

Non-government education reflecting diversity

Union culture and Muslim schools



L to R: IEU Organiser David Towson with Al Amanah Islamic College Deputy Principal Wassim Saad

"Some people think of poor conditions or [that we're on] some different award. But that's just about stereotyping and prejudice."

Wassim Saad, Deputy Principal, Al Amanah Islamic College

The IEU supports:

- equal access to faith-based schools, which are affordable to every child, to contribute to building a socially cohesive and just Australia
- the right to a successful education for all, free of the market forces of competition and privatisation
- development of a clear set of principles to bring differential funding from state and federal sources into a consistent framework
- the requirement that equity measures target extra funding across all schools where relevant student and/or school needs are identified
- the industrial and professional rights of IEU members in all schools of all faiths and from those of no faith at all
- the values such as tolerance and respect for diversity that are taught in all schools of all systems. Australia's diverse schools greatly contribute to social cohesion.



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our schools, our future...



NSW/ACT IEU General Secretary Dick Shearman

The Independent Education Union represents the industrial and professional interests of more than 30,000 teachers, principals and support staff in NSW and ACT non-government schools, and more than 65,000 nationally – including all Muslim schools.

There are more than 30 Muslim schools in Australia – including 15 in NSW and one in the ACT – teaching approximately 16,920 students. In each of these schools, dedicated teams of teachers and support staff work together to deliver quality education, covering all the usual Key Learning Areas, while also enabling students to practice and learn about their faith.

NSW Muslim schools are diverse and in demand, increasing in line with demographic trends. All are co-educational and have open enrolment policies – Muslims and non-Muslims are welcome to attend – and many are low-fee.

The IEU strongly supports faith-based education. We recognise the significant contribution to the social capital of our nation provided by all schools, whether public, secular independent or faith-based.

Australians come from a broad range of cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and the non-government school sector both reflects and celebrates this diversity.

For many families, the ability to send their children to schools reflecting their culture and values, teaching their faith, keeping alive their language or catering for specific needs is an integral part of what it means to be Australian.

Non-government schools are also at the forefront of sharing culture within the community and building understanding. They provide frequent opportunities for people of many backgrounds to come together and learn from each other through cultural exchange programs, peace initiatives, interfaith events and diversity days.

This is the second in a series of IEU brochures on the diversity of the non-government education sector.



“I read lots of material about the Union at uni, and I joined up straight away. It’s really important you know your rights.”

Iglal Mohammed (pictured left) , Teacher and IEU Representative, Iqra Grammar College, Minto

“I’ve always had the belief that unions play a vital role in our society. If it wasn’t for the dedicated work of the union movement people wouldn’t have half the conditions and advantages that exist today.”

Osman Karolia, Principal and IEU Member, Arkana College, Hurstville

“There is complete trust in the Union and its ability to solve problems and strong membership here gives us a lot of strength.”

Batoul Jayyousi, Teacher and IEU Representative, Malek Fahd Islamic School, Greenacre

(Right) Batoul Jayyousi, Teacher and IEU Representative, with Sarwat Sleiman, Teacher and IEU Chapter Chair, Malek Fahd Islamic School, Greenacre.



Strong union culture in Muslim schools

In NSW, staff in Muslim schools enjoy union-negotiated industrial arrangements and similar industrial protections and conditions to non-Muslim schools. Staff represent many nationalities.

“All are welcome here,” says Al Amanah Islamic College Deputy Principal Wassim Saad, who sometimes finds those who have not experienced Muslim schools are surprised to discover they have similar industrial protections and arrangements to any other school.

“I think with the words ‘Muslim’ and ‘Islamic’, there are sometimes misconceptions attached.

“Some people think of poor conditions or [that we’re on] some different award. But that’s just about stereotyping and prejudice. We keep an eye on conditions and industrial matters and we go by the book.”

