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PIONEER PRESS

School makes history
BY PAUL TOSTO
Pioneer Press

It will be one of the smallest graduating classes in the Twin Cities, but it will be historic: Three students from Al-Amal School in Fridley today will be the first to graduate from an Islamic school in Minnesota, marking a new chapter in the state's rich tradition of religious education.

Sumaiya Mamdani, Amber Salem and Malik Harfi will take their diplomas this afternoon, joining more than 4,000 private school and 70,000 public school seniors in Minnesota expecting to graduate this spring.

For teens and parents, graduation day brings a tremendous "Hey, I made it" satisfaction. But the feeling today will belong, too, to Al-Amal, which began nine years ago with about 35 elementary school-age kids and has seen demand grow for Islamic and academic instruction.

"It's very important," Principal Salah Ayari said of today's event. "It shows that the Muslim community in Minnesota has a new focus now on education." It will build confidence among parents that "we can provide this kind of education for our kids and permit them to go to college."

Like Catholic, Jewish and Lutheran schools, Al-Amal weaves together religious and academic teaching. Reading, math, science and social studies are taught along with Arabic and the Quran. Parents and students come searching for smaller class sizes and a sense of discipline and unity in the religion.

Malik, a senior at 16 who plans to attend the University of Minnesota, was among the first group of Al-Amal students, starting as a fourth-grader. The school, he said, offers the chance to be around Muslims all the time and brings together people of different races and ethnicities. "We all share one thing. We share Islam."

Al-Amal has grown to 307 students from pre-kindergarten through grade 12. It's one of about 200 full-time Islamic schools nationwide and the only one operating in Minnesota, according to the Islamic Schools' League of America, a national advocacy group. Most of the Islamic schools in the country teach elementary grades and roughly 25 percent graduate seniors, said Judi Amri, the group's director, who estimates the nation is adding about five to 10 new Islamic schools a year.

Finding the resources to teach high school can be difficult for small schools. Al-Amal has made it work because the three students graduating today are part of the Post Secondary Enrollment Options Program, a state

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program that lets Minnesota juniors and seniors take academic course work at the U or other colleges without charge.

Sumaiya, 18, said she's finished two years of college work already. She's been at Al-Amal since ninth grade, coming from Hopkins West Junior High. She didn't want to come at first and leave her friends. But, "I became a different person in the first year," said Sumaiya who hopes to go into medicine. "I learned there's never enough I could learn about Islam."

Amber, 18, came to Al-Amal as an eighth-grader from a small town in North Dakota, "a big transition." She's been driving in daily from Albertville, an an hour commute with traffic.

She's liked that religion has played a much larger role in her life here. She and her peers, she said, have worked through some of the experiments in building a curriculum, but seniors after her will still need some patience.

Ayari, the principal, sees reasons for hope. He has a small waiting list for preschool, and his eighth and ninth grades have about 15 students each, making it likely that today's graduation ceremony won't be the last.

"For the upcoming students," said Malik, "the path has been paved."

Paul Tosto covers K-12 education. Reach him at (651) 228-2119.



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