Effective School Improvement

Its Relevance in Islamic Schools

By

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1.   Introduction

School Improvement is the new trend in education circles. It is certainly not a fad that will die a natural death but rather the articulation of an ancient need into realistic steps.

All regional accreditation organizations have evolved to include "school improvement" in their mission. Accreditation is not any longer a matter of simply meeting certain criteria, such as, what is the percentage of teaching staff that is certified? Nor is accreditation and school improvement about doing something to meet requirements. For example, let's have the students take the Stanford 9 since they want us to do it. It should be what the school is all about.

Regardless of whether an Islamic school is accredited with a regional organization or not, adopting an improvement plan is the key to survival, growth and success.

2.   Characteristics of an Islamic School

The estimates for the number of Islamic schools at this time in North America vary from 120 to 400, according to the Islamic Schools League of North America. They often open with as few as 20 students and may grow to over 700 students in certain large metropolitan areas. Despite these differences in size, it would be safe to surmise that all Islamic schools share certain characteristics:

a. The majority are **private** schools.
b. It follows that they all have critical **financial** situations.
c. They cater to a **minority** of the general population.
d. It follows that they have **specific needs**.
e. The governing **board** is often composed of influential well-meaning individuals who are not necessarily experts in education.
f. The administration and **staff** may or may not be certified, and their **payscale** is generally below that of public schools in the same area.
g. Despite creative recruiting methods, most schools have problems **recruiting and retaining** suitable staff, usually because of the above-mentioned salary discrepancy.
h. As a result, **educational quality** may suffer, missions may remain theoretical, and student enrollment may decline.

We can use these common characteristics to build a simple diagram of Islamic school survival as follows:
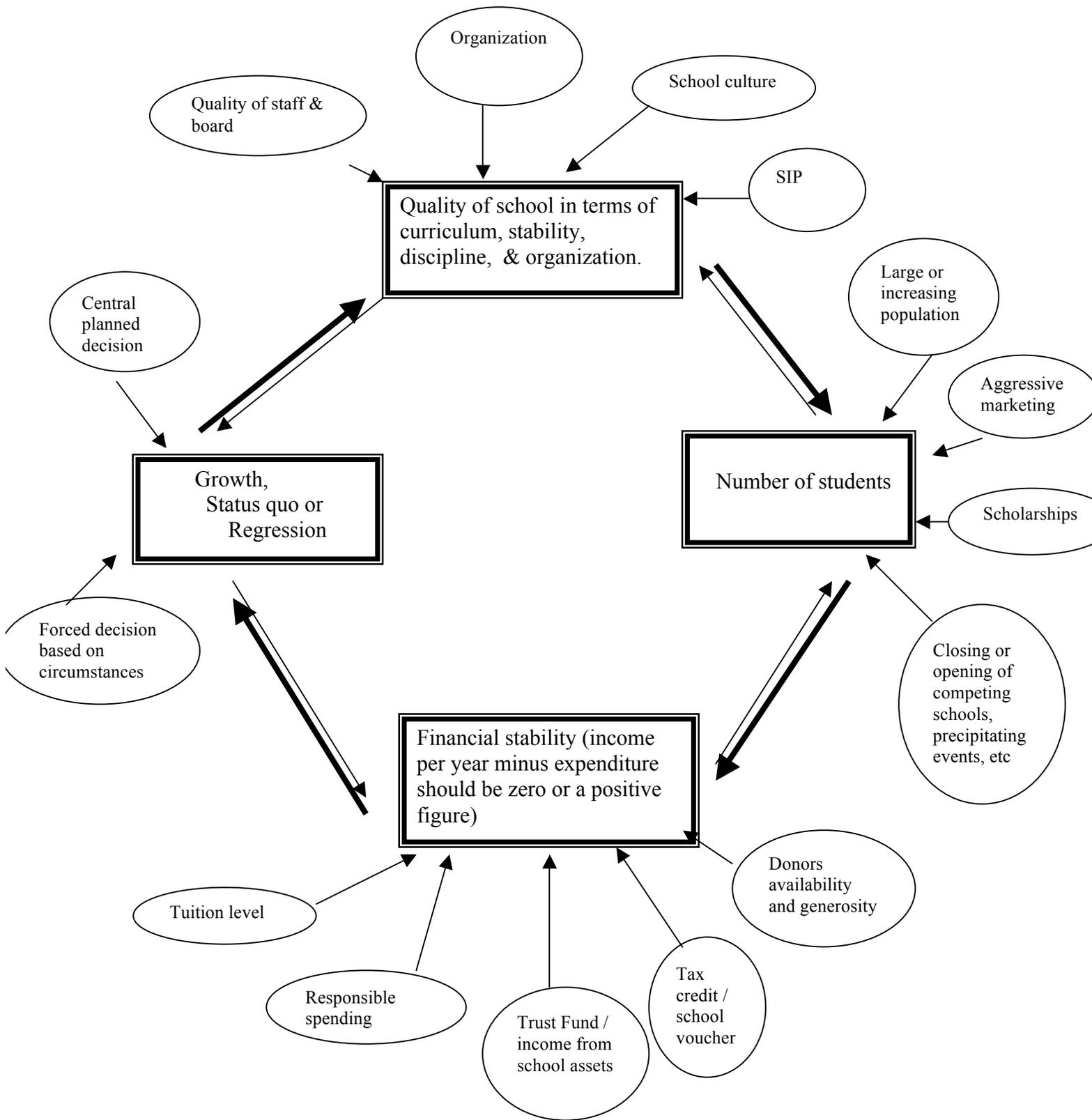
Diagram 1 : Factors affecting Islamic school survival

