

Islamic High School: Yes, you can do it!

Putting High School Requirements and Misconceptions into Perspective.

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I. Introduction

High school is a very challenging project for Muslim communities. Despite its great importance, the majority of Islamic schools are reluctant to start it because of how overwhelming it is perceived. High school is definitely more complicated than middle school, however, its complications are exaggerated into a lot of Islamic schools leaders minds.

This paper explores the various aspects of the high school project and distinguishes between mandatory requirements of high school and the can-do-without luxury items in order to encourage more middle Islamic schools to pursue this critical and worthwhile project.

II. Why Islamic High School

The best thing that ever happened to Muslims in a non-Muslim environment is the availability of Islamic schools—where our children spend most of their growing years. Children go through stages of growth, from infancy to childhood to adolescence. Many things can be cultivated in them as they grow, year after year. In elementary and middle schools, children learn what is taught to them by their parents, but they also absorb and internalize the many lessons and values they are exposed to from their school. Alhamdulillah, our children in Islamic schools can memorize Qur'an very easily and learn to repeat supplications, each in its proper circumstance. In time, they learn to appreciate the wisdom of the Islamic values and teachings and can recognize real-life opportunities in which to apply these teachings.

Vulnerable Age

Yet as children mature and go through adolescence, they go through a change in character, attitude and personality. According to psychologists these are the most crucial stages in their lives. If we interrupt the scheme of Islamic education formed in the child's early years, this may result in a total rebellion against our Islamic value system, due to unavoidable outside influences.

In order for the education achieved in Islamic elementary and middle school to be the most effective and lasting, there must be continuity and reinforcement during the adolescent years. These years are vital in the molding of our young Muslim youth and preparing them to be our future activists for Islam in America. In building Islamic high schools, we can spare our youth the pressure of trying to fit in and be accepted by their non-Muslim peers while still hoping to validate their Muslim identities. This pressure

can either make them yield to non-Islamic values, try to emulate their peers in actions, attire and/or lifestyle, and in doing so, compromising Islamic manners and values, their parents struggled so hard to instill, or in some cases, totally abandoning them.

Adolescence is a very critical stage in character building. Being in an Islamic high school environment can make this phase of a student's life a lot easier. They will not be subject to peer pressure; they will not be exposed to odd alternative lifestyles frowned upon by Islamic principles and values; they will not be tempted to participate in popular school events with free mixing, such as homecoming and prom night; they will not be intimidated by social norms such as dating—or worse, be pressured to participate.

Islamic high schools provide an opportunity for our youth to avoid the challenge that they face to “belong”, to identify with their own. Each young man and woman in this age who is attending high school is under constant barrage of peer pressure, and only a few of them have the strength to stand up to this pressure and be proud of themselves and who they are, rather than stand out as a social outcast. The experience that our sons and daughter face in high schools is not similar, not by a far stretch, to the environment in the universities. High school years have been like an immersion camp that leaves its lasting impression on the identity of the most vulnerable group amongst us. Only those who ALLAH protects are saved from the unavoidable assimilation that takes place in public schools.

Islamic high schools provide also an opportunity for the students to strengthen their faith and be conscious of their responsibility to Allah and humanity. Continuing high school years in an Islamic school is the only way to balance their identities and personalities without leaving any doubts or insecurities in their developing young minds.

In spite of the fact that some parents are trying their utmost best at home to instill Islamic values and set a good example, yet the challenges outside and even in side the home can be terrifying. There are audio-visual influences, print media, TV, video games, movies, peer pressure. All could play an effective role in erasing the Islamic personality and deeply influence their behavior and choices for years. It takes a constant and non-interrupted effort on the part of parents, school, friends, and community to keep our youth on the path of Islamic values.

