

St. Paul Pioneer Press

St. Paul Pioneer Press (MN)

November 7, 2004

A PLACE TO BELONG

AT TAREK IBN ZIYAD ACADEMY, STUDENTS CAN STUDY ARABIC ALONG WITH ENGLISH, STAY IN TOUCH WITH THEIR CULTURE AND "JUST BE THEMSELVES."

Author: Tammy J. Oseid, Pioneer Press

Edition: St. Paul

Section: LOCAL

Page: B1

Dateline: INVER GROVE HEIGHTS

Index Terms:

TWIN CITIES SCHOOL PROFILE

Article Text:

In the middle of a Twin Cities suburb, more than 200 Muslim students study their own heritage and culture, and most importantly, they feel they belong.

When Tarek ibn Ziyad Academy opened its doors for the second year this fall in the former Inver Grove Heights Elementary School, the Islamic charter school had 765 applicants for about 215 seats in kindergarten through fifth grade. Forty of 50 spots for next year's kindergarten class are already reserved. Eight 2-year-olds already have been signed up for the 2007 kindergarten class.

"We were quite shocked when we opened our doors, the demand we tapped into," said executive director Asad Zaman, also the school's principal. "It was clear to us that there was a need. Our kids were not being served at other schools."

Islamic private and charter schools are springing up around the nation as the American Muslim community grows. More than 80 such schools now operate in the United States, according to the Islamic Schools' League of America.

As numbers grow -- as many as 7 million Muslims now live in the United States -- American Muslim families are increasingly looking for schooling options. About 21,000 people in the Twin Cities metro area are from predominantly Muslim countries, almost double the population in 1990, according to an analysis of the 2000 U.S. Census.

At some mainstream public schools, Muslim children -- especially girls who wear headscarves -- are teased. Getting permission for daily prayers or ensuring that cafeteria meals follow Muslim law can be a hassle.

But like parents who choose Christian private or charter schools, some Muslim families simply want to ensure their children learn their culture's values and history.

"I'm teaching my son these things already, but the school helps me raise my children according to our culture," said Eman Ibrahim of Oakdale. Her kindergartner just started this fall, but her second-grader has attended Tarek ibn Ziyad Academy since it opened. When the Inver Grove Heights school district closed Inver Grove Heights Elementary in June 2000, the district at first reached an agreement to sell the aging school to Al-Amal Elementary in Fridley for \$1.3 million. The private school planned to open a south branch, complete with instruction in the Koran.

But Al-Amal's \$3,000 per-student tuition is out of the reach of many immigrant Muslim families, so Islamic Relief agreed to sponsor a charter school, which is ! publicly funded and can charge no tuition.

Unlike the recent ly closed Col. Charles Young Military Academy in St. Paul, Tarek's finances showed no problems in its 2003 audit. The audit for the 2003-04 school year -- its first year of operation -- is due next month.

BELONGING

Boys in uniform khaki pants and girls in headscarves and modest dresses line up neatly to go to Arabic class. The mostly Somali class carefully circumnavigates the carpeted prayer area in the middle of the school as they follow a scarved teacher.

Tarek girls aren't required to wear hijab, or headscarves, but almost all do -- they say they want to imitate their mothers or teachers. About half of the teaching staff is Muslim and wear hijab; the others are mostly Christian and dress modestly but with uncovered heads. During Ramadan, all the children follow the traditional dawn-to-dark fast, so there's not so much temptation for each child, Ibrahim said.

Fourth-grader Najma Ahmed says she feels more comfortable at Tarek ibn Ziyad Academy than at Highwood Hills in St. Paul, which she attended previously. She always had plenty of Muslim students to pray with there, but she likes that at Tarek almost all of her classmates! are Muslim and many of her teachers are, too.

In addition to learning Arabic along with English -- akin to Latin at Catholic prep schools or Hebrew at Jewish schools -- from kindergarten on, other things set Tarek apart. Unlike mainstream Minnesota public schools, where students study comparative religious history in social studies classes, Tarek students study Middle Eastern history more extensively.

In other ways, Tarek's much like any other school, said fourth-grade teacher Sara Shabsavand.

"Academically it's about the same," she said. "But children feel comfortable here asking questions about their own religion. Girls feel comfortable wearing headscarves. They can wear them at other schools and they can pray, but other children make fun of them. Here, they can just be themselves."

RELIGION

About 1 p.m. every day, Tarek students stream out of classrooms, clean up in the restrooms, kneel down facing the east and begin to pray. Zaman says he doesn't track students' religion, but almost all children participate in the daily prayer.

Charter schools like Tarek ibn Ziyad Academy are venturing into the gray area that separates church and state. The law prohibits religious instruction in publicly funded classrooms.

