

# ***How to Turn a Sinking Dinosaur Into a Winning Racehorse:***

## **The ACA Arabic Restructure Project**

By Dr. Fawzia Mai Tung and Mouna Elchami

### **Abstract**

*In 2004, the need for a complete restructuring of the Arabic Department at Arizona Cultural Academy was identified as part of the overall School Improvement Plan. First, a further identification of the goals, weaknesses and strengths was carried out. This was followed by researching viable alternatives, curricular material, methodologies and staffing. Initial steps were taken in the summer of 2005, and implementation started in the fall of 2005. The Project is scheduled for final evaluation in the spring of 2009. However, a mid-point evaluation is due to be completed by May 2007. As of now (February 2007) the preliminary results show that the Project is successful.*

[This section to be presented by Dr. Fawzia Mai Tung.](#)

### **A. Identification of a need for restructure**

In Fall 2004, the ACA NCA-CASI School Improvement Committee launched a survey to identify weaknesses and strengths in the school. This was sub-divided into the Students Survey, the Parents Survey, the Staff Survey, and the Community At Large Survey. [See attached slides of samples of survey questions.](#)

After gathering the completed surveys, the two areas that stood out as most unsatisfactory were the Arabic and Qur'an Departments. [See attached slides of charted results.](#) Only the Arabic department will be discussed in this paper.

The committee then decided to further explore the problem by sending out a follow-up survey. This survey asked about parents' ideas of the goals of Arabic learning in an Islamic school; which areas of Arabic – listening, speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary, application, etc – were perceived as weakest; and how much Arabic the child already knew – including the child's ethnic and heritage background. [See Arabic survey sample.](#)

The results gave a clear picture of the then status of Arabic learning at ACA. [See attached slides of charted results.](#) Generally, the students were excellent at reading and writing but were unable to function verbally. Students who were heritage speakers perceived the school Arabic curriculum as inadequate to fulfill their needs. The great

majority of parents stated their goals for their children as learning a second language rather than only learning to read and understand the Qur'an.

The conclusion was that something was fundamentally wrong with the then structure of the Arabic Department. A self-study was needed to identify which areas needed work: curriculum, class repartition, teaching methodology, staff training, and/or quality of staff.

## **B. Planning for Restructure**

In February 2005, the Head of the Arabic Department and I traveled to Kansas City to attend the CIENA conference on the new National Standards for Arabic as a Foreign Language. The results of that trip were manifold: we acquired a preliminary draft for the National Standards, we met and networked with various leaders in the area of Arabic as a Foreign Language, and we formed a preliminary idea of the direction of restructure.

### **1. Eliminating Leveling**

After a discussion with Mrs. Asmeralda Alfi, the Director of BIAE, it became obvious that the first step would be to get rid of the leveling system and move to a grade-level system of class repartition. The leveling system, adopted by ACA back in 2002, modeled after the majority of Islamic schools, had proven to be the biggest hurdle in student learning. Some parents had already questioned the goal of leveling: was it aimed at resolving an immediate need or at providing a long-term solution for student learning? The leveling system had two obvious and immense drawbacks: the gap between a Beginner and an Advanced student increased year by year. [See slide diagram of gap increase](#). Therefore, a Beginner Student was doomed for life to remain a Beginner Student and would never ever catch up to a regular level. Moreover, the original goal of streaming students by achievement level was never really achieved since every year, new students with different levels would join the school, thus giving rise to multiple levels within each level. [See slide diagram of incoming new levels](#). This resulted in decreased learning for each student.

Teachers became stressed out as they tried to give a response to parents who demanded individual progress in learning. The natural response was to try to individualize teaching, thus reducing learning time per class period. [See slide diagram of teaching time](#).

### **2. Establishing a vertical curriculum**

The solution was to replace the leveling system by a traditional class curriculum system. One curriculum per grade level. Using the National Standards as a reference, the entire Arabic Department staff embarked on drafting a skeletal vertical curriculum during the summer of 2005.

