

The Dilemma of Schooling Our Kids in the West

الحل الأمثل لمعضلة تعليم الأطفال في الغرب

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Praise be to Allah,

One of the mistakes I see many people, intentionally and unintentionally, make is to compare the conditions of Muslims who live as minorities in the West to the Muslim minority populations in places like China and the Philippines and to the early Muslims who went to places like Malaysia and Indonesia. The reason I think this comparison is false is mostly because when the Muslims went to China they did not send their kids to public schools to raise them on their behalf. They lived together in certain villages and neighborhoods and raised their children collectively. These two factors make for a major difference between the two groups.

The dilemma that we are facing today is that Islamic schools are not always available. If they are available, they are not affordable for all Muslims, and many of them are simply unsatisfactory (certainly not all of them).

Now I want to mention some of the pluses and minuses in each of the alternatives for schooling.

Here are some of the main problems with many Islamic schools, when they are available and affordable:

- Un-Islamic behavior almost comparable to public schools in some cases.
- No Islamic curriculum.
- Poor organization.
- Didactically below-average; unqualified teachers.
- Below-average facilities.

On the other hand, the following are advantages of Islamic schools over homeschooling and charter schools:

- Not all parents are capable of homeschooling their kids.
- Islamic schools also provide a social life for the kids within the Muslim community and that advantage is enormous.
- They teach Islam and Arabic in a way many parents – and certainly all other schools – would fail to match.
- They bring Muslims together and create a sense of community.

Charter Schools: the answer to the dilemma of funds?

Yet, in charter schools, you can't teach Islam – and we have to strictly abide by the rules—which is a huge defect. However, there are many supporters who will say that just by bringing Muslim students together and protecting them from some of the dangers of the public school system may be enough; and they may learn Islam at the *masjid* or elsewhere. Certainly, these are valid points.

Homeschooling

- Safest environment, no negative peer pressure and no bullying.

- Teacher/student ratio is 1/1-5 at the most.
- Parents give customized care and attention to their kids.
- Home schooled kids have higher SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) scores than students from public schools.
- The parent teacher(s) can make their own customized curriculum to suit the needs of the Muslim student (for example, to teach Islamic history as social studies).
- There is a large variety of homeschooling organizations and groups as well as distant learning programs that help or supplement the home education.
- You make your own schedule (take Friday off to go to *Jumuah* prayer, for example, and work on Saturday and Sunday).
- If you travel you do not have problems with a school system; and may even take your children a few months every year to visit a Muslim country, if you come from one or take up a job overseas.
- For socialization and making friends, you can take your kids to the *masjid* often, which you should do anyway.

I have to admit that it does take motivated and educated parents to take such a task upon their shoulders, but if you only knew the happiness that you will have knowing you protected your child from a myriad of dangers then you would go for it!

If you decide to home school, I recommend that you have your child take a standardized test on a yearly basis. The wisdom behind this is to gauge your child's progress as well as to evaluate your own success as a teacher and see what may need improvement. Besides, taking these tests is a necessity in the future before your child goes to college *in-sha'a-Allah*. If you live in the USA, a high SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) will open the doors of many reputable universities to your child, as well as make him/her a recipient of scholarships. Taking such tests requires skill, practice, and training.

Now, which one of these choices is best?

It depends on the parents and their ability to teach, and the availability, affordability, and quality of Islamic schools—among many other factors—so you will have to do the act of balancing all of the above.

We - as a community - must continue to build and support Islamic schools while improving their quality.

As parents we need to invest in the education of our children with our money, time, and effort.

Allah knows best.