

Striving for Success

This Islamic school enjoys a culture of warmth and civility.

By Joel Winter

Our school sits in rural Oakville, surrounded by farmers' fields. It has had the appearance of being a "no name" school ever since the sign out front was destroyed by rocks shortly after September 11.

When you walk through the front door, you see "Welcome to Al-Falah" above a bulletin board that announces the winner of the student of the month award. Al-Falah means "success" in Arabic, and it was with the hope of this that the school was formed some five years ago.

Al-Falah is one of the more than 20 Islamic schools that have sprung up in the last ten years in the GTA. Some of them are in industrial units or renovated facilities, while others are in actual school buildings.

Our school is part of a movement among the Muslim community whereby many parents are taking their children out of public schools because they want a better place for their children to both learn the basics and also learn in an Islamic environment.

It has been a difficult evolution for many of these schools. The lack of government funding, together with the fact that the majority of Muslim wage earners do not have high incomes, mean that tuition has to be kept very low.

As a result, the schools operate on shoestring budgets and can offer teachers only low wages (at Al-Falah, the average salary for a fully-qualified teacher is \$25,000). Often, teachers have to supplement their salaries by moonlighting at other jobs. The JK teacher, for example, works at a convenience store on the weekend.

Even with the lowest tuition that we can manage, many of our parents have a hard time paying the average tuition of \$300 per month per child, especially given that many have two children at our school. One hears stories of parents with little furniture in their apartment.

Despite the virtually third-world conditions at Al-Falah, many of our staff wouldn't dream of teaching anywhere else. The school culture is distinctly different from that of public schools.

The students are for the most part well-mannered and behaved. Consequently, the teachers and the principal don't have to spend a lot of time disciplining students, leaving room for more productive activities — teaching and learning.

It's very easy to enjoy and love the kids at Al-Falah, with their bright smiles and pleasant "Salam alaikum" (peace be upon you) greetings as you walk down the hall.

Because Islam teaches that the strongest person is the one who controls his or her anger, the school culture strongly discourages fighting. Of course, we do get some scuffling from time to time, but I have suspended only two boys so far this year for fighting (more serious neck holds). The fact that teachings about the value of patience make up a good part of Islam is also helpful.

From the inside, Al-Falah isn't much different from a public or separate school. Al-Falah spends 75% of its time on the Ontario curriculum, meeting and in some cases exceeding most of its requirements. The drama, dance and music programs are replaced by Arabic, Quran, and Islamic studies.

The homeroom teachers teach the core subjects and Islamic studies; the latter often is woven into the language or social studies program. There are subject teachers to teach Arabic/Quran from grades JK to 8, and French from grades 4-8.

We go on school trips the same as the public schools, and to the same kinds of places. The children enjoy parties on Islamic special days, and do such things as watch videos like *Spy Kids* or *Finding Nemo*.

The students are children, just like other children around the world. Of course, the school's culture encourages them to behave in a disciplined and responsible manner, but they do enjoy having fun just like other kids. This winter, for example, we celebrated the Quebec Winter Carnival, complete with poutine, candy floss, and winter games.

The students wear a uniform that is similar to other schools. Boys wear grey pants and white shirts, and the younger girls wear tunics. Older girls wear abayas, loose-fitting gowns, and head scarves.

The girls at Al-Falah are encouraged to succeed as well as any of the boys, and some of our highest achievers are girls. When they graduate from high school, both girls and boys are expected to go on to a professional career.

Al-Falah attempts to build a strong Islamic character in its students. These teachings help the students to understand that Islam is separate from the horrendous wrongdoings of people who act in its name against humanity.

The school attempts to build confidence in its students and to help them to be proud of who they are in the face of the prejudice they experience from people who misunderstand such things as the role of Muslim women or the concept of jihad.

Despite the challenges we face because of the lack of government funding, I love my job. Have you every seen four grade 7 & 8 boys hugging the principal? This happened to me after our Eid holiday. I will never forget it!

(Mr. Winter is the principal of Al-Falah. He is married with one son, Isaac, who is in grade 2 at the school. In his spare time, Mr. Winter is an avid cross-country skier.)