Why Islamic Schools?

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Do You Have a Choice?

Far removed from the days of the one-room schoolhouse, or even the neighborhood public school, today’s educational landscape offers parents a myriad of choices when it comes to educating their children. While the majority of American children attend a local public school assigned to them based on their area of residence, an increasing number of parents are choosing alternatives for their children. Within the realm of public schooling, we see an ever-growing number of charter and magnet schools, as well as the opportunity for students to enroll in schools outside their residence areas (inter-district and intra-district enrollment). Parents who can afford private schools can choose religiously affiliated schools, such as Islamic schools, Catholic schools, or non-denominational secular schools. Home schooling is now recognized as a legitimate and effective form of education, and following on its heels we see online and virtual schools. And the choices continue to expand.

Why Would You Exercise That Choice?

One question that has intrigued education researchers regarding school choice is, “What is it that motivates parents to exercise choice?” More often than not, choosing an alternative school for their children requires some amount of sacrifice. This is most obvious in the case of private schools, where parents have to dole out large sums of money to educate their children. So, what is it that parents are seeking for their children when they make these sacrifices?

A review of the research indicates that when parents exercise school choice, their motivations fall under three main categories. The first has to do with academics: parents are looking for schools that are academically rigorous and that have high standards and performance. Secondly, parents may be concerned about the social climate or environment of the school. In this case, they may be considering factors such as student safety, student discipline, teacher dedication, and a sense of community in the school. Finally, some parents may exercise school choice because of religious or moral considerations, such as character and moral education and the compatibility of values between home and school.

It might come as a surprise to many, but of those three motives (academic, social, and moral), academic reasons take the lead by far when it comes to choosing schools. Study after study has shown that parents are mainly concerned about academics when they decide to enroll their children in alternative schools. Interestingly, this is true regardless of the type of school. In other words, whether the school choice is public or private, religious or non-religious, parents’ number one concern is their child’s academic well-being.

What about Islamic Schools?

One form of schooling, however, that has not been investigated by researchers is the full-time Islamic school. Obviously, Islamic schools are a new phenomenon on the landscape of educational options in North America, having made their first appearances in the past two to three decades. Being relatively unknown to the general public, as well as the world of academia, full-time Islamic schools have been given little, if any, attention in the realm of educational research. This trend is changing, however. September 11 brought about greater visibility of Muslims in the public square as well as the media, and some of this attention has been directed towards Islamic schools.

Fortunately, in the past few years, several doctoral dissertations have been written about full-time Islamic schooling in North America. One such dissertation addresses precisely the question posed...
earlier, within the context of Islamic schools: What factors motivate Muslim parents to choose full-time Islamic schools for their children? To answer this question, a full-time Islamic school in the U.S. was selected for investigation. This school was a K-12 school with about 300 students that had been operating for nine years. Since this study is a case study, its findings can not be generalized to all Islamic schools; however many parents, community members, and Muslim educators will find that what is reported here is no stranger to what they intuitively know about full-time Islamic education and the families who have chosen it.

Ask the Parents!

It doesn’t take a researcher to tell you that the best way to find out why parents opt for Islamic schools is to ask them! But asking can take a variety of forms, and the type of answers you get may depend on how you ask. So to cover as broad a range of responses as possible, parents provided their reasons for choosing an Islamic school through three different venues: 1) filling out a written survey, 2) participating in one-on-one interviews, and 3) participating in small group discussions (focus groups).

The main findings of the study are summarized here. You will also find many parent quotes that were recorded during the interviews and focus group discussions. Nothing helps to better illustrate what the parents think than to listen to what the parents actually said!

So, What Did the Parents Say?

When parents were asked to give the single most important reason for choosing to put their child in an Islamic school, all of their responses had to do with one of the following: 1) Islamic environment, 2) religious education, and 3) preserving their children's religion and identity.

1) Islamic environment: One of the primary reasons for parents to send their children to an Islamic school is to provide them with an Islamic environment. While defining precisely what is meant by an Islamic environment can be complicated, and will vary from person to person, there are certain elements that are universally recognized. Parents are looking for a school that supports their children's learning of Islamic morals, behaviors, and practices. They believe that for their children to be good Muslims, they have to grow up in an environment that models, in a practical sense, what it means to be Muslim. For example, many parents referred to the benefits of having their children perform the dhuhr prayers at school with the other students and staff. Islamic environment is viewed by parents as a critical tool for laying the groundwork for their children’s future as Muslim individuals, and as a means for their children to acquire and deeply internalize Islamic teachings and principles. In the words of one father:

...since an individual is not seen as an island, it needs an environment. So it is precisely this environment that I’m looking at; that the kids will get so they can grow up in a wholesome environment, imbibing Islamic thought and spirit…

