

## Chapter I

### ISLAMIC SCHOOLS: DATA BASED PROFILES

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*The very essence of Islamic schools is the teaching of Islam. It is what defines us. We have many Islamic curricula that fulfill cultural and traditional needs and expectations of parents and communities; however, we continue to desire more spiritual content and real life applications. We realize that if we want a curriculum for our children, we must look at Islamic curricula through the lens of our children's needs. What we teach and how we teach is of deep concern to Islamic schools, and the need to take up this challenge is now a top priority.*

While talk about such curricular needs has been bubbling up for years, it is only now that the community of educators has the capacity to act in a meaningful and connected way. The Islamic Schools League of America is facilitating this national dialogue on school leadership as it relates to spiritual curricula in K-12 Islamic schools, and the curricula's impact on the future of American Muslim children through research, conferences, and online discussions.

Questions persist: What are the Islamic schools of America? How many are there? How are they structured? What stage of development are they experiencing: growth, plateau, reduction? How "connected" are the schools to the larger society and to each other? This essay will provide the major findings of primary research related to full time K-12 Islamic schools in the United States, helping to create a more accurate profile of Islamic schools based on that data.

Data on Islamic schools is very difficult to obtain. A previous, and the only other known, primary survey research was published in 1989 by the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) in an obscure booklet titled *In-Depth Study of Full-Time Islamic Schools in North America: Results and Data Analysis*.<sup>1</sup> In that booklet, the number of full time Islamic schools was established at approximately fifty (50). Today, there are approximately 235 such schools, and no other national studies such as the ISNA study and this study are known to have been carried out. This research is critical to the schools for establishing and identifying community, professionalism, standards, and shared educational philosophies as well as to the American-Muslim community and the larger American society for a crucial understanding of full time Islamic education that is based on fact rather than conjecture.

### ***Methodology – Establishing an Accurate List of Schools***

Before any research could occur, an accurate and current list of the schools needed to be created. As late as 1998, no such list of the full time Islamic schools in the United States existed. The lists that existed were primarily voluntary lists where a school could self-register. No mechanism existed to ascertain the accuracy of any entry or follow up on that information over time. Consequently, the initial step in the research was to accurately identify the schools and obtain their contact information. This part of the research began in 1998 and continued until 2004. Current systems in place with the Islamic Schools League of America now accurately maintain up-to-date information.

#### *Identifying the Schools – Creating a Protocol*

##### Step One: Consolidate online lists

The online lists used were available free on the internet by various Muslim regional and national groups, and any list available was mined for contacts, with the majority of listings obtained in the years 1998-2000 from the *Islamic School Addresses in North America* section of the Muslim Student Association (MSA) website.

- The online lists were consolidated into one major list of over 600 school listings.
- Duplicates were eliminated:
  - Duplicate entries of the exact same name and street address were eliminated.
  - Variations of spelling were considered a “match” when determining duplicates if other information such as street name closely matched. For example, “Al-Huda” and “Alhuda” would be considered duplicates if they also carried the same street name.
  - However, no variations of actual *names* were considered duplicates or eliminated even if the street name was similar or identical. For example, if one list presented “Alhuda School, 123 Main Street, NY, NY 12345” and another list presented “Universal School 124 Main Street, NY, NY 12345” both entries were retained, listed separately, and evaluated as possible schools.

- Entries were eliminated in which any information indicated the school was a part-time school unless the information also indicated that the school was planning to become a full time school.

### Step Two: Verification

Initial verification was a lengthy process that followed a protocol: Telephone contact was attempted first. If that failed, then an attempt was made to obtain more information about the school telephone number via the internet. Next, a query about the school would be sent to the IECN.<sup>2</sup> In 2004, a land mailing was made to each school; any mail returned as undeliverable was set aside for further investigation. In a final step to verify schools, the online registration was installed on the League's website for self-registration.

