

In the name of God

WISE
World Islamic Summit on Education

The Third WISE Webinar on
Managing and Reopening Schools Amid COVID-19

Parent Engagement During the Pandemic

*With participants representing schools from
Europe, Asia & Pacific, and the Americas.*

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Saturday December 12th:

- 6:30 am Los Angeles
- 9:30 am Toronto
- 2:30 pm London
- 6:00 pm Mashhad
- 9:30 pm Jakarta
- 1:30 am Sydney (Sunday)

The bottom half of the poster features a photograph of three students in a classroom. Two girls in white hijabs are looking at a laptop, while a boy in the foreground is wearing a white surgical mask and looking towards the camera.

**The Third Webinar on
Managing and Reopening Schools Amid COVID-19:
Parent Engagement During the Pandemic
Saturday December 12th, 2020**

Opening Remarks

Welcome to the third webinar of WISE. We are honored to have guests and participants from schools around the world. The focus of this webinar is “Parent Engagement during the Pandemic.”



I am Nooh Kasraie, a member of the secretariat of WISE. I would like to welcome you and thank you for joining us. To those who are new to these webinar series, WISE stands for the World Islamic Summit on Education. Our mission is to provide a platform for a periodical and systematic meeting for Islamic Schools around the world. A group of eleven schools met in Istanbul last year for a pre-summit to start this beautiful initiative and to create a network of schools specifically Shiaa schools around the world. Inshallah we can share best practices with each other and learn from one another.

We were supposed to have our first actual in-person summit this year in June. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic it did not happen. So, instead we started having series of webinars in the meantime.

The first webinar we had in June focused on “Managing and Reopening Schools amid COVID-19.” This was mainly for school administrators. We had presenters

from RISE in the USA, Wali ul Asr Learning Institute in Canada, Al-Sadiq and Al-Zahra Schools in the UK, Alavi School in Iran, Muthahari School in Indonesia, Bellfield College in Australia, and we were able to end the first webinar with a surprise ziarat of the blessed shrine of Imam Reza(as).

The second webinar that we held focused on “The Safety and Wellbeing of Students and Staff.” We were blessed to have great presenters from Al-Zahra College in Australia, Hadi School of Excellence in the USA, Avicenna Private School in Austria, and Imam Sadr Foundation & Rihab Zahraa School in Lebanon.

Here we are today with our third webinar. This is the series of webinars that focuses on helping schools as they are going through the pandemic. Today we have opened our webinar to teachers and parents as well. We are blessed to have our friends from around the world join us.

We will have three distinguished speakers today;

- Our first speaker is Dr. Mehrmohammadi, from Iran
- Our second speaker is Mr. Alireza Abedi, the principal of Al Hadi School, from the USA
- Our third speaker is a parent, Mr. Mohsen Azarbadegan, from the UK

We are running schools at a challenging time that nobody has ever experienced before. Previous webinars focused on how and when to open schools and how to focus on the mental health and the safety of students & staff.

Today’s webinar focuses on parents. Unfortunately, most Islamic Schools around the world are experiencing declining numbers of enrolment. The latest statistics show anywhere between 20 to 30 percent of school’s average enrolment has declined.

At the same time, many schools are still fully online as we speak. Now parents play a different role as we have distance or online learning. They become a learning coach or a learning partner. That is why engaging the parents and creating such a strong home-school alliance becomes a priority. It becomes very vital to the success of the school.



First Presentation

Our first speaker, Dr. Mahmoud Mehrmohammadi, is a retired full professor of education. He is actually one of the founding members of WISE, a very experienced educator & scholar. He has been in charge of multiple Islamic Schools around the world. He has a very long track of publications.



Dr. Mahmoud Mehrmohammadi

The presentation that I will share with you in this webinar is relevant to the theme of the webinar as it has to do with the parent engagement during the pandemic.

