

## The Cost of Education: A look into local Islamic Schools

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In a society in which education is a right, in fact a requirement, quality of education is often compromised by a sweeping effort to simply provide schooling to the masses. As a result, corners are cut, children are left behind, and overall academic budgets, especially in recent years, have suffered tremendously.

In the Muslim community, Islamic schools have developed immensely and it seems as though more schools open every few years. For today's generation of parents, the options seem endless. Muslim parents can choose between public schools, private schools, charter schools, homeschooling, private non-Islamic schools, and of course, private Islamic schools. In comparison with their parents before them, today's parents have an enormous wealth of options. However, with these options come questions and hesitations as to whether or not to send children to Islamic schools based on reputations the schools have or preconceived notions the family has.

Nevertheless, because Muslim children in America are minorities in their formative years, many Muslim families prefer to send their children to Islamic schools, where they believe, their identities will develop.

"When a child has an innate desire to belong and they know they're different, they will either separate themselves from the faith or it will do something to their identity," said Dr. Dina Eleteby, School Head at New Horizon Elementary School in Irvine. When they leave the Islamic school, she explained, they know who they are.

Through a brief overview of Islamic schools in Orange County, the quality of education as well as the Islamic and academic environments of the schools can be analyzed and evaluated. Although the schools differ in their approaches, all of the following schools report that their biggest challenge is finances and budget. While public schools are funded through federal, state, and local taxes, private schools struggle to constantly raise funds. According to the American Federation of Teachers, the average public school spends \$9,963 educating one child per year. A 2010 summary report in *Policy Analysis* No. 662, published by the CATO Institute, found that average costs of education are actually much higher than those reported by school districts (<http://www.cato.org/pubs/pas/pa662.pdf>). The report found that the average real per-pupil spending in the Los Angeles metro area is \$19,000, percent higher than the \$10,000 the district claims it spends. The average Islamic school in Orange County spends less than this amount per child, but does so without federal and state funding.

Islamic schools may have a negative reputation for being poorly financed or run, but if the community expects its schools to operate at a professional level at par with or even exceeding that of public schools, then it needs to invest in those schools. While schools attempt to give the community access to Islamic education by lowering tuition, the issue of funding a quality school remains a problem.

Additionally, the Muslim community often values other professions over those in the field of education. As a result, it becomes a difficult task to find educators who are passionate about Islamic education. Perhaps more important however, acquiring professional and passionate teachers requires good pay, something Islamic schools are struggling to provide.

Overall, the following OC Islamic schools have acknowledged the importance of academic excellence and Islamic identity.

### Al-Ridah Academy

**Background** – Al-Ridah Academy opened in September 2000 at the Orange County Islamic Foundation in Mission Viejo with only 12 students. Today, it has grown into a student body of 75 with 12 teachers, 3 assistants, and 3 administrators. The school currently has pre-school through fourth grade and plans to add fifth grade in the coming year.

**Islamic Environment** – "What we're trying to do is nurture a whole human being – the social, spiritual, and academic individual," said Adita Arya, Principal at Al-Ridah. The school's vision is to give children a holistic education that nurtures the soul as well as the mind. This is accomplished through the practice of Islam, including prayer, supplication, remembrance of God, and engaging students in thinking about meanings of verses and prayers. It is also accomplished by teaching social skills that include problem solving and conflict resolution.

**Curriculum and Accreditation** – Core academics follow the California state standards, and the school aims to teach beyond that level through testing, observation, and other types of assessment.

Core subject teachers must be California state credentialed teachers in multiple subjects, the same standard public schools have. Teachers must also be able to adhere to and facilitate Islamic knowledge practice in the classroom, whether or not they are Muslim. Quran and Arabic teachers all have degrees related to the subject they teach, many overseas. Quran teachers have *ijazas*, or certification to teach Quran.

Al-Ridah Academy is accredited by two nationally recognized institutions: WASC (Western Association of Schools and Colleges), which accredits public and private schools in the West Coast, and NAEYC (National Association of Education of Young Children), which provides a strict criteria for pre-school, including a limited class size.

**Tuition, Budget, and Funds** – Al-Ridah supplements its budget with tuition and donations, mainly from the two three fundraisers it hosts each year. Although the tuition varies by grade level, the average child's tuition is around \$550 per month. The estimated cost of educating a child (including books and supplies) is less than \$15000 per child per year, and the tuition does not cover the entire cost because it is a hefty price for one family to pay.

Most children receive some form of financial aid. Financial aid is supplied either by a donor's monthly pledge which basically sponsors a child's tuition or by donations to the general tuition fund.

“Al-Ridah offers Islamic and secular education within a safe environment,” said Arya. “Islamic schools are crucial because they address the spiritual needs of a child. Public schools cannot and are not allowed to give that.”

### Minaret Academy

**Background** – In its fourth year of operation in the elementary school section and its seventh year for its pre-school section, Minaret Academy has undergone considerable growth. Although one of its biggest challenges in the past years has been establishing itself as a school of high standards for the community, the school's enrollment has increased significantly. Located at the Islamic Institute of Orange County (IIOC), the school started with around 50 students and currently has 138 students enrolled.

**Islamic Environment** – The school's vision is to build the future leaders of the country. In addition to daily Dhuhr prayer in the mosque and annual Quran competitions, the school hopes to embed an Islamic identity into the daily lives of students. “In order to have God consciousness and the skills of a leader, we do incorporate an Islamic identity. Children are taught to be confident, independent, and self-reliant,” said Shabnum Husain, Principal at Minaret Academy.

**Curriculum and Accreditation** – Because Minaret Academy is less than five years old, it cannot apply for accreditation but plans to do so in the near future.