- Telephone: All schools with listed telephone numbers were called during normal school hours of operation. Many of the schools were reached quickly, but overall, this was not as fruitful as expected because of several different issues:
  - No one to answer phone; no answering machine; messages left were not returned.
  - Educators were sometimes surprised by the call, not commonly receiving calls other than from parents or local community members, and were initially suspicious and hesitant to provide information, particularly post 9/11.
  - School had moved physical location.
  - School had closed.
  - School had new telephone number or new area code.
- Online: After exhausting the phone search, an extensive search was conducted on the internet. The two main search websites used were Google <[www.google.com](http://www.google.com)> and Langenberg Reverse Directory <<http://reversedirectory.langenberg.com/>>.
  - The first step was to google the name of the school. Results were cross checked with name of school, street address, city, and local mosque.
  - The second step was to conduct a reverse directory search on the old phone number, which would often yield a portion of the school's name or a city.
  - The third step was an attempt to contact or identify a mosque in the area to inquire about the school, thus narrowing the search by helping to identify the current area code.

One of the greatest barriers to contacting the schools was the area code changes. This was severely problematic because new area codes were being added very quickly, and most of these schools are in urban areas where area codes were most likely to be added. Simply identifying *which* area codes had experienced a change was problematic. Furthermore, some school phone numbers experienced more than one area code change during the years 1998 to 2003, making initial contact difficult. For example, in Michigan, the three (3) main area codes increased to *twelve* (12) area codes by 2006. To complicate matters further, there is an area code assignment method called the *overlay* method that, "... places a new area code 'on top of' an existing one. Both area codes serve the same location."<sup>3</sup>

- Query IECN – The third part of the verification protocol was to query the IECN listserv about the school in question. Some of the more stubborn cases were solved that way since oftentimes a school would be in touch with at least one other Muslim educator outside their local area. Schools on the IECN would share contact information about schools in their state that were not yet connected via the IECN or other virtual means.
- Mailing – A fourth measure we took in verifying schools was to send mail via the US Postal Service, i.e. snailmail. In 2004, an initial mailing to all the schools for which there was contact information was conducted. When an envelope would be returned as undeliverable, all previously mentioned measures in this protocol would be repeated in one last effort to contact the school. If this proved unsuccessful, the school would be removed from the list. All schools are contacted on a yearly basis.
- League Website Online Registration – In 2002, an online registration for schools was created. This registration requested not only basic contact information but also asked schools to answer a questionnaire.

### Step Three: Keeping the List Current

The final step in the protocol to develop an accurate and current list of the schools is to keep the list current by periodically verifying and culling. The League continues to employ its verification protocol, keeping in mind that there are several factors that lead to inflated and inaccurate counts of schools in established lists:

- Double listings as a result of

- similar name but different address because the school grew and moved – for example, *Al-Huda* at *1234 No Name Street* in *East Lansing, MI* builds a new and expanded school 1½ miles away. When it moves, the new location is reported as *Alhuda* at *4567 Yes Name Street* in *Lansing, MI*. Because both the name and the address are different, they wrongly appear as two schools.
- spellings of the school names – many are transliterated from Arabic, so the spelling often varies: *Dar Ul Uloom*, *Darul Uloom*, *Dar ul-Uloom*, etc.
- schools with more than one name – for example, the *School of Knowledge* is also listed as *Madrassa-Tul-Ilm*.
- Charter schools – independent public schools. They are not parochial schools, but they have the flavor of a religious school since their student body is oftentimes as much as 99% Muslim.
- Schools that have closed or merged with another Islamic school but are not removed from the list.
- Schools that have closed (not removed from the list) and then reopened a year or two later under a different name but same location.

Unless the list is constantly verified and culled, it can build to some of the highly inaccurate numbers quoted in the media by both Muslim and non-Muslim organizations.

After eight years of following these protocols, a verified list of 235 schools in the US and US Virgin Islands has now been built. This number of 235 is not an absolute or concrete number because there are some schools so young they are not yet known. Additionally, there are some schools that might have closed, but that is also not yet clear. Nevertheless, the likelihood of there being 100 such unknown schools is extremely small. The number of missed schools in either direction of 235 is likely to be no more than 10 – 15. Overall, it is reasonable to rule out the larger numbers of 300, 400, 500, and 600 that have been erroneously but routinely quoted in the media. Furthermore, since a verified list of schools now exists, claims of other numbers need to meet or exceed the previously articulated level of assurance.

