

## The Oregonian

# Muslims will open a coed high school

**Tigard - Interest leads to the Oregon Islamic Academy, a first in the Northwest**

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Syed Ahmad's restaurant business brought him, his wife and five children from Texas to Oregon a couple of years ago.

He moved to Tigard to be close to the Muslim Educational Trust's prekindergarten to eighth grade Islamic School, where he takes his three children every day. But he told Wajdi Said, the trust's executive director, he'd take his family back to Texas to attend an Islamic high school unless one opened here.

Such mounting pressures from parents have prompted the Muslim Educational Trust to open the new coeducational Oregon Islamic Academy -- the first high school in the Northwest geared to Muslim students.

The academy's mission is "to shape the minds and hearts of its students according to the teachings of the Holy Quran and the traditions of the Prophet Mohammad (PBUH)," the parenthetical phrase an abbreviation for "Praise Be Unto Him."

Said explained that will come in rigorous classes of math, science, history, language arts, Arabic and other courses to prepare students to excel in college as inquisitive learners, and caring and moral adults who are proud of their Islamic beliefs.

"Hopefully they will be part of the success of America in the 21st century," he said.

The educational trust's school, located in Tigard off Southwest Scholls Ferry Road, has 20 preschoolers. There are 89 K-8 students and a waiting list of 260.

Projections, according to Said, show the high school will open with six freshmen in September. School officials plan to grow to a ninth-12th grade program and add three buildings, including a computer and science laboratory. Boys and girls will attend class together.

The school will be open to students of any faith, Said explained, and all will study comparative religions so they can be leaders in the nation's pluralistic society.

"In this day and age of extremists and fundamentalists, it's wonderful they're wanting to learn about others," said Sister Mollie Reavis, a mathematics and comparative religion teacher and former interim principal at St. Mary's Academy.

Reavis, who served on the Islamic academy's formation committee and reviewed its parent-student handbook and curricula, has seen zealotry across faiths. She welcomes the addition of another Portland-area school that she thinks will prepare youth well for their roles as college students and as citizens.

The Catholic girls high school has had nine students come from the Islamic K-8 school, and they've all done well, Reavis said. But she understands that some Muslim parents might want a high school of their own.

"They want for their children a place where their religion and values are supported and not ridiculed," she said, "and that's what most parents want."

Karen Keyworth, co-founder of the Islamic Schools League of America and its director of education, said by phone from Michigan that she knows of no other Islamic high school in the Northwest.

The league, a nonprofit organization supporting Islamic schools, is about to embark on an extensive study of Islamic K-12 education in the United States. But the league has about 235 schools, serving about 32,000 students, on its reference list. Of those, about 20 percent offer high school education to about 3,200 to 6,400 students, she said.

Many parents with students in Islamic schools face a quandary when their children finish eighth grade. Most opt for public school, she said, others go for a secular or non-Muslim religious private school, and a few home-school their children.

Ahmad and his wife feel strongly that their children need to spend their teen years in a school they believe will reinforce their religious faith and cultural values, such as a respect for elders.

"It's the American private school experience," Keyworth said, as many religious schools add grades once they've reached a sizable demand from parents and a maturity to provide it.

High schools are more expensive to start and operate, she said. Some run like a one-room schoolhouse, with one or two high schoolers busy with independent learning projects. But some are full-scale, stand-alone campuses with all the offerings of large public schools.

"The better the school, the greater the pressure from parents to move up to high school," Keyworth said, but added, "the bottom line is that they have to educate the child well. If they can't, they won't continue."

Ahmad is happy his children will have a chance to continue their education into high school without moving back to Texas.

"God gave me the resources thankfully," he said, "to send my kids to private schools."

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