

Monday, August 22, 2005



Morris Richardson II / The Detroit News

David Jacob, right, installs insulation with Tom Woodman at Crescent Academy. About 85 percent of the school's students come from Canton. Many parents chose to move to the community because of the school, says its director.

Learning

Islamic school doubles its pupil capacity

The Canton Township facility's expansion is a response to growing need among Muslim community.

By Amy Kuras / Special to The Detroit News

CANTON TOWNSHIP -- Crescent Academy, a 355-student Islamic school, is a month away from completing an expansion that will increase its capacity to about 600 students.

The school, which serves students in preschool through eighth grade, is expanding because of the growing Muslim community in the western suburbs, said school director David Tauhidi.

"The community had been growing with a lot of professionals moving to the area," he said.

As Muslim parents move to the area, they choose Canton over other suburbs because Crescent is there, he said.

Crescent has small classes and high academic standards, which was not much of a draw at first for Natasya Shajira, whose daughter Haleema will be a third-grader at Crescent in the fall. As it turned out, the school has been perfect for her daughter, she said.

"When we first enrolled her, we weren't really thinking so much in terms of academics, but we have been extremely pleased," she said.

The explosive growth of Canton since the school opened in 1991 also is a factor, Tauhidi said. About 85 percent of the school's students come from Canton; when the school opened, most students came from surrounding communities.

Parents who choose Crescent Academy over the Plymouth-Canton district's well-regarded public schools do so because they want their children to have grounding in the principles of Islam. The Muslim call to prayer is broadcast over loudspeakers throughout the school day, and a large masjid, or prayer room, is in a central location.

Rest rooms are equipped with special faucets and benches for students to wash their hands and feet before praying.

"Our parents have different expectations," Tauhidi said. "They do not expect that girls will mix freely with boys, or that sex ed will start in third grade."

Students are taught Arabic along with their usual lessons.

Niofer Nisar's two oldest daughters attended the school until seventh grade, and her youngest will be in the fourth grade this fall. Nisar was drawn to the academy's all-day Montessori program for preschoolers.

"It was better for her to be in a teaching environment than a home baby sitter," she said. "They have a good religious study."

The school operates on an interdisciplinary philosophy, where every aspect of education is tied to another and tied to the principles of Islam.

"They have the syllabus planned in such a way that a social studies teacher would talk about geography or history with Islamic principles," said Bader Fatima Khan, a pediatrician and mother of two Crescent Academy alumni.



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Brick mason George Wojtowicz works on Crescent Academy renovations. The school will hold 600 students when the expansion is complete.

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Many graduates, including both Nisar's and Khan's older children, have gone on to prestigious universities.

Most children who attend the school are the first generation in their families born in the United States. Others are second generation, whose parents did not have a similar school available to them as they were growing up and want their children to be in a religious school environment, Tauhidi said.

Families come countries from all over the world, including India, Pakistan and Lebanon.

Tuition is \$4,000 annually. Scholarships are available for parents who commit to doing a certain amount of volunteering.

The community has been supportive of the school, Tauhidi said.

"Early on, (Canton) was smart enough to realize that if you want your community to grow, you have to be welcoming," he said. "I think we have been genuinely welcomed."

Crescent Academy graduates generally go on to public schools in their home districts once they leave, Tauhidi said. He said the foundation they receive at Crescent, both academically, spiritually and culturally, serves them well once they move into the larger communities at public schools.

"Identity is a fundamental component of the human personality," he said. "It has a lot to do with how you see yourself and what you believe you can become."

Amy Kuras is a Metro Detroit freelance writer.