At Malek Fahd Islamic School in Greenacre, Teacher and IEU Representative Batoul Jayyous has worked at the school since it opened 20 years ago. She has watched it “like a child growing in front of me”. It now has more than 1,700 students and Batoul is proud of her role as an IEU Representative in contributing to the school’s development.

“I’m very proud that I took this role over this period of time. It gives me great satisfaction to be able to help so many and to have people put their trust in me. There is complete trust in the Union and its ability to solve problems and strong membership here gives us a lot of strength,” she says.

Her colleague, the school’s IEU Chapter Chair, Sarwat Sleiman agrees. “The Union has really helped us through negotiations for a new agreement and without it we wouldn’t have these conditions. The IEU has also assisted many teachers professionally, working with them and giving advice and support in progressing through the accreditation processes.”

Like many other Muslim schools, Arkana College in Kingsgrove also has a strong union culture.

“I’ve always had the belief that unions play a vital role in our society,” Arkana College Principal Osman Karolia says. “If it wasn’t for the dedicated work of the union movement people wouldn’t have half the conditions and advantages that exist today.”

Arkana College Teacher and IEU Representative Janice Pratt says the College also has a strong professional development culture.

“Many principals think you can just pick up a book and learn everything by reading it but I’ve been able to go on a lot of teacher training and this has not just been limited to maths, science, English and drama. We can go and then disseminate it within the school and we’re also able to bring in our own interests, like musicals and science.”

Our IEU representatives

In each school a member of staff is elected as an IEU Representative. In Muslim schools IEU representatives are committed and passionate about the Union and its contribution to industrial and professional conditions.

Ever since she graduated as a teacher nine years ago, Teacher Iglal Mohammed has been an IEU Representative. "I read lots of material about the Union at uni, and I joined up straight away."

"It's really important you know your rights. I found the information from the IEU really useful and interesting."

Iglal says it was "by chance" that she began teaching at Islamic schools, and has spent all her career in them so far – at the Australian International Academy at Strathfield, Quibla College, Leumeah and currently teaching Year 1 at Iqra Grammar College, Minto.

"I love being a Rep because I get to meet so many people. I know everybody, as everyone in the school comes to me with questions. It gives me an excuse to be friends with everyone."

"We had a teacher wanting to take paternity leave and I was able to explain the whole process to him, and that he had to give notice. He and the Principal were pleased to have it all organised properly."

Rod Simmons, a Teacher and IEU Representative at Al-Faisal College in Auburn credits Union branch meetings with helping him to stay abreast of what is happening in other schools and to increase member inclusion.

"Often I find issues we discuss in our Chapter are not as significant as issues brought up by other schools at Branch meetings. So I can let members know that things aren't that bad. It means we can appreciate what we've got and aim to do things better depending on what we're facing."

Rod says he is committed to including all members in the work of the Union and giving them a chance to play an active role.

"We invite members along [to branch meetings] so they get to see that we're inclusive. We want all our members to be activists in their own particular way."

Al Amanah's Belinda Hall also derives satisfaction from her role as IEU Representative, including and "helping to shape working conditions" at the school.

"Strong Union representation is important because you have the security of knowing that you have the IEU behind you, always willing to give you advice and support."

"Furthermore, having union representation at any school is extremely important as it guarantees employees' rights, maintains Australian working standards, and empowers members to have their say about working conditions and the running of their school."

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Belinda Hall, Teacher and IEU Representative, Al Amanah Islamic College



Back L to R: Arkana College Teacher and IEU Rep Janice Pratt, IEU Organiser David Towson and Osman Karolia, Principal and IEU Member.



Al Amanah Islamic College Teacher and IEU Rep Belinda Hall with students.

Religion and culture - contributing to diversity

Along with the strong union values held by staff in Muslim schools, they share a commitment to social justice and to teaching respect for diversity. Students get to practice their own faith while learning about and mixing with students from many others via a range of programs.

Iglal, from Iqra Grammar College, is a great believer in education as a route to reconciliation.

