padela

Maryam Razvi Padela is currently a doctoral candidate for an EdD in curriculum and teaching from the University of Rochester with an anticipated dissertation titled *The Representation and Mediation of Religion in Social Studies Classrooms and Textbooks*. Her interests at this time pertain primarily to public school discourses about religion. She holds a BA in religious studies with a minor in elementary education and an MS in curriculum and teaching. Maryam is also permanently certified to teach in New York State in pre-K-6th grades and her teaching background includes public, private, and weekend schools.

Reem Javed

Reem Javed is a doctoral candidate at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, where she focuses on Islamic studies, women's studies, course design, and critical pedagogy. She also earned an Islamic Education Teacher Certificate through the University of Toronto, School of Education, as well as a BA in Islamic Law and Theology from Zaytuna College in Berkeley, California. (Her previous degrees include a BS in biological sciences from University of California, Davis and an MS in chemistry from San Diego State University.)

Sabith Khan

Sabith Khan is a scholar-practitioner, with expertise in American philanthropy, civil society, religion, and culture. He is an assistant professor at California Lutheran University in Thousand Oaks, California. His research intersects religion, philanthropy, nonprofit organizations, and voluntary action. His skills include management and leadership of organizations and strategic communications. Having worked in India, UAE, and the U.S., he brings strong cross-cultural expertise, as well. In addition, Khan served as a Visiting Researcher at the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies at Georgetown University from 2015 to 2017. Khan is the lead author of a book titled *Islamic Education in the United States and the Evolution of Muslim Nonprofit Institutions* (Edward Elgar Publishing), released in 2017.

Madiha Tahseen

Dr. Madiha Tahseen is a research fellow and a community educator at the Family and Youth Institute. She holds a PhD in applied developmental psychology from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC). She is a research coordinator at the Kennedy Krieger Institute and a postdoctoral researcher at UMBC, conducting a mixed-method research study on the experiences of Muslim American youth.

Amin Aaser

Amin G. Aaser is the managing director of Noor Kids, a Harvard-supported educational program that seeks to build confidence in the religious identity of young Muslims. Noor Kids has been welcomed in over 25,000 homes across 25 countries. Amin began his career in business management, earning an MBA from UC Berkeley.

Aasim Padela

Aasim Padela, MD, MSc, is an associate professor of medicine at the University of Chicago. At the university, he directs a research and educational program termed the Initiative on Islam and Medicine. He is also faculty at the Divinity School, Center for Middle Eastern Studies, and MacLean Center for Clinical Ethics at the university. Dr. Padela is an emergency medicine physician, health services researcher, and bioethicist whose scholarship focuses on the intersection of community health, religious tradition, and bioethics. As a scholar at ISPU and in conjunction with Muslim seminaries and several Muslim community organizations, his research is mobilized toward culturally tailored health care interventions and policy recommendations.

Amaarah DeCuir

Amaarah DeCuir, EdD, has been involved in Islamic weekend schools for almost 20 years in and around the ADAMS Center community, part of the Northern Virginia region. She began her service as a weekend teacher for two years. Years later, she renewed her involvement as an external teaching evaluator and then as a teacher trainer for two local weekend schools. In addition to her work with Islamic weekend schools, she has over 12 years of leadership experience with a full-time Islamic school and five years of classroom teaching experience in public schools. She is currently a faculty member at American University in the teacher education department within the School of Education. Her remarks are informed by these experiences.

Habeeb Quadri

Habeeb Quadri is an educator, author, and youth activist. He is a principal at MCC Academy and part-time staff and advisory board member at the Harvard Graduate School of Education's professional development programs. He has co-authored five books and published two others. He also is board chair of Muslim Youth of North America (MYNA). His consulting company has partnered up with IQRA' Foundation to initiate the first National Islamic Studies Standardized Test and National Islamic Studies Benchmarks.

Mohammad Usman Asrar

Mohammad Usman Asrar is a PhD student in practical theory at Claremont School of Theology. He founded Cubestone Foundation to develop early Islamic educational curriculum, keeping issues of foundational knowledge and character issues in mind. He also has some data on Muslim youth groups having had 15-plus years of experience in teaching and educating youth groups in local mosques.

Susan Douglass

Susan Douglass is the education outreach coordinator at the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies at the Walsh School of Foreign Service. She developed the education outreach program for the Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University in 2007, served as senior researcher for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, and managed several projects for the Ali Vurak Ak Center for Global Islamic Studies at George Mason University. She has contributed to a number of curriculum projects, has designed and developed various online teaching resources, and has a variety of major publications to her name. She received her PhD in world history at George Mason University in 2016, and has an MA in Arab studies from Georgetown University and a BA in history from the University of Rochester.