Molding the Islamic character

Having an Islamic high school will probably be to some students, the last chance to study and learn about the basic values and tenets of our faith. This is the best opportunity for a Muslim community to provide proper training for our future activists, future generation of moms and dads, to train the young generation for daa'wa and outreach. Once these students go to college, and later, the corporate world, they will no doubt be faced with many many questions about Islam. It is our obligation as a community to give them the tools to be able to speak out and respond to these questions, with articulate and persuasive answers. They need the knowledge that is gained from well-selected Islamic Studies materials and curricula, and they need the practical opportunities to give them the strength and confidence to speak out and fend for themselves in situations where there

may be discrimination, prejudice, disrespect or antagonism toward Islam or Muslims. This is what will qualify these students to present Islam in the most positive way possible and consequently further our mission as an Umma.

In high school, students are in a very vulnerable stage of their lives...searching for their identity, trying to find answers to their inner emotional changes and how to have self-control and conduct their lives in a legitimate manner. Islamic knowledge in this stage will help make clear to them the Islamic etiquette of gender issues, purity, marriage, spouse selection, career selection, parenting and community service.

Raising Well-Rounded Muslims

Islamic high schools are the incubators which produce Muslims who view Islam as a way of life. This understanding will be reflected in their career choice as well as spouse selection. This will help them to gear their careers toward the welfare of the Islamic Ummah while leading a successful family life with the right selection they will make based on that understanding. This is the stage where the students' personalities are polished and morphed into its adult format. It is in this stage that the constants and norms of their behavior will be reinforced and put to everyday use and refinement. The process of education (Tarbiyah) through role modeling and practical implementation becomes of paramount importance in building the desired balanced Muslim character.

Lastly, our children of today are the parents of tomorrow. If we are hesitant to go through the time, effort and funds needed to have Islamic high schools to train these future parents to the proper Islamic way, how can we expect them to pass on the Islamic knowledge and have pride in their Muslim identity, to their children and grandchildren?

No other education beyond high school will give them the opportunity to continue their daily Arabic language, Qur'an and Islamic Studies. All these are tools they will need to pass on Islam to future generations.

III. Common Misconceptions

The Problem with "Frame of Reference"

Watch out for people within your school community who will shoot down the idea of launching a full-time Islamic high school, simply because they cannot fathom the prospect of even attempting to provide what they perceive high school is "supposed to be", in view of the Islamic school's modest resources. These naysayers may not be able to see beyond their own "frame of reference"—what they remember or assume "high school" to be. If the person you're talking to, himself attended or enrolled his children in a public, American high school, the large metropolis with 3000 students, 100 teachers, a colossal gym, Olympic-sized playing fields, state-of-the-art science lab, 50 classrooms etc...it may be difficult for him to believe that there are actually hundreds of small public schools in less populated areas as well as very-small, intimate-campus private schools, with *intentionally-limited* enrollment--student populations in the double-digits, a handful of teachers and comparatively humble facilities—schools that also have stellar records and whose students are accepted into wonderful universities nationwide. It may be

difficult for this person to focus his view on the “no-frills” fundamental purpose of any high school—to educate students according to 9-12th curriculum standards and get them into college. You may consider posing this question: *Why are more and more universities accepting HOME SCHOOLED-applicants—including Stanford University,* http://learninfreedom.org/colleges_4_hmsc.html , <http://www.hslda.org/docs/nche/000002/00000241.asp>

Bigger is better

“The NASA Science Lab”

As part of a well-rounded science course for life science, chemistry and physics, students in high school need to conduct many hands-on experiments. Accomplishing this doesn't require a very sophisticated overly expensive science lab. There are different options for the science lab:

1. Limit your lab to the necessary requirements/equipments
2. Work with local community college to rent their lab and send your students over there.
3. Use virtual lab approach where experiments are being simulated on the computer. One of the vendors is www.beyondbooks.com which for \$1/month/student students can have access to these computer simulated experiments. This option may not be accepted by some universities though.

“The Olympic-size Gym/Playfield”

A lot of school officials get discouraged when they see the fancy sports facilities in public schools (stadiums, swimming pools, 5-acres fields...etc). They develop an impression that this is a have-to-have for a successful high school program which is not the case. Physical education can be met in so many other ways and doesn't entail such expensive out-of-reach, for most Islamic schools, facilities.

