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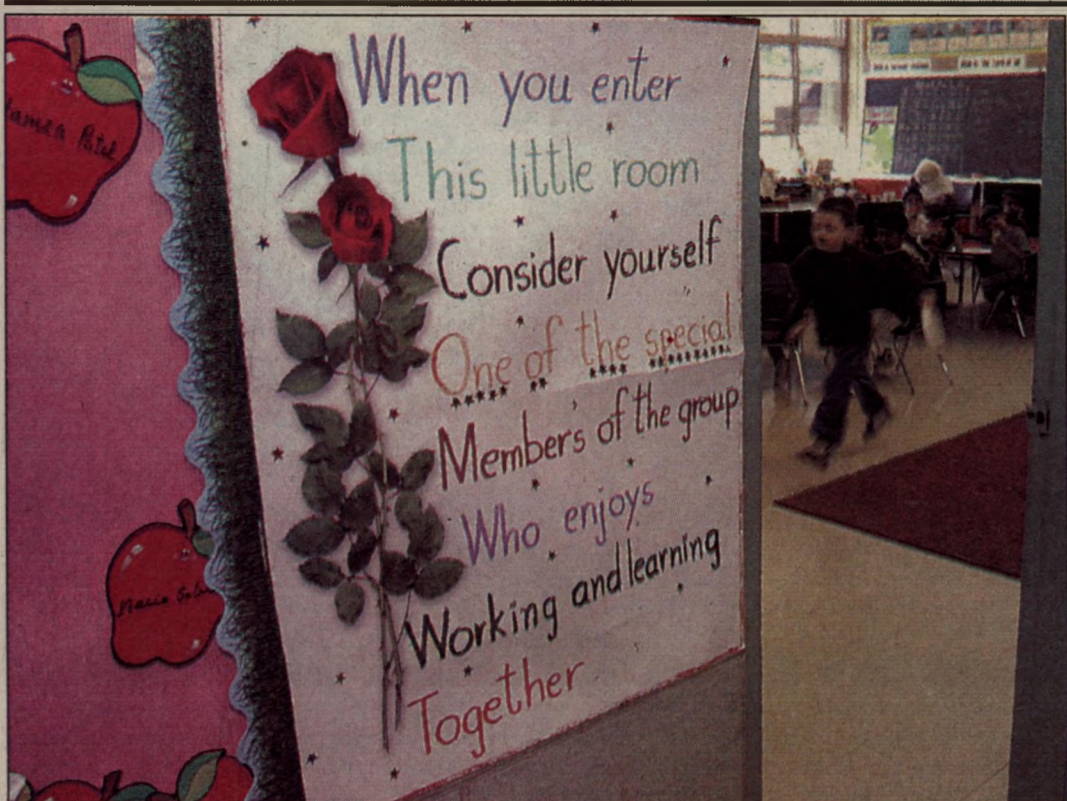


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Photos by Barrie Erskine
An entrance to a classroom at Al-Falah Islamic School; Fatima Tanfeeq, 7, works on her spelling; and Sana Arif, 6, enjoys her lunch sitting on the school's playground equipment.

Al-Falah: culture, education and religion

By Shelly Sanders Greer
SPECIAL TO THE BEAVER

At the corner of Burnhamthorpe and Trafalgar Roads in north Oakville stands a small, one-storey school that looks like any typical school. Although it looks ordinary on the outside, it is quite unique on the inside.

Built in 1956 as Snider's Public School which operated until June 1976, it became Al-Falah Islamic School two years ago, when the Islamic Circle of North America was able to acquire the property.

Now it is the private school of choice for 100 Islamic children, Junior Kindergarten to Grade 5, who have the opportunity to learn the values and customs of their unique culture.

"There's a demand for an Islamic school in the community," says principal Mohamed Bhabha.

"Parents want a school that provides a value-based education."

The school opened in 1998 with 60 kids, and this fall, children will be turned away because their maximum of 150 students will be reached. To meet the growing demand, the school will add Grade 6 and increase the sizes of the Junior and Senior Kindergartens.

The cost of attending this school is approximately \$2,500 a year, depending on the grade, and it is an inspected school by the Ministry of Education. This means it follows the Ontario curriculum in addition to the Islamic classes.

Students come from a variety of backgrounds including Somalia, Lebanon, Turkey and Canada. All of the teachers are Muslim and are certified by the province to teach.

"It is a big soup pot - very multicultural which reflects the country," says Safa Ismail, administrative assistant for the school, and a moth-

er of two children, five and eight.

Probably one of the biggest differences between Al-Falah and other schools is the large prayer room, carpeted with rich red tapestries. This was the gym but now is the room where the students head five times a day to pray. The gym is a large shed, separate from the school in the back.

To understand what Islamic families are coming here for, one requires a basic idea of what the Islamic culture is all about. Ismail, explains that all Muslims believe in the same thing. "We believe in only one God. When becoming Muslim, we make a testament that there is only one God and that the prophet Muhammad is the last and final messenger."

Ismail actually made this testament when she was 17 and converted to Muslim.

After a year of readings and discussions with members of a Muslim

organization, she made a testament and agreed to live her life based on the five pillars of the Muslim religion.

The first is the testament. The second is praying five times a day. The third pillar is fasting in the month of Ramadhan, the ninth month in the Islamic calendar, if able. The fourth is Zakat, which means 'poor due' - a form of charity Muslims make every year to those in need, and the fifth pillar is Hajj - a pilgrimage to Mecca once during your lifetime, if able.

Another aspect of being Muslim is an arranged marriage, which Ismail had 10 years ago. A Muslim organization arranged for her to meet her future husband but contrary to popular belief, Ismail had every right to say no. They decided to get married four months after they met and Ismail says it has been a wonderful 10 years.

(See 'Children ...' page B3)



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