

US Education Reform: Implications for the American Muslim Student Population

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Ahlam Moughania
Education Consultant

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Introduction

Education reform in our nation has evolved significantly in the last decade. What became known as the era of high stakes testing and unreasonable accountability measures was later determined unattainable, the tenets of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) ⁱ were essentially extended through waivers approved by President Obama. The waivers awarded individual states have their own conditions to embrace the needs of real world application education standards and twenty first century assessments that can evaluate students' ability to affect and create solutions to global circumstances.ⁱⁱ Hence the current nub of educators and districts to effectively align curriculum and assessment practices to the rigorous National Common Core Standards that were adopted recently. This article will highlight the increased priorities for addressing the performance gap between minority students, particularly students of Arab Muslim descent, and their white peers of various faiths. The raised expectations in literacy across all content areas and the increased numbers of students from various Middle-Eastern countries contribute to the performance gap. CCSS implications highlighted in this paper are curriculum content, curriculum resources, and teachers' cultural competence to utilize research based best practices for engaging students of diverse backgrounds. Both State and federal governments employ modes of oversight over districts and individual public school academies to ensure standardization of curriculum and assessment. Additionally, both recommend informing and engaging parents in local decision making on curriculum content and resources. Yet progress in this area is minimal relative to the performance gaps and rise in Islamophobia. Districts and individual schools need to proactively partner with families and community experts to collaboratively correct prevailing negative stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims in curriculum resources as well as among educators.

Federal as well as State Government Oversight of K-12 Curriculum

The United States Department of Education obliges states to develop content standards and academic assessments for each subject taught in public schools from kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12). State departments of education are guided in this task by national educational associations that have created their own standards and expectations using the cooperative expertise of scholars and educators in each subject. In June 2010, the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) released a set of state-led education standards, the [Common Core State Standards](#)ⁱⁱⁱ (CCSS). Although left and right wing politicians are not in agreement, Forty-five states, the District of Columbia, four territories, and the Department of Defense Education Activity have adopted the Common Core State Standards. While the [Myths vs. Facts](#)^{iv} of the CCSS lend clarity to some of the reservations districts have about the standardization of curriculum and assessments, some debate continues on the feasibility of implementation. Nonetheless, public schools, both traditional and charter, are keenly aiming to deliver the rigorous curriculum adopted by the State in order to prepare students for the next-generation assessments being developed for 2014/2015 by the [Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium](#)^v.

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For the CCSS to be effectively implemented, administrators and teachers must transform schools to becoming student centered and a place where information is exchanged reciprocally between students, teachers, administrators, and the community. While State and Federal government have an overarching presence in a form of checks and balance to ensure education funding is appropriately expensed, the critical pieces of “how” educators will transform the learning environment isn’t scripted in mandates, rather recommendations and related professional development are provided by national and state agencies. For example, the quintessence of collaboration, engaging parents, and partnering with communities are recommended practices by the National Education Association detailed in a report as a result of the Minority Parent Engagement Summit. (NEA, 2010) Legislation has been enacted to guide school districts on increasing parent engagement, such as is the case with parental involvement programs funded by [Title I, Section 1118^{vi}](#), intended for disadvantaged students. Further, cultural competency and teachers’ capacity to embrace the diverse cultural and religious observations of their student populations have been the foci at recent state level school improvement conferences. Clearly, our governing bodies recognize the need for addressing the persisting performance gaps amongst minorities through parent and community engagement. Yet, much work is needed at the district and school level for implementing recommended practices with fidelity, specifically in reaching the American Muslim communities. This is particularly challenging when hard data doesn’t exist on American Muslim ethnicities.

The “Public” for Public Education: Decision Making on Curriculum Content and Resources


It is estimated that over four million Muslim Americans live in the United States. Because the U.S. government has classified people of Middle Eastern descent as “white” since 1970, it is challenging to get an accurate count of Muslim Americans in the U.S. and therefore difficult to determine how members of this population are faring economically and academically.^{vii} Although unaccounted for as a subgroup in State and Federal databases, Muslim American families can be tracked by individual schools and districts through enrollment application data, specifically with regards to information collected on languages spoken in the home. Thus it is feasible for districts to plan for the linguistic as well as socio-emotional needs of target groups such as Arab and/or Muslim Americans. These needs are even more crucial in CCSS curriculum as literacy is to be developed and assessed in math and science as well as English and social studies courses. All students must engage in collaboratively discussing, rationalizing, and presenting on concepts and abstracts in all subjects. Thus the critical standards being taught to in all courses can be examined relative to the prior knowledge, cultural context, academic, and language needs of increasingly diverse student groups. This is particularly crucial for social studies and English language arts as religion is embedded throughout these standards from communities at the primary grades in elementary, history and geography in middle school grades to world history and geography in high school.^{viii} As teachers are not adequately equipped to address topics in creationism and evolution in science, they rely on adopted textbooks similarly to humanities teachers racing through publisher selected facts and myths on Islam. Such inauthentic or inaccurate teaching about Islam is not, in fact, education about Islam at all.