The following labels appear in the diagram:

- Organization
- Quality of staff & board
- School culture
- SIP
- Quality of school in terms of curriculum, stability, discipline, & organization.
- Central planned decision
- Large or increasing population
- Aggressive marketing
- Growth, Status quo or Regression
- Number of students
- Scholarships
- Forced decision based on circumstances
- Closing or opening of competing schools, precipitating events, etc
- Financial stability (income per year minus expenditure should be zero or a positive figure)
- Tuition level
- Responsible spending
- Trust Fund / income from school assets
- Tax credit / school voucher
- Donors availability and generosity

These arrows may keep going round and round on the same plane and maintain the status quo; or they may keep the cycle moving downwards leading to what someone once termed "The Spiral of Death"; or they may start moving upwards, causing the school to grow and develop further.
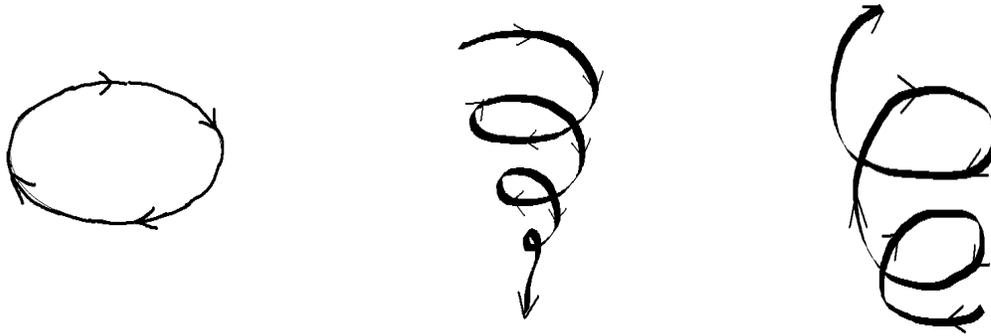
Diagram 2 : cycle or spiral

A number of schools have so far moved upwards. I know of no detailed study of why certain Islamic schools fail and others succeed. I can however assume, looking at the characteristics of Islamic schools, that any one of the factors mentioned could switch the circle to the downward spiral. For instance, quality decline, let's say in a major subject such as English Language Arts, causes a large number of students to leave the school. Similarly, a school could start growing when any one of the factors switches upwards. For example, the community demand outstrips the supply. In other words, there are too many Muslim families looking for an Islamic school, causing the number of new students enrolling each year to exceed the number of students leaving due to dissatisfaction.

The logical thing to do is to NOT wait for nature to take its course and for things to happen one way or another.

At the Arizona Cultural Academy, we decided to use the model of the NCA School Improvement Plan and apply it to the entire school structure.

3.   *Building a School Profile*
Generally speaking, accreditation organizations are interested mostly in student performance and curriculum. However, as we have seen above, the very survival of an Islamic school depends on more than just the curriculum and student performance. Therefore, while building a school profile, all the factors previously mentioned are taken into consideration.

The administration needs to start by forming a school improvement team or committee. At ACA, since we are accredited with the NCA, the team is called the NCA Steering Committee. The composition of such a team should include at least one member of the school board, one member of the administration, at least two teachers, two parents and two students. The actual numbers may vary depending on the size of the school.

