

Practitioner's Note

The Council of Islamic Schools in North America (CISNA)

An Internationally Recognized Accrediting Agency

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INTRODUCTION

The number of Islamic schools in the United States continues to rise, along with the demand for qualified leadership, teaching staff, and sustainable funding models for these schools. Post-pandemic anecdotal data demonstrates this increase as the Council of Islamic Schools of North America (CISNA) continues to receive inquiries from communities on how to establish new Islamic schools. Feedback from school leaders reveals that they are outgrowing their current campuses and need to expand to accommodate growing student populations. From 1991 to 2015 there was an 800 percent increase in Islamic school enrollment, from 4,482 students to 40,485 (Council for American Private Education, 2017). The share of total private school enrollment in Islamic schools increased from 0.1 to 0.8 percent from 1991 to 2015. Currently, about 300 Islamic schools in the United States serve more than 50,000 students (Islamic Schools League of America, 2021). Although the number of schools continues to

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grow and existing schools increase enrollment, parents who have enrolled their children in Islamic schools as well as the public still question the quality of education delivered at these schools. As Islamic schools mature and evolve, they seek ways to improve their credibility and public image. One of the pathways for quality assurance is seeking accreditation. This article elaborates on Islamic schooling in the United States and the Council of Islamic Schools of North America's role in providing guidance and leadership to enhance the services provided by Islamic schools.

The need for Islamic schools is founded on a parental desire to instill and strengthen their children's Muslim identity. Islamic schools strive to fulfill this need by enabling and empowering students to learn within an Islamic framework. According to a recent study on why parents choose Islamic schools, the study found that "parents' desire to teach their children the foundations of the Islamic religion was one of the major factors for choosing Islamic schools. The parents' desire to preserve the Islamic cultural heritage and to provide their children the opportunity to develop an American Muslim identity grounded in Islamic values was of equal importance." This study also revealed that many other factors influenced Muslim parents' choice of Islamic schools unrelated to religious teachings or cultural preservation. Quality of education and the physical and psychological safety provided by the private environment of Islamic schools were identified as influential factors in parents' enrolling their children in Islamic schools. (Shatara et al., 2020, p. 66). Interviews conducted at accreditation visits indicate that while parents, when responding to a formal survey, may state that their top factor for selecting an Islamic school is for their child to forge a strong Muslim identity, their actions and words in informal situations reveal that they expect a high-quality academic education.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE COUNCIL OF ISLAMIC SCHOOLS IN NORTH AMERICA

In 1989, an education symposium organized and hosted by the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) gathered Muslim educators, community members, and representatives from many Islamic institutions throughout North America. Discussions resulted in the appointment of a seven-member ad-hoc committee to serve as the architects of a mechanism for cooperation and communication among full-time Islamic schools throughout the continent. This committee included representatives from

various US geographical regions and Canada. By November of 1991, as a result of the committee's efforts, the first full-time Islamic School general assembly meeting was held in Detroit, Michigan. Approximately 45 full-time Islamic schools were represented, a constitution was ratified, and the Council of Islamic Schools of North America was formed. CISNA has served as a unifying organization for Islamic schools in the United States and Canada since its inception and has partnered with ISNA for nearly two decades to bring professional development and networking opportunities to Islamic schools and Muslim educators.

The Council of Islamic Schools in North America supports the vital role of Islamic schools by advocating for equitable opportunities for Islamic school students to participate in appropriate state and federal education programs, monitoring and analyzing legislation and regulations affecting Islamic schools, and disseminating information about Islamic education to policymakers and the public. CISNA contends that high academic standards and excellence in all programs, including Islamic education, are not contradictory. Charles Glenn (2018), who researched and wrote a book chapter on Islamic high schools in the United States, found that according to students, parents, and school staff, Islamic school education helped Muslim students establish their Muslim identity and learn to become positive contributing members of American society.

In order to meet the needs of Islamic schools and Muslim families, CISNA provides the framework for quality assurance of Islamic schools through accreditation, ongoing professional development, networking opportunities, and state and national advocacy for school choice. CISNA began accreditation services in 2012. The CISNA accreditation process ensures that Islamic schools meet high education standards and stresses quality, commitment, and integrity in all facets of a school's program. It provides a means by which Islamic schools adopt evidence-based best practices and standards as determined by the CISNA community of educators.

CISNA'S MISSION

CISNA's mission is "to advocate for Islamic schools, provide accreditation services, professional development, and resources to ensure institutional effectiveness that leads to student success" (CISNA, n.d., n.p). As an advocate for school choice, CISNA is a member of the Council for American Private Education and participates in collaborative efforts with other non-public schools and organizations to advocate for parental choice and student services.

