

Bringing Efficiency to the Weekend School

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The Islamic Weekend School is a Western phenomenon. Typically, it is organized by a small group of parents at the grassroots level, parents with perennially limited resources and organizing, staffing, managing and teaching experience. Also, such schools can be heterogeneous in the truest sense of the word. Moreover, it is easy for such schools to be without a strongly principled Islamic leadership. Because of the latter two reasons, an Islamic school can be riddled with two fundamental conflicts of interest that damage the quality of the service. To get past these problems requires time and patience, which would be used for educating and motivating. However, once a leadership has evolved that understands the predicaments and has found a space in managing the organization it needs to take systematic precursor steps or program to resolve the inefficiencies that abound the running of the school itself. Then its profile will be raised in the community and it will be easier for it to bring about changes to the fundamental conflicts of interest. This paper addresses the technical elements of change that will bring greater efficiency and professionalism to the weekend school.

I. Introduction: The Weekend Parochial School is like any other public school in that there are expectations from parents, children and the community. This means that it should have an annual calendar, curriculum and lesson plan, proper scheduling as well as proper books and materials available in a timely manner, periodic testing, parent-teacher meetings, dedicated and trained staff and teachers, procedures for various events and contingencies, and so on. It is different from the Public School in that it is religious-value oriented and its goals for the students is spiritual knowledge, understanding, acceptance and obedience – the proper development of adab – of Ibadat and Muamalat.

This brief paper spends time on the technical aspects of hosting a community Islamic school for young people, be it on the weekend or after hours on week days. In some sense, once a school house is acquired, this is easiest thing to do. Now, whether it should be the first order of business to be addressed is debatable. However, some elements of it will precede everything else, like deciding the day(s) of the week to teach, the hours to keep, a curricula, choosing books, assigning teachers, etc. It is quite possible, and it is

done very often, to start such a school without addressing or even recognizing the bigger question of leadership's and parent's understanding of and commitment to a genuine or more complete Islamic education. Eventually, that is where conflicts of interests crop up. In such cases, a general club-like situation may descend among certain segments of the students that will hinder learning or there may be a disconnect between teachers and a student and his parents with respect to learning Arabic language that will impact the quality of the learning experience. This will manifest superficially as a technical failure even though its roots are somewhere else. Again, there are elements of the technical aspect that are contingent on the size and participation of the community in receiving and giving services. For example, without adequate number of qualified individuals volunteering to be teachers, or having qualified Arabic language teachers affect the number and types of classes offered. So, no matter the quality of the vision, some technical aspects will be wanting.

This paper, then, examines a series of activities that has the potential to give the Weekend School a professional look and the feel of a well-oiled machine. Making the premises functional with things as simple as wall and door signage; a viable calendar; given the curriculum, adopting structurally similar syllabus and lesson plans for all Qur'anic Arabic classes, on the one hand, and Islamic Religious classes, on the other; instituting school-wide unified periodic testing; clarifying the classroom conduct of volunteer teachers; undertaking uniform record keeping; holding early registration and book ordering; promoting center membership fee-tuition plan combo; introducing sliding scale tuition plan for families in financial difficulty; retaining interest among senior students via TA

training and even a database to handle registration and other data. While some of the ideas are self-explanatory, others, such as the calendar, data recording, tuition fee and financial aid plans, need to be motivated and or explained. In order to successfully use these modules requires awareness and training for staff, teachers and some board members. However, last but not the least, one needs to start by enunciating and explaining the principle(s) motivating the technical facilitation trajectory suggested here.

II. Principles Underlying the Plan to Professionalize the Weekend School: There are several axiomatic positions that motivate attention to comprehensively detailing technical elements of setting up and running the Weekend School.

1. It is Sunnatullah (swt) and Sunnat-e-Rasul (sm) to do things in small steps allowing the gradual preparation of people so that they may anticipate and accept changes when they come.
2. People love order and appreciate predictability. Their level of appreciation increases with the level of order and predictability that they are used to enjoying in their alternative state of existence.
3. Enhancing order and predictability does not go unnoticed. Increased trust is likely to follow and more responsible business could get delegated to the party leading the drive for change and improvement.
4. The process and duration needed for such positive changes increase expertise and confidence of the change agent, increasing the long run viability of the organization itself, and imparts to the change agent a greater ability to grasp more complicated issues, enunciate the possible solutions more thoroughly, put together a more potent coalition of members and strength to stand up to criticisms and dilatory tactics.
5. Start with changes that carry the least resistance. That means, at the beginning, focus on small, less conspicuous and less costly adjustments. Then gradually build up to more ambitious and on your face changes.
6. Before introducing new details, improve existing details wherever possible.
7. For the purposes of this article, it is assumed that regular maintenance, cleanliness, safety and space-related needs are non-issues.