### ***Methodology – Data Based Profile of Islamic Schools in the United States***

Using the number of 235 as the definitive total number of Islamic schools in the US, the League has gathered information on and analyzed two of its own data sources, collected since

2004. The first is the League *online registration survey* (106 schools = 45% of all schools and does not include League member schools), and the second is the League *membership application survey* (32 schools = 13.6% of all schools). The online survey and the membership application survey are essentially the same, but some minor changes were made when preparing the survey to distribute as part of the membership application process. For example, in an effort to elicit more accurate information about accreditation, that question was expanded in the membership version of the survey. In the few areas where the survey was changed, the data is *not* presented in this report. In addition, there is an information source called Edustarz that is used with permission of its publisher (97 schools = 41% of all schools). This third source is not being presented as research data, but it will appear in the discussion as valuable anecdotal information.

Goals of Data Collection:

- Provide a definitive profile of full time schools based on data
- Determine trends
- Identify areas of concern

Limitations of all Data:

- Self-selected – only schools that are interested and willing to offer the information are represented.
- Connectedness – if a school is not actively online and interacting with the Muslim educator community, it will not know of the League, the website, membership, or be able to share its information.
- Self-reported – the data are not observations; they are self-reported information.
- Limited scope – the survey tools are limited in length, and questions are focused on obtaining basic information such as growth, size, governance, budget, educator certification, etc.

League Members	Online*		Edustarz
32	106*	Number of Schools Answering Question	97
3,567	14,163*	Actual Number of Students Indicated	14,663
111	134*	Average per School based on Actual	151
<b>26,085</b>	<b>31,490*</b>	Extrapolated/Estimated Total Students based on 235 schools	<b>35,485</b>
* Online & League Members source data are exclusive of each other, i.e. do not overlap. Edustarz numbers include some schools from both groups.			

### League Membership data (separate from Online League data):

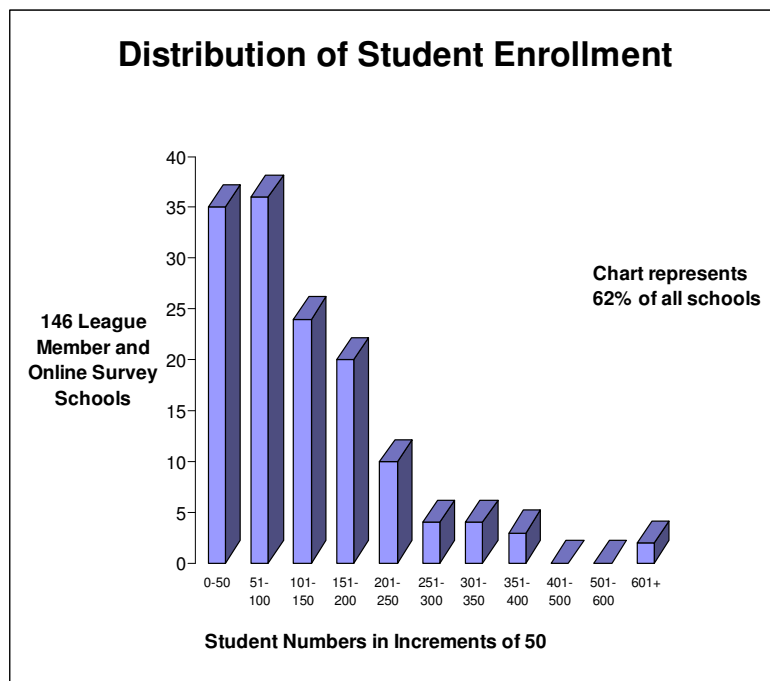
- Only schools applying for membership are represented in this data. Because membership fees are tied to the number of students in a school, larger schools are less likely to join. This could result in the member schools data being more representative of a profile for smaller schools.

### Edustarz information:

The third source is not being presented as research data because it was created as a for-profit publication – a booklet intended for school fundraising entitled “Schools4Us.” Despite the inability to use this data for research, when weighed against the dearth of information available anywhere on Islamic schools, it is too valuable to be discarded. Therefore, that information is included in parts of the discussion so that it might provide additional insight. It is *not* included in the data, only in the discussion of the data.