The premise behind this move is as follows: If a school is in an ideal position: that of every student at every grade level having attended this school from the bottom up, and

therefore all being at around the same achievement level; then, a regular vertical curriculum would be needed. In the meantime, we would have something to measure against, though it would not be applied.

Our school has not yet reached maturity level: that is, when less than 5% of students in each grade are new incoming students of unknown achievement level. At this time, in middle and higher grades, at least 50% of the students in any class are still new incoming students each year.

We started by stating the final objectives of a graduating 12<sup>th</sup> grader, then stating the midpoint objectives at the end of Grade 6. Finally, splitting down the performance objectives by grade level in elementary and secondary grades. [See slide of original draft of vertical curriculum.](#)

We also incorporated basic theories of the Spalding Method for English Language Arts. For example, we looked at the basic vocabulary offered by most curricula. They were usually chosen by curriculum writers based on various premises: some worked around a central theme; others worked from ease of spelling upwards; others seemed to follow no special logic. The Spalding Method built its list of vocabulary/spelling from a list originally compiled by Dr. Ayres. This was achieved by analyzing over 40,000 pieces of English written materials, from letters and articles to books. Each word was counted and a frequency list established. Thus was born the top 1,000 most frequently used word list. Mrs. Romalda Spalding later expanded this to 1,700 to allow for study of root words and frequently misspelled words.

There is no such study or list in Arabic, but short of carrying out such a study on our own, we tried to keep this principle in mind: “how often would a child need this word?” as we built our own vocabulary list.

### **3. Placement Test**

The next step was to draft a vertical Placement Test, also using the Spalding Method as a model. This involved all four skills, and included spelling and reading comprehension.

At the beginning of each school year, the placement test would be given to all students in all grades. The scores would then be charted, the median of each grade level identified, and the achievement level of each grade determined accordingly. [See slide of a grade's scores and determining grade level from the median score.](#)

That year, for example, Grade 4 and Grade 10 were determined to both follow the Grade 4 curriculum (according to the drafted vertical curriculum).

Students falling below the range for that grade would be streamed into Remedial classes, and students falling above the range for that grade would be streamed into Honors classes.

### **4. Teacher Training**

It became obvious from the start that the lack of proper teacher training in modern methodologies of foreign language teaching was a huge handicap. My first reaction was to bring in trainers. I did so in June 2005. Mrs. Lina Kholaki from the New Horizon Schools in California visited us for a two-day workshop. I extended an invitation to other

Arabic teachers in the Phoenix area to attend the workshop too. It was highly successful in several ways: all teachers were exposed to new concepts and methodologies. Teachers interacted and networked with one another. But to me, I saw the impossibility of achieving ideal teacher training through a series of such workshops not only because of the eventual cost, but because they would be but a drop in the ocean.

I could see two alternatives: First, I could fire all my staff and hire new staff that would be not only experts in the Arabic language, but also qualified and experienced pedagogists in the teaching of a second language. This alternative was obviously idealistic. Such experts are very rare and therefore extremely expensive. Our Arabic teachers sit at the bottom of our pay scale because they cannot possibly earn certification like our teachers of core subjects. And obviously, such experts would already be working with more prestigious institutions.

The second alternative would be to hire only one such expert, with preferably experience in teacher training, and have her become a consultant. In other words, create a certification/teacher training section within our own school walls. I did what I always do when things seem hopeless: I prayed to Allah, SWT. Right then, a new applicant came to the school. She had the perfect background: trained in France, she had been working for years with the Ministry of Education in Lebanon and with the French Cultural Center in training trainers and teachers of foreign language. The foreign language in question was French. However, having grown up in Lebanon and studied up to her Bachelor's Degree in Arabic, she had enough grasp of the Arabic language to apply her skills to the teaching of Arabic as a foreign language.

This section to be presented by Ms. Mouna Elchami.

