

The Islamic School of Miami Weekend Program

by

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Abstract

This paper presents the history of the Islamic School of Miami Weekend School program that began in 1989 in South Miami-Dade County, Florida. A description of the community context is provided. The goals and objectives of the program and how they have evolved over time in view of events that have happened locally, nationally, and globally are described. The paper describes the curriculum with a focus on courses of study, scheduling, selection of textbooks, and assessment. The administrative structure of the school and the school's relationship with the Masjid and Board of Directors are presented. The recruitment, retention, and continuous development of teachers are discussed. The successes and challenges of the program are discussed with a view to sharing our experiences with other schools/communities. These include but are not limited to: student attendance, parent and community involvement, budget, teacher development, staff turnover, student assessment, quality control measures, program evaluation, discipline and physical facilities. Successful strategies used to address these issues are discussed. Specific recommendations are offered to other schools/communities based on our experience.

The Islamic School of Miami has its genesis in the efforts of a small group of brothers and sisters who were concerned about the provision of sound Islamic Education to muslim youth in the south Miami-Dade area. Around 1985, two muslim sisters established a very small school in a rented community hall. It continued for a couple of years. In 1989, a very comprehensive effort was undertaken by muslim educators to establish a weekend school under the umbrella of the Institute for Islamic Education and Research. The weekend school was held at a rented public school building on Sundays from 10:00 am to 2:00 pm. After starting with a small group of students, student enrollment rose to about 200. A curriculum committee was formed to design the curriculum, teaching Quranic Arabic, Quranic recitation and memorization, Seeratun Nabiyyi, and Islamic Studies. By the 1990s, the muslim population in South Miami-Dade was growing rapidly. The muslim community in the area was composed mostly of immigrants from South Asia, the Middle East, the Caribbean, and Africa. The need for a more established weekend Islamic school and eventually a full-time Islamic school was high on the agenda of the community.

In 1994, a group of muslim educators at Florida International University and the Miami-Dade County Public Schools in association with the Muslim Students Association of Florida International University established the Islamic School of Miami. Classes were held at the FIU campus in South Miami-Dade. The organization was incorporated in the State of Florida as a non-profit organization with the following goals and objectives:

1. To meet the educational needs of muslims by:
 - a. establishing and operating a weekend/evening school to provide courses on Islam
 - b. establishing and operating a full-time accredited preK-12 school
 - c. establishing and operating an Islamic University and/or center for Islamic Studies at local universities.
2. To enhance the understanding of Islam.

In 2001, the Islamic School of Miami bought a 4 1/4 acre property in West Miami-Dade with an existing building that was converted to a multipurpose facility for conducting prayers and the weekend classes. There is plan to build a masjid and a fulltime elementary school beginning in June 2005. In the 2002-03 school year, a program of Friday evening classes was added. During the 2004-05 school year, there are 185 registered students in the Sunday school program with 15 teachers, and 65 students and five teachers registered in the Friday evening classes.

Aims and Objectives of the Islamic School of Miami

The following aims and objectives have guided the educational program of the Islamic School of Miami Weekend School:

1. *To help students read and understand the Quran.*
2. *To familiarize students with Islamic beliefs, conduct, and way life.*
3. *To acquaint students with the life of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), his companions, and other prophets.*
4. *To provide courses in Arabic and any other languages which the community desires.*
5. *To provide opportunities for creating and developing leadership qualities among the students through various activities such as student government, school newspaper/magazine, Year Book, etc.*
6. *To assist the students to understand and evaluate the thoughts and religions of others.*

The curriculum focuses on teaching Arabic, Quranic recitation and memorization, Ibadah and Islamic Studies (including the Seera of prophet Muhammad (SAW) and the other prophets of Allah. Classes are run every Sunday from 10:00 am to 1:30 pm., and there are four periods of 40 minutes each, with a 30-minute break in between. The fifth period is preparation for Salat-ul-Zuhr. The actual schedule is as follows:

The Islamic School of Miami Bell Schedule

Period	Time
Period 1	10:00 - 10:40
Period 2	10:45 - 11:25
Lunch Break	11:30 – 12:00
Period 3	12:00 - 12:40
Period 4	12:45 - 1:25
Period 5	1:30 - 2:00
Salat ul Zuhr	1:40
Salat ul Zuhr Iqama	2:00
School Dismissal	

Students are not permitted to leave school before Salat ul Zuhr. It is strongly recommended that parents attend the prayer with their children and teachers, and thus serve as role models.

Students are served snacks during the lunch break. During the month of Ramadan, younger students bring their own snacks/lunch from home. This is a time for the students to also play and relax.