Another father elaborates further:

Parents may try to educate their children at home, Islamically. They may send them to public school. But it's not only what the parents teach or tell their kids to learn or believe in, but it's also the environment that dictates what kind of children you will be raising...They will gain not only from what their teachers have to tell them, but also from the environment. When the kids are in an Islamic environment, they will learn more about the way people behave, the way they dress, their attitudes, their way of greetings, and all this will help a lot in raising the kids in an Islamic way.
Another aspect of Islamic environment that parents find valuable is their children’s presence in a setting where they can be around other Muslim children. Not only do Muslim friends provide their children with a sense of belonging, but they can also be a source of positive peer influence. Almost any parent with a child in an Islamic school can testify to this influence when they see their child’s eagerness to fast, memorize Quran, or don the hijab.

2) Religious Education: By far the most significant motivator for choosing an Islamic school - and one that was overwhelmingly repeated by parents on the surveys, in the interviews, as well as during the focus groups discussions - is religious and moral education. Parents are most strongly driven by their desire to see their children learn about Islam and to learn to live Islam. What is the difference? In learning about Islam, parents want their children to acquire knowledge about the basic principles and teachings of Islam, for example, the five pillars of Islam, the six pillars of iman, stories of the prophets, memorizing Quran, etc. However, parents are not content that their children learn only the theoretical teachings of Islam; they want their children to learn their religion and to apply these teachings in their daily lives.

…they are learning here about what is Islam about, how we can do it, how we apply it, stuff like that; that’s the most important. It’s not the academia; I can teach him at home…I can teach him about Islam too, but here they can live it.

This important coupling of the children’s knowledge of Islamic teachings with its practice is an essential element of religious education, and one that is difficult to achieve in the absence of day-long exposure and interactions – something that is lacking in public schools or weekend Islamic schools.

3) Preserving Identity: One distressing experience of the Muslim community in North America has been the tendency of some of our young to “dissolve” in the “melting pot”. This can take a multitude of forms, ranging from a whimsical heedlessness towards Islamic dictates to an outright rejection of their identity as Muslims. For many of our youth, swimming upstream against peer pressures and the overwhelming social tides is too taxing. And we all know that even the heartiest chunks of meat and potatoes will completely dissolve if they’re left to simmer long enough in “the pot”.

Many Muslim parents recognize this imminent threat to their children’s Islamic identity, which has led some to put their children in Islamic schools. One mother, who was raised “back home” describes how her own culture shock caused her to consider very seriously what her own children would face, and her subsequent decision to enroll them in an Islamic school:

…growing up in [country], you are in a Muslim environment, you’re born in a Muslim family, so…you had the understanding that you’re going to grow up to be a Muslim. And, unfortunately, that’s missing here. The kid has to really, really struggle with his identity. Because it’s a different world that he goes to outside, ethnically and culturally and the religious point…It was a struggle we had coming here, and settling down. It was a big cultural shock, religious shock, and all kind of things we have to deal with in the world. The environment is different. And so my question was, where would I send my kid?

This mother’s concerns are not unique to immigrant Muslims, but are all too familiar to indigenous as well as second, third, and later generations of American Muslims. Muslims trying to hold on to their deen, and to pass it on to their children, know the struggle all too well. A strong Islamic identity is an indispensable survival tool in a society where so many trends and mores are diametrically opposed to Islamic teachings.
Thus, many parents view the full-time Islamic school as a haven where their children’s Islamic identity can be established, nurtured, and strengthened. At the very basic level, parents want their children to be Muslim and to stay Muslim:

*I think the most [important] would be of course that they should be Muslims when they grow up. I have read some research, especially by Jeffrey Lang, that only 10% of Muslim kids when they grow up they remain Muslim. So obviously that’s the first thing, survival as Muslims. But then I would like to achieve way beyond that, inshallah.*

But beyond the minimum damage control of remaining Muslim, parents have much higher aspirations for their children. Parents hope that when their children are grown and on their own, they will face life's situations with an Islamic frame of mind, and will make decisions based on the foundation and values that were established during their younger years. One parent describes his hope for his daughter:

*That she would have a strong Islamic framework; that that would stick with her through her life. We want that to be inbred in her; in her mind, in her heart, in her body, that that stays with her. That's not something that you go through for eight years or 10 years or whatever…But I want her to have a strong Islamic framework that she’ll have for the rest of her life, not just while she’s in school.*