At the beginning of each school year, the NCA SC works on the production of a number of surveys. This year, we produced a student survey, a parent survey, a staff survey, a board survey, and a community survey. By "community" we mean the Muslim community in the Greater Phoenix area.

The NCA SC then distributes these surveys among the appropriate population, often with the help of the Student Council. Upon the collection of these surveys, a statistical result chart is then drawn.

The NCA SC reviews the results at its next monthly meeting, and shares them with the appropriate population (board meeting, PTA meeting, staff meeting, or school council meeting).

1. Determining the Needs

The NCA SC then discusses and identifies the exact needs shown by these results. It then prioritizes them. It is not advisable to work on more than two or three goals a year, especially if they are major ones.

For example, if around 25% of students, parents, and staff say that English Language is of poor quality, but only 10% of the same population say that Arabic teaching is of poor quality, then obviously improving English takes precedence over improving Arabic.

On the other hand, if also 30% to 40% of the same population mention that discipline is a major concern, then you may decide to leave Arabic alone for now and start working on discipline.

Sometimes, it might be necessary to follow-up with a further survey. This year, for instance, we determined that Arabic and Qur'an needed improvement. However, informal sources provided often contradictory statements. For example: There are too many hours of Arabic, there are too few hours of Arabic. The students have learned nothing new in Qur'an, the students are assigned too much to memorize in Qur'an. So we designed a follow-up survey to determine which aspect of these two subjects were the main source of concern.

The results were surprisingly uniform regardless of grade or proficiency level. Most parents agreed that they were satisfied with reading and writing, the number of hours and the ability of the teachers. However, the majority were concerned about conversation and

grammar. In the field of Qur'an, the majority of parents rated their opinion of learning to read directly from the Arabic Qur'an as their top priority, followed by application of Qur'anic principles, Tafseer, and finally amount of memorization as their bottom priority.

2. Setting the Goals

The NCA SC then sets the goal based on the needs. Let's say that one of the needs identified is: improving student performance in math. Then the logical goal could be: Improving the math scores on a standardized test. It is always better to be vaguer than more precise in the wording of the goal. If you word it as: "The average student will score on or around the 50th percentile in the math section of the Stanford 9", and it turn out that your average is 45th percentile, then you would have failed your goal, even though your students might have scored on the 55th percentile in say, the state tests, (AIMS in our case).

3. Defining the Interventions

Once the goals are set, you need to spell out what exactly you plan to do to achieve that goal. The School Improvement Committee may brainstorm, research, or form sub-committees to find interventions that work. You may even decide to bring the issue to other forums, such as the School Council or the PTA. You may decide to send members to attend conferences and bring back ideas that work.

Once all ideas are put together, you may need to sift through them. Most probably, there will be too many ideas that all seem to work. Some might be combined into just one. For example, we looked at English writing last year, and liked the Extended Essay in the IB Diploma Programme (grades 11 and 12). At the same time, we liked the effect of the Student Treasures Publishing (hardcover class books) that was achieved in some of the elementary grades the year before. We also had someone propose a yearly essay competition to stimulate good writing. The committee combined all three ideas into one. Consequently, the committee put forward the proposal of an "Annual Writing Project" at all grade levels. A number of words was set per grade level, and the type of writing decided (any form for elementary, expository for secondary). There would be a theme per grade, and the art illustrations would be part of the Art Curriculum. Research, brainstorming, and drafting would take the best part of the First Semester, and editing and finalizing would take place during the Third Quarter. End of Third Quarter or Start of Fourth Quarter would be the deadline for all books, and the finished product should be available during Graduation ceremony. One copy would be kept in the school library to document writing over the years.

4. Planning the Actions

Goals are very fine things but will not be reached unless you have in place: a timeline, specified people in charge, and the needed resources.

For instance: Do you plan your students to reach that 50th percentile in Math in one year? In two years? Do you plan to raise the teacher payscale in 5 years? In ten years? Or whenever school income reaches a specific number? Who will be in charge of the book publishing? What monies are to be used to purchase the new textbooks? And so on.

It is always better to be on the safe side, and give yourself more time. When assigning jobs, take into account the future gradual waning of enthusiasm for any new program. People tend to be very active at first when assigned a new title or job, but a few months or years down the road, they will start to view this as an added burden, especially if the rewards are slow to show up.