CISNA's professional development and networking services were first offered at the ISNA Education Forums, launched in 1999. In May 2023, ISNA and CISNA will hold the 24th Annual Education Forum in Chicago. The Chicago ISNA-CISNA Education Forum brings together nearly a thousand educators to learn and develop skills and knowledge on best practices in education. In addition to the education forum held in Chicago each year, CISNA provides webinars, retreats, and regional education conferences.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, CISNA was a leader in providing support for Islamic schools with guidance, resources, and expertise in remote learning and hybrid learning, especially in the areas of Arabic and the Qur'an. Networking Groups were launched in March 2020 to allow educators to share resources, ask questions of their peers, and become a part of a network that allowed open dialogue on pertinent topics. Sub-groups were created for board members, principals, Arabic, Qur'an, and Islamic studies teachers. These groups have thrived and have connected nearly a thousand educators across the globe. The webinars and networking opportunities remain essential for Muslim educators in the United States, Canada, India, Japan, Pakistan, South Africa, UAE, and beyond. CISNA most recently launched its first Islamic School Board Development Retreat and hosted nearly 70 Board members from 40 different schools around the United States. As part of continuing growth, CISNA collaborates with and plays an active role in the Global Association of Islamic Schools (GAIS), an organization established in November 2021.

THE PURPOSE AND BRIEF HISTORY OF K-12 SCHOOL ACCREDITATION

The concept of school accreditation began in the late 1800s as a way for private colleges to have a uniform method to evaluate high school programs for their ability to prepare high school students for colleges and universities (Oldham, 2018). Their review processes included inputs such as the number of books in their libraries and the number of degrees held by teachers. The accreditation review process had humble beginnings but evolved into what exists today as a thorough and rigorous process of assessing schools. Accrediting bodies review every relevant aspect of a school's operation, ensure that the school undergoes a process of intensive self-study and self-evaluation, and assign experts to assess performance against standards and best practices. Accreditation is a comprehensive

process that respects a school's mission, measuring its success and progress in achieving its stated goals. K-12 school accreditation provides protocol for schools committed to systemic, systematic, and sustainable continuous improvement. The school accreditation process invites schools to collaborate in reviewing the quality of the school's program. The process supports, enhances, and stimulates growth and improvement throughout the school. There are four major accrediting agencies in the United States today: Cognia, Middle States Colleges and Schools Commissions on Elementary and Secondary Schools, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, and the Western Association of Schools and Colleges. Some agencies conduct reviews regionally, and others nationally and internationally.

CISNA'S JOURNEY TO BECOMING A LEAD ACCREDITING AGENCY

In 2011 CISNA established a partnership with AdvancED, now Cognia, a global accrediting agency, to accredit Islamic Schools as an add-on accreditation focused on the Islamic components of the school's programs and identity. While the accreditation standards of a state or regional agency address general areas of institutional quality, the CISNA standards address all areas through an Islamic lens, and the process focuses on the spiritual life of the school. CISNA is the largest and only Islamic accreditation organization of Islamic schools worldwide and is recognized by the New York State Department of Education (the largest in the United States).

Islamic schools have the option to choose any partner organization as a dual accreditor depending on the region where they are located. This is a common practice between regional or faith-based accrediting agencies and larger regional, national, and international agencies.

In November of 2022, CISNA signed an agreement with Cognia to become a lead accreditor. Becoming a lead accreditor involves a rigorous review and standards alignment with the partner agency. The CISNA team conducted an alignment of the Cognia standards with the CISNA standards to ensure that the CISNA standards met all of Cognia's requirements. This accreditation partnership allows schools to complete the CISNA protocol and gain dual accreditation with Cognia. CISNA now serves as an international accrediting agency and accredited its first international school in Dubai in December 2022. There are currently more than 30 schools pending accreditation, including schools in Dubai, Japan, and Pakistan.

CISNA'S ACCREDITATION STANDARDS

Accreditation is both a status and a process. It is a status in that it is a seal of quality assurance based on standards that hold institutions accountable for adhering to best practices in the education field. Each school that applies for accreditation must complete a self-study that responds to the standards and provide evidence that supports the school's narrative. In addition to the self-study, each school must conduct the Islamic identity survey. The results of the surveys are an integral component of the review process.

CISNA's standards, recently revised in 2022, cover four domains and 12 subcategories. The four domains are governance, school administration, teaching and learning, and school culture and environment. Each incorporates the Muslim worldview by embedding Islamic principles and Muslim identity throughout the standards.