### The Private/Parochial School Milieu

According to the National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education, Teachers College, Columbia University, “Approximately 5,953,000 students attend 27,223 non-profit



schools. This comprises 11% of all students and 23% of all schools in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). Most non-profit schools are small, located in urban centers, and possess a religious affiliation. About 80% of non-profit schools enroll less than 300 students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000).”<sup>4</sup> (Note: this is ONE quote from

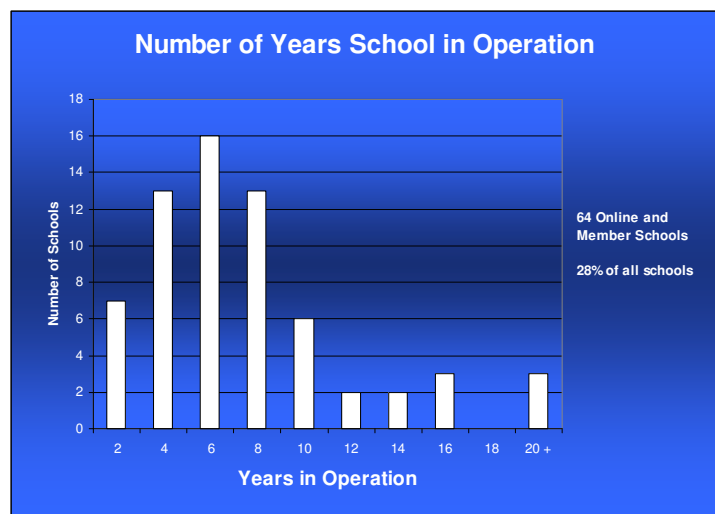
<<http://www.ncspe.org/readrel.php?set=pub&cat=83>>

click on Question #5 What are private schools, and it will bring up the document. The entire quote comes from the bottom of page 2 of that document. The document itself is citing two studies, and that is why it looks like more than one source, even though it isn't.)

Approximately 93% of private Islamic full time schools enroll 300 or fewer students. Although this is higher than the figure for non-profit schools in the US, given the relatively young age of most Islamic schools, this is not surprising. Furthermore, one would expect that over time this percentage will decrease and come closer to the average of other parochial schools as the age and quality of the Islamic schools increase and the population of Muslims increases. The Edustarz schools indicate a very similar percentage – 91%.

An estimated number of students – between 26,000 and 35,500 students – in Islamic schools can be extrapolated from the actual number of students reported in the data. After taking into consideration other factors, the most *probable* number of children in Islamic schools is approximately 32,000 students. Although this data indicates fairly clearly the actual number of children attending full time Islamic schools, it does not, however, indicate the *percentage* of the Muslim school-aged population attending Islamic schools because the numbers for the Muslim population in general is still not well determined. Nonetheless, it is important for the Muslim community to know how it behaves regarding private schooling. Based on a conservative estimate of 850,000 Muslim children under the age of 18<sup>5</sup>, one can estimate that the percentage of Muslim children attending full time Islamic schools is, at the very most, 3.8%. This is well below the national figure of approximately 10% of U.S. children attending private schools.<sup>6</sup> There is no evidence to indicate whether there is a large percentage of Muslim children attending private secular or non-Islamic schools.

Most Islamic schools are very young. Fully 85% are 10 years or younger (28% = 65 of 235), and 55% are 6 years or younger. Even Edustarz information shows almost half of those schools are 10 years or younger. This would indicate that many, if not most, of the schools will require a few more years before they reach that 10 year mark that is so