III. Suggested Changes:

- **Starting with Signage – An Urgent Facelift.** The issue of signage on the walls to indicate where particular rooms are situated, on doors to indicate names of

teachers, courses taught and hours kept and regular update of announcement board become more important the bigger the building is, the more irregular the students and their parents are in their visit to the school, the more far flung the students reside causing them to come to school rushed, the less likely parents are to receiving letters, reading them or reading e-mail correspondences, the greater the turnover in office staff and the greater the expansion of the constituency base. Also, by using transparent plastic casings attached to walls and doors for announcements allows avoiding unsightly tape marks on those areas. This is the cheapest, fastest and the least questioned way to bring significant parity in orderliness between the Weekend School and the public schools.

- **A Viable Calendar.** While a facelift provides a step toward physical orderliness, a calendar provides orderliness to the provision of various services themselves. Both of them exist in some form or another as an organic response. However, the goal is to have a document which is unambiguous and unambitious with a tendency toward long run stability. These are the three components that ensure the long run viability of a calendar or the plan of the working year.

First, we assume here that the school meets once a week for 3.5 hours and that there are two classes – one for Arabic – the Qur’anic Arabic Studies or QAS, and another, the Islamic Religious Studies or Islamiyat - IRS. The school could be on Saturday or Sunday, usually starting in the morning between 10:00 and 11:00 AM and ending between 1:30 and 2:30 PM, respectively.

Having three classes such as, Qur'an, Arabic and IRS is liable to produce a systemic failure when the student body is mixed, from Arab and non-Arab descent. Many non-Arab parents are likely to pull out their children from the middle period deeming Arabic to be an unnecessary subject. This causes stress in the students left behind, a lot of loitering and sound in the corridor, a potentially debilitating disparity in exposure and knowledge among the young students and a lot of absenteeism in the third period. It can easily appear and feel like a general loss of control to the education committee, non-parents and visitors going through the premises.

Now, with two classes, QAS and IRS, it would be advisable to start the day off with the former while students are fresh. Typically, to our students, this is a more challenging topic of learning. Now, with two classes, the class hour becomes too long – 1.5 hours each, after deducting 30 minutes for lunch. Now, 30 minutes for lunch break usually is not long enough for younger children, especially when the cafeteria and sit down areas for serving and eating lunch are limited causing crowding. Now, some parents think that a little time should be allowed for play and socialization. If this break is extended to 50 minutes and class is over 10 minutes before Duhr salat, then 2 hours 30 minutes of time remains for the two classes. This can be split as follows: 1 hour and 20 minutes for QAS and 1 hour 10 minutes for IRS. If it is utilized well, this is really not too short because of all the structural layaways. In fact, assuming a student will be in the system from KG to the 11th grade, this is a significant allocation of time. Now, Christian and Jewish schools catering to similar client of families take up two days of the week

for spiritual education – Sunday or Saturday morning and Wednesday evening. So, if the Weekend School wants to increase learning time for students, a better route could be to add a weekday evening of classes. One further point here, collapsing the school day to two classes clearly increases the length of individual class hour. The curriculum should be so designed as to split each of those hours into two parts with different learning agenda and pedagogical methodologies. This will break the monotony and reduce wasted class time.

A viable calendar must have a few other practical streaks to it, including the number of vacations built into it. We are likely to have two Eid celebrations, two other local or center related celebrations, Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter. Most families and many student teachers use the religious holidays for taking a break. Using these breaks as break points in our calendar is a good choice. It is not like endorsing them, as some in our community are loathe to doing. The same reason we use for classes on the weekend, that is, convenience, dictates us to suggest this choice. Now, all schools are over by the first week of June and student teachers are likely to be done by mid-May. So, our year cannot stretch beyond that week since people start traveling abroad by that date. The end of the year celebration must be concluded before then. Finally, a calendar must have at least one parent teacher conference day, within the first three or four months of school. There should be four days of registration in April. They should be designated by letters of the alphabet, rotating from year to year, so that it is manageable and fair. And the school year should be divided into three quarters that shows three days of exams per quarter.