Governance

The Governance standard focuses on values and organization, administrative oversight, and community relationships. The highest authority in a nonprofit Islamic school is its board of directors. The governance structure and function of a nonprofit define the rest of the organization. The board's primary responsibility is to serve as guardian of the school's mission and purpose (NAIS, 2020). CISNA's standards ensure that governing bodies adhere to best practices by involving all stakeholders in developing a mission and vision; by having bylaws that are reviewed, updated, and followed with fidelity; by supporting Islamic values and principles; and by holding themselves accountable through an evaluative process. One of the concerns for Islamic schools is the relationship between the board and the principal and distinguishing between roles and responsibilities. An area of focus for training for CISNA is board development, which allows board members to better understand their role and how they can best serve the school and support the principal.

School Administration

The School Administration standard focuses on school operations, oversight of school staff, school improvement, and collaboration. According to Grissom et al. (2021), "Principals really matter . . . it is difficult to envision an investment with a higher ceiling on its potential return than a successful effort to improve principal leadership" (p. xiv). Research shows that the impact of the principal is based on three key areas: instruction,

people, and the organization, and that the four key behaviors are engaging in instructional leadership, building a productive school climate, facilitating productive collaboration and professional learning communities, managing personnel and resources strategically (Grissom et al., 2021). These four key behaviors are built into the CISNA standards on school administration. The self-assessment in this standard propels school leaders to a reflective process. Principals are responsible for creating a positive and productive learning environment for students. They are in charge of setting school policies, managing budgets, and overseeing the hiring and training of teachers and staff. A good principal can set the tone for the entire school and help create a culture of excellence and high expectations for students and staff.

Teaching and Learning

The Teaching and Learning standard covers curriculum and assessment, teacher qualifications and expectations, professional development, and student programs and activities. A Rand Corporation report (Opper, 2019) shows that teachers matter more to student achievement than any other aspect of schooling, and it is not just the academic component that matters. Studies indicate that the nonacademic factors are just as important, and how teachers make students feel is essential to academic growth. Teachers are the front-line educators who work directly with students to help them learn and grow. They are responsible for developing lesson plans, delivering instruction, student assessment, and providing feedback to students and their families. A great teacher can inspire a love of learning in their students and help them develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they need to succeed in school and in life. The CISNA standards for this domain cover key components of teaching and learning that have been identified as effective in increasing student achievement. For example, providing timely and specific feedback on students' performance can help them understand their strengths and weaknesses and improve their learning outcomes (Yang et al., 2021). One of the standards is "Faculty helps learners reach content mastery through quality feedback using various formats." The standards incorporate best practices for instruction and high expectations, allowing the school to evaluate its programs, curricula, and teacher qualifications and credentials. An accredited school has higher levels of accountability because they respond to external measurements.

School Culture and Environment

The School Culture and Environment standard includes indicators such as fostering a positive Islamic identity among students and promoting a positive image of Muslims and Islam. Other indicators focus on community engagement and relationships with the broader community and alumni. School climate and environment are also essential components of K-12 schooling. They refer to the overall environment of the school and the attitudes, values, and behaviors of students, teachers, and staff. Several factors highlight the crucial role of the school's climate and culture. One important aspect is that a positive school climate and culture can promote student well-being by creating a safe, welcoming, and supportive environment where students feel valued and respected. This can help students to feel more connected to school, which has been linked to higher academic achievement and better social-emotional development. In addition, a positive school climate and culture can also help retain talented teachers by creating a supportive, collaborative, and empowering workplace. When teachers feel valued and supported, they are more likely to stay in their jobs and be more effective in their roles. A positive learning environment also contributes to student achievement by fostering learning and growth. When students feel safe, engaged, and supported, they are more likely to be motivated to learn and succeed academically. A positive school climate and culture can also engage families and the broader community in the education of students. When schools are welcoming and inclusive, families are more likely to be involved in school activities and events, which can improve student outcomes.

THE CISNA ACCREDITATION PROCESS

The CISNA accreditation protocol involves a comprehensive review of the Islamic school's programs, processes, and outcomes. The accreditation visit is conducted by a team of educators who have experience and expertise in Islamic education. The accreditation process includes the following steps.

Self-Assessment

The school involves all stakeholders in responding to the CISNA standards. Each standard is addressed in terms of how the school meets the standard. The goal is not simply to indicate that the school complies, but to describe how and to what extent the school complies with each standard. Evidence is gathered and documented within the narratives of

the self-study. The results of the self-study become the basis for a school's improvement plan and provide the context for the review team's accreditation visit.