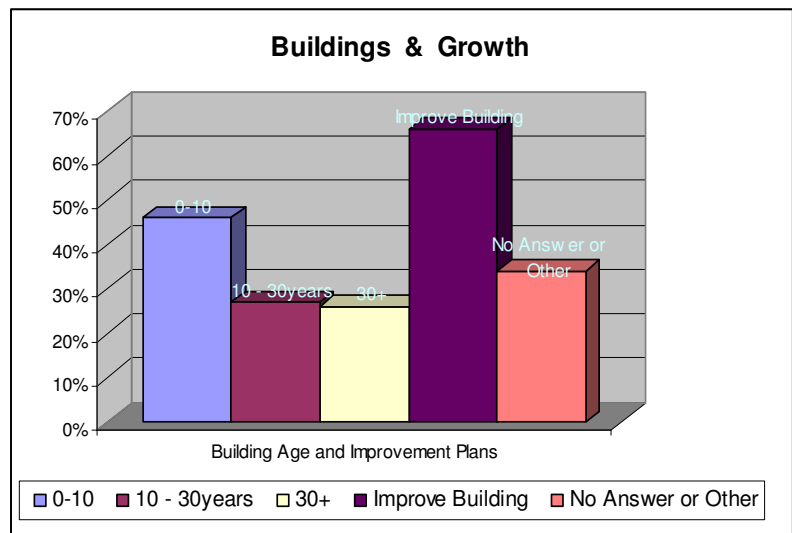


indicative of quality and stability and offers students a proficiency advantage. According to

Caroline Hoxby in a Harvard study of charter schools, "... charter schools may do better as they become more experienced.... For instance, in reading, the advantage is 2.5 percent for a charter school that has been operating 1 to 4 years, 5.2 percent for a school operating 5 to 8 years, and 10.1 percent for a school operating 9 to 11 years."<sup>7</sup> Clearly, new schools need time to organize themselves before they can produce the quality education that is so important to building a solid reputation in their community.

**Buildings and growth:** When people in a community decide to start an Islamic school, they have no idea that the most important issue they will have to face is the physical space.

Lack of sufficient and attractive physical space will present a larger barrier to a school's growth than even the school's actual academic performance. No matter how many students a school is able to attract, if they do not eventually acquire sufficient space for the children to run, play, conduct science experiments, etc., the school cannot grow.

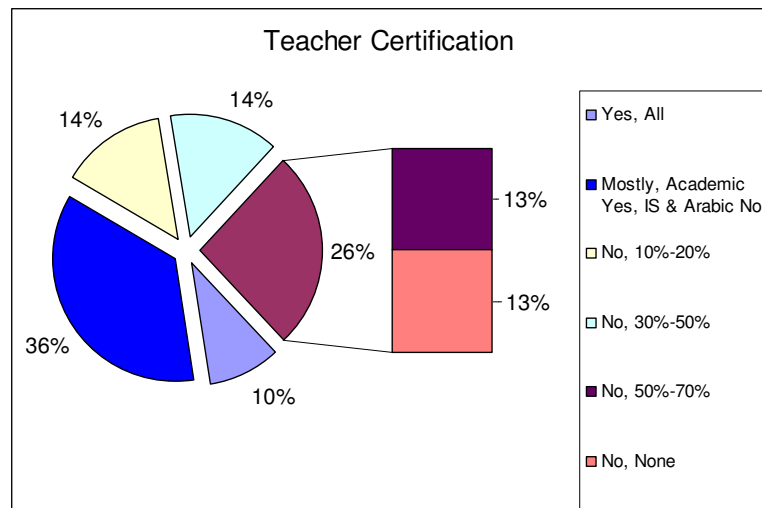


The data indicates that slightly under half of schools are in fairly young buildings of 10 years or younger. However, slightly more than half of schools are located in buildings 10 years or older, with approximately 25% of all schools being in buildings of 30 years or older. The most telling statistic regarding the future of the schools is that fully 66% of schools are either currently involved in building improvement or have *written* plans to do so. This indicates a willingness and ability to invest in the future of the school. If these schools were not growing, there would not be such a large percentage making capital investments.

Next is the issue of teacher certification. Schools were to select the most appropriate response to the stem: *Our teachers are **all** state certified (to teach) in the US.* In addition to indicating overall certification percentages, the response choices also allowed the schools to indicate a distinction of having all academic teachers certified and Arabic/Islamic Studies teachers not certified – a very common occurrence in the schools. According to the data, in

10% of schools *all* teachers are certified, and in 36% of schools all *academic* teachers are certified. Thus, in 46% of Islamic schools, all academic teachers are certified. On the one hand, this is very positive in that academic teachers constitute the vast majority of teaching staff in the schools, and this data shows these teachers are certified. On the other hand, a troubling figure for Islamic schools is that 36% indicated the Arabic/Islamic Studies teachers are not certified.

