**A Holistic Approach to**

**Leadership Role in an Islamic School**

Being the leader of an Islamic school can be a challenging role. It requires embracing a holistic leadership mindset that can bring out the “better leader within.” In today’s demanding global environment, leaders who have a deep sense of self-awareness and strong managerial practices thrive in challenging leadership roles.

Due to time constraints I shall limit this presentation to the discussion of two important school leader or principal roles:

1. A school leader must be one who promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.

2. A school leader must be one who promotes the success of all students by ensuring the effective management of administration, operations and resources in order to provide a safe and effective learning environment.

Across the United States and Canada, Islamic schools (both full-time and supplementary) are a gift for our communities. In fact the growth of the Islamic schools movement is a unique testimony to the commitment the North American Muslim community has towards the education and tarbiyyah of our children. School principals are leaders who are responsible to facilitate the development and articulate the implementation of the shared vision of the school community and the parents.

One important quality a successful school leader must have is the ability to engage parents and community in order to “create shared responsibility for the success of students and school.” This means promoting two-way conversations between parent/community and the school administration, where both sides are listening and communicating with each other.

**A successful leader must engage the community in meaningful ownership for the mission and activities of the school.**

In order to engage community members and parents in achieving the vision and the goals of the school, the school leader must keep both of these parties informed. It may be about student performance, school finances and any other matter. A principal has to be committed to community engagement. School newsletters, bulletins, meetings and parent support groups are good ways to keep parents and the school community informed and engaged in various activities and projects of the school.

**Importance of Shared Decision Making**

Parents and community members need to be engaged in the essential decision making process of the school. A good model to implement is “site based councils”, where councils are formed by parents, community members and teachers. The principal instills a leadership capacity into the members of these councils and gives them a chance to be full participants in decisions about school policy, budget, programs and instructional improvements.

**A successful Leader encourages parents’ involvement in the school and in their children’s learning**

Alhamdulillah, the Muslim community in North America is by and large highly educated, professional and talented. Therefore, the community needs to be invited to get involved in their children’s educational activities. Children can learn about the diversity of American Muslim culture and experience the blessings of Islam and Islamic traditions.

School leadership needs to assess educational needs of the school’s parent population and provide information and training where needed. A place (perhaps called “Parents Resource Room”) on the school grounds should ideally be in place where parents can meet and work together. This will give them a sense of belonging and it will allow them the opportunity to connect with each other, along with staff and faculty. In this place parents will have a chance to share their interests and hobbies, books & videos etc.

In order to make sure our children achieve highest academic standards and assimilate Islamic moral values, our parents need to develop a clear understanding of these standards. This can be achieved by organizing special workshops for parents, back-to-school nights, newsletters, emails etc. which focus on academic and moral standards of each class.

**Make sure that parents and children are connected to health and social services in the community so that all physical, emotional and social needs of the children are met.**

A caring and successful leader makes sure that all of the basic needs of every child are met in order for effective learning to take place. Due to tight budgets, Islamic schools will often need to find innovative ways to hire professional service providers who can work with children and families. It might be important to note that many public schools offer special services for children of private schools who live in the same school district free of charge.

**WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?**

According to recent Gallup Poll on the public’s attitude towards the public schools:

“Both parents of school-age children and other members of the public see education as a major national issue, and believe that parent involvement is a major factor in improving public schools.” (Rose and Gallup 2001)

In their long-term research on parents involvement and children’s academic achievements, Anne Henderson and Nancy Berla found that, “the research has become overwhelmingly clear; parents involvement—and that means all kinds of parents---improves student achievement.” They concluded:

* Educators hold higher expectations of children when parents collaborate with teachers.
* In programs that are designed to involve parents in full partnerships, disadvantaged students’ achievement not only improve, but can reach levels that are standards for middle-class children.
* Schools that work well with families have higher teacher morale and higher ratings of teachers by parents.
* A school’s practices in informing and involving parents are stronger determinants of whether inner-city parents will be involved with their children’s lives.

Thus we can conclude that community and family involvement and engagement is essential in promoting school’s vision and mission.

**The second important role of a principal is as “an instructional leader who promotes success of all students by ensuring the management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient and effective learning environment.”**

According to ISSLC’s standards every successful school administrator needs to focus on the following three matters:

* Knowledge
* Disposition
* Performance

**Knowledge of:**

* Learning goals of an Islamic school in a pluralistic society.
* Methods and ways of developing and implementing a successful strategic plan.
* A clear understanding of “systems theory”.
* Tools of data collection, ability to analyze the data and implement strategic plan in the light of the analyzed data.
* Successful and effective skills of communication.
* Strategies to build consensus and agreements.”
* Successful practices in school administration, curriculum issues and staff professional development and management.
* Financial management and a balanced budget

**Disposition**

An Islamic school leader believes in Islamic values, and is committed to:

* The message of the Qur’an to “Read”, and the ability and right of all to learn and be educated.
* To provide opportunities for students and faculty to build strong Iman and always follow Islamic values of honesty and justice.
* A school vision of high moral and academic standards for all students, teachers and the community.
* Continuous improvement in school’s academic, sports and extra-curricular programs.
* Academic, intellectual, physical and moral development of every child to the highest standards.
* Encouraging and inviting all parents and community members to get involved in school activities and programs.
* The continuous evaluation of his or her own performance and the performance of his or her faculty and staff.
* The high standards of professional development for himself/herself and for the faculty members.

**Performance**

The role of the leader of an Islamic school is to ensure that the school under his or her leadership is providing the highest moral, ethical Islamic standards for children, teachers, staff, parents and community members. He or she is the torchbearer of those standards, implementing them in belief and action every day.

The leader should put an efficient and responsible system together to ensure that:

* The financial systems of the schools are well managed and all records are up to date.
* The buildings and grounds are safe, clean, attractive and conducive to learning.
* The school’s curriculum embraces the highest standards and is implemented by the teachers professionally.
* The Islamic Studies and Arabic language programs are given enough attention and time and children’s progress in these subjects is carefully monitored.
* The school’s mission and vision are communicated to the students, teachers and the community.
* Teachers are given time and opportunities for professional development.
* Core Islamic beliefs and values are continuously followed as model by the principal, teachers and staff.
* Hard and soft data is used to make decisions about finances, curriculum issues and management of the school systems and services.
* The school library and resource center is highly equipped with resources for students and teachers.
* Ample and organized opportunities are provided for children to participate in extra-curricular and sports activities.
* The school’s administrator, teachers, parents and children are engaged with local public schools, library and other institutions in the community.

Alhamdulillah, we have seen a tremendous growth in the numbers of full-time Islamic schools in North America during the last twenty five years. We need to work hard to train more school leaders professionally, Insha’Allah.

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