Highly-qualified teachers

It is very possible for Islamic K-8 schools to utilize their existing middle school teachers, provided that they are subject-specialized (i.e. Math, Science, English etc.), to also teach at the high school level. These same teachers can be groomed into being highly-qualified for their respective subjects through on-going and aggressive professional development activities. One “quick fix” schools may take advantage of is to require all teachers to get an “emergency credential” from the public school district. While this does not, in itself add to the teacher's education or expertise, per say, it does help to set expectations that the teacher should lay a plan to eventually become fully credentialed, in a period of time determined by the school. Teachers should be encouraged and supported (e.g. through offering monetary incentives) to enroll in part-time local or online credentialing programs.

Several universities offer local or online classes such as National University and North Dakota and University of San Diego (www.onlinelearning.net). Online classes are a very good option for your teachers currently employed at school, so that you don't need to lose them to a full-time, off-campus credentialing program, obligating you to hire replacements, while the original teachers satisfy credential requirements.

While university admissions people will not check to see if the student's high school teachers are credentialed or even qualified (remember that home schoolers are often taught by their own parents!), they will however, check that the school is *accredited* (see below). At the high school level, with the expectation for students to study Science, English, History and Math at secondary-levels and more in-depth, teachers **MUST KNOW THEIR SUBJECTS**. Teacher applicants with Master's degrees in the subjects you wish to offer are more beneficial to your students than applicants with multiple-subject (K-6) credential or only general degrees. The school may then supplement (coach) whatever is lacking in the teacher's understanding of lesson planning, assessment and/or classroom management.

No Sports, No Way

One of the biggest attractions large public schools have over small private schools is competitive sports programs. Many Islamic schools simply don't have the enrollment numbers to build teams for competitive sports (football, basketball etc.). They also may not have expert coaches. This does not mean that the school cannot offer a sports program, with a little creativity and coordination it is possible. Schools should investigate the following options:

- Contact PE teachers at other faith schools in your area and ask to join their inter-school leagues. (Christian sports leagues even allow non-religious independent schools to participate.)
- Create a directory of community competitive sports leagues for your students/parents—there are plenty! Local Parks and Recreation districts organize structured sports teams that compete locally. Students' long-term participation in such a league will not only satisfy their interest in sports but may also make them attractive to colleges and earn them scholarships—just as much as having joined a public high school team.
- Develop an Independent Study policy. The school should determine and explain to students what physical activities (e.g. soccer, tennis, working out at a gym) are acceptable substitutes for whatever PE or sports the school is able to provide. The school should determine the number of credits to award for these activities. The policy should be accompanied by official forms (where the student must describe the activity and state the location/ provider), and a log of the number of hours completed, including parent and/or program representative signatures.

The “shopping mall” of classes and electives

Another high school fallacy is that schools must have an extensive menu of courses for students to choose from. This is the case in public high schools and it is definitely a limitation in our Islamic schools. However, it should not stop the school from pursuing its high school program. A School can limit the course offerings based on its teachers qualifications and most students' preferences. Regarding club participation and electives issue: the truth is that, while colleges are seeking students who are “well-rounded” and have participated in activities outside their academic coursework, admissions people will take into consideration the opportunities offered by the school. The question will be

asked: *Did the student demonstrate in-depth leadership and initiative in their involvement?* If the school offers 20 different clubs and electives, admissions offices are not going to be impressed by a prospective student who does indeed join all twenty clubs at a high school, but does nothing more than attend meetings. Likewise, if a student attended a school that offers 2 clubs/ electives, and signed up in one of them but showed in-depth involvement, initiative, and leadership—colleges will reward this. Smaller Islamic high schools can also compensate by researching community programs its students may enroll in to satisfy the need for enrichment activities, and make this information available to parents. Also, students themselves, and their parents may be encouraged to start their own after-school clubs. Here, the sky is the limit as to the types of clubs that can be arranged—depending on the skills and interests of your students and parents. So long as these clubs are given structure and “officiality” by a charter, application form, set objectives, a schedule and adult supervision, they are legitimate. A student who starts his/her own structured club is automatically “President” of whatever club—this impressive information will definitely show initiative and leadership which will shine on his/her college application!