When that figure is added to the 13% of schools indicating *no* teachers are certified, the number of schools with uncertified Islamic Studies and Arabic language teachers increases to 49%. Since these teachers help define the very essence of an Islamic school, their lack of certification or their being perceived as less professional than their colleagues becomes more significant.



The issue of uncertified Arabic/Islamic Studies teachers notwithstanding, when looking at overall certification figures for Islamic schools, 60% have a teaching staff where 80% of teachers are certified. Interestingly, this demonstrates a higher level of professionalism in the schools than is popularly believed by the Muslim community. Thus, given that enrollment relative to population is low, one might deduce from this information that schools would benefit from conducting public relations programs to inform their communities about the level of professionalism in their school. Contrarily and interestingly, in 25% of schools, most to all of their teachers are not certified. There is likely a variety of situational reasons for this since it is not often a school chooses to hire only uncertified teachers.

It's important to note that uncertified does not mean *uneducated*. Anecdotal information indicates that uncertified teachers have BA, MA, and even PhD degrees, but they lack teacher certification for K-12. Furthermore, to paint a more accurate picture of Islamic schools, it is useful to place Islamic schools into the national context where hiring uncertified teachers occurs more often than most people think, "Private schools routinely hire unlicensed teachers.... The rate [of un-certified teachers] for the public sector is 89.8 percent, whereas

the rate for private schools is much lower, particularly in non-religious schools, where just 48.8 percent of teachers are certified.’<sup>8</sup>

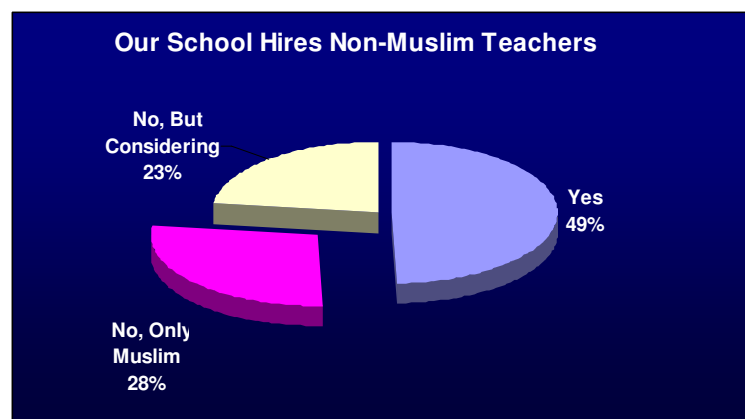
Further study is necessary to determine these figures more precisely and to determine what impact – negative, positive, or none – this might have on students. The question about certification is being hotly debated across the United States (regarding public schools), and attitudes are beginning to shift. Studies suggest that other factors are more predictive of student learning than teacher certification.

Simply put, a teacher’s certification status matters little for student learning. We find no difference between teaching fellows and traditionally certified teachers or between uncertified and traditionally certified teachers in their impact on math achievement (p 64)...To put this in perspective, the advantage of being the student of a teacher in the top quarter of effectiveness rather than the bottom quarter is roughly three times the advantage of being taught by an experienced teacher rather than by a novice, and more than ten times any advantage created by teacher certification! (p 66)<sup>9</sup>

Given the uncertain impact of uncertified teachers on schooling, the desire by Islamic schools to hire Muslim educators, and the sometimes serious shortage of certified Muslim teachers that Islamic schools often face, we can predict that Islamic schools are likely to continue hiring uncertified teachers when they feel it is necessary.