I am working on a very specific assumption. I am operating under the assumption that the new world order in education, if we can call it, is indeed problematic from the point of view of parents. They are facing many challenges to cope with this new world order and the roles they are expected to play.

The title of my presentation is the “Challenges of Parenthood under COVID-19.” The subtitle is the “Prospects of a New Partnership in Education.” Let me start off by sharing with you my account of why I think this new world order of education is indeed problematic for parents specifically. My explanation of this problematic context is that a new vision of schooling or a new breed of education is being

developed which is mainly referred to as mixed or blended but with a different use or meaning. That is, education is going to be defined more or less as a joint responsibility of the institution of school and the institution of home. So, in home-schooling both homes and schools are expected to play an equally significant and valid role in this new arena being developed. The institution of family will now count more heavily in performing the critical social mission of education.

The shift in the context happened so fast and so unexpectedly that left every parent in a state similar to a control shock. They were suddenly thrown into a field to perform a variety of tasks for which they were not prepared for. It posed a real challenge to the perception of parenthood and stretched parental responsibilities to new borders. It sometimes required an adjustment to lifestyle as well as learning new skills on the part of parents to handle the educational emergency.

Maybe the most troublesome and distressing aspect of it all was the fundamental uncertainties surrounding the outcome of the new off-site version of delivering educational services to students. The concern on the other hand truly yet implicitly echoed the trust public assigned to the social institutions named schools to competently and professionally discharge educational responsibilities in a professional fashion. Parents feared the interruption of the role played by this time-honored institution while the prospect of the alternative mode is utterly unclear. For them the question is will cognitive social, spiritual, emotional and physical development as education's main missions be maintained and secured? To some, a version of de-schooling idea was suddenly becoming a reality which rested on the advancement of digital communication technology representing a totally problematic axiom.

Technology replacing or simulating real educational circumstances is and should indeed be acknowledged as a source of genuine concern since education is an

intricate and critically sensitive enterprise that cannot be relegated to tools and apparatus no matter how sophisticated and smart, they are. I, therefore, share a deep concern and sympathize with parents who view and label the new situation as a first step towards de-schooling. It is a dim prospect for the emerging situation.

Another bewildering and annoying aspect in the new education world order from point of view of parents concerns sending their children to school at the time of pandemic. Can this time-honored social institution rise up to the occasion and live up to the expectations? Are the learning infrastructures responsive and up to the task? Is my child's safety and wellbeing ensured in this high-risk situation? Are the staff ready? Are the necessary protection devices in place? Are the school rules and regulations properly revised to account for new conditions? Questions like this abound.

In my classification of the responsibilities and interventions I would like to mention first and foremost what I refer to as home hidden curriculum. By this phrase I mean things like the opportunities to strengthen family bonds, the opportunities to engage in dialogue to reach proper decisions collectively with respect to children's rights and responsibilities. Are we really ready as parents to take advantage of these opportunities under new conditions where students are at home and they no longer spend their active daytime in the school? Are we ready to have greater impact with respect to religious beliefs and virtues through actions and deeds within the home parameters?

The second branch or category of responsibilities or the interventions at home are labeled as moral and educational. Some examples would be monitoring student behavior in virtual learning settings, such as taking tests and doing homework online while observing the school standards. Another example would be being fully present (physically and otherwise) in online classes. Of course moral and educational

responsibilities have more examples such as honoring the deadlines set for learning activities by students, refraining from the temptation to act on behalf of the children when it comes to signing up in class, doing homework or taking tests. These are some temptation that parents really give in to and take the position of their children and undertake things like this, which is a temptation that has to be resisted. Whether we would be able to resist it or not is a big question.

The third category of responsibilities or interventions at home has to do with emotional and mental affairs. Examples would be managing the potential dangers of stress and depression that students are facing in the emergent situation. Managing isolation and to come up with solutions making up for the lost social interaction of the kids.