IV. Getting Started

Feasibility Study:

The school should conduct a feasibility study of the school’s capacity to provide a program that allows students to exceed the minimum graduation requirements set by the State and college admissions requirements, vis-à-vis the school’s resources of time, staff and funds. The school leadership team should consider the implications (expected additions or changes) of a high school program on the following areas of school operation: *teaching staff, facility, curriculum, fees, and administrative release time*. A timeline of activities that build the infrastructure of the high school program should be included and should reflect proposed courses, needed staff and projected expenses for grades 9, 10, 11 and 12. Launching one grade per year affords school leaders, staff and budget time to gradually adjust to the new demands of high school. As part of the information gathering, the feasibility study team should consult with other area private schools with hindsight on starting high school. These people can be considered “experts” of sort and their testimony may help in the next step of *getting your community’s buy-in*.

Getting your community’s buy-in

The school should conduct a survey of parents and community regarding the expectations and demands of these groups for a comprehensive Islamic high school. The feedback data of currently-enrolled middle school parents is of particular interest, as they are the ones who would be most-immediately affected by the decision to launch high school. Before any decision is made to launch high school, school leaders (board and administration) should reach a strong consensus about the need for and feasibility of introducing high school. Any dissention at the top will likely trickle down to the school faculty and fuel internal fears about the decision. Before any decision is announced to the community, the teachers and staff should be engaged in open discussion about the proposal for high school. The feasibility study and expert testimony may comfort teachers who are reluctant or apprehensive. Teachers are any school’s “front-line

soldiers”. They are the ones most closely in contact with parents and prospective high school students. Teachers can either help school leaders’ efforts to bolster support for the new high school, or they can shake fear and mistrust into prospective customers. Remind the teachers of key facts, messages and objectives: 1. *The point of high school is to help students get into college.* 2. *Colleges want students who are well-educated and well-rounded.* 3. *A good education starts in the classroom.* 4. *If you have the passion for your subject and able to relate to your students, then your students will get the education they need.* 5. *Islamic values will be more deeply instilled into our students.* Teachers are the mouthpiece of your school. Expectations should be set from the start that you need them to help you sell the program to the community. They need to make concerted efforts to talk to students in their classes about continuing with the Islamic school for high school. Perhaps the strongest, most persuasive argument teachers can make to their students is that, if they stay on for high school, they will continue to receive personalized attention through their studies, unlike what they would likely get at the “factory” public high schools with 2-3000 students. Teachers themselves are very good at brainstorming other “selling points” to use on students and parents. Arrange a Parent/ Community Orientation to share the school’s feasibility study and plans for high school. The “experts” with whom you consulted could be invited to address the group as well.

Learning the ropes:

Though there are plenty of high school experts out there to call on for direction and advice, it’s necessary for Islamic school leaders to grow their own expertise in this arena, if the project is to enjoy any long-term stability and credibility. There are several ways school leaders can go about boosting their own learning and experience. 1. *Do your Homework:* Go on the internet and READ as much as you can about high school programs, state requirements, curriculum standards, testing, high school job descriptions, policies, course catalogs, student handbooks. As you read you will find your understanding of high school issues naturally expanding—including your ability to recognize and define all those ACRONYMS unique to the field of education and specific to high school e.g. PSAT, NMSQT, SAT, AP, PLAN, ACT. This exercise, in itself will give you some background knowledge on high school which will help you to develop a good list of questions to ask in the next step. 2. *Networking and Consultation:* Check out the list of resources (below) and start making phone calls. Make friends with administrators, faculty and staff at public and private high schools in your area. Some of them will prove quite helpful and generous with their guidance and resources. Make appointments for phone or in-person conversations about high school requirements. Your list of questions will grow and become more specific as months pass. Your confidence and comfort will also grow. 3. *Do-It-Yourself:* The best way to learn is by doing it yourself! Once you’ve found out from the experts about the basic requirements in terms of paperwork, applications, deadlines, courses, texts, it’s time to get your hands dirty. Even if you are fortunate to find a professional to do the work for you, make sure to shadow him/her on every task, better yet, actually fill out the required forms, write the course plan, research curriculum, order materials, schedule exams, and write the student handbook.—This is how you will become “the expert” and reduce your dependence on others. The College Board also provides annual Counselor Workshops (professional

