

The Impact of COVID-19 on Islamic Schools in the United States

Implications and Recommendations

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic caused unprecedented disruption to education, as an estimated 1.6 billion students were impacted by school closures globally (United Nations, 2020). Both the fragility and agility of educational institutions were on display as schools worldwide endeavored to respond to the pandemic and pivot to distance learning models. In the United States, the impact was felt in both public and private school sectors. Ramifications of school closures on educational institutions and children across the country were experienced in varying degrees, raising concerns regarding equity and equal access to resources and tools necessary for student success.

According to the Islamic Schools League of America (ISLA), there are approximately 300 full-time Islamic schools in the United States (ISLA, 2021). Like their private school counterparts of other religious and nondenominational backgrounds, Islamic schools faced the pandemic with uncertainty. Their future stability was threatened by the disruption COVID-19 caused in the economic sector and its trickle-down impact on

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enrollment, tuition, and donation dollars, upon which Islamic schools rely heavily. Under pressure to provide continuity and minimize academic disruption, Islamic schools across the United States invested immense energy to adapt to the pandemic and offer their educational services through distance learning platforms within a span of days or weeks.

The new reality that schools across the globe had to face—specifically, abrupt interruptions to their educational programming for an unforeseen future—was not part of the education manuals or training educators had received. Organizations that support Islamic schools, such as ISLA, provided professional development webinars, courses, and guidance to Islamic schools on topics ranging from hybrid learning design to teaching with technology, fundraising during a pandemic, and mental health support for both teachers and students. These resources supported Islamic school leaders and teachers as they concluded the academic year, many of them still operating virtually. Yet, as the 2019–2020 academic school year ended and a new one commenced, Islamic schools grappled with the conundrum of reopening schools via in-person, hybrid, or virtual learning models. Their decisions required that they take into account federal and local guidelines on school reopenings, the needs of their school community, and the resources available to them to maintain their educational services.

To provide a data-based perspective and guidance to Islamic schools, ISLA administered a survey to gauge the impact COVID-19 had on current Islamic school enrollment and instructional delivery models. The data would serve as a benchmarking tool for Islamic schools and provide a broad-view picture of how Islamic schools were operating as the pandemic continued to impact educational institutions even with the start of a new school year. In the sections that follow, we provide a brief background of Islamic schools in the United States and then discuss the survey methodology, results, and implications of the findings.

BACKGROUND

The first full-time Islamic schools in the United States were established 90 years ago, known as the “University of Islam.” These were K-12 schools for children of the Nation of Islam to provide an empowering alternative to public schools that perpetuated white supremacy and racial and economic inequality for Black students. They were renamed the Clara Muhammad Schools by Imam Warith Deen (W. D.) Muhammad in 1975. W. D. Muhammad charged educational leaders at the Clara Muhammad Schools to create a Quran-centric curriculum and an educational experience that

would result in students' knowledge of self and self-reliance (Rashid & Muhammad, 1992).

Another major phase in the development of full-time Islamic schools began in the late 1970s, resulting in the establishment of "community Islamic schools." This is a term used by Khan et al. (in press) to refer to full-time Islamic schools that were formed or funded primarily by immigrants from predominantly Muslim countries who were now raising families in the United States. These schools were also influenced by founding leaders who were white, Black, Hispanic, or other racial backgrounds, whose families had been in the country for generations, and who chose Islam as their way of life in their teens or adulthood. Community Islamic schools often replicated public schools' curriculum and academic structure while adding Islamic, Quranic, and Arabic classes to the school day (Memon, 2020).

While there are historical distinctions between the Clara Muhammad Schools and community Islamic schools, they nevertheless espoused many shared aims. Specifically, most, if not all, full-time Islamic schools sought to provide an alternative to public schools to protect Muslim children from systemic racism, Islamophobia, and behaviors that contradict Islamic teachings, such as experimenting with alcohol, drugs, and sexually explicit interactions. Importantly, they sought to create a safe space where Muslim children could learn about their religion and develop confidence in their Islamic identities.

