

## ***Top Ten Hot Issues for Islamic Schools***

### ***Introduction***

The number of Islamic schools in United States has increased at a dramatic rate in the past twenty years. They might be on the east or the west coast, north or south, but no matter where they are, they have the common goal of educating Muslim children, preserving their Islamic identity, protecting them from the pop culture, and preparing them for their future leadership role as the productive citizens. Some schools are big, some small, some co-ed, some single education, some K-12, some K-6, and many other configurations. Although each school is very different than the other, most of them have a similar mission: to provide “quality academic education in an Islamic environment.” These Islamic schools might not even know of each other’s existence, though many share common challenges.

Building and maintaining an Islamic School is complex, challenging task. At times, many of us may feel as though a specific challenge exists only at our school; however, in reality most Islamic schools share similar difficulties. Some say finance, some say curriculum and the others say lack of human resources.

In this paper, we will be identifying the top ten hot issues affecting Islamic schools. We will be exploring common challenges for Islamic Schools, encouraging leadership of our schools to ask some crucial questions and offering possible recommendations for improvement. We learned from Jim Collins book, *Good to Great*, “good is the enemy of great”. In this growth stage of Islamic schools, we expect great work from our schools—good is not enough. What strategies can we use to make our schools GREAT?

### ***Top Ten Hot Issues: Challenges, Questions and Recommendations:***

#### ***1. Image Building: Enhancing the public perception of Islamic Schools***

Currently, it has become necessary for schools to tackle not only the wider community’s perception of Islamic institutions, but also to tackle the Muslim community’s perception. When our own community views Islamic schools with distrust and skepticism, we need to propose ways in which that trust can be redeemed.

### ***Challenges***

#### ***1. Muslim community’s perceptions:***

- Islamic schools cannot be good
- Lack of trust
- Other parents’ feedback has more value than educators’
- Parents blaming the school for their children’s weaknesses
- Conflicting measures of school expectations

#### ***2. Wider community’s perceptions:***

- Fear of unknown
- Negative images of Islam in the media
- Effects of 9/11

### ***Questions***

- How can we enhance the public perception of Islamic schools?
- How can we gain the trust of the community?
- How can we dispel the misconceptions about Islamic schools?

### ***Recommendations***

*Gain the trust by:*

- Providing quality education
- Continuous improvement in every area
- Obtaining accreditation
- Developing a marketing plan
- Being transparent with the parent body
- Educating the Muslim community
- Interacting with the wider community

### ***2. Keeping the mission alive***

Creating and implementing a mission and vision statement can mean a world of difference for an Islamic school. Having a clearly written mission that is periodically reviewed and revised is the key to a better understanding of expectations between the school and its community.

### ***Challenges***

- The mission and vision of the school is not clear to every constituency
- Different people expect different things from the school
- The school is judged according to different expectations
- Sometimes the mission does not reflect the school
- Sometimes the mission is not realistic to achieve

### ***Questions***

- Do we have a clearly written mission statement?
- Do we periodically review and revise our mission statement?
- Does our vision statement represent who we are and where we are going?
- Do all school constituencies have the buy-in to the mission of the school?

### ***Recommendations***

- Create clear, well-thought out mission and vision statements
- Refine and revise the mission and vision statements as needed
- Document and publicize who we are and what we stand for
- Do what we say we do
- The school community has the buy-in to the mission and work collectively to achieve it
- Do not compromise the mission

### ***3. Financial stability***

Quality education at any school requires sufficient income through tuition collections, regular donations, smart investments, and secure savings. Islamic schools are responding to high academic expectations despite a lack of finances. We need to explore alternative ways such as establishing an endowment fund and approaching a new circle of donors to bring steady income to the school besides tuition revenue.

#### ***Challenges***

- Quality education is expensive
- High expectations with low funding
- Expecting more programs without enough funding
- Donors are drained by many Islamic projects in need of support
- No savings for financially challenging times
- No endowment fund
- Lack of sufficient funds for financial aid

#### ***Questions***

- Can we offer quality education and also be affordable?
- Can we find new sources of revenue?
- Can we find new strategies for increasing efficiency?

#### ***Recommendations***

- Find new sources of revenue
- Find new strategies for increasing efficiency
- Expand the donor circle
- Build a reserve fund
- Build an endowment fund
- Build a financial aid fund

### ***4. Leadership***

The lack of qualified leadership in Islamic schools is startling. Running a school requires a relevant professional background, the ability to deal with long hours and a heavy load, and support from the school's constituencies. In order to improve upon our leadership, we need to create a nurturing environment in which leadership can flourish, as well as plan for leadership succession from our youth.

