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Lead Article

Islamic School opens door to non-Muslim educators

NEW YEAR |
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School will start on Tuesday with a non-Muslim leader and two non-Muslim teachers as officials look toward its future.

ing into every aspect of its curriculum was started 30 years earlier by five female Muslim converts. Now, it was in the prekindergarten through sixth-grade school had fallen to about 10 students, and with an earlier annual fundraising dinner yielding so little, there was a real possibility the

school might close. Conversations for months, would continue in August ultimately leading in August to the most significant change: the hiring of a non-Muslim leader. It appears to be the only Islamic school in the nation with that distinction. The school will start the new school year Tuesday with two

non-Muslims among its five teachers, and is considering a push to draw non-Muslim students as a way to build enrollment from the current 40. "For us, religion is very important," said Glenn Block, Islamic School of Seattle (ISS) board president. "But equally as important is seeing that the school operates in a healthy

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School

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ISLAMIC SCHOOL

Non-Muslims hired as school leaders look at ways to build enrollment

are. Having one without the other is not acceptable." The school faces some tough challenges.

A growing Muslim population in the Puget Sound region, estimated at over 10,000, is concentrated in north Seattle, on the Eastside and South King County — each a complicated commute from the school's Central Area location, where few Muslim families live.

And building enrollment — whether with Muslim or non-Muslim students — might be tough for a school that eschews textbooks and that is only now working toward national accreditation. ISS is considering, for the first time, adding state testing next spring.

Navigating all this falls to the school's new director, Luis Tornillo, a former California teacher who once aspired to the priesthood but these days follows no particular organized religion.

While the 61-year-old lacked the administrative background the board sought, members admired his strong commitment to education evidenced by 30 years in California public schools.

And they liked his passion for the same child-centered philosophy that is the corner-

but represents a new direction for him.

"I see myself carrying out (the founders') original vision: a unique, perhaps historic, blending of two ideas — powerful, child-centered learning from an Islamic perspective," he said.

Origins of school

Dissatisfied with the kind of religious education available to Muslim children at the time, five women started the school in 1980 from a house that would eventually become the SeaTac mosque.

With generous donations from wealthy Saudis, one of the women, Ann El-Moslimani, along with her late husband, bought a former Jewish school building near Cherry Street and 25th Avenue as a home for the new school.

With the move to Seattle, enrollment by year three had tripled to more than 100 students, including African-American kids from the surrounding neighborhood as well as Saudi children whose parents were studying at the University of Washington.

Later it drew Cham refugees, children of Iranian families fleeing the revolution and, in recent years, East Africans — primarily Somalis.

"World events over the years have affected the population and makeup of the school," said Aziz Junejo, host of a weekly Islamic cable TV show who sent his own daughters to the school.

"Even on a limited income they sacrifice to make sure their kids are in an environment where they can maintain their culture and learn Arabic."

Over the years, the school has seen high turnover



STEVE RINGMAN / THE SEATTLE TIMES
Luis Tornillo, the new non-Muslim director of the Islamic School of Seattle, sits in one of the school's classrooms.

Sister Ann

The worn halls of the nearly 100-year-old building are familiar to El-Moslimani, whom many call Sister Ann, and she moves easily within them.

The 74-year-old is the face of the school and over the years has held every position there — teacher, fundraiser, marketer.

She's also stepped in as principal when needed, like she did last year.

Ann El-Moslimani is one of the school's founders.

Except for a year and a half when the board forced her to, El-Moslimani never drew a salary. "Sister Ann laid her life on the line for that school," said Jeff Siddiqui, a past president of the board. "She

broad choice in their own instruction and close interaction with Montessori-certified teachers.

As a teaching model, it has its disciples and detractors. In most schools it exists primarily in preschool and kindergarten, usually phasing out as children move into higher grades.

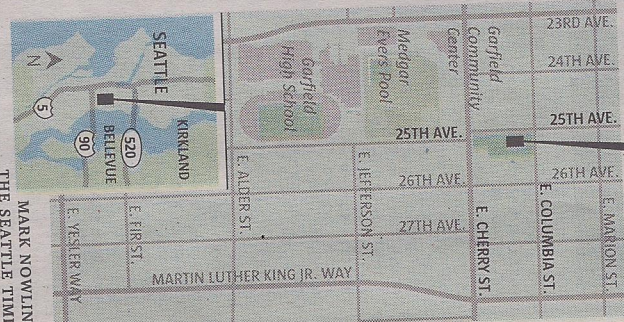
But ISS applies the child-centered theme throughout the school.

El-Moslimani said she was never concerned that Tornillo is not Muslim, but thought it more important that he shared her passion for this method of teaching.

The school doesn't regularly test its students, and lacks resources to track them after graduation, so comparing ISS with other schools is difficult.

Junejo speaks fondly of the benefits to this own daughters — young women who proudly wear the hijab and possess a level of confidence

Islamic School of Seattle



MARK NOWLIN / THE SEATTLE TIMES

need to know.

"The educational standards between the Islamic school and the public school are not even parallel and it can be challenging for any child," he said. "But the struggle is worth it."

El-Moslimani said most ISS students go on to graduate from high school and continue to college. And she said most appear to adjust well.

Tornillo, like El-Moslimani, said he doesn't accept that testing is the only measure of school and student performance. Yet he understands that need for accountability, and will begin administering the state assessment tests in the upper grades next year, while looking at more data-driven ways to track students once they leave the school.

Important issues

All these issues were raised at that dinner meeting in Bur-

ty activist who attended the meeting.

"There were teachers and parents who made the case that this wasn't just a place where children go to learn," Elamin said. "It's an important pillar, an institution that helped define the Muslim community and its role in the Greater Seattle area."

A steering committee was spun off from that meeting to examine how and why the school was in trouble and to come up with ways to save it. "The idea was they'd do all this work and go to the big donors and get money," El-Moslimani said.

The school depends on donations for about half its revenue. The rest comes from the \$5,500 annual tuition families pay per student.

Block, Elamin and others on the steering committee launched a campaign to raise money at Microsoft, pulling in under \$100,000.

And, El-Moslimani said, "We limped along through the last year."

To stabilize the school, they needed a strong leader who would build enrollment and morale, attract funding and raise the stature of the place.

The challenge was finding one the school could afford. While the job description doesn't specify religion, "We all felt the community would be more responsive to a Muslim," Block said.

But members discussed at length the idea of hiring outside the faith, something the school had never done.

With Tornillo as director, El-Moslimani will stay on at the school temporarily as an adviser, to offer religious guidance.

Ultimately, Block said, the school needs Tornillo to "be