In recent decades, Islamic schools in the United States have grown to an estimated 300 full-time Islamic schools. Professional Islamic school organizations, such as the Council for Islamic Schools in North America (CISNA) and ISLA provide a reliable platform for collaboration and professional development and, in the case of CISNA, have developed unique accrediting standards for Islamic schools. Many Islamic schools, both Clara Muhammad Schools and community Islamic schools, have seen their student demographics become more diverse, in part a reflection of the diversifying and growing Muslim population in America as a whole. Across the country, approximately 50,000 Muslim students are enrolled in full-time Islamic schools (ISLA, 2021). This is nearly double the number of students in 2009 (Keyworth, 2009).

COVID-19 AND ISLAMIC SCHOOLS

In early March 2020, ISLA's email listserv, called the Islamic Educators' Communication Network (IECN), comprised of nearly 1,000 educators from across the United States, Canada, and including some individuals from United Arab Emirates, Australia, and other countries, began to

discuss how COVID-19 might disrupt their educational services. Contingency and crisis management plans, communication with parents, and staff training in preparation for distance learning were all topics brought up by the community of Islamic school educators.

As COVID-19 continued to wreak havoc across the world and increasingly in the United States, the email listserv was a fertile ground for professional support and guidance. In addition, CISNA and ISLA both increased their offerings of webinars, resources, and networking opportunities to help school leaders respond to the ever-changing landscape in which they were operating. Also, the executive directors of both ISLA and CISNA, which are members of the Council for American Private Education (CAPE), a national private school advocacy group, attended biweekly meetings to learn how federal funding might be leveraged to support independent schools as they navigated this multifaceted crisis.

In this context, ISLA developed a survey instrument that would help provide data to understand the impact of COVID-19 on Islamic schools. This would provide valuable data to advocate for private Islamic schools' needs for federal funding and better tell the story of Islamic schools during this crisis. What forms of instruction were they providing? Were they facing enrollment declines or closures? Were they able to respond to the added financial needs of their constituents? All of these questions were to be addressed in ISLA's survey that administrators of Islamic schools in the United States were asked to answer.

METHOD

The questionnaire was developed on an online data collection platform and consisted of 12 closed and two open-ended questions. The survey items included questions about: location of the school by state, grade levels offered, method of instructional delivery at the onset of the 2020–2021 academic year, mode of instructional delivery at the time of the survey administration, enrollment declines by grade level, percentage of families requesting financial aid, percentage of financial aid requests being fulfilled, and how the school was responding to declining enrollment. This last question was open-ended.

One response was solicited per school from the principal or head of school to avoid oversampling and allow the data to speak to Islamic schools' overall state. In addition to directly emailing the survey to the Islamic schools included in ISLA's Islamic school database, the survey was also shared via two communication networks catering to Islamic school leaders. The survey was administered during October–November 2020.

Responses were received from a total of 81 Islamic schools. All regions of the United States were represented in the sample. The data was analyzed, and a report was created and shared with the Islamic schooling community to help Islamic schools make data-based decisions to mitigate the impact of COVID-19.

RESULTS

Instructional Delivery Models

Nearly half of all Islamic schools responding to the survey (49%) commenced the 2020–2021 academic year with exclusive virtual instruction, followed closely by hybrid instruction (43%). Schools offering hybrid instruction provided both virtual and on-site learning options simultaneously, although the survey did not attempt to capture the diversity of the hybrid instructional models provided. Only 7% of the participants reported starting the academic year with exclusive on-site instruction. However, as the academic year progressed, a larger percentage of Islamic schools shifted from exclusive remote instruction to a hybrid model of instruction, with a total of 59% of respondents indicating hybrid instruction at the time of the survey, up by 16% compared to the start of the year.

Student Enrollment

COVID-19 negatively impacted student enrollment in Islamic schools. Specifically, 79% of Islamic schools reported a decline in enrollment in the 2020–21 academic year in varying degrees. The most common trend was a 20–30% decline in enrollment. According to the survey responses, the grade level that experienced the most enrollment decline was pre-kindergarten, followed by elementary grade levels. School leaders that reported declining enrollment were asked to select the factors they believed contributed to this downward trend. The most frequently chosen option was household financial standing, followed by local schools' virtual instruction offerings. While the majority of Islamic schools were negatively impacted, 11% of respondents reported an increase in enrollment, while 10% indicated that their enrollment was not impacted either way by COVID-19. In comparison to our findings on Islamic schools, an average of 56% of private schools across the United States experienced enrollment declines for the 2020–2021 academic year (McCluskey, 2020). Based on this comparative data, it is safe to argue that Islamic schools experienced a more widespread and drastic reduction in enrollment than their private school counterparts.