"I have experienced abuse because I wear a headscarf. I don't blame the people. It's the media. The media always portray us in such a bad light. People are afraid and don't understand."

"The media always portrays us as terrorists but I'm not a terrorist. I'm a mother."

Iqra College has an open door policy and holds numerous events, to which the wider community is invited, including the fortnightly assembly, science week, literacy week and a talent quest.

This policy plus interfaith, intercultural, charity and harmony events are a feature of many Muslim schools, including Malek Fahd. As with schools in all sectors and systems, they are valued as community building exercises.

"These events are quite important for all involved," Malek Fahd's Batoul says. "It is really important to dispel myths about Islam. And also we don't want our own children to be cocooned. Everyone needs to learn about respect and tolerance."

Interfaith education is not just limited to students. At Malek Fahd Islamic School in Greenacre some non-Muslim staff members have also been known to fast during Ramadan. "Sometimes they fast to share the experience with their students and show they respect their faith," says Malek Fahd IEU Representative Batoul Jayyousi.

"There is a real sense of celebration here, whether you are part of the faith or not. It's like Christmas, when even if it's not part of your faith you can't help but be affected when you see the lights and the decorations in the city."

Unique approaches

While all Muslim schools mark Ramadan, how it is celebrated and other aspects of faith and culture can vary widely, just like with any other school.

"People tend to think Islamic schools are all the same but having worked at a few, I'm amazed at how different they all are," says Australian Islamic College of Sydney Principal Yasmine Gamielidien.

"Islam is practiced in so many parts of the world and there is always a cultural aspect ... in some parts of the world, the culture becomes enmeshed in the religion."

Al Amanah Islamic College Teacher and IEU Representative Belinda Hall says staff at her school benefit from weekly non-compulsory Islamic awareness sessions, which are open to Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

"The purpose of these sessions is for a religious leader to educate staff about the Islamic way of life, as well as giving the staff the opportunity to ask questions."

Belinda says these sessions have helped her get used to customs at her school like not shaking hands with the opposite sex and not being in an enclosed area with a staff member of the opposite sex without a third party present.

But while learning about the Muslim faith and culture can be a great attraction for staff in these schools, for Matthew Lyons, a Teacher and IEU Representative at Al Sadiq College, the education requirements and responsibilities are no different to anywhere.

It "sounds different on paper, [but] once I stepped through the gates it was the same as any other school", Matthew says of his Kindergarten to Year 8 school that caters to the Alawite community.

Malek Fahd's Sarwat says everyone should get a first-hand experience. "I'd like to encourage people from all other cultures and faiths to find out more about Islam and not be taken in by misinformation ... we all worship the same God in the end."

"The IEU has also assisted many teachers professionally, working with them and giving advice and support in progressing through the accreditation processes."

Sarwat Sleiman, Teacher and IEU Chapter Chair, Malek Fahd Islamic School, Greenacre

"One of the benefits of having a range of schools reflecting various faiths and cultures is that they provide a great opportunity to actually come together, appreciate and learn about one another."

Ali Roude, Deputy Chair, Islamic Council of NSW.



Students from Masada College (Jewish), Australian International Academy (Muslim) and Davidson High during the Respect, Understanding and Acceptance program, which is aimed at breaking down barriers. The program is an initiative of the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies. Photo: Jenny Kahn.



Increasing enrolments

There is a place for schools of all sectors in the Australian education landscape – including government, Catholic and independent.

Enrolments have increased in all school sectors over the last 40 years, with no decline in government school enrolments.

According to 2008 ABS data, there are 2729 non-government schools, catering for 1,169,740 students.

These enrolments account for:

- 30.2% of all primary students
- 39.2% of all secondary students
- 34.1% of all students

"We invite members along [to branch meetings] so they get to see that we're inclusive. We want all our members to be activists in their own particular way."

Rod Simmons, Teacher and IEU Representative, Al-Faisal College, Auburn

Australian Islamic College of Sydney Principal Yasmine Gamielien with IEU Organiser Pam Smith.