The fourth category of responsibilities and interventions are referred to as academic and technological, for which some examples would be learning the tricks of virtual learning, or to become e-learning literate. The second example would be to become in effect a TA to fulfill the gaps in learning.

All in all, these responsibilities and interventions that are expected from parent under the new education world order may add up to a sense of helplessness with debilitating effects. Undoubtedly parents need to spend a lot more “time on task”. Time on task, defined as time focused on undertaking planned learning tasks, is not viewed as a pertinent factor or variable with bearing on learning and achievement applicable to students only as the research on learning suggests. It is also applicable to parents withing this new education scheme. It is as if the new situation has given birth to a new variable or concept in education and educational research that could be referred to as parental time on task (PTT). The variable calls for more quality time spent directly or indirectly on widespread educational issues on concerns with plans and activities of the school. This is while parents as a group naturally exhibit

different personalities, different dispositions towards education, different academic qualifications and experiences, different spending capabilities and in general, different affordances and possibilities to meet the requirements of parenting with respect to formal education.

But it is utterly safe to assume that they all want the best to happen for their kids. It is similarly safe to assume that most will invest the time and energy necessary to support the education of their loved ones. Therefore, the school administrators are well-advised to tap into these assumptions and do whatever is needed to make new scale of parent engagement a reality.

Online workshops where parents' experiences could be shared and also allocated teacher talk with every parent are among the actions recommended. Publishing attractive and informative flyers and brochures addressing problems and possible solutions is another worthwhile mechanism. School administrators, in other words, cannot stop at mere advising or preaching parents to exercise resilience in facing the challenges and responsibilities of the new order in education. Practical actions such as the one's mentioned are needed to make this dream come true.

Let's make hope and optimism the name of the game in the new era. The new era could prove to be advantageous to the pre-COVID-19 situation of all the players of the game, of which parents are but one, consciously accept their share of obligations. Their deep connection with education could indeed prove to be a blessing in disguise, signaling the ultimate redemption of the most challenging human enterprise called education. As we have in the Quran, وَعَسَىٰ أَنْ تَكْرَهُوا شَيْئًا وَهُوَ خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ



Second Presentation

Our second presenter comes from al-Hadi school. Brother Alireza Abedi is the new principal of Al-Hadi school located in Houston, Texas. He comes from years of experience as an educator. And he's made a significant change in the culture of schooling and in engaging the students and parents in a time that this is much needed.



Alireza Abedi

Al-Hadi school was established in 1996 and it is located near Houston, Texas. I have the honor of providing service to the students, parents and the staff here at Al-Hadi.

Given the current climate, it's really uncharted territory for anyone. Now that we have had a few months of experience, we tried to quickly identify many of those challenges we were facing and identify solutions for those. In engaging our stakeholders given our current challenges we realized there are 3 steps to this process.

First and foremost, communication was a challenge.

As Dr. Mehmohammadi mentioned, the goal of the schools should be making the parents competent. The increased communication obviously requires additional bandwidth from the school given that we are experiencing new challenges, wanting to run an online school and transforming what we had in the classroom to an online setting. All of those require additional time; and time being a finite resource we had to streamline and improve the quality of communication. So, I'll talk about a few of the things we did. To avoid having long delays and emails that go unanswered for a while or any concern that is brought to our attention, we created a communication road map.



The communication road map for us looked like we are encouraging open communication but let's clarify even further than before. There are the respective individuals you communicate with, their contact info, their extension, their role on the campus and at the bottom how quickly you can expect a response from that individual and who is the next line of communication or contact person.

This extended even to our lead teachers. Because we identified engagement as the first step, we had to stream line and make communication a little bit easier. In

addition, we had a suggestion box that we upgraded and put on the front page of our website. At any point you had a question or comment you will be able to use it and expect a response to come quickly because we dedicated a staff member to addressing those concerns.

We sent a weekly video newsletter to our parents to keep them engaged and to keep them updated on all the information and events that are going to take place in the coming weeks.