Over the years, the curriculum has gone through several changes based on the needs of students and the community. In 1992-93 school year, a small group of educators - the principal (Mr. Mohammad Ibrahimuddin), vice principal (Dr. Mohammed El-Sayed); a teacher (Mr. Anwar Saeed, who was later replaced by Dr. Abdul Hamid Samra), and the Curriculum Coordinator (Dr. Mohammed K. Farouk) revamped the curriculum to make it more streamlined and age appropriate. The group also decided to adopt the Iqra textbook series for the various grade/age levels. This was done in order to ensure consistency and because the Iqra publications are based on sound research. Since then, the curriculum is reviewed annually and tweaked when and where necessary to ensure relevance and appropriateness, based on teacher, parent, and student feedback. A new assessment system that is aligned with the curriculum and textbooks was developed during the 2004-05 school year.

The following is a description of the rules and regulations of the Islamic School of Miami
Weekend program:

RULES AND REGULATIONS.

The following policies regarding absence, tardiness, and homework are suggested by the school administration. However, teachers will have discretion over formulating their own classroom policies.

Absence Policy:

Students and their parents are to be emphatically reminded about the importance of regular attendance. Few hours each week are not enough to teach Islamic Education. It is in the interest of our young generation that they should not miss a single school day. Islam, its knowledge, and practices can only save our children from drugs, marijuana, alcohol, and other sexually transmitted diseases, including the fatal disease of "AIDS". Therefore, consequences of student absence should be communicated to students and parents. The consequences are to be provided immediately.

Consequences:

1st time absence: Teacher's aide calls home of absent student and informs student how much he/she has missed by not coming to school.

2nd time absence: Teacher calls home and talks to student and also parent and discuss the importance of regular attendance for Islamic Education.

TARDY POLICY:

Students are to report to class at the beginning of the period and position themselves in the classroom to learn. If a student does not report to class on time, the consequences will be as follows:

Consequences:

1st time student is tardy - WARNING

2nd time student is tardy - WRITE NAME ON BOARD WITH ONE CHECK

3rd time student is tardy -WRITE NAME ON BOARD WITH TWO CHECK MARKS AND DETENTION DURING LUNCH TIME

4th time student is tardy - WRITE NAME ON BOARD WITH THREE CHECK MARKS AND CALL PARENTS

5th time student is tardy - WRITE NAME ON BOARD WITH FOUR CHECK MARKS AND CONFERENCE WITH SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR

Homework Policy:

Since weekend school for few hours is not enough to teach Islamic Education, homework is the other best alternative for teaching/learning. Homework is more effective if a written understanding is reached with the parents, determining the purpose and the way in which help at home can best be offered. Homework should be checked by the teacher and mistakes of students will be indicated for correction.

Consequences:

1st time: Name written on board for not doing homework and a verbal warning.

2nd time: Name written on board with ONE CHECK detention at school lunch/snack time to do homework.

3rd time: Name written on board with TWO CHECKS detention at school to do homework, and telephone to parents.

4th time: Name written on board with THREE CHECKS detention at school snack time to do homework. Request a parent conference.

5th time: Name written on board with FOUR CHECKS, detention at school snack time to do homework, referral to School Administration.

Discipline Procedure:

If a student has violated classroom regulations, or is a constant classroom discipline problem, the teacher may:

1. Contact the student's parents
2. refer the student to the Principal.

Dress Code:

All participants in the school are required to dress in conformity with Islamic requirements. Those who are not in conformity with the school policy will not be allowed to attend classes.

PARENT - TEACHER - STUDENT ASSOCIATION (PTSA).

Parents, teachers, and students are strongly urged to join the Islamic School of Miami PTSA, which serves as an advisory board to the school. The main objective of the PTSA is to provide the necessary support for curricular, academic, co-curricular, and physical plant development of the school.

A W A R D S

1. "PERFECT ATTENDANCE AWARD" A certificate of perfect attendance will be granted to each student at the end of each grading period.
2. "STUDENT OF THE YEAR AWARD" There will be two, one award each for a male and a female student of the year for overall outstanding performance in academic and co-curricular activities.
3. "BEST SCHOLAR AWARDS" These will be granted to one student from each grade level.

The administrative structure of the Islamic School of Miami

The Islamic School of Miami operates under the general direction of the Board of Directors of the Islamic School of Miami, Inc. The Board consists of nine members, with a Chairperson, Vice Chairperson, Secretary, and Treasurer. All the Board members are volunteers.

The school is headed by a principal; a vice principal for curriculum, a vice principal for administration, a Counselor, and three office staff members.