### ***C. Implementation of the Project***

In August 2005, we started implementation. We made sure to have a letter out to parents regarding the new changes, then made this the main topic at Parents Orientation Day. [See slide of letter.](#)

#### **1. Remedial classes**

The main new development was the establishment of grade levels, with the opening of parallel remedial classes. The difference between this and the old "Beginner and Advanced" classes was that the Remedial classes had one clear goal: to return each student to their grade level as soon as possible.

How was this to be achieved? The key was to:

- a) Identify each student's deficient skills, using the placement test
- b) Establish performance objectives to be attained, by aligning with them with those of the regular class
- c) Measure the components of these performance objectives
- d) Identify the student-specific difficulties within the performance objectives
- e) Locate suitable remedial methodologies, and finally
- f) Create individualized lesson plans and packets. It was of utmost importance NOT to concentrate on content teaching.

See several examples of remedial individualized students study packets.

In 2005-06, a total of .... students were returned to their regular grades before the end of the school year.

In 2006-07, as of now, a total of ... students have been returned to their regular grades.

Students who returned to their grades all performed at or above grade level.

## **2. Case Studies**

- a) Student A ([Arief](#))
- b) Student B ([Marwa](#))
- c) Student C ([Aliya](#))

## **3. Regular Classes**

The most fundamental change brought in the regular classes was teacher training and alignment with the National Standards. Weekly meetings are held one on one between the Head of Department and each teacher. Observations are done by the Head of Department at least once a week.

Teachers were not only trained to deliver the curriculum by determining goals and deriving methods, but they also started identifying current gaps in student skills and designed suitable materials and methods to remedy them.

Teachers regularly assess the students and identify remedial needs. Even mid-year, a student can be pulled out of the regular class and sent to the remedial class for a limited period of time.

## **4. Teacher Training**

- a. Hiring of more substitutes
- b. Orientation
- c. Assisting/Substituting
- d. Student Teaching, with mentor
- e. Teacher

This section to be presented by both Dr. Fawzia and Ms. Mouna.

## **D. Results**

Contrary to expectations, we had only ONE honor level student in the entire school. So instead of training teachers to practice differentiated teaching, the one student was sent to the Resource Teacher for an individualized Honors class. Her parents now state that this is the first year that they are satisfied with Arabic in our school.

Most heritage students started the new program with an arrogant attitude acquired during the leveling years. They had developed an attitude of paying little attention in class, despising classmates, and making no efforts to do homework. With the new program concentrating on the verbal use of Modern Standard Arabic, these heritage students started to fall back while claiming to learn nothing in class. Within the first month of implementation, I had to calm down a few concerned parents who felt their

children were learning “nothing” in Arabic. I had to recount my personal observations of classes where their children would pay no attention to teacher corrections of their mistakes and asked them to wait another month. Eventually, the parents came to see the facts in the light of reality.

The regular classes moved from the study of fixed texts to acquisition of skills for the personal use of Arabic as a language. One example of the success of Arabic is my own third-grade daughter. She now spontaneously integrates spoken MSA into daily language. Just yesterday, when I asked her why she ate the stuffing of the stuffed squash and left the squash in her plate, she smiled at me and said, “ana la ohibbu squash.” In my happiness over her use of Arabic, I forgot to scold her and instead, answered, “Squash is called kousa, ana la ohibbu kousa.”

Another example of student feedback: Recently a 5<sup>th</sup> grade heritage speaker was identified for remedial class. When he informed his mother of the decision, she hit the roof and gave her a piece of her mind. The student broke down into tears, and asked his mother, “But why won’t you let me go to Remedial Class? My friends who were so bad in Arabic went for three weeks and now they are back and are better than I am. Please let me go so I can come back and be better than they are.” The mother was stunned and came gratefully to share this story with us.

A follow-up survey for Arabic has been distributed and is being collected and processed at this time. (It will be available at the time of the conference insha’allah.)

An evaluation of short-term results (mostly concentrating on the handling of remedial classes) is planned for Spring 2007 and will be completed before end of May 2007.

An evaluation of long-term results (mostly concentrating on the new curriculum and methodologies) is planned for Spring 2009.