Tasneema K. Ghazi

Along with her husband, Dr. Abidullah Ghazi, Dr. Tasneema K. Ghazi, PhD, founded the IQRA' Foundation and serves as its executive director. IQRA is a nonprofit Islamic educational establishment (*waqf*) instituted to creatively respond to the growing need of children, youth, and adults for sound Islamic instruction in the modern global village.

Zahra Rafie

Dr. Zahra Seif-Amirhosseini Rafie is a social scientist, holding a PhD in sociology and international relations from the London School of Economic and Political Science. She obtained her master's degree from The University of Cambridge in Islamic history and philosophy, and her BA (Hon.) from The University of London, Goldsmiths College in sociology and philosophy. She is an associate professor of sociology at Nova Community College. She's also a freelance consultant and researcher. Her latest research project is *Youth Empowerment, Ethics, and Islamic Studies Curriculum for Ages 11+.* She recently completed research on Muslim homeschoolers in the greater Washington, DC metropolitan area for the International Institute of Islamic Thought.

Appendix 1:

Helpful Resources on Character Development

The following are resources mentioned by participants during the convening on the topic of character and virtue development:

1. John Templeton Foundation Charter: https://www.templeton.org/funding-areas
2. *Smart and Good High Schools, Integrating Excellence and Ethics for Success in School, Work, and Beyond* report: http://character.org/more-resources/publications/catalog/smart-good/
3. Muslim Leadership Academy: https://mlaprogram.wordpress.com/home/
4. Social and Emotional Learning (SEL): what-is-sel
5. *Screenagers* documentary: https://www.screenagersmovie.com
6. University of Toronto, School of Education Islamic Teacher Education Program: https://www.facebook.com/IslamicTeacherEducationProgram/
7. Ghazali Children's Project: https://ghazalichildren.org/
8. Noor Kids: https://noorkids.com/
9. IQRA' International Educational Foundation: http://iqrafoundation.com/welcome-to-iqra/
10. Standardized test of Islamic Studies for full-time Islamic schools: http://www.isstschools.com
11. International Institute of Islamic Thought: https://www.iiit.org
12. Council of Islamic Schools in North America: http://www.cisnausa.org
13. American Academy of Religion, "Guidelines for Teaching About Religion": https://www.aarweb.org/about/teaching-about-religion-aar-guidelines-for-k-12-public-schools
14. Religious Freedom Center, "Resources for Religious Instruction": http://www.religiousfreedomcenter.org/resources/
15. Common Core State Standards Initiative, "Guidelines on the Study of History and Social Studies": http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RH/11-12/
16. Professional Learning Communities (PLC): https://www.edglossary.org/professional-learning-community/
17. Character Lab: https://www.characterlab.org/
18. The Family and Youth Institute (FYI) educational resources: http://www.thefyi.org/education/
19. *AlJumuah* magazine: https://aljumuah.com/about/
20. The *Muslim Girl* blog: http://themuslimgirl.com/blog/
21. Inspiring Purpose: http://inspiringpurpose.org.uk
22. Visual Storytelling: https://thebibleproject.com
23. Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, *Meeting the Needs of Generation 9/11: Strengthening Religious Literacy*: https://www.ispu.org/strengthening-religious-literacy/

Note: All appendix links were working as of July 4, 2018.

Appendix 2:

Convening Introduction and Questions Sent to Participants Prior to the Convening

Character Virtue Development in Islamic Education Convening

Institute *for* Social Policy *and* Understanding
Washington, DC • July 24-25, 2017

Our Focus

Sir John Templeton, the philanthropist who established the John Templeton Foundation, was deeply moved by the wisdom he found within the Islamic and other faith traditions. One of Sir John's hopes in establishing the Foundation was to help build stronger relationships between faith and scientific communities. He believed that theologians could inform science and that scientists could inform the study and practice of religion. One specific topic of interest for Sir John was character development. Recognizing that all of the world's major religions speak to issues of character, few faith-based schools actively incorporate the latest research on character. In order to effectively engage faith communities with the science of character development, we seek to know more about how we can best address the opportunities, challenges, and needs of Islamic Sunday schools that are interested in integrating the science of character into their curriculum. Our meeting on Tuesday, July 25, is an opportunity for us to hear and learn from you.

Why Character Virtue Development?

Sir John believed that character virtue development was critical to the flourishing of individuals and of societies. He saw human expression of virtue as both reflecting the character of the divine (love, forgiveness) and as the rightful human response toward the divine (humility, gratitude). In Sir John's own writings, it's clear that he attributes his own virtues to the work of God in his life. Our department then has been tasked with supporting research, programs, and resources that spur on the development of the virtues that Sir John identified in the Foundation Charter as being of particular value to him, including (but not limited to) love, purpose, humility, forgiveness, thanksgiving, generosity, honesty, joy, thrift, diligence, creativity, curiosity, awe, future-mindedness, reliability, and communication.