Relationship with the Board

The Constitution of the Islamic School of Miami requires all Board members to actively participate in all the educational activities of the school. As a result, one Board member is the Principal, two members of the Board are the Vice Principals of the School, the Board Chair, Mr. Tasnim Uddin, is a teacher, and one board member (Mr. Saeed Sakrani) supervises the Friday classes. As a result of this arrangement, the relationship between the Board and the school is cordial. The Board develops policies and general guidelines for the weekend school programs that the school administration implements.

The Board has its separate budget and bank account. Signatories to the board account are the Board chair and treasurer (Mrs. Lynda Raheem), while the principal is the signatory to the school account. The school operating budget is managed by the principal. Tuition collected goes into the school account. Teacher honorariums and school supplies are paid out of the school budget by the principal. The maintenance of the physical facilities and custodial expenses, and utilities are paid out of the board account. Without the Board paying the utilities, physical maintenance, and custodial expenses, the school will not be able to afford these expenses. However, the activities of the school generate donations for the organization.

The Principal provides overall leadership for the school. He coordinates the work of the vice principals, counselor, office staff, teachers, and liaises with the Board of Directors. He is responsible for the overall maintenance of the facility. He, along with two vice principals, screens and hires teachers and the counselor. He is also responsible for hiring and firing the office staff. He liaises with parents and community groups and agencies. The Principal has overall authority and responsibility for the school budget and operating account. The current Principal is Mr. Muhammad Ibrahimuddin, who is a veteran educator with over 30 years of

teaching and administrative experience in public schools and is an Assistant Principal at Hialeah Adult Education Center in the Miami-Dade County Public Schools.

The Vice Principal for Curriculum is responsible for the development and revision of the curriculum, the adoption, purchase, and sale of textbooks, providing support to teachers in curriculum development, lesson planning, assessment, screening and selecting teacher applicants, teacher training, and other duties assigned by the principal. The current Vice Principal for Curriculum is Dr. Mohammed K. Farouk, an Associate Professor of Education, former department chair and Associate Dean in the College of Education at Florida International University.

The Vice Principal for Administration is responsible for assisting the Principal with his administrative responsibilities such as scheduling of classes, assignment of teachers, liaising with parents and community groups and agencies, discipline, monitoring office staff, requisitioning and purchasing of school/office supplies, and other duties assigned by the Principal. The Vice Principal for Administration is Mr. Tarek Chebbi, an Educational Evaluation expert with the Miami-Dade County Public Schools and a doctoral candidate in Curriculum and Instruction in the College of Education at Florida International University.

The Counselor is Mrs. Nadia. She is responsible for registration, attendance, testing, student placement, discipline, and assisting the Vice Principal for Curriculum with monitoring the implementation of the curriculum. The current Counselor is a certified elementary school teacher in the Miami-Dade County Public Schools.

Recruitment, retention, and continuous development of teachers

Currently, there are 19 teachers working at the Islamic School of Miami - 15 for the Sunday program, and 4 for the Friday evening classes. One of the teachers is a certified Montessori teacher with several years of teaching experience. 90% of the teachers are female. A few of the teachers are volunteers, but most are paid between \$25 and \$50 a week depending on their experience. Interested individuals usually contact the school to express their interest in becoming a teacher. The Principal and the Vice Principals interview the candidates to determine their suitability. After a thorough investigation, and being satisfied with the results of the interview and the investigation, an offer of employment is made. Upon acceptance of the offer, the candidate then fills out the appropriate official employment forms, including eligibility to work in the United States. The Counselor then works with the Vice Principal for Administration, and sometimes with the Principal, and assigns the teacher a classroom based on need, the teacher's qualifications and experience, as well as preference.

Teacher retention is not an issue at the Islamic School of Miami. The teaching force is stable, although a few teachers have left after completing their studies and returning to their home countries.

A week before the beginning of the new school year, a teacher orientation meeting is conducted. Teachers, new and old, are informed about school policies, the curriculum, and expectations for behavior and conduct. Teachers have an opportunity to voice their concerns and issues that are openly discussed and those that can be resolved there are resolved. The school administration will take other issues and concerns from the teachers to study them and resolve them. The Vice Principal for Curriculum has organized a few professional development activities for teachers on lesson planning, continuous assessment, classroom management. These workshops are not regularly given. Teachers are also encouraged to participate in workshops

and conferences organized by other organizations such as the Muslim Teachers Association of South Florida (MTA).