Resources may mean more than just financial ones. Do you need to get special training? Will it be ongoing?

5. Monitoring and Adjusting

When setting up the plan, you need to set up feedback as well. At the NCA SC monthly meetings, a regular item on the agenda is: feedback from all personnel in charge of the interventions.

For the Annual Writing Project, for instance, the person responsible for it is to report on whether all teachers in charge (usually the English teacher) have carried out the project, and what stage they're at.

There are times when the feedback indicates that the intervention is not working. Either because of the intervention not reaching its goal, or because the setup of personnel and/or resources is not adequate. The committee then needs to revise the situation, either supplement or correct the inadequacies, or decide to scrap altogether the whole project in favor of a better one.

Sometimes, there are too many interventions. This might cause teacher or student burnout or actually be totally unrealistic. The committee might decide to cancel most of them in favor of just one of them.

6. Celebrating

This is an important step, not to be taken lightly.
Plan to celebrate either at the end of a particular stage, let's say a five-year cycle of school improvement; or if you have achieved a goal earlier than the targeted date; or if your goal exceeded your planned one.

Celebration gives your stakeholders renewed spirit and enthusiasm, rewards those who worked on it, and spreads your newly learned lesson to others who might benefit from it.

Once the dust settles, the cycle starts all over again. School improvement never ends. As a living entity, a school grows and changes with time, and so never really stays at a status quo. It is incorrect to think that once you have achieved a certain level of growth, development or improvement, that the school will stay there indefinitely. Re-assessment is absolutely needed.

7. Specific Problems of Islamic Schools

There are probably as many problems as there are Islamic schools, to be on the conservative side. I will present three particular problems that I think might be relevant to many of us, and how we have dealt with them in our particular case.
These are:
   a. The problem of school governance
   b. Discipline
   c. Academic Achievement

Discipline was identified in ACA two years ago as the one most outstanding problem in the school. We analyzed the problem and came to the conclusion that it was really several problems compounded under one title.

8. The Problem of School Governance

Discipline is only a student issue. However, we also had a parent issue. Parents who pay money to the school either in the form of tuition or in the form of donations feel that they own the school. This is not necessarily a bad thing. But if this interferes with the running of the school, then something is not quite right.

The first thing we did was to revise our school rules, including the staff handbook and the parents handbook. We amended it by incorporating rules that we felt should stem these problems. For example, we decided that parents are not allowed on campus during school operation hours except by appointment or for specific purposes. In conjunction with the idea of stemming gossip mongering, we required teachers to stay for one period after students are released. All staff were specifically told and trained to speak to parents only by appointment.

One of the most important steps was to draw up a flow chart of school organization and authority, and to have it adopted by all concerned. This might actually be the slowest step of all.

Another major step was to set up a School Council. School councils have been increasing in numbers over the last 20 years or so. The idea behind it is "school-based

management" as opposed to centralized management in public schools. In a small private school, the crux of the matter is ***perceived ownership by all stakeholders***.

At least one member of the administration needs to take training in School Based Management and bring it back to the school. The stakeholders typically include: the board, the administration, the certified staff, the classified staff, the students, the parents, and the community at large. For a school our size (average 100 students divided into Montessori, elementary school and secondary school), we set up a school council with the following composition:
   a. Board member (1)
   b. Administration (1)
   c. Certified staff (1)
   d. Classified staff: (1) from Montessori, (2) from Elementary, and (2) from Secondary
   e. Parents: (1) from Montessori, (2) from Elementary, and (2) from Secondary
   f. Students: (1) female Secondary Student, and (1) male Secondary Student
   g. Islamic scholar or Imam: (1)
   h. Member of the community at large: (1)

All meetings are open sessions. In other words, anyone from students to parents to any member of the community may attend the meeting as an observer.

The presence of a board member in the School Council is vital for buying in of the council by the board and for legitimizing their authority in the eyes of the other stakeholders. Enough authority must be given to the council to allow it to be able to do its job well. The President or Chairman of the council should preferably not be the board member or the principal.

Most concerns are channeled to the council, discussed, voted on and acted upon. This frees the administration to do their job, frees the board from having to micro-manage, and most importantly, takes away the responsibility of decision-making from one person to a group. Decisions made by the council are usually accepted precisely because it was made by a group representing all stakeholders. Surprisingly, the number of concerns soon grew smaller and the council was able to space out their meetings from monthly to on demand.

