

Education and Indoctrination in the Muslim World

By Andrew Coulson

This article is an excerpt from a longer and very thoughtful article on the threat posed by militant Islamic schools in dozens of less-developed nations around the world. Because these schools charge no fees and sometimes even provide free room and board, they appeal to many poor parents who can't access government schools or private schools. It may seem obvious that the solution is to increase the accessibility of government schools so that poor parents will choose them instead of the madrasas. However, it turns out that in many cases the government-run schools are almost as propagandistic as the madrasas – since totalitarian governments tend to view schools as ideal sites for brainwashing young people in order to consolidate their hold on power. The author describes a solution that is better than shored-up government schools and shows how it is already working in the city of Quetta in Pakistan. In Quetta, there have been dramatic increases in “the enrolment of girls and boys in academically-focused schools, while lessening the existing incentive for families to send their children to madrasas or government schools.”

The single most important pattern to be found among the education systems of the developing world is that private schools paid for at least in part directly by parents are consistently more responsive to parents' demands. As a result, these schools are far less likely to try to indoctrinate children than schools paid for entirely by third parties (whether governmental or private). When choosing and paying for their own children's education, parents in these countries overwhelmingly seek out practical academic instruction and career training that will allow their children to become economically successful. Both government schools and militant seminaries tend to attract students chiefly by virtue of their low or non-existent out-of-pocket costs to parents.

The biggest lesson of the research comparing alternative school governance structures is that fee-charging market schools outperform government schools (and to a lesser extent government-funded private schools) in academic achievement, cost effectiveness, facilities conditions and maintenance, gender equity, and enrollment growth.

The reason for these patterns is not hard to fathom. Market schools paid for at least in part by parents must be responsive to the demands of parents or they cease to exist and their employees lose their source of livelihood. Unlike government schools, market schools have a financial incentive to expand their services to the widest possible audience and to operate as efficiently as possible.

Even USAID and multilateral aid agencies that are ideologically tied to universal compulsory state schooling recognize these realities, though they are unable to follow them to their local conclusion. A USAID project **Society for Quality Education, November 2007**

aimed at improving the physical condition of schools in developing countries reported that facilities are more likely to be maintained if those charged with school maintenance and improvement feel a sense of ownership. The project description did not acknowledge, however, that the best way of instilling a *sense* of ownership is *actual* ownership by the school's management. It did not mention that fee-charging, privately-owned schools across the developing world – and, for that matter, across the developed world – are generally better-maintained than collectively-owned schools, even when they are out-spent by collectively-owned schools.

The practical upshot of these observations and findings is that expanding access to fee-charging private schools would likely be the most effective means both of improving the educational situation in developing nations and of promoting the U.S. national interest by lessening indoctrination. A potential difficulty in accomplishing this goal is that subsidies to fee-charging schools would lessen parents' contributions to the cost of their children's education – a key element of the market incentive structure that underlies the superiority of these schools.

Fortunately, a large-scale study in Indonesia suggests that direct payment of tuition by parents has a diminishing return, and that significant benefit can be obtained when parents pay only a portion of the cost of their children's education. Coupled with the previous section's recommendation, this suggests that a privately-funded partial-tuition subsidy scheme would be a promising vehicle for broadening access to fee-charging schools. Another plausible approach would be to temporarily subsidize fee-charging schools so that they could build up an endowment of their own, allowing them to eventually become self-sufficient at a lower tuition fee than would be possible without the initial subsidies.

These ideas are not new. They have in fact already been put into practice in one of the most challenging settings in the world: the city of Quetta in the Pakistani province of Baluchistan. Quetta is a very poor, very rough neighbourhood. Not far from the border with Afghanistan, it was home to one of the weapons trans-shipment sites used by the ISI to supply the mujaheddin during the Afghan jihad and was an international hub for the regional heroin mafia after the rise of the Taliban. It does not have an intrinsically-hospitable climate for women's rights and education. Quetta is located firmly within northern Pakistan's tribal belt and is populated mostly by conservative ethnic Pashtuns. An Afghani champion of women's rights, known as Meena, was assassinated in a Quetta refugee camp in 1987 (reportedly with the help of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Islamist Hesbiz organization, a mujaheddin group backed at the time by the CIA).

Despite this context, urban Quetta has been the setting for a successful World Bank education project aimed at increasing girls' enrollment. Under this project, launched in 1994, families in 11 poor neighbourhoods were asked to select a manager who would open a private school. The new

schools were then to be given diminishing subsidies over the first three years of their operation. The planned subsidies were 150 rupees (\$2.60 US) per girl per month in year one, 135 rupees (\$2.33 US) in year two, and 100 rupees (\$1.72 US) in year three. After that, schools were expected to become entirely self-sufficient, receiving no further subsidies.

Participating schools were required to set aside at least 30 percent of the subsidies for a school endowment to help them achieve self-sufficiency. The new schools were permitted to enroll boys as well, but received no subsidy for doing so. The subsidies for girls were considerably smaller than the 200 rupees per student per month spent by local government schools.

In any event, financial independence took slightly longer than expected, but most of the schools became self-sufficient by year five. Of the minority of schools that continued to require partial financial assistance at this point, the *largest* subsidy required was just 30 rupees (\$.52 US) per girl per month – 15 percent of the average expenditure of local government schools. The average monthly tuition charged per student in year five was 58 rupees. Both start-up and operating costs for the new private schools worked out to about one-quarter of the costs at a government school. The Quetta project thus combined the use of temporary subsidies for those schools that eventually became self-sufficient with ongoing partial subsidies for schools that needed them.

The program's effect on enrollment was dramatic. Initial average enrollment in the treatment neighbourhoods was 45 percent for girls and 56 percent for boys. By the end of the *second* year, these figures had jumped to 71 percent for girls and 76 percent for boys – a substantial increase for both sexes, and a halving of the initial 11 percent gender gap. In the control neighbourhoods (comparable areas that did not participate in the program), enrollment remained essentially unchanged for girls and dropped substantially for boys.

By concentrating their funds, skills, and volunteer efforts on replicating Quetta-style programs throughout Pakistan and the rest of the developing world, private donors could dramatically raise the enrollment of girls and boys in academically-focused schools while lessening the existing incentive for families to send their children to madrasas or government schools. This approach would be far less costly than trying to extend the government school sector, and less fraught with the indoctrination, corruption, and abysmal facilities maintenance associated with that sector.

(Excerpted with permission from a much longer article at <http://www.cato.org/pubs/pas/pa511.pdf>. Mr. Coulson is Director of the CATO Institute Center for Educational Freedom and the author of Market Education: The Unknown History. He blogs at www.cato-at-liberty.org.)