

## **Islamic Schools**

The focus of this article is on full-time Islamic schools in the United States, defined as private schools that exist to provide Muslim families with the option of education based upon an Islamic worldview and including religious, cultural, and often language instruction based upon one of several Islamic traditions. It does not discuss the many part-time programs, often sponsored by mosques, that also offer religious, cultural, and Arabic-language instruction. There are also Muslim families engaged in homeschooling.

The latest estimate of the National Center for Education Statistics is that, during the school year 2005-2006, there were 202 Islamic schools in the United States, enrolling 26,209 pupils or 0.5 percent (that is, one in two hundred) of private school pupils. The Islamic Schools League of America, which maintains a more current database state-by-state complete with school addresses, lists 235 Islamic schools in the United States, enrolling 32,000 pupils; check the League's website for the most recent listing.

The League's listing includes schools in 37 states, with the largest number in California (32), New York (24), Texas (20), New Jersey (18), Florida (15), Illinois (13), and Michigan (13). There are also 26 Islamic schools listed in six Canadian provinces, 16 of them in Ontario.

Public schools do not record the religious identity of their pupils but it appears, based on the Pew Research Center's estimate that there are 2.35 million Muslims in the United States, that more than 9 out of 10 children in Muslim families attend public schools.

A number of other Western democracies provide public funding for Islamic schools. The most notable is The Netherlands, where approximately 50 such schools receive full funding from the government. England, Australia, Ireland, and other countries also provide public funding and require Islamic schools to follow essentially a government-prescribed curriculum but from an Islamic perspective and with additional subjects such as Arabic language as the board of the school chooses.

Muslim education in the United States, like other faith-based schooling, has developed completely outside of the publicly-supported sector, making its first significant appearance in the form of the schools started by Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam in Detroit and Chicago in the early 1930s, with the declared intention of the moral transformation of the black community on the basis of a heterodox version of Islam. Since the mid-1970s, schools associated with this movement have become orthodox or mainstream Muslim schools known as Sister Clara Muhammad Schools, with much less stress upon rejection of the majority society (and race), and much more upon Islamic teaching (Rashid & Muhammad, 1992, 178-185). The Islamic Schools League of America identifies 23 of these schools, down from 38 some years ago.

The other Islamic schools are characterized by the League as “immigrant community-based” and most of them have been founded quite recently, 85 percent of them within the last ten years. Most remain small, with more than half enrolling fewer than 100 pupils, but the League reports that more than two-thirds are in the process of expansion.

Critics of Islamic schools in Western Europe have expressed concern that they could result in postponing or preventing the integration of Muslim immigrants into the host societies, a charge brought against Catholic schools in the United States during the 19th century. Research in The Netherlands suggests that this concern is as misplaced as it was against Catholic schools; indeed, there is some evidence that Muslim youth who attend Islamic schools in England are less alienated on average than are those who attend state schools.

This is not to dismiss reports that a few Islamic schools in the West seek to nurture a rejection of the host society; in 2006 a school in Amsterdam was closed by the government for that reason, and there have been periodic concerns of this nature in the United States. The most notable controversy involves the Islamic Academy, a K-12 school owned and operated by the Saudi embassy for children of its staff with campuses in Alexandria and Fairfax, Virginia, which has been accused of promoting Islamic extremism through its textbooks and instruction.

There is no reason to believe, however, that the hundreds of community-based Islamic schools across the country are promoting rejection of American life in general, though of course it is in the nature and purpose of faith-based schools of any religious tradition to teach pupils what aspects of the surrounding culture are inconsistent with their beliefs. The League reports that, of the 232 Islamic schools on its list, 45 percent are completely independent, 29 percent are connected with mosques but governed by autonomous boards, and 21 percent are owned and governed by mosques.

The evidence is that American Islamic schools, like the Muslim community in general, are (in the words of the Pew Research Center) “decidedly American in their outlook, values and attitudes” and “believe that Muslims coming to the U.S. should try [to] adapt American customs, rather than trying to remain distinct from the wider society.” Parents of the tens of thousands of pupils attending Islamic schools, like parents of the millions of pupils attending Christian and Jewish schools, are seeking a good academic education in a context that takes seriously their deepest convictions.

There is currently a strong emphasis among supporters of American Islamic schools on raising standards, with some calling for schools to seek accreditation from regional accrediting agencies, while others propose a separate Muslim accreditation process. One organization seeking to fill this role is Muslim Educators' Resource Information and Training (MERIT), which focuses on the training of boards, school leaders, and faculty and promotes networking among Muslim educators.

See also: Accreditation

#### FURTHER INFORMATION:

Haddad, Y. Y., Senzai, F., and Smith, J. I. (2009). *Educating the Muslims of America*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

Islamic Schools' League of America (<http://www.4islamicschools.org>)

Muslim Educators' Resource Information Training Center (<http://www.meritcenter.org>)

National Center for Education Statistics, *Characteristics of Private Schools in the United States: Results From the 2005–2006 Private School Universe Survey*, NCES 2008-315  
(<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2008/2008315.pdf>).

Pew Research Center, *Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream*, 2007  
(<http://pewresearch.org/assets/pdf/muslim-americans.pdf>).

Rashid, H. M. and Muhammad, Z. (1992). The Sister Clara Muhammad Schools: Pioneers in the Development of Islamic Education in America, *Journal of Negro Education* 61, 2 (Spring).

Charles L. Glenn