development for high school counselors) that any registered high school can register for and learn more.

Hire a professional college counselor:

The Western Association for College Admission Counseling (WACAC) and the National Association (NACAC), feature job listings on their websites (below) from which schools can hire trained, qualified counselors to advise students regarding course selection, credits/ transcripts and admissions requirements. You may also use your networking/ negotiation skills to find someone in your local community—currently employed full or part-time at another high school or as a private, freelance counselor—check the Yellow Pages!

V. The Basics (Requirements)

Graduation Requirements:

The school administration will need to reconcile its own educational goals with the state-mandated high school graduation requirements and the university system's admission criteria. The school course offerings have to satisfy both. Appendix A shows a table for such requirements.

Accreditation

Every high school must undergo a thorough review by a regional accrediting organization every six years in order to remain a viable recognized educational organization. This is a must for your high school program, and must be in time for 11th grade. It is a requirement by the College Board to recognize your high school program and grant you a code which you can use for school identification in respect to testing and university admissions.

Curriculum

To develop a curriculum, prospective schools will want to consider the subject admission requirements of the most demanding public university system in the state, as well as the state high school graduation requirements. Based on that, the school administration needs to design a course map stating which subjects/courses to be taught in grades 9-12. After this is accomplished, an effort should start by teachers to develop a syllabus for each one of these courses. These syllabi may be based on state content standards and targeted university system approved course descriptions. The school administration can decide if they want to prepare their students to be admitted only to community colleges where they can attain an AA/AS degree for 2 years, then transfer to a university in their state, or be able to apply to 4-year university right after graduation. In some states (like California) in order to have your students able to directly apply to universities, your courses have to be **College Preparatory** which means it should be designed in a way to be approved by the targeted university system.

Educational Programs:

School administration can take advantage of the following educational programs in their high school:

Advanced Placement Program:

A program that offers college level courses at high schools across the United States and Canada. AP program is run by the College Board which develops and maintains college level courses in various subject areas. In addition, it supports teachers of AP courses, supports universities as they define their policies regarding AP grades, and develops and coordinates the administration of annual AP examinations. These activities are funded through fees charged to students taking AP Exams.

International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme (DP):

IB is an international program and a leading university entrance program. It is taught in 2,075 schools, often in international schools, in 125 countries all around the world (as of 2007). More than half of the schools offering the Diploma Programme are state-funded schools. Though it is recognized by more and more universities in the U.S.—many that offer college credit for IB Diploma students, however, it remains less popular than nationally affiliated preparatory, such as the Advanced Placement program.

Online classes:

This is an option which is being adopted by schools with low enrollment in high school classes. Not all students succeed in online classes. Students who are not “self-starters”, with disciplined study habits, or who are easily distracted, may find online classes dry and boring—they may tune out and not learn well. They can also be costly. Some vendors are National University Online and Laural Springs.

Community Colleges classes:

The school administration has plan curriculum that includes fulfilling certain subject requirements at a local community college. This is opportunity for them to get “double” credits for some college classes and perhaps finish high school earlier. However not all universities will grant college credit for these classes.

Administration

Because of the so many details of high school, a certain amount of time is needed for the program administration. These tasks include but are not limited to daily interaction with students and teachers, discipline, promotion of program, student recruitment, maintenance of high school records, curriculum development, student assessment tracking, independent study tracking, guidance counseling, grant writing, grade and credit reporting, training, mentoring and on-going assistance.