We also held town halls 7 times a year. Having these town hall sessions provided that opportunity once again for that clear communication. We would dedicate half of the time to the presentation and the other half to questions. Through that we were able to clearly explain what our phase 1, 2, 3 plan looked like for the parents.

The next step was that we had to consolidate the concerns. It is not sufficient for the parents to know they can share their concerns. What needs to happen is a two way communication where they see that these concerns being consolidated and worked on and there is progress being reported.

Parent-teacher conferences were one of the ways that we would be able to say we have consolidated these concerns and how we are addressing it. We used google forms where parents could sign up for time slots and then the zoom link is was sent to the parents and they were able to have a quick conversation and touch base.

We have also sent out quite a few parent surveys.

We held religious programs and daily Muharram programs that kept everyone engaged. This way the trust in the school increases and the parents know that the school has the right priorities.

A mentorship program is critical and one of the game changers for us. We were able to have students, sign up and indicate who their first, second and third choice for a

mentor was, and we did our best to match them with that mentor. Parents found their child is being more inclusive and they're not isolating themselves. This mentorship program allows for a group of five or six students to have one mentor and work very closely with that individual.

Recreational activities have also been a strong part of program and our vision. We wanted to make sure that with COVID, with families staying indoors, particularly families who are living in apartments can get out and have their recreational opportunities. From the very beginning of the school we started with after school hours for PE, sports, soccer.

One creative solution we were able to come up with was a school app. This was a way where push notifications can come to you. For example, if your student is in basketball or in debate, you can get notifications regarding those programs. This was through a company called Legit Apps. They also design apps for UC Berkeley, Stanford and some of the big name schools. We were able to Alhamdulillah get this at no cost for Al-Hadi which was a big win for us.

Practical ways of building engagement during the pandemic

Our key stakeholders are the parents, students and staff



For parents, we found fitness classes a practical solution and a way of building engagement during this pandemic. One key component is that they also need that

extra way of unwinding, releasing stress and physically becoming more fit. We reached out to our parents and asked if they are able to volunteer with one of our after school club activities.

We also increased student recognition programs as students are struggling and that positive affirmation would go a long way.

Every quarter we have two school wide award ceremonies.

Student council events were held as we wanted to give them the autonomy to plan their events and activities.

At the town halls I hear what concerns the students have. Having that opportunity where the students can also share their concerns is valuable and parents really like the fact that their child also gets a voice and can advocate for themselves.

For staff, we've done several things because when the staff are energized and motivated they can also further engage the parents. We have committees such as our wellness committee, which, for example, organized an art therapy session where everyone from our custodial staff to our mawlana went and completed an art piece and then it all went together into making a collective artwork for the whole campus. Technology committee, operations committee and all of those the mentorship programs are beneficial for the students and they also help the staff, because they can then talk to 4-6 students in a small group.

We also have session with the Alim. It's another way mawlana grounds us and kind of reinvigorates that we are in this challenge and he mentions ahadis from our Masoomin (as) and from verses of the Quran; being able to ground the framework of what it is we do as educators. These are some of those things that we're doing on a more practical basis.

Third Presentation

Let me point out that WISE is planning for very different initiative, some are admin level, some are teacher level, parent level, and student level. I just want to share two of the student level recent collaborative projects that we've had.

One was an art competition that was focusing on Arbaeen. It initiated from our friends at Bellfield College and then RISE academy from the US joined forces, so two sets of students, both members of wise both participated in this initiative.

Our presenter is Brother Mohsen Azarbadegan who has been living in the UK since 2003. He has graduated from Oxford University and is since working as an executive director in a multinational firm. His son joined Al-Sadiq School when he was only 3 years old and dear brother Mohsen has been a parent of this very good school for the past 7 years.



Alireza Azarbadegan

It is almost short of 9 months that we've gone through the lockdown and I will try to structure our experiences as a family going through the pandemic and present it here to all the attendees.