Through the work of the School Council, we were able to turn our administration from "reaction mode" to "action mode".

8. Discipline

After sifting discipline problems into categories, after taking out those related to parents, poor flow of authority and poor organization, we were left with only purely student-related discipline problems.

The principles of discipline are the same regardless of whether we are talking about a school, a family, or the army.

a. There must be rules. Rules must be made for a reason (or rather, as is the usual case, for many reasons). They are then written down (you will never win if you say, it's the unwritten rule that…). Then they must be made known (the "everybody knows it" reason doesn't work).
b. The rules must be applied and respected with consistency. You must stick to them, no exceptions. If you don't plan to stick to them, then just don't make them. All that will be achieved is undermining the school's image and authority.
c. There must be monitoring. Traffic laws would never work if it weren't for traffic police, traffic cameras, courts that make sure you pay your fines, etc.

Another principle that is not usually mentioned but that I use, regardless of whether I am dealing with discipline or with curriculum, is the principle of overshooting. Aim for the stars, and you might reach the moon. Aim at the ground, and the most you will ever reach is just the ground.

In concrete words, you must have a good School Handbook, or alternatively, a Staff Handbook and a Parents Handbook. These are reviewed annually to incorporate new rules as the need arises. Major changes should be channeled through the School Council.

Next you must make sure all parents, students and staff members are aware of the rules. This is usually done at a Parents Orientation before the start of school in August, a Student Orientation on the first day or first week of school, and a Teachers Orientation in the week prior to the start of school. Parents are required to sign an "Agreement" stating that they have been made aware of the school rules and they pledge to abide by them. If any staff member is hired or if any student joins the school during the course of the school year, an orientation session is again given at that time.

Specific members of the administration must be assigned the job of policing the school. Who will check on uniforms? Who will check on whether any food or drink were taken to the classrooms? Who will check whether any student was chewing gum? If anyone is found to breach the rules, the consequences must be applied, as outlined in the Parents Handbook. You should never make exceptions regardless of whose child this is. You make an exception once, you will be forced to make it again and again.

Classroom discipline rules must be bought by the teachers. If they don't own it, they will not follow it.

One particular problem plaguing our school in the first three years was solved in the fourth year through the adoption of a school planner system. Namely, the "I-forgot-it-was-due-today" problem. Teachers need to be trained (put aside a full session on the topic) on saying, "Take out your planner, write in the box for Tuesday, March 8, Journals due, topics are: Field Trip, Science Fair and How I did this quarter." The teacher (especially in elementary grades) MUST write this out on the board and make sure

students are actually copying it down, in the DATE DUE box, not the box for today's date. In the beginning of the year, the teacher must also teach the students to fill in their own plans. For instance, if a book report is due in three weeks on a Friday, the student should write on the Friday before that, "Finish reading book, start on the draft." And on the Friday before that, "Book should be at least half finished today." Better still, the student could write in every single box, "Read book."

There are many methods of keeping disciplines, all available online or from various books and magazines. Whichever you adopt is not as important as sticking to it.

Finally, the single most critical factor that seems to undermine discipline in many Islamic schools is the "I-know-him/her" factor. Everyone knows everyone else, therefore, there is no need to respect him/her. He is my cousin, so why can't I talk to him in class? The teacher is my mom's friend, it's OK.

To get respect from students, an adult needs to respect himself or herself first. The administration may establish a dress code for teachers, or even require a uniform. Looks are only skin deep, but unfortunately, most people don't seem to apply the principle to themselves. A neat and professional appearance wins half the battle. Secondly, if anyone is certified or possesses some respectable degree, advertise the fact. Politicians know well the power of propaganda. Educators need to learn from them.

The best teacher is a model to his/her students. You model the rules, they will soon understand that you are not requiring anything you do not do yourself. You ask them to be well-mannered and polite, you do it first. You ask them to be on time, you make sure you are too.

Structure and rituals are often overlooked in our society. They used to be a major part of Chinese Confucianist philosophy. They are also part of our own religion of Islam. If we look at Salat for example, it is a ritual, quite different from du'a, though both are a form of prayer. Rituals give a structure through which discipline can be taught. We have built a few small rituals, such as assembly at the beginning of day and end of day. At assembly, students are lined up by grade and are required to stand in very straight lines. Another example is the requirement that students should start and end the class with specific rituals. The class leader calls: "Salam!" whereupon the whole class says "As-Salamu 'alaikum, Mr. or Mrs. so and so," in unison. The teacher then replies, "Wa alaikum assalam wa rahmatullahi wa barakatu." Then only does class start. At the end of class, the leader calls, "Thanks!" and the whole class says, "Thank you Mr or Mrs so and so!" and the teacher replies, "You're welcome. Assalamu 'alaikum, wa rahmatullahi wa barakatu."