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It may be education about the western study of Islam, or education about a particular textbook writer's or publisher's view of Islam or of what the writer thinks students should be permitted to know. Some textbooks, in fact, have taken a secular stance about religions in general, portraying religions as purely sociological phenomena without addressing faith practitioners' views about revelation and prophethood. In other words, the veracity of faith in general can be placed in question by the textbook because it was portrayed as merely a human invention or construct.^{ix}

In the post 9/11 decade of amplified Islamophobia, inadequate progress has been made in public school's curriculum and teaching practices to correct the inaccuracies in textbooks and the fluid real time online resources such as CNN Student Edition used in today's classrooms. One misconception that has taken root in American culture since 9/11 is the notion that Islam condones violence and acts of terror. At minimum, educators can inform students of the perspective that like many religions, Islam is grounded in peace. The root of the word Islam comes from the Arabic word for peace: salaam.^x Another basic fact missed by most educators is that not all Muslims are Arabs and not all Arabs are Muslims. Evidently, less biased and accurate curriculum materials and teacher training for teaching "about" Islam and the Arab world are vital to dispelling prevalent myths and stereotypes. Conclusively, curriculum content and textbook resource decisions need to be arrived at in committee that includes representation of all impacted stakeholders.

The CCSS were developed in collaboration with a variety of stakeholders including content experts, states, teachers, school administrators and parents.^{xi} As it may not be logistically possible to have had adequate parent representation from all ethnic groups, curriculum enactments or adoptions of resources at the district and/or building level must ensure equitable parent representation of all groups of the student population. This is the opportunity for administrators, teaching staff, and curriculum experts to "gauge" from parents the implications the curriculum content and cooperative teaching strategies will have on specific cultural and/or religious practices. Examining the implementation of State and national standards on religion, Susan Douglass, principal writer and researcher for the Council on Islamic Education, affirms these efforts require collaboration among scholars of religion, educators, and members of the communities to realize the potential in the new structures for teaching world history and geography in multidisciplinary, skill-based courses at the appropriate grade levels.^{xii}

4  For the most part, public school districts have flexibility in terms of choosing resources and teaching methodology while aligning to State standards to create grade level courses and adopt appropriate textbooks. Although districts are expected to implement a committee decision making process whereby curriculum experts, administrators, and teachers review textbook and resource options, they are likely to be choosing from pre-approved selections made by their State.^{xiii} Nonetheless, the review process should require the school's committee to identify and review subject matter and grade level appropriate textbook and compare against other textbooks from different vendors.

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The review should also include examination for tight alignment to content standards for grade level the textbook is intended for. Additional elements of the review should include the readability level, student and teacher resources available for differentiation, integration of technology, and the often ignored cultural responsiveness and author bias. Identifying author bias is seemingly easy, yet if the reviewer isn't aware of the accurate history and perspectives, he/she wouldn't necessarily identify what is being omitted or only partially covered to inherently mislead the reader to grasp the views of the writer.

Consequently, unless the district's curriculum resources selection committee is composed of staff members that are a fair representation of the student population's ethnicity and faith systems, it is imperative that informed parents as well as community religious scholars be recruited to assist in the review processes. School administrators will legitimately argue that such a review process is time and labor intensive and thus consideration should be given to creating such committees to be consolidated at the State and national level to expedite and maximize the needed expertise involved.

Sharing the Authority for Education

While the responsibility for K-12 education rests with the states under the Constitution, there is a compelling interest in the quality of the nation's public schools. Under this premise, the federal government, through the legislative process, provides assistance to the states and schools in an effort to supplement not supplant, state support. For instance, Title I^{xiv} funding is intended to support accommodations in curriculum and instruction and assessment to most needy sub groups of student populations such as the economically disadvantaged and/or English language learners. Yet these supplemental programs have limited impact if the core programs and adoptions are not equitable to needs of student sub groups. For example, if a core reading program only integrates characters and cultural references of African American, Hispanic, or oriental background, a student from the greater Middle East or Arab world will continue to feel inferior to his/her peers and struggle with the sense of identity he/she is trying affirm and preserve. The lack of engagement in the reading and subsequent limited development of comprehension skills will not be remedied with the supplemental vocabulary program adopted to support his/her language development needs. Further, fiction as well as non-fiction materials on Islam and the Middle-East in school libraries must be evaluated for accuracy and bias in representation by committees that include faith experts as well as culturally competent educators. In short, to realize the needed impact of the National Common Core Standards adopted across our nation, schools need to prioritize engaging all their learners by embracing the cultures and belief systems they represent. Can our Federal and State governments model the same level of collaboration and sharing of authority the CCSS expectations have of students, educators, and communities?