The first phase was: Isolation.

Just before the school holidays, the whole lockdown in the UK started, so my son wasn't going to school anymore. There were a couple weeks before the new semester started. We had very limited resources to do anything really for my son.

To mention a background, my work is something between 10-16 hours a day, so it's a very busy job. My wife is in her last year of her PhD, so she is very busy as well. My son, Taha, is very sporty and very social. He is very self-sufficient at the same time. This is the context we are in, we have a town house that has a very small garden in the back with no room for playing any games.

So the main challenge we were thinking about was not really education in the classic sense of it, but rather the mental health of Taha. We thought we are going to go through this hopefully, but Taha will not be able to socialize, do any activities, or see his friends anymore so it's going to be very difficult for him.

One of the things we tried very hard was keeping to a schedule; we separated sleeping and working hours. We're still experiencing problems with drawing boundaries, because I'm working online from home. His sleeping time was all over the place because he didn't have to wake up very early to go to school tomorrow. The other thing we tried to do was try to keep Taha talking with his friends over the phone or on Zoom.

We tried to socialize with people around us for Taha to not miss out on that side. There was this challenge between us and him if he should have a smartphone as everyone else has. We tried socializing with some of our friends and used a group

call over Zoom so children could see each other. It didn't go very well as we weren't used to Zoom, everyone was talking over each other, the quality of the camera wasn't good and people forgot to unmute themselves.

The other thing we tried to do was to keep active. We tried to do some activities at home and have a morning exercise. We tried to do all these to keep Taha busy in the period where there was no school yet.

What happened was that either I or my wife wouldn't be able to do work that day. We were interrupted and had to keep Taha engaged and it was very challenging in that sense.

Then school started in an online mode which was a relief for us. First of all it put everything in a schedule. Now Taha has to wake up at 8 a.m. and attend a meeting in the morning with other children and do activities for the rest of the day.

One of the experiences I had was that in our home where Taha was sitting in his class was also where I was working. I had to mute my meetings but it was a great experience as I could sit in his class and see the challenges; what their teachers are doing in his class and how Taha is doing in that context.

I was worried about screen time as Taha was now spending hours for school, and a lot of teachers were pushing students to take breaks between the sections and not look at the screen. Some of their entertainment was also on screen as they played or watched TV. We started to control the time by setting some rules, telling how many hours he can spend on this or that.

It was getting a little easier to go outside and we went and played football. Then we started baking together at home and reading books. At this point, me and my wife got more appreciative of what is going on in a school day. We now knew what was going on and we were able to have conversations with the teachers.

That was the second phase of the school. The third phase was the new normal. Children started going back to school but in a very safe environment. The after school clubs were not that much active and there weren't not much outside activities.

The reality is that we are still in this phase.

The bonding in the family as a whole has gotten a lot stronger. We spent a lot more time with Taha, and learned more about the games he enjoys.

The other challenge we have is that the news is constantly talking about issues on COVID and so we tried to keep him away for his mental health.

To summarize, we've been part of an evolution with the school as they started experimenting using different tools and online education. We have been seeing that evolution and I think both us and the school learned a lot through it.

Concluding Remarks; Dr. Nooh Kasraie

We have a surprise for you which is a visit to a divine place. Even though we can't visit the grave of Hazrat-e-Zahra (as), we have been instructed to visit the Shrine of Hazrat-e-Masoumeh (as), instead. We have Sayyad Behbahani who lives in Montreal and is currently in the shrine of Hazrat-e-Masoumeh (as) and he will take if from here. Let's take our hearts and our souls to the shrine of Hazrat-e-Masoumeh(as).



Let's pray together for success of all the Islamic schools around the world, the mental and physical safety of all the staff who are working hard to provide this education for our students, and the parents who are trying very hard. I will end the program with this verse of the Quran: So verily with the hardship, there is relief. Verily, with the hardship, there is relief.

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