In summary, the major motivators for parents who choose Islamic schools for their children are religious education, Islamic environment, and protecting their children’s Islamic identity. And while some parents did mention academics as a reason for choosing an Islamic school, it was clearly secondary or tertiary in terms of the parents’ priorities. One mother describes how friends questioned the soundness of her judgment upon hearing that she planned to enroll her children at an Islamic school. Below are her thoughts in response to their concerns:

*...the key priority for us was the Islamic environment, number one, followed by the religion, you know, teaching the Quran, Islamic studies…And then what we put secondary was education, because to us Islamic teaching was more important. We didn’t focus on that [academics] so much...we had other friends we knew that were, like, are you sure? You're going to compromise sending them to a smaller school, and their education, especially English and all that will be compromised. And we said, you know, they can always learn. They can always learn that later on in their lives. But now it’s important the Islamic education for them. So, alhamdulillah, that was our decision and why we chose to send them to the Islamic school.*

The above quote not only illustrates that many parents place religious considerations above academic ones when choosing an Islamic school, it also brings to bear a common misconception held by the Muslim community at large, that Islamic schools are academically inferior to public schools. While it is well beyond the scope of this article to address that issue, it is certainly one that should be addressed in an objective and systematic manner. How do parents who send their children to Islamic schools view these schools’ academic performance? How do parents who do not choose Islamic schools perceive their academic quality? How are Islamic schools actually performing when it comes to academics, as measured by standardized tests, graduates’ post-secondary performance, and other objective measures?

**Anything Else?**

While religious education, Islamic environment, and preserving identity were parents’ top reasons for choosing an Islamic school, there were additional reasons that drove their decisions. Among
the most important of these is protecting their children from the negative influences of public schools; for example, drugs, violence, sexual promiscuity, and student behavior and attitudes. For many parents, these dangerous snares pose the threat of dissolving their children into the melting pot in the worst possible way. This father vividly describes how these very fears instilled in him a passionate desire to protect his children:

> I have my older brothers who have kids, so I saw them growing up. I saw them at young age and high school and college. And it was a good experience for me to watch how Muslim kids grow up in a non-Muslim country, a non-Muslim environment, mostly in public school. And I saw a lot of examples in front of me of bad situations of how kids grow up and develop, and how the peer pressure on the kids, especially when they get in the age of middle school and high school...we've been around for a long time and we've seen a lot of problems in the community. And this is one reason, for myself, because I've seen a lot; because I've been involved in the community, I've seen tons of problems. I've seen teenage pregnancy, I've seen drugs, I've seen suicide, I've seen a lot of problems within the Muslim community, with the Muslim families. We are thinking our community is immune: no, our community is not immune! Our community have tons of problems, especially problems that you don't see on a daily basis, unless you get involved in social work...It makes me feel that I want to protect my kids...I said I am willing to compromise education with Islamic environment, and that's basically because from what I see. Once you exposed to some of these problems, you say what in the hell is education!? Forget education! I just want my kids to be safe. They can get education later on, when they pass the hurdle of the teenage age group. Once they pass over this hurdle, they can get all the education they want.

Other reasons mentioned by parents included Arabic language instruction, the compatibility of values between home and school, strong academics, and safety.

What Benefits Do Islamic Schools Provide for Parents?

So far, the discussion has centered on the benefits that parents believe Islamic schools provide for their children. But parents also recognize several benefits for themselves! The most important of these is that having their children at an Islamic school supports their parenting. Because the school is reinforcing what they teach at home, their child-rearing efforts are made that much easier. These parents recognize that if their children were in a non-Islamic school, there would be a conflict between home and school values, and they would have to work much harder to instill Islamic values in their children's hearts and minds.

Another advantage for parents is the peace of mind they feel knowing that their children are safe, knowing who their children are associating with, and knowing that their children can practice their religion freely and comfortably without enduring any teasing or negative attention.

Many parents feel that having their children in an Islamic school has given them the opportunity to learn from and with their children. As their children learn about Islam, they as parents learn along with them. Some parents feel that their children's knowledge about Islam has exceeded their own, and that reinforcing what the school teaches has helped them practice their religion more fully.

And finally, but certainly not least, one cannot ignore the parents' beaming narrations of the parental satisfaction they feel when they observe their children learning about and practicing Islam.

> My parents are in town from [country] and it was maghrib time and I told my son to lead the prayer. And he led the prayer. My dad and me were standing behind and he recited the sura. They told me, “Where did her learn it?! Look at the way he’s reciting!” I said, “This is [name of
Islamic school]...it gives a pleasure to the parents and the grandparents; it's a good thing, alhamdulillah.

What Are Some Advantages of Islamic Schools Over Public Schools?

When parents were asked what advantages they think an Islamic school provides over a public school, the three most prevalent responses were 1) behavioral and moral issues, 2) the positive impact that the school has on their children, and 3) the sense of comfort and belonging.