Minaret looks for certified teachers with experience, particularly in the state of California. While the school does offer the pay of public schools, it does offer its teachers benefits. According to Husain, all new faculty members are required to be fully credentialed. “As far as teachers are concerned, we prefer them to be Muslims because they integrate Islam across the curriculum in a satisfactory manner,” she said.

The school is affiliated with the OC Department of Education as well as the Placentia-Yorba Linda Unified School District and the pre-school is mandated and monitored by the Department of Social Services. According to Husain, the school has received no citations and only 2 minor recommendations this year. The small class sizes allow for one-on-one education. Additionally, the faculty receives the school's test scores and develops a plan of action accordingly, based on the needs of every student.

Husain said that Minaret Academy offers high academic standards across all subjects, particularly in Arabic.

**Tuition, Budget, and Funds** – As a private school, the school receives nominal funding in the form of resources from the School District for staff development and to enhance language development. All funding comes from the community and from tuition.

The basic cost of educating each child at Minaret Academy (aside from the building and utilities cost, which is subsidized by IIOC) is around \$1000-\$2000 per month. The tuition is \$500 per month. Husain explained that the idea of lowering tuition is to make it accessible to the community and affordable for parents.

The school finds a sponsor for students who request it. There is currently no financial aid program in place, but the school is working toward a program.

“I would encourage parents to visit and observe the classroom. We are confident that what we do and what we have

to offer is nothing less than excellent,” said Husain.

### **New Horizon Elementary School- Irvine**

**Background** - New Horizon Elementary School Irvine (NHESI) started when a founding board of dedicated individuals felt that the time was right for an Islamic school in South Orange County. In September 2001, NHESI opened its doors to the first pre-school through sixth grade students. The school opened with 80 students, and now 10 years later, is at its capacity (as it has been for five years) of 197 students.

**Islamic Environment** – *Dhuhr* prayer is scheduled into each day’s schedule and students start each day with a recitation of *surat al Fatiha*. When discipline becomes an issue, discussions are brought up regarding the *sunnah* what the Quran says. More importantly, the Islamic environment at NHESI is manifested in interactions at the school, according to Dr. Dina Eletreby, NHESI School Head. Rather than mechanical manifestations of religion, school focuses on meanings. The Islamic environment is also factored into the respect that exists between students and teachers, she said.

**Curriculum and Accreditation** – Dr. Eletreby explained that 2 major components to academic excellence exist at NHESI: excellent teachers and the resources those teachers have. The school aims to retain teachers who are professional and knowledgeable.

Teachers must be professional and talented. The school requires teaching credentials and three years of classroom experience.

NHESI has WASC accreditation. WASC accredits public and private schools in the West Coast. The school also has CAIS (California Association of Independent Schools) accreditation. CAIS accredits independent, non-profit schools who run the school through a board.

**Tuition, Budget, and Funds** – At New Horizon Elementary School Irvine, it costs about \$13,000 to educate one child per year. The current tuition is set at \$10,000. Instead of anticipating a budget based on the number of students enrolled or how much they can charge and deciding what can be cut, Dr. Eletreby explained that NHESI asks, “What would an optimum school look like?” and develops its plan from there. The bulk of expenses are spent on teachers’ and administration’s salaries. The way to get qualified teachers, Dr. Eletreby explained, is to pay them. The school raises money through community donations (by hosting three annual events) and tuition.

Twenty-five percent of the student population gets tuition assistance, and a student with financial need can get a New Horizon education.

“I have a passion for our community and seeing our community become the best. Our schools need to mirror the greatness of our faith,” said Dr. Eletreby.

### **Orange Crescent School**

**Background** - In 1983, Orange Crescent School (OCS) opened under the Islamic Society of Orange County with students in pre-school through first grade. As each year progressed, the school opened the following grade. OCS currently has approximately 400 students in pre-school through eighth grade. This year, OCS added a new Toddler and Infant Care Program as well as an official after school program which consists of activities including Drama Club, Tutoring and Homework Help, and Cake Decorating classes.

**Islamic Environment** – The upper grade levels at OCS pray Friday prayer at the mosque, and kindergarten children pray in the mosque every morning. Each month, the school participates in highlighting a character or value of the month. “Our programs address the spiritual, physical, emotional and intellectual needs of students,” said Ruby Ahmed, WASC and After School Program Coordinator at Orange Crescent School. The school also has a “modest uniform,” which includes *hijab* for upper grades.

**Curriculum and Accreditation** - OCS first applied for accreditation in 1999 through WASC, receiving a six-year clear, and renewed its accreditation in 2005.

Teachers are encouraged to either have attained their teaching credential or be currently enrolled in a program. However, the school has not discriminated against those who do not have their credential but have had many years of teaching experience as well as a bachelor's degree. It is not required that teachers are Muslim. Staff of OCS's blended Montessori program are required to have the minimum amount of ECE (Early Childhood Education) uni

and be trained in the Montessori method, explained Ahmed.

Textbooks are aligned with state standards. OCS is currently evaluating its Arabic, Quran, and Islamic Studies curricula and creating ways to make it aligned and beneficial for its students.

**Tuition, Budget, and Funds** – Because donations and tuition do not fully cover costs, PTO parents have fundraised extensively. New programs implemented include recycling programs that bring money for the school, fundraising efforts to fund field trips, and making the school fundraiser an annual event. OCS also receives a few grants through the Garden Grove Unified School District and the OC Department of Education.

The cost of tuition for the first child at OCS is \$455 per month (other siblings are discounted). Orange Crescent is the most inexpensive private Islamic school tuition in Southern California (aside from schools that operate on a homeschooling-based program, in which funding is different).

"OCS provides an Islamic environment and school next to the *masjid* where children can feel comfortable being Muslim through being around Muslims," said Ahmed.

Other OC schools were contacted but could not be reached for comment.

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