- **Similarly Structured Syllabi & Lesson Plans:** Because of the youthfulness, non-professional teaching background and potentially rapid turnover of the volunteer teachers, it is very important to put in place means and methods that allow continuity in the implementation of the curriculum. First, a template type write up of all syllabi and lesson plans is important so that the workload of the volunteer teacher is reduced and the administration, the parents and the students know what to expect and when. The teachers can walk in and simply start teaching after a brief orientation. They do not have to write the syllabus or the lesson plan. Their job, essentially, is to execute a certain sequence of activities. By making them uniform by category – syllabus and lesson plan – we assure both the education committee and the parents an easier time following them. This is important because the education committee is manned by part-time volunteers and the families spend a very short time with the school. So, in the event of a loss of a teacher the syllabus and the lesson plans can not only be easily reproduced but also, updated equally easily. For the parents, monitoring the progress of multiple children is further enhanced by this because the format and approach is the same. That assists cutting down on confusion and ambiguity.
- **School-wide Uniform Periodic Testing:** Again, to simplify and coordinate student evaluation and, also, not leave it to the decision of the teacher, tests should be given on the same date for all classes - QAS and IRS, and for all levels. Several things may be achieved if it is done in the following manner. There should be three tests per quarter. They should cover, at most, three weeks worth

of materials. This way the students will not be expected to read up too much, especially since the class meets only once a week for less than 1.5 hours at a time. It is easier to write and grade the tests. Tests should be brief with about 10 questions each time. They should have a format that reflects what students face in their regular schools – true-false, multiple choice, fill-in-the-blanks and short essay-type with 5-10 lines of answer. The tests should be written with same word processing program and have similar formats. They should be collected and used as test banks for each textbook. This will further facilitate easing the role of volunteer teachers and put the system on as much auto-pilot as possible. For parents, having test on the same day on both subjects and all students allows them to monitor the preparation of all their children simultaneously. Finally, for the system such a system of regular testing allows for a sane and consistent manner of student evaluation. There does not have to be a last minute announcement of a test for placement purposes before the year is over. Already records exist that point to the status of a student. So, come April, the administration can do its job of planning for the next year independent of the activities being done by the teachers.

- **Uniform Record Keeping:** Student records are important to maintain for reasons that need no explanation. However, this is one more chore for the volunteer teacher and the education committee. Facilitating doing this should also be of concern to the latter body. In devising a plan to meet this need one should consider using easily available resource and employ easily replicable and

maintainable design. So, with that in mind, I suggest developing an Excel workbook that will be the same for all QAS classes, on the one hand, and all IRS classes, on the other. Each teacher will be given such a workbook in the beginning of the year with the list of students already entered. This workbook will have multiple sheets to reflect the three quarters, quarterly and annual summary pages, and corresponding pages for homework and tests. There should be columns for unique student ID, name, attendance value, classroom conduct value, homework and testing values. Having unique ID allows including extra sheets for the quarter and the year that reflect students' performance to date so that they may be publicly posted without violating the Privacy Law. It's a good tool to get parents' interest perked.

One additional twist that can be added here to enriching the program goes as follows. Each student will start the quarter with 30 points for 10 weeks of classes. These points could be lost over that period of time, but only at a particular rate. These points are to control modesty and attendance issues. So, by not following the school modesty code a student would be deducted 1.5 points, while being absent or late would cost either 1.5 points or 0.5 point, accordingly. The three tests and homework could be worth 45 and 25 points, respectively. Thus, each quarter would be graded against 100 points. A note here: Islamic education is to do with respect for others – teachers, parents and school in this case, behavior modification and practice what one learns. This is the proper adab. By incorporating this issue into the grade sheet we send a signal as to its value in a

Muslim's life. It is also an active means by which to motivate choices that could neutralize some of the negative external environmental influences.

Early Registration and Book Order: There is absolutely no doubt about the moral behind the idiom: Early to bed and early to rise make a person healthy, wealthy and wise, especially for the Weekend School. Otherwise, registration is in late August and early September causing book ordering, classroom scheduling, and lesson execution to be complicated and disorderly. So, the New Year instead of starting with a bang starts with a thud, scrambling, a lot of excuses and apologies. This is not good for the image and, to say the least, it is disappointing to the families and stressful to the education committee members, staff and volunteer teachers. Registration should be completed by the end of April and books ordered by the end of May. Then the summer becomes what it should be – free. Along with teachers and other board members, the volunteers in the education committee can enjoy the break and perhaps plan other things for the school year. Two notes here: All late registrations should bear a reasonable penalty that is not simple a token fine. Also, there should always be a ceiling to the class size and a firm final deadline for all registration, perhaps October; except for transferees should there be room available in the class. In the first year there may be some reluctance and resistance to instituting such parameters. However, with early announcement and after a year, these rules will appear as very sound markers.

- **Membership Fee-Tuition Combo and Sliding Scale Financial Aid:** Typically, membership in Islamic Centers is significantly less than the families receiving services in the form of salat and other facilities as well as the education of children. This means that the general fund is inadequate, the same fund that established the building that houses the school. So, service quality and level, maintenance and expansion become the victims. While these inadequacies bother the participants, many are not moved to even become members while they and their wards receive services. This problem may be structurally addressed through several simultaneously instituted means. First, the tuition fee must be more reflective of the costs. Raising it to do so should follow without hand wringing. Those unable to pay can still receive service through the financial aid window. Actually, nothing is gained by providing shoddy service fearing cost. Ultimately, the underserved children grow up, leave and hardly ever show up again. Giving them a richer experience could reverse this trajectory. Second, there should be two tuition plans, one for members and another for non-members. The combo payment must be cheaper hands down. In both instances, as the number of children increase from one to two and then to three or more, the average amount paid should decrease while the total tuition amount grows. One could charge a separate amount for books. It could be built into the tuition plan.