Why Islamic Education and Weekend Schools?

We seek to engage with Islamic education generally, and weekend schools more specifically, for several reasons. Sir John encouraged the foundation to engage with all major faith traditions and this convening is one step toward achieving our goal of working across a diversity of faith traditions. We are interested in weekend schools specifically due to their broad reach. Our focus is on children and adolescents because early childhood and adolescence are critical periods of development for both virtue and faith formation. Brain science has indicated that during early childhood and adolescence the brain is uniquely primed for growth and learning. The positive returns from investing in children and youth reverberate far into the future.

This Convening

Our primary goal for this convening is to learn from you. We seek to identify the needs, opportunities, and challenges within the Islamic weekend school context, especially as they relate to character virtue development. We hope to further understand how character development is understood and practiced, especially how it intertwines with

Islamic faith development. Through this understanding, we want to brainstorm how initiatives involving teaching character development could address these needs and opportunities.

The questions below are for you to consider as you prepare your 15-minute remarks and your one- or two-page written summary. You do not need to address each question; please focus on those most relevant to your work. The purpose of the written summary is to enable participants to become familiar with each other's ideas prior to the day of the convening. We have found that familiarity with each other's ideas facilitates a richer conversation.

1. How can the science of character benefit the good work already being done in weekend schools (as an example of what the science of character looks like in practice you might consult the work of one of our grantees, Character Lab, here)?
2. What are the core components of a Islamic weekend school curriculum? How is character integrated into the curriculum? What role can innovation play, for instance, would online video-modules or smartphone applications be useful? Who are the major publishers or players within the curriculum space? How does a weekend school know if it is being successful in reaching its goals, especially for character development?
3. What are the primary challenges, needs, and opportunities for weekend school teachers today?
4. What are the basic demographics of the youth within North American Islamic weekend schools (age, gender, geographic spread, etc.)? Who leads the Sunday schools? How broad is the theological diversity? Generally, is science addressed, and if so, how?
5. How do weekend schools intentionally involve parents in their character development work? How can parents intentionally complement the work being done at school?

Endnotes

1 This section is excerpted from the Introduction document presented by the John Templeton Foundation at the convening. The full document can be found at the end of this report.

2 Aasim Padela presentation

3 Tasneema Ghazi presentation

4 Tasneema Ghazi presentation

5 Reem Javed presentation

6 Amin Aaser presentation

7 Excerpted from the presentation by Zahra Rafie

8 Details can be found at http://character.org/more-resources/publications/catalog/smart-good/

9 Anisha Ismail Patel presentation

10 This section is excerpted from the presentation by Amaraah DeCuir

11 Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. For more information, see: what-is-sel

12 Tasneema Ghazi presentation

13 Reem Javed comments. The documentary *Screenagers* can be found at: https://www.screenagersmovie.com

14 Details on the course can be found here: https://www.facebook.com/IslamicTeacherEducationProgram/

15 Tasneema Ghazi PowerPoint presentation, Slide 7

16 Tasneema Ghazi PowerPoint presentation, Slide 4

17 Virginia Gray Henry-Blakemore presentation abstract

18 Virginia Gray Henry-Blakemore presentation

19 Amin Aaser presentation

20 Susan Douglass presentation abstract

21 Susan Douglass presentation abstract

22 Susan Douglass presentation abstract

23 Amin Aaser presentation

24 Madiha Tahseen presentation, Slide 1

25 Madiha Tahseen, presentation abstract

26 Amin Aaser presentation

27 Amin Aaser presentation

28 Amin Aaser presentation

29 Amin Aaser presentation

30 Amin Aaser presentation

31 Amin Aaser presentation

32 Zahra Rafie presentation

33 Amaarah DeCuir presentation

34 http://www.isstschools.com

35 Reem Javed presentation

36 Learn more about Professional Learning Communities (PLC) here: https://www.edglossary.org/professional-learning-community/

37 Amin Aaser, in discussion

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RESEARCH MAKING AN IMPACT

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About ISPU

ISPU conducts objective, solution-seeking research that empowers American Muslims to develop their community and fully contribute to democracy and pluralism in the United States. Since 2002, ISPU has been at the forefront of discovering trends and opportunities that impact the American Muslim community. Our research aims to educate the general public and enable community change agents, the media, and policymakers to make evidence-based decisions. In addition to building in-house capacity, ISPU has assembled leading experts across multiple disciplines, building a solid reputation as a trusted source for information for and about American Muslims.

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