The normal reaction to change is resistance. Teachers may say, "Oh, it's OK, I don't need them to say thanks to me…" or they may just mutter, "Assalamu 'alaikum!" to the class without the actual ritual. It is not strange to notice that, the teachers that followed the ritual and implemented it most closely got the best discipline in terms of

noise level in the classroom, and control over student movement during class. When implementation was made a school requirement, overall discipline improved.

We can measure the success of discipline implementation from a few parameters. In our case, we compared the number of parent complaints, and the number of detentions. These decreased drastically in both cases, with detentions numbering zero as of now (March) compared with at least 2-5 a day last year in the same time period.

Finally, never underestimate the role teachers and administrators play in the maintenance of a well-disciplined school culture. Administrators (and board members) should be the first to stick to school rules. Our school rules state that the first step in the case of any concern is to approach the person concerned. Only if that fails, is one to go on to the next step and approach the administration. If a parent skips the step and moves on to the administration, the administration must be self-disciplined enough to say to the parent or student in question, "Thank you for addressing this concern to me, I promise I will deal with it properly after you have discussed it with … (the person concerned), and still are not satisfied." More than 90% of the times, direct communication ends the problem.

Teachers, in turn, must train themselves NOT to speak to parents except through parent conferences that are scheduled and prepared. Parents do not react the same way when faced with a panel of teachers and maybe one or more administrators, armed with paperwork to support their claims. Shouting across the parking lot is not considered professional.

9. *Improving Academic Achievement*

This is often a touchy subject among educators. It really need not be, if only your mission is clear. At ACA, our motto is clear: Quality education is an Islamic mandate. I always define my view of quality education in terms of results, not in terms of scores or curricula. If our graduates are able to get accepted at the university of their choice, study the major of their choice, preferably with one or more scholarships; if they can alternatively take up the profession of their choice, should they choose not to pursue higher academic studies, then we can say that the education we have provided is of quality.

The Islamic portion of our motto can be defined as producing graduates that are good practicing Muslims, and should anyone choose to, that are able to get accepted into Islamic higher studies. I stress the word practicing. No one sees in the heart of anyone else, and no one can grade the amount of religiosity in anyone else. As long as we have done our job of teaching our children the "practice" aspect as a reflection of the "inner" aspect, we may say that our job is done.

How then should we approach providing "quality education"? This is the one area where the SIP is most useful. However, it is important to realize that as a private school, you have much more leeway than the public school. The "interventions" mentioned

previously do not necessarily have to be small projects, such as adding a 15-minute DEAR (Drop Everything And Read) time. If need be, you may need to take a good look at your curriculum, weigh its pros and cons, and be courageous enough to realize sometimes that you should chuck out the whole thing. You have the ability to do that.

We all know that a textbook is not a curriculum. A curriculum is not the same as standards. You may decide to adopt your state standards, or the national ones, or develop your own.

It might be a good idea to sit down and study your goals. You might get the SI committee to define your goals in the following manner: by the end of grade 6 (or grade 12), the students will be able to…

At ACA, for example, we decided that by the end of Grade 6, our students should be able to read aloud (oral fluency) and quietly at a fluent speed, while formulating thoughts at a higher level; write interestingly and correctly both narrative and expository essays of 500 words; enjoy and discuss literature; write with a beautiful and legible handwriting; perform basic research; and be able to make short oral presentations.

With these goals in mind, you can now look at your present curriculum and or textbooks and decide whether these are adequate or up to the job. If not, find out whether you need to add to them or find a better program.

For example, at ACA, we have adopted the Singaporean math curriculum for our Grades 1-10, and the IB Math Studies for our 11th and 12th grades. We also adopted the Spalding Method for Language Arts in our Grades 1 through 6.

10.   Conclusion

Finally, we have by no means reached our goals. Nor shall we ever, most probably. After all, a school is a living and evolving entity. But we feel that we have learned a lot and improved a lot, and that the main tool was the School Improvement Plan.

May Allah SWT bless Islamic schools and grant us success, Ameen.