Surveys

An important component of self-evaluation is collecting valuable feedback about the school's purpose and impact from stakeholders. Schools are asked to conduct surveys of all stakeholders, including parents, students, staff, and alumni, to gather perception data that will help schools evaluate their practices and inform decisions about the addition and improvement of programs. The data is analyzed by the school to interpret the impact the school is making in each standard. CISNA has developed Islamic identity surveys for students of different age groups, parents, staff, and alumni.

Site Visit

A team of educators from CISNA member schools visits the candidate school to assess its accordance with the CISNA standards. The site visit involves classroom observations, interviews with board members, parents, staff, and students, and a review of the school's documentation. The review visit serves to ascertain how the components of the school's mission statement are integrated into the entire academic program and the culture of the school. The team assesses the quality of learning environments to gain valuable insights and gain a broad understanding of institution quality to target improvements.

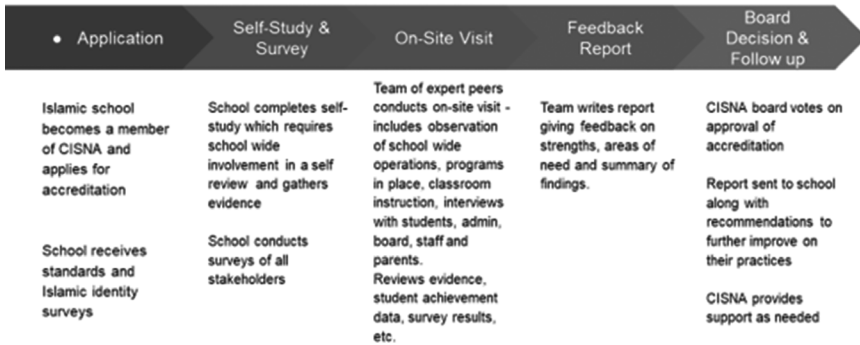
Review Report

The visiting team prepares a report that includes an assessment of the school's compliance with the CISNA standards, identifies areas for commendations, improvement priorities, and recommendations. The school is required to develop an improvement plan based on the findings of the self-study and the team report.

Accreditation Decision

Based on the accreditation team's report, the CISNA board makes a decision about the school's accreditation status. If the school meets the required standards, it is granted CISNA accreditation. If the school does not meet the required standards, it may be given a provisional accreditation or asked to address improvement priorities before it may be accredited.

Review process



THE VALUE OF CISNA'S ACCREDITATION TO ISLAMIC SCHOOLS AND MUSLIM COMMUNITIES

CISNA accreditation assures the community that the school has participated in an external review and met rigorous review standards. It is external verification that a school provides quality education. Accreditation through CISNA verifies adherence to mission and vision, focuses on best practices for governance and leadership, guides a thorough self-assessment and development of a school improvement plan, assures high academic standards integrated with Islamic teachings, confirms standards are met, and informs the public of a school’s credibility and commitment to excellence.

Schools pursue accreditation for a wide variety of reasons: quality assurance for parents and the public sector, a pathway for addressing concerns and providing a systematic framework for the improvement of programming and services, self-evaluation based on the school’s unique purpose and CISNA’s standards, eligibility for grants and other sources of funding, and high school course credits accepted by universities and colleges.

Accreditation brings a series of benefits to schools, programs, parents and the teaching profession. An action plan that results from the accreditation process to address areas of need can directly impact student achievement, especially when schools focus on strategies to enhance teaching and learning. “Accreditation is the launchpad for school improvement. Based on rigorous research-based standards and evidence-based criteria, the process probes the whole institution—from policies to learning conditions and cultural context—to determine how well the parts work together to meet the needs of every learner” (Cognia, n.d., n.p.). The accreditation process

improves organizational effectiveness by involving all stakeholders in a comprehensive self-study process that evaluates all aspects of a school's operations. This can lead to improved organizational effectiveness as the school identifies areas of strength and weakness and implements strategies to address them. As Islamic schools continue to manage their public relations, accreditation enhances their reputation and improves public perception. CISNA provides these essential services to schools, board members, principals, teachers, staff, and parents, and students benefit from the process. We are at a turning point in our journey in Islamic schooling; second- and third-generation American Muslim parents demand quality and accountability, and the accreditation process provides that and much more. CISNA, as an international accrediting agency, and the only one focused on Islamic principles as foundations, is leading the way in transforming Islamic schooling by providing schools with the self-improvement process to guide their own institutional growth and development based on research-based best practices.

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