So while much of Tarek resembles the private Al-Amal Islam School in Fridley, the Inver Grove school doesn't teach the Koran or other Islamic religious texts even though almost all its students are Muslim.

"The idea is that the government has to be neutral in matters of religion," said Edward Schiappa, a University of Minnesota communications professor who teaches constitutional law. "It's a fine line. ... Just as First Amendment case law says you don't want to establish religion, they don't want to! interfere either."

Students may pray outside of class time or express their religious beliefs in homework assignments, for instance, but schools can neither encourage nor discourage religious activity or they can risk their federal funding, according to the U.S. Education

Department.

"The key is to walk a careful line which neither promotes the establishment of religion nor inhibits the right of free exercise," said Jill Coyle, the Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan school district's attorney.

Still, charter schools are intended to be experimental, so they may be given more leeway, Schiappa said.

The school's calendar and day are set up to accommodate Muslim students. Classes break during the noontime prayer; vacation days are scheduled on Muslim holidays instead of traditionally Christian ones. The cafeteria is free of pork and other foods Islam prohibits. The name of the school itself is also based in religion.

General Tarek ibn Ziyad's bloody battle marked the beginning of the Muslim rule of Spain in the eighth century. He famously burnt the boats his army used to cross the Mediterranean sea.

It's ibn Ziyad's later multicultural administration over Spain that primarily inspired the name, Zaman said.

BIGGER PICTURE

An imam, or religious leader, in a Bloomington mosque, Zaman believes religion helps him connect with families in ways a secular principal wouldn't always be able to.

He's worked with his students' imams to address family difficulties typically beyond the reach of schools.

"When things go haywire, I have a network I can call upon," he said.

He also sees his job as teaching more than just children. Tarek can be a steppingstone for some families to learn more about American culture in a safe environment, he said.

Some Tarek families -- even non-immigrants -- didn't know homework was a regular part of school or that teachers encourage parents to call with questions about their child's work.

"Nobody had done that before," Zaman said. "Nobody told them a parent needs to be involved."

Ziyad's burning boats are a good metaphor for the role he wants the school to play for Tarek's immigrant families.

"What does it mean to be an American citizen? To us, citizenship means involvement. It's something our families need to learn, too."

That's why part of the school's mission is to build "a diverse, virtuous and moral America," he said.

"It shocks me that a large number of immigrants don't have an opinion on local issues," he said. "We might as well burn the boats ... make America as good as we want it to be."

CHALLENGES

Still, the school's challenges among its own student body are significant. Almost 88 percent of Tarek students are poor. More than 81 percent speak only limited English. Almost all are Muslim.

So when the school didn't meet state standards in reading or math this year, Zaman wasn't surprised.

"Have you seen where they were last year?" he said.

Though the school's fourth-graders, for example, improved more than a full grade level in the school's first year of operation, they started at just the second-grade level.

As in many other schools, testing drills have become part of the routine at Tarek.

Students take regular practice tests and study test-taking skills alongside reading, writing and arithmetic. All Tarek teachers are trained in teaching English as a second language. "I feel I am helping our own community, especially the disadvantaged," said Shahsavand, who converted to Islam 18 years ago! . "They are like my own children."

Despite the school's challenges, Ibrahim says her children are doing well academically. Parents of older students say they'd like to see a similar charter school for older students. Zaman and others have tried to expand their concept, but an application to the Minnesota Department of Education for additional grades wasn't approved.

Tammy J. Oseid covers Dakota County schools. She can be reached at toseid@pioneerpress.com or 651-228-2171.

Caption:

5 PHOTOS BY NATHAN BERNDT, PIONEER PRESS

1) Maymun Salad holds up her answer during a third-grade math exercise. Math and other drills have become part of the routine at Tarek ibn Ziyad Academy. Some students improved more than a full grade level in the school's first year of operation, say the school's administrators.

2) Cards bearing the names of students hang on a window near the entrance to the third-grade classroom. "We were quite shocked when we opened our doors, the demand we tapped into," said Tarek's executive director, Asad Zaman.

3) Suad Ahmed, 7, reads a "Powerpuff Girls" book she checked out of the Bookmobile. She is in first grade at Tarek ibn Ziyad Academy. Tarek girls aren't required to wear hijab, or headscarves, but most do. They say they want to imitate their mothers or teachers.

4) Arabic immersion teacher Mohammed El-Benni teaches a fifth grade class. Tarek's students learn Arabic along with English.

5) Third grade teacher Tasia Islam instructs her students to line up so they can go back to class. They are, from left to right, Rawan Al-Khatib, Abyan Abdisalam, Anzal Aden, Fardous Ali and Zowda Hassan.

Copyright 2004 Saint Paul Pioneer Press