Assessment

There are a variety of standardized assessment tests that are specific to high school and required by the university admissions criteria. The main ones are

PSAT (Preliminary Scholastic Assessment Test)

The PSAT/NMSQT is a practice test for the SAT that is also used in determining the National Merit Semifinalists. This is an optional test.

SAT (Scholastic Assessment Test)

It has two parts: Reasoning Test and Subject Tests

The Reasoning Test is the most common entrance examination. Most colleges and universities use the scores to predict how well a prospective student will perform in college. The subject tests are given to test students knowledge in particular subject area. Some colleges and universities use SAT subject tests scores as criteria for admissions. Some colleges do not require students to take SAT subject tests at all. The SAT is owned, published, and developed by the College Board. This test is necessary if ACT not taken.

PLAN

The PLAN is a "pre-ACT" test that is generally administered in the fall of the sophomore year. ACT claims that it predicts success on the ACT.

ACT (American College Test)

The ACT is another college entrance examination used in addition to, or instead of, the SAT. ACT assessment measures high school students' general educational development and their capability to complete college-level work with the multiple-choice tests covering four skill areas: English, mathematics, reading, and science, reasoning.

AP/IB Exams

AP exams are taken upon completion of an advanced placement or IB course. The College Board provides teacher training for each course. Almost all universities will award college credit for certain scores.

*Staff***Teachers:**

The school should hire or assign teachers to teach the high school courses who have:

1. B.A or B.S. as a minimum, and credentialed or be on the path to get their credential.
2. Or a M.S. degree in the field of study they are teaching.

High School counselor:

Simple diploma program should have a high school counselor no later than 11th grade. College prep program requires this person no later than 9th grade.

This person's responsibility is to advice students academically and personally, analyze students' transcripts, keep in touch with different colleges regarding student admissions and requirements, ensure meeting all state requirements, monitor students' academic progress, and keep track of external dates and deadlines related to student exams and course submissions.

Facilities

High school students need more space than elementary students. They need to have an outside basketball court for boys and the indoor basketball/Gym for girls. There are no facility requirements for a simple diploma program. This becomes an issue for high school accreditation. The facility does not need to be huge, nor luxurious, it should just be able to support and accommodate educational objectives for courses and activities such as Science instruction (lab), Physical Education (Track, Basketball), Technology (Computer Lab).

VI. Key Resources/ Contacts

The College Board
www.collegeboard.com

National Association for College Admissions Counselors
www.nacacnet.org

Western Association for College Admissions Counselors
www.wacac.org

Western Association of Schools and Colleges
www.wascweb.org

University of California Office of the President
www.ucop.edu

Appendix A
Comparison of high school graduation requirements in state of California

High School Subject Area	State Mandated Requirements for High School Graduation	UC Requirements for Freshman Admissions (all UC approved courses)	CSU Requirements for Freshman Admissions (all UC approved courses)
English	Three years	Four years	Four years
Mathematics	Two years, including Algebra I beginning in 2003-04. (EC 51224.5)	Three years, including algebra, geometry, and intermediate algebra. Four years recommended.	Three years, including algebra, intermediate algebra, and geometry.
Social Science	Three years of history/social science, including one year of U.S. history & geography; one year of world history, culture, and geography; and one semester each of American government and economics.	Two years of history/social science, including one year of U.S. history or one-half year of U.S. history and one-half year of civics or American government; and one year of world history, cultures, and geography.	Two years, including one year of U.S. history or U.S. history and government and one year of other approved social science.
Science	Two years, including biological and physical sciences.	Two years with lab required, chosen from biology, chemistry, and physics. Three years recommended.	Two years, including one year of biological and one year of physical science with lab.
Foreign Language	One year of either visual and performing arts or foreign language.	Two years in same language required. Three years recommended.	Two years in same language required.
Visual and Performing Arts		One year of visual and performing arts chosen from the following: dance, drama/theater, music, or visual art.	One year of visual and performing arts chosen from the following: dance, drama/theater, music, or visual art.
Physical Education	Two years		