Successes

We are blessed by Allah that we have been able to operate the Islamic School of Miami Weekend program for so many years. The following are what we think are our successes:

1. We are still in existence. The fact that we have been doing this work since the 1980's is a testimony to our success.
2. Strong community support. We believe the community continues to support the school because of its excellent programs.
3. Graduates of the program are now coming back to the school as teachers. They have graduated from college and in a few cases graduate school and hold professional positions in their fields. They also play a leadership role in organizing co-curricular activities at the school, thus enriching the educational program. Our graduates are also actively involved in other local masajids and Islamic Centers.
4. Continuous improvement of the curriculum and assessment system. We review the curriculum and assessment system on a regular basis for relevance and appropriateness.
5. A stable teaching force.

Challenges

Just like any other organization, we do face some challenges that we are actively working to address. These include:

1. Lack of professional qualifications. A majority of the teachers are not professionally trained. A few are Montessori trained and/or professionally certified public school

teachers. The school administration encourages teachers to go to college to earn a teacher education degree or take classes for certification.

2. A majority of the teachers are immigrants and educated in their home countries. Some of them are not familiar with the American culture and the US educational system. They therefore have difficulty reconciling their approach to teaching and the children's view of schooling. This often results in frustration among the teachers and the students. This is important in view of the fact that most of the children are born and raised in the United States and attend public schools here. We try to address this issue through workshops and one-on-one training of the teachers as well as conflict resolution between teachers and students.
3. Tardiness: Even though our teaching staff has been stable, a persistent problem we have is that most of them are not punctual. As a result, most of the students also come to school late. Student tardiness could also be attributed to parental influence. Many parents do not see tardiness as a problem. We constantly remind teachers, students, and parents about the importance of punctuality in Islam and their responsibilities as Muslims to come to school on time. We also record tardiness and factor it into the calculation of the students' final grade. We encourage punctuality through the end of year award program as well.
4. Not following the curriculum. Many teachers do not adhere to the official school curriculum, preferring to teach what they personally believe is important for the students to learn. We try to address this problem through monitoring the teachers' lesson plans, homework assignments, and student performance on the midterm and final examinations.

5. Irregular attendance by some students. This problem is partly a result of lack of parents' seriousness. This leads to problems of students not doing their homework, poor performance on the examinations, and difficulty in accurately monitoring student progress.
6. Limited parental involvement. Not all parents are actively involved in the education of their children. This results in some students not making significant achievement in the Islamic School. The school organizes open houses to educate parents about the program and their responsibilities in reinforcing what the school teaches at home, especially because students attend the Islamic School for only four hours a week.
7. Discipline. Due to issues with parents presented above, it is sometimes hard to enforce the discipline plan.
8. Physical facilities. Even though we have a bigger facility now, it is still not adequate to meet the needs of the school. For example, we use the same space to conduct classes on Fridays and Sundays as we do for regular and Friday prayers. This requires us to use partitions to divide the classrooms, move chairs and tables and rugs every time classes are held. The use of partitions increases the noise levels that may interfere with lessons. The Board is moving along with plans to start building the masjid and a full-time school in June 2005.

Conclusion

This paper describes the Islamic School of Miami Weekend program – its history, curriculum, administrative structure, successes, and challenges. It is imperative that as the muslim population continues to grow in the United States at a rapid pace, it is imperative that we pay attention to the education of muslim children as well as adults. We must establish

educational programs that will prepare our children for learning about Islam, strengthening their faith, maintaining their Islamic identity, as well as for living in a pluralistic democratic society in a globalized world. We must find a forum such as the ISNA Education Forum, and form networks to exchange information about our various educational programs so we can all learn from one another and develop standards for establishing and operating full-time and weekend Islamic schools.

It is critically important to pay attention to the professional development of Islamic school teachers. Training workshops can be organized in house or through external organizations and/or consultants.

Islamic Schools and Islamic centers must work hard to educate parents about the importance of their involvement in the education of their children, to take the Islamic schools more seriously, and provide support to these institutions in order to perform their job more effectively. We need a serious change of attitude among muslim parents and educators toward Islamic education and its central role in the survival of the muslim community.

In order for Islamic Schools to prosper, there should be a clear demarcation of the roles and responsibilities of the Board of Directors and the School administration. We have found this to be critically important at the Islamic School of Miami, and this has helped the school administration tremendously in focusing on the school rather than fighting with the Board and/or getting bogged down in politics.

In addition to providing formal education, Islamic schools must also pay attention to the physical, emotional, and psychological development of the child. Hence, the curriculum should be broad enough to include co-curricular activities, athletic programs, and such other programs/activities that enhance the development of the whole child.