#### ***Challenges***

- Dwindling leadership pool
- Non-competitive compensation
- High turnover in leadership
- Lack of relevant professional background
- Incredibly complex job and heavy load
- Dealing with uncertainties
- We don't value and nurture, we expect a lot, we criticize abundant and then we burn-out and lose our leaders

### ***Questions***

- Where are we going to find qualified school leaders?
- How are we going to nurture them and show them our support?
- How are we going to make the job attractive to our younger generation so they will consider it as a career choice?

### ***Recommendations***

- Support and nurture the school leaders
- Show trust and respect, and recognize their efforts
- Encourage growth by providing resources and time for professional growth
- Plan for leadership succession
- Encourage promising young Muslims to get their education in school leadership
- Develop internship and mentoring programs for interested young Muslims to learn from experienced school leaders

### ***5. Attracting, training and retaining qualified teachers***

No Islamic school can survive without a solid commitment from qualified and skilled educators. Unfortunately, factors such as competition from other schools, low salaries, and misconceptions about teaching are the cause for a severe lack of well-trained teachers. We need to build our teacher base using a recruitment strategies, professional development plan and strong compensation package.

### ***Challenges***

- Strong competition from public and private schools
- Supply and demand: more Islamic schools, not enough teachers
- Negative misconceptions about teaching
- Inadequate compensation system
- Heavy load, disrespect and distrust

### ***Questions***

- How can we support and nurture our teachers?
- Can we create a salary scale that is competitive and fair?
- How can we protect our teachers from unjust treatment?
- Can we find ways to train teachers while they are teaching?
- Can we find creative ways to utilize our parents?
- Can we offer training and internships to promising young men and women and encourage them to consider teaching as a career?

### ***Recommendations***

- Offer competitive salaries, so the teachers can live a standard of “middle class dignity”
- Support the teachers by offering orientations, training and mentoring
- Create a professional development plan
- Develop a performance evaluation system that focuses on growth & development
- Nurture, motivate and recognize the teachers

## **6. *Building an effective board***

Strong, well-educated, effective board functions as the backbone of an Islamic school. In order to produce an efficient board, a board development plan—whereby board members are oriented, trained and assessed—should be established and implemented. The board should create an environment of support and guidance for the principal, faculty, and staff.

### ***Challenges***

- Tendency to focus on management instead of governance
- Many well-intentioned board members who lack training in governance
- Not placing enough emphasis on governance
- Lack of awareness of fiduciary responsibility
- Difficulty to separate role as parent from that of trustee

### ***Questions***

- How can we educate our board members?
- Can we re-direct the energy of our well-intentioned board members to governance?
- How can we convince them that their role as trustees is crucial to the school?
- How can we convince them that the principal needs their support, guidance and nurturing?

### ***Recommendations***

- Develop a board development plan
- Develop a board profile
- Establish board standards and manage the board with those standards
- Develop and implement accountability system for the board and individual board members
- Develop board orientation and continuous board training workshops
- Develop an annual agenda for the board and committees, and utilize it as an evaluation tool
- Assume the fiduciary responsibilities and the financial stability of the school. Focus on strategic issues and the big picture.

## **7. *Diverse parent body***

Diversity is Allah's gift; however, managing diverse needs are quite challenging. It is expected that our students would come from very different families that would like to see each of their expectations fulfilled. Some parents want a stronger emphasis placed on Islamic Studies and Arabic, while others may want that emphasis placed on math and science. To reach a mutual understanding, a strong relationship must be built between the school and parents.

### ***Challenges***

Pleasing our parents is very difficult since everyone expects something different from the school:

- Academic excellence

- Memorizing Qur'an
- Understanding Qur'an
- Living Qur'an
- Conversational Arabic
- Classical Arabic
- Islamic values
- Parents' values
- Cultural expectations
- Hearing from a friend about the school crossed the street and expecting same practice

### ***Questions***

- What do we do when we have competing cultural expectations and demands?
- What do we do when parents' expectations conflict with the policies of the school?
- How do we deal with the issue of one of the influential parents' children causing problems at the school?
- What do we do when we have a few parents rallying against the school?