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Empowering Parent Involvement Beyond Field Trip Volunteerism

Numerous studies have supported parent involvement in children’s education with positive correlations drawn reflecting the increased student achievement with increased parent involvement. Recent Federal mandates as well as State recommended practices for school improvement describe authentic parent involvement as parent “engagement.” Districts who “engage” parents are seeking to elicit ideas from parents in the context of developing trusting relationships. Consequently more parent energy drives the efforts undertaken because they emerge from parent/community needs and priorities.^{xv} Schools are urged to collaborate with parents and community-organizing groups that want to improve the school.

But school administration needs to be willing to let parents and community groups help set the agenda for change. Parents and community organizations can put pressure on the school district and elected officials for new resources in ways that school staff cannot. Teachers and principals in low-performing schools in urban areas have worked with local organizers by meeting with parents, family members, and community residents organized by these groups to discuss making improvements to teaching and learning at the school. Further, school leaders have collaborated with parents and community members in researching and adopting academic programs that will enrich the school’s curriculum.^{xvi} For example, in Maryland, the superintendent of Prince George’s County Public Schools set priorities that include family engagement modeling the approach that considers parents as partners, not problems. This model district actively tries to connect family members, particularly fathers, with one another. This has helped create a sense of unity among parents who would otherwise be isolated or disconnected.^{xvii}

Such abovementioned connections among Arab American and Muslim parents and with school staff can lead the way to narrowing the performance gap. Thus, districts need to prioritize training and empowering parents to do more than chaperone field trips. And there is an abundance of resources and support for districts to do this. For instance, the Parent Information and Resource Centers programs provide federal funds to 62 organizations working to promote successful parental engagement policies and programs throughout the United States.^{xviii}

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Teacher Preparation and Ongoing Coaching

As teachers today are being held accountable to rigor, relevance, and relationships in the learning process they must realize that effective instructional strategies for all students in the classroom should not evolve solely from the teacher's culture; they should be drawn primarily from the cultures of students and communities.^{xix} Thus teachers need to go into their classroom ready to learn and be intrigued by their students' background. "Unless teachers are able to understand the diverse needs of their students, it will be difficult if not impossible to teach them effectively."^{xx} They need to be able to embrace the diversity in their classrooms and be prepared to address the elephant in the room when anti-Arab sentiment is viewed on CNN, PBS, or in print. It cannot be an option for a teacher to ignore negative racial implications and/or biases in curriculum resources she/he uses. At minimum, teachers can promote critical thinking skills by facilitating the analysis of news reports, guiding students to evaluate stories for biases, unsubstantiated accusations, or uneven treatment of Arabs and Muslims.

In fairness to teachers and the level of preparation they receive in the college education program, the responsibility for orienting and ongoing mentoring does fall on the district and immediate supervisor to ensure teachers are prepared to engage Arab American and Muslim students and their families in a learning partnership. School wide diversity training at the beginning of the school year needs to be supported with regularly scheduled mentoring sessions that target particular groups and grade levels as well as specific strategies for effective communication and collaboration with students and parents. Curriculum supervisors need to establish a proactive consultative relationship with teachers to ensure resources used are accurate and adequate to counter the myths and negative stereotypes of Arab American and Muslims, particularly in courses covering current events and contemporary world issues. It is vital for teachers entrusted to teach about religion embedded in social studies, literature, and the Arts standards to be properly trained and supported with accurate curriculum materials. "Teachers' comfort level remains important to quality teaching on this sensitive topic...the key to comfort is knowledge of what and how to teach about the worlds' faiths."^{xxi}

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Conclusion

A standardized national curriculum is seemingly the vision for humanizing the last decade's education reform of No Child Left Behind. To secure a waiver to NCLB requirements, the majority of our States have adopted Common Core State Standards and are aligning their curriculum and assessments to prepare students for the 2014/2015 rigorous Smarter Balanced standardized assessments to gauge students' mastery of CCSS. While districts disaggregate their data and address the needs of sub groups such as African Americans or Hispanics, it would be a grave consequence for districts not to examine the persistent performance gap that exist between unidentified groups, particularly Arab Americans and/or Muslims. Most school textbooks and materials inadequately represent Arabs and Muslims and most often representation is inaccurate. As teaching about religion is embedded throughout social studies standards, it is detrimental for content to be omitted or glazed over due to teacher's limited cultural competency. To better reach and effectively engage this significant minority group in a collaborative student centered learning process recommended for CCSS, curriculum content as well as adopted textbooks and resources used in public schools must ensure accurate representation of Arab Americans and Muslims. This is especially vital at this time to counter and educate the negative misinformation increasingly proliferated by the media since 9/11 and with any terror related activity that may occur both within and outside the United States. Conclusively, it is essential for decision making on curriculum materials to be made in committees whereby expert representation of student population ethnicities and faiths is needed to minimize bias in selections. Establishing a culture of collaboration and mentoring among administration, teachers, and minority parents would be the groundwork for the expected ongoing collaboration the CCSS require among Arab American and Muslim students and their peers of various backgrounds and faiths.

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