

What can Islamic Schools Learn from Public Schools?

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Public Schools may be seen as the antithesis to Islamic Schools. In fact, most parents who choose to put their children in Islamic Schools or any other private or religious school do so with a desire to escape the secular, spiritually demoralizing and at times dangerous environments of public schools. However from an organizational standpoint, Islamic schools have much that they can learn from the way public schools operate. While the attitude has often been to steer absolutely clear of public schools, there may be lessons learned and even services gained from the public educational system. Public schools have three distinct advantages that Islamic schools should consider. The first has to do with management-staff relations, the second can be described as “bigger is better” and finally the way student needs are serviced.

Management-Staff Relations

Private schools, in particular Islamic schools, are based in tight-knit communities. This is generally because Islamic Schools are established

by a small number of families who are usually well-acquainted with one another. Since Muslim populations are still sparse in parts of the United States, most of the teachers and managers in an Islamic school are acquaintances, friends or even family outside of the professional setting. As a result management –staff relations tend to be more casual. While this engenders a great sense of family and community in an Islamic school, at times these relationships begin to compromise the professionalism and the ability for managers to enforce disciplinary processes.

For example, if a teacher is chronically late to work, a School Head that is a family member is placed in the awkward position of firing or reprimanding that teacher. The situation becomes even more precarious if the offending teacher is related to a board member or a big donor to the school.

In public schools, relationships are more professional. This is mainly because of the wide range of individuals that make up the heterogeneous environment in a public school. While some people may be related or even friends, there is a clear distinction between personal matters and business. This may primarily be because of the fact that so many of the people in a public school are not related or friends so the overall

atmosphere lends itself to professionalism over casualness. One must be cautious about interpreting this to mean that public schools do not have friendly interactions and even social gatherings outside of school. In fact, there are many opportunities for social interaction between management and staff; however managers are always careful to deal with their employees in a manner that does not compromise their authority.

Another strategy that works to maintain appropriate and effective management–staff relations is focusing discussions on the profession and the organization. This focus on the job creates an image in the mind of the employee that the manager is the individual that represents the organizational goals more so than a friend or family member.

Ultimately the key to effective management–staff relations is to maintain a balance between brief casual conversations and a predominant focus on the school and its effective management.

Bigger is better

One of the most noticeable differences between private schools and public schools is the size. The largest K–12 Islamic schools have about 1500 students. Most Islamic Elementary schools have less than 300 students.

Public elementary schools average around 800. High Schools are usually between 2000-3500 students. This large number of students provides the ability to maintain a large number of human resources for administrative and academic collaboration.

While most Islamic Schools have 2-3 office personnel in addition to the principal or school head, most public schools have a minimum of 8-10, as well as district personnel that support the schools in the district. Having this many people administer a school provides a wider delegation of the every day tasks that every school must deal with regardless of whether the school has 100 or 1000 students. These include counseling, attendance, school nurse, bookkeeping, office management, special events, supervision, enrollment, etc. Additionally, Islamic schools have added administrative needs such as fundraising, marketing and community outreach. Even management is spread out over a principal and as many as 5 assistant principals. While most of these tasks in Islamic schools are spread out over volunteers and sometimes even teachers, the reality is that when there are personnel who focus on these administrative needs, job descriptions are clear and productivity is increased.

Teachers in large schools also have access to colleagues with whom they can collaborate and share ideas. While Islamic schools probably have one or two 1st grades or two math teachers, public schools have four to six 1st grades and 8-10 math teachers. The formation of departments creates more opportunities for support and curriculum development. The effect of this is even greater when teachers throughout the district get together for collaborative curriculum projects.

One of the advantages of Islamic schools is the small, community feeling it engenders by having such a small number of students. Without compromising this feature, small Islamic schools can form small associations wherein teachers and administrators can collaborate in person through workshops or via newsgroups. Administrative services can also be outsourced to an entity that is shared by more than one school so that costs are evenly distributed. These services can increase to the point at which many schools utilize one central administrative office for specific services in a design similar to that of a public school district. These are just a few examples of alternatives to relying so heavily on volunteers that at times burn out, or turnover too often becoming undependable.

Servicing Needs

Public schools are able to serve a broader spectrum of students based on their needs. This includes students with learning disabilities. As mentioned in the previous section, the large number of students in public schools allows for the hiring of more human resources to serve a wide range of student needs. Public schools also receive funding through grants and other government programs that support their obligation to provide services for special education.

Private schools, in particular Islamic schools, just simply cannot serve all students. They will always have to turn away certain students or at times kick them out because they just cannot handle their emotional or behavioral needs. Ironically, even in public schools, kids are expelled for adverse behaviors that the public school is unable to handle or remediate. Islamic schools have often been the target of criticisms because of their attempts to serve the needs of students who have needs beyond the skills and training of their teachers. In addition to special education for the mentally handicapped, public schools have trained personnel who help students with all types of learning disabilities, emotional disabilities, and behavioral problems. Special courses are offered where these types of students receive one-on-one instruction, resource specialists, and even

personal trainers in some cases. Islamic schools, like most private schools will never be able to serve these various and highly complicated needs, yet they enroll many of these students every year, hoping that the Islamic environment will help.

Islamic schools will better serve these students as well as the rest of their students by encouraging and supporting the formal evaluations done by their local public school. Every child has a right to public school service, including special education services, even if they attend a private school. Parents must be encouraged to contact the school in their attendance area and request a formal evaluation. The results of these evaluations will include various recommendations for services done by the district. These can include keeping a student in the Islamic school, but pulling the student out for an hour to receive services at the local public school. Government programs such as free/reduced lunch are also available to Islamic schools if they have students who qualify. Services can include free tutoring and even meals. Behavior problems like chronic tardies or absences can be addressed through the local school district. Attending school is compulsory upon every parent and parents as well as young adults can be prosecuted by the local district attorney for failing to attend school regularly. While proceedings vary in every district, there exist formal

procedures for filing against families through the local school district and police department. Although this may seem harsh, it is beneficial for Islamic Schools to be aware that services do exist for a wide range of needs and problems.

Islamic Schools are still developing in the United States and as new ones open, lessons are passed on from older Islamic Schools as well as neighboring private schools. There is also a great deal of things that can be learned and gained from public schools. This not only includes services available to Islamic schools, but also management strategies that may engender a more successful organization.