### ***Recommendations***

- Do not compromise the mission of the school
- Build strong partnership with parents
- Try to understand before you expect to be understood
- Educate parents about:
  - School's mission
  - Educational realities
  - Positive parenting strategies
  - Different school issues

## **8. Curriculum**

Most Islamic schools lack a well-rounded curriculum in the area of standard subjects, Qur'an, Islamic Studies and Arabic studies. As Muslims, we need to be at the forefront of innovation in education, whether it be through multiculturalism or environmentalism. On-going curriculum development plan should address the curriculum, instruction, assessment issues and consist of integration of technology, and professional development opportunities for educators.

### ***Challenges***

- Standard subjects: most Islamic schools borrow curriculum from public schools
- Arabic, Islamic Studies, Qur'an—there are many efforts to build our own curriculum. However, we do not have a well-rounded, strong curriculum appropriate for American Muslim identity
- We know EQ is more important than IQ, yet we continue to teach to the latter more than the former

- We know that student-centered, project-based learning produces longer-lasting better retention or mastery than teacher-centered didactic teaching, yet the former is much less prevalent in our schools
- We do not have much to offer to high achievers and struggling learners
- Our schools are very traditional and are not open to progressive ideas
- Bridging gap between secular subjects and religious studies by integrating curriculum areas

### ***Questions***

- Can Islamic schools be the leaders in progressive ideas consistent with Islamic beliefs, like multiculturalism, inclusiveness, environmentalism?
- Can we build synergy and partnerships with other schools to share resources?
- Can we build partnerships with outside entities to offer services to our community?
- Can we develop our experts in different areas by sending our teachers to training and expecting them to share their knowledge with other teachers?

### ***Recommendations***

- Solid, well rounded, clearly defined curriculum
- Well-trained staff with the instructional strategies addressing the needs of the diverse learners
- Every lesson has activities addressing multiple intelligences
- Teachers are trained to deal with high achievers and low achievers
- We should not accept students who have special needs unless we are equipped to address their needs
- We should have well-trained educators who follow up with the curriculum throughout the school
- Adopt innovative ideas consistent with Islamic beliefs (multiculturalism, inclusiveness, environmentalism)
- Integrate and utilize technology in every classroom

### ***9. Lack of a road map***

One thing all Islamic schools can agree upon is that being young and independent in nature, Islamic schools sorely lack resources, resource specialist, resource centers, policies and guidebooks, and an agreed-upon curriculum. We can benefit from sharing successful practices rather than re-invent the wheel.

### ***Challenges***

- Islamic schools are very young and independent in nature; no agreed upon model to follow
- Islamic schools are unique in mission; however, not enough educational resources to support that mission
- The administrators and the teachers act as curriculum developers, policy writers
- No resource specialists or consultants available
- No resource centers as training grounds
- No educational resources for Islamic schools

- No curriculum written for Islamic schools
- No defined policies, procedures or guide books

### ***Questions***

- How can we benefit from the experiences of veteran teachers and administrators?
- How can we pave the road for newcomers?
- Can we adopt some resources and practices in line with Islamic values?

### ***Recommendations***

- Develop national and local Islamic Educational Resource Centers
- Provide networking opportunities for teachers, administrators and board members
- Create forums to share and benefit from successful practices
- Create forums to problem solve

### ***10. Building bridges, partnerships and networking***

Creating an Islamic community for our children is a step in the right direction. However, we must not let that community become isolated from the rest of the educational world. We need to find ways to outreach to and network with other schools and professional organizations so that we may benefit from their experiences and knowledge.

### ***Challenges***

- Islamic schools are isolated
- Most Islamic schools have one class per grade, which does not give an opportunity for the teachers to share their expertise and challenges
- Everyone is struggling to survive on their own
- We keep re-inventing the wheel
- We do not utilize parents' energy
- We do not tap into businesses for partnerships

### ***Questions***

- Can we allocate times for the teachers to share their knowledge with others?
- Can we find ways to utilize parents' efforts?
- Can we outreach to the community for partnerships?
- Can we build networking opportunities with other schools?
- Do we see the school districts as valuable to our schools?

### ***Recommendations***

- Build synergy between teachers, administrators and other schools
- Allocate times for teachers to work with each other to exchange ideas and strategies
- Better utilizing the talents of the parents at the school
- Build partnerships and alliances with business and service organizations
- Reach out and find similar schools and start learning from others' experiences
- Join professional educational associations like NAIS, NAESP, NASSP, NAMS, ASCD, NAEYC