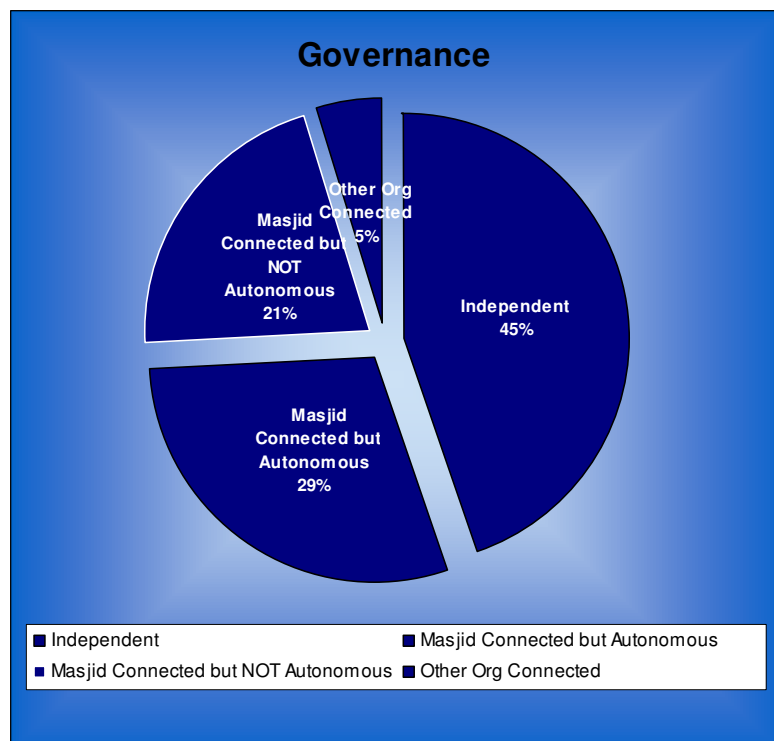
Despite how one might feel about the issue of certification, the fact remains that if schools are growing and seeking accreditation, these percentages will quickly change in the direction of greater certification.

While the accreditation portion of the survey revealed problems too complex to provide reliable data on that subject, other factors and indicators outside the survey show clearly that accreditation is a swiftly developing trend. Given the other indications of growth, this is an important area in which to assist the schools as they grow and develop.



When asked to respond to the statement, “Our school hires non-Muslim teachers,” almost 50% of schools answered “Yes,” with another 23% indicating they were considering hiring non-Muslim teachers. The breakdown of the Yes answers indicates an overwhelming percent of schools saying that approximately 10% - 30% of their teachers are non-Muslim. Curiously, one school indicated that 100% of the teachers were non-Muslim. Less than one third of schools indicated that they do not hire, nor do they consider hiring non-Muslim teachers. That notwithstanding, it is clear that the presence of non-Muslim educators is common in Islamic schools, and as schools move towards accreditation, the need to hire certified teachers combined with the short supply of certified Muslim teachers will likely push this figure higher.

Finally, the data regarding governance addresses a misconception about Islamic schools – the assumption being that full time Islamic schools are controlled by their local mosques. The data shows that fully 45% of Islamic schools are completely independent entities. Another 29% are connected to a mosque but make decisions very autonomously. Only 21% of Islamic schools are actually governed by a mosque. Overall, almost 75% of schools indicate they are operating either independently or autonomously. This makes sense if, as has been supposed, schools oftentimes will begin life as an outgrowth of a mosque or “Sunday school” related effort. They need the support of the larger and more established mosque to get them off the ground. Then, as other factors impact them and their needs become more complex and separate from those of the mosque, they move to become independent. Regardless of how or why a school arrives at independent governance, the majority of schools must view it as an advantage or else they would not leave the financial security of a mosque. One advantage to independence is the



ability to respond to parents, the conventional “clients” of private schools and the ones to whom the schools are most accountable. If a school is held accountable to the mosque rather than the parents, the governance dynamics and resulting system behaviors are changed and become more reminiscent of traditional public schools than private schools.

**Analysis**

The Typical Full Time Islamic School

Based on the data, we can now articulate a profile of the “typical” full time Islamic school.