1) Behavioral and moral issues: By far, the most important advantage of an Islamic school for parents is the issue of morals and behavior. According to parents, one of the major disadvantages of public school is that it exposes their children to behaviors and practices that are contrary to Islamic beliefs. In addition to common concerns, such as the use of bad language, or even worse, drugs, parents are also concerned about peer pressure and sexual attitudes and behavior. By attending an Islamic school, parents believe that their children can avoid this peer pressure to a certain extent, and are thus less likely to become involved in un-Islamic situations. While some parents worry about the influence of peer pressure on their younger children, believing that they are more vulnerable during their formative years, other parents feel that peer pressure is greatest at the middle and high school levels, when friends have a much greater influence on the child than the family does.

2) Positive Impact: Not only do parents believe that attending an Islamic school helps their children become proud and confident Muslims, they also pointed out that another benefit of Islamic schools over public schools is the positive impact they observe in terms of their children's religious practice, knowledge, and attitudes. Parents expressed satisfaction at seeing their children implementing Islamic practices such as praying, fasting, dressing Islamically, and reciting Quran. One mother expressed her pleasure over the changes she observed in her children after transferring them from a public school to an Islamic school. In one of these instances she relates:

   My kids used to ask me when we going to Disneyland or on vacation. And now they’re asking me, when we going to go to Mecca?

3) Comfort and Belonging: Another advantage afforded to Islamic school students, according to their parents, is the sense of comfort, acceptance and belonging they feel when they are with people who share their beliefs and practices. In addition to what many parents described as a sense of family, some also lauded the fact that their children can practice their religion freely without being questioned or teased, and without feeling uncomfortable, embarrassed or left out.

   Just the feel that you are in an Islamic environment, that you are with the people who understand you...And then again, the feeling of not belonging [in public school], not fitting in because they are not able to do the things the other kids do, or be involved in the things the other kids are involved in.

What are Some Limitations of Islamic Schools Compared to Public Schools?

A conversation about why parents choose Islamic schools would not be complete without listening to what parents have to say about the limitations of Islamic schools. From the spiritual, emotional, and moral perspectives, the parents have painted a pretty rosy picture of what Islamic schools offer for their children and for them. But any individual or community who is familiar with the challenges and struggles faced by Islamic schools is all too aware that we are not dealing with a bed of roses ... except for the thorns, perhaps.
So, while parents recognize the benefits of Islamic schools, they are also aware of the areas in which public schools have a competitive advantage. The two most frequently cited of these are the Islamic schools’ lack of facilities and resources, and the lack of programs and services. Clearly, both of these are related to the financial strains faced by most of our Islamic schools.

In terms of facilities and resources, many Islamic schools are unable to provide, either completely or at a satisfactory level, amenities such as fully equipped science labs, physical education facilities and/or equipment, and libraries. The lack of finances also affects schools’ abilities to buy additional resources such as teaching aids, classroom manipulatives and other materials, high quality furniture, and most importantly, the ability to offer competitive salaries to hire and retain a highly qualified teaching staff.

But money doesn’t only buy “things”; it can also pay for numerous programs and services that are readily available in public schools, such as extracurricular activities, gifted and talented programs, remedial programs, ESL programs, and elective courses. And while parents recognize that their children may be missing out when it comes to facilities, resources, programs and services, the fact that they have made a conscious decision to forgo these benefits in exchange for an Islamic education and environment is a testament to their priorities.

**Conclusion**

In addition to this doctoral dissertation, only one other has been written about the reasons that motivate Muslim parents to choose an Islamic school for their children. Feryal Elkhaldy, in her dissertation (1996), also concluded that religious factors were the most important consideration for parents sending their children to three Islamic schools in Florida (followed by sociocultural reasons, and lastly for academic reasons).

It would only be fair to remind our readers again that this study was a case study, and therefore the results may or may not be applicable to other Islamic schools. However, it would come as no surprise if a similar study conducted at the national level told the same story. This feedback, provided by the parents, is an invaluable component that can help Islamic schools navigate through their growth and development as they steadily edge towards becoming mature institutes of learning.

Martin Luther King had a dream. Many Muslim educators, and those involved with Islamic schools, also have a dream. And that dream is to see Islamic schools become model schools and beacons of education in North America; to see Muslims and non-Muslims alike, clamoring to enroll their children. Islamic schools are still in their infancy, and there are many years of pioneering sacrifice, dedication, and hard work ahead. But when it becomes a reality, inshallah, we won’t be asking only a small number of Muslim parents, “Why did you choose to send your child to an Islamic school?”