As to the financial aid to families with need, there should be an annual allocation for meeting this need. However, its distribution is difficult to plan. One way out of this difficulty is to seek help with the state department of labor or families and children. They, typically, will carry or be able to inform which state government

agency carries the sliding scale for benefits that the state uses. Adopting this by the Weekend school will stop some headaches and silence certain debates. Proof of income or other relevant documents could be used to seek assistance.

Finally, the membership and tuition fees could be subject to a rate increase every three years between 12 and 15% to reflect cumulative inflation and any increase in services.

- **TA Training for the Senior Students:** It is very difficult to keep 11th grade students to attend the Weekend School. They want to get teaching experience. Even students from the outside with very limited Islamic learning background step in seeking to be a “sub” in a class. Some parents can get very adamant that their children should be a TA even if they are not ready simply to keep them engaged. This is all very good from one angle. However, the quality of the service to younger students suffers badly whenever the education committee relents and allows such volunteers to step in without any prior classroom management training or curricular background. Now, there is another overt problem constantly plaguing the Weekend School – teacher unavailability, tardiness, absence and turnover. So, these young hands are entrusted without much qualm with very huge responsibilities. Since, for some time to come, this will be a serious problem, it makes absolutely good sense to start a TA training class for the students in the 11th grade. The nature of this training is an area of curriculum, which is not a focus of this paper. However, here, one can allude to some elements of that structure. The student TA trainees must have been a

student of this or similar school in the last three years, learn to consult the calendar and be alert to it, must choose a class they would like to TA - preferably an IRS course, need to know the curriculum for that course and the overall curriculum of the school, have access to existing syllabus and lesson plans, otherwise, in tandem with current teacher develop them over the course of the first quarter, prepare and deliver mock lectures, write and grade tests, learn how to use the Excel workbook and assist the same teacher with carrying out that responsibility, learn to apply the classroom management policy, be taught how to handle difficult students and how to communicate with parents on pertinent issues.

- **Classroom Conduct of Volunteer Teachers:** All members of the Weekend School must apply for a position. They need to be told about the expectations and policies. A written contract of understanding must be signed. They must all be subject to orientation and training at the beginning of the year and some in-service training later on in the year. The job of teaching or being a TA cannot be taken casually. There is a matter of trust and of liability. There is also the issue of image and professionalism. Teachers cannot shout or be physical and they must not instill fear in their students by clear or muffled threats. Indeed, it is frustrating being a teacher or a TA in many instances in the Weekend School. The roots of that problem are deep. It is a social issue that will take time to set aright. In the meantime there is no short run cure. So, any frenzied expression will not help. Kind, generous, smiling, relaxed and gracious manner, allowing students to

makeup and catch up, connected with good teaching every time with clear instructions and demand and resolute attachment to the calendar will serve to get a message of seriousness to the students that does not have to be driven in with fury. Many satisfactory results are likely to follow from this. There should be a manual for classroom conduct and both the teacher and the TA should be familiar with it.

IV. Conclusions: The Weekend School is a rich innovation in the life of the Western Muslim. For it to be truly effective and a respected program many overlapping enrichment steps have to be undertaken. However, not all enrichment steps are cost dependent. In fact, some enrichment steps reduce financial and even emotional costs. The suggestions in this paper may be categorized as that type of enrichment. The idea here is to bring about technical efficiency to the site and the program. It bypasses the issue of acquiring a building for housing the school and any reference to curriculum development and adoption. It recognizes the limited resources with which the Weekend School has to operate, its tremendous importance to the community, the voluntary and amateur nature of the education committee and teachers, the meager time commitment expected in the plan of parents and children. However, looking longitudinally, it recognizes the huge amount of time that will be devoted from KG to the 11th grade for any student attending consistently and feels compelled to suggest ways and means by which the experience could be made to be life changing. Various items to streamline suggested herein include: Wall and door signage; a viable calendar; adopting structurally similar syllabus and lesson plans for both IRS and QAS classes; instituting school-wide

unified periodic testing; undertaking uniform record keeping; holding early registration and book ordering; promoting center membership fee-tuition plan combo; introducing sliding scale tuition plan for families in financial difficulty; retaining interest among senior students via TA training in the 11th grade; and clarifying the classroom conduct of volunteer teachers.

Note: The author has modules developed for each of the suggestions made in this paper.