- Average sized for parochial school – 100 students or less
- Young – 6 years or younger
- Growing
- Professionally oriented
- Independent governance

Quick Stats

Most common size	under 100 students 55% under 150 students 85%
Average number of students	121
Age of schools	6 years or younger 55% 10 years or younger 85%
Growth	66% of schools are currently in expansion project or have written plans to do so
Professionalism	widespread movement towards professionalism – in 60% of schools 80% of teaching staff are certified teachers

**Recommendations**

Full time Islamic schools are in an extremely dynamic as well as precarious position. They are poised to grow if they are willing and able to take the necessary steps:

- Data indicates that schools are moving quickly towards the standards that parents expect, but their public relations efforts have not kept pace with this improvement. Schools will bring their public reputation into closer alignment with their actual quality if they spend more time communicating the good news of their development

- to the Muslim community, as this community remains unaware of the positive and recent changes.
- The fact that the percentage of Muslim children in private Islamic schools is roughly two (2) to three (3) times less than in the general public indicates there are widespread negative beliefs and attitudes about private Islamic schooling in the Muslim community that Islamic schools and mosques might wish to address jointly. Whether or to what extent this is impacted by immigrant-held attitudes towards Islam informed by the social and societal milieu of a history of colonialism in their countries of origin has yet to be studied. Nonetheless, the Muslim community in America is well situated to advocate its own blend of intellect, modernity, and Islam as reflective of the reality in which Muslims live in the United States; moreover, Islamic schools are the ideal place to promote that model and eliminate negative, self-nullifying stereotypes.
  - The disproportionate number of uncertified Arabic language and Islamic Studies teachers in conjunction with the trend towards Islamic schools requiring teacher certification indicates that the community of Muslim educators needs to address this issue. Alternative routes to certification are more available today than ever before, and Islamic schools and Muslim communities must facilitate this need. Islamic Studies and Arabic language, it can be argued, are the very definition of an Islamic school. That these teachers are the *most likely* to be uncertified creates an atmosphere in which negative attitudes and stereotypes often held by Muslims about Muslims (i.e. religious people and/or entities are “backwards” or “unprofessional”) can be reinforced and perpetuated. Since there are no legal barriers or requirements related to how private schools handle Arabic language and Islamic Studies, the only barrier to equalizing and ensuring the desired level of professionalism in these areas is the Muslim community’s willingness to do so.
  - Most Islamic schools have an independent governance structure. To better facilitate this, when schools are conceived within the structure of an Islamic center or mosque, the founders (school and mosque) should plan from the very beginning for the school to grow towards independence. Embracing this wholeheartedly and incorporating it into the expectations of the community would help define it as a

- positive change. At times, a school's move towards independence can be misunderstood or mistakenly viewed by the mosque as negative and result in bitter discord. Planning ahead for this natural growth can diminish such problems.
- Given the large number of non-Muslim teachers teaching in Islamic schools, an introductory course that offers these teachers basic information about Islam from the perspective of a teacher and containing classroom related content seems useful. Furthermore, these teachers might serve as important interfaith bridges.
  - Islamic schools and their communities need to deal with the fact that well over half of the schools are either currently in the process of building/remodeling or about to begin such an effort. However, planning for such growth is difficult in that it requires the community to cooperate along lines that can be very divisive, such as school location, classroom size, playground space, prayer space, parking, and more. These efforts can turn into bitter battles without the help of experienced professionals (such as architects, project designers, etc.) who are equally familiar with the dynamics of Muslim communities and how they use physical space.
  - Scholarships and trusts need to be established to support and encourage Muslim students to enter the field of academia on all levels – elementary, secondary, college, and university. In particular, Islamic schools need Muslim teachers.
  - Further research on every aspect of Islamic education is needed. Funding for that research will be equally critical. Small amounts of \$2,000 to \$5,000 can be extremely effective when directed at graduate students, schools, and organizations. Larger amounts can help fund longitudinal studies that are critical, yet absent.

*The League wishes to thank FADEL organization for its steadfast support, without which this important work could not be conducted.*

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<sup>1</sup> Islamic Society of North America. In-Depth Study of Full-Time Islamic Schools in North America: Results and Data Analysis. Ed. Sha'ban M. Ismail. Plainfield, IN: Islamic Society of North America, 1989. (page 79.)

<sup>2</sup> The IECN is the interactive email forum (a.k.a. *listserve*) with approximately 450 educators connected to full time Islamic schools in North America and hosted by the Islamic Schools League of America.

<sup>3</sup> Types of Area Code Changes. 2006. Verizon.  
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