Financial Aid

The survey asked the participants to report on trends in financial assistance requests and the schools' ability to fulfill those requests; 67% of respondents indicated that their school experienced an increase in requests for financial aid. In response to the rise in financial aid requests, 60% of the surveyed schools increased their allocation of financial assistance compared to the previous academic year. The high response to financial aid requests suggests the schools took action to respond to the school community's urgent needs by fundraising, tapping into preexisting reserve funds, or otherwise adjusting their annual budget.

Mitigating the Impact of COVID-19

The survey included an open-ended question that prompted Islamic school leaders to share their school's methods for mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on student enrollment. One of the frequent entries was related to tuition assistance and, relatedly, working with families on a case-by-case approach to devise payment plans. Schools also frequently reported the importance of clear and consistent communication with parents to keep them engaged regarding quality programming and safety precautions. Many schools had to increase their efforts in fundraising and marketing, including boosting their social media presence. Other schools reported making budgetary cuts, which included reducing staff members. Respondents also noted that providing hybrid instruction enabled them to mitigate enrollment declines and accommodate working parents.

DISCUSSION

Currently, there is no nationwide data on school reopenings in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2021), making it challenging to compare the Islamic school data with the national averages. However, in February 2021, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) announced at the National Council of Educational Statistics (NCES) annual meeting for private school leaders that it would carry out an extensive study to gather data on school reopenings in the United States. This forthcoming report will help Islamic schools benchmark their reopening efforts with the nation's public schools. Informal reports offered by CAPE board members suggest that the decision of nearly 50% of Islamic schools to remain exclusively virtual at the start of the school year was notably more conservative than other private schools across the nation, many of which provided in-person instruction to maintain a competitive

edge over public schools. Yet, the results of ISLA's survey also indicate that Islamic schools were attuned to their school community and demonstrated agility as the pandemic continued to impact their instructional offerings. Specifically, most schools' shift from 100% remote to hybrid instruction suggests that Islamic schools actively monitored their school community's needs and adjusted their instructional methodology accordingly, aligning it with local and national guidance for safe school reopenings.

Among other issues, the COVID-19 pandemic also highlighted the urgency for creating sustainable financial models for Islamic schools. Since March 2020, 128 private schools have permanently closed their doors in the United States due to the pandemic, 107 of them Catholic schools (Cato Institute, 2021). Given the increased cost of operating a school during the pandemic to adhere to health and safety protocols and decreased enrollment and funding due to the pandemic, many schools were unable to maintain operations. Data is not available regarding how many Islamic schools were forced to permanently close due to the pandemic.

The average annual tuition charged by Islamic schools in the United States is \$6,000 to \$7,000 per student (ISLA, 2021). In comparison, the average private school tuition in the United States is \$10,740 (CAPE, 2021). In terms of public school education, the average expenditure per pupil federally in the United States is \$14,840 (Hanson, 2020). The tuition charged by Islamic schools leaves many Islamic schools across the country financially vulnerable and dependent upon capital campaigns to bridge the gap of cost of expenditure per student. With the anticipated enrollment declines and reduction of donor-based funding due to economic hardship, Islamic schools must plan to find creative and diverse funding sources to create emergency funds for financial aid and operational sustainability.

While the pandemic put a tremendous strain on education systems worldwide, it also highlighted that schools and education systems could be reimaged. On a visionary level, the current discourse in Islamic education calls for the renewal of Islamic schooling in Western countries to better align with an Islamic philosophy of education (Abdalla et al., 2018) and for this renewal to espouse wholeness in education inspired by *tarbiyah* (Brifkani, 2021). Islamic schools need to communicate and provide the value of integrated and holistic Islamic education, grounded in an Islamic worldview and embedded in the strategic planning, curriculum, pedagogy and ethos of every school (Memon, 2020; Shamma, 2018). These factors will help Islamic schools clearly differentiate themselves from public schools and help them deliver on their initial promise of providing an

educational experience that cultivates a strong Muslim identity and Islamic foundation for its students, especially as economic hardships force parents to make difficult choices about their children's schooling.

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