With great anticipation, the New Horizon School community awaited the decision of the U.S. Department of Education regarding our Blue Ribbon application. It was September of 2005 when I received the first phone call from a representative from the DOE informing us that we would indeed be receiving the Blue Ribbon and to expect an official letter in the mail.

I remember that moment vividly, finding myself feeling quite emotional, knowing this was to be a seminal moment in the school’s history. We were, to our knowledge, the first Islamic school in the United States to receive this award, and I knew the ramifications would be felt for years to come.

Indeed, this accolade would further validate the school’s credibility and status along with its full-term accreditation by CAIS and WASC. Established in 1984, New Horizon School was poised as one of the early institutions to take the lead in Islamic education in the United States. With an emphasis on academic excellence in a balanced Islamic environment and the fostering of a wholly compatible American Muslim identity, New Horizon was an early pioneer in developing this new concept in the world of education in the U.S., preceded only by the Sister Clara Muhammed schools.

These feelings of excitement and joy would, unfortunately, be interrupted by another phone call from DOE, which would replace those feelings with shock and disappointment. It was another official from DOE, and he informed me that our Blue Ribbon award was being called into question.
If we take a moment to reflect on that time period, we as Americans were commemorating the fourth anniversary of 9/11, and our post-9/11 world had certainly changed the landscape of our nation in unexpected and unfortunate ways. We would see the rise of “anti-Islam” hate groups that challenged the loyalty of American Muslims and even their ability to be true Americans.

So, it was the American Congress for Truth, an organization designated by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) as a “hate group” that called for the withdrawal of our Blue Ribbon status stating that we were “fomenting terrorism.” They had called upon a North Carolina Congresswoman to reach out to DOE to protest our achievement. The DOE official said to me, “Whenever Congress calls, we have to respond.”

Thus began a necessary but frustrating process of defending our school and our legitimacy. The DOE reached out to Mimi Baer, then Executive Director of CAIS, and David Brown, then Executive Director of WASC, who provided highly complimentary feedback and virtually restored DOE’s faith in our educational and institutional integrity. It was, however, the words of Rabbi Steven B. Jacobs of Temple Kol Tikvah that reaffirmed our belief in the power of the interfaith work that is a hallmark of New Horizon’s commitment to the “betterment of family, community, and humanity.” He offered these words of support which we relayed to DOE:

"Many of us have been intimately involved with each other, especially since 9/11. We have shared a journey that brings greater understanding and a passion for safety and justice in our communities. Los Angeles is an amazing city in interfaith relations. We are proud of New Horizon School and their achievements. We stand side-by-side with them, and any attack on them is an attack on the whole community."

The support from the wider educational and religious community of Los Angeles proved to be a testament to the power of dedication to the ideals on which our country was founded. It gave us hope to continue to stand strong as a school and to further forge the meaningful connections that advance our important work. All-told, however, the experience also showed us the ugly reality of bigotry and hate that existed then and unfortunately still exists today. With the political “climate change” in the past three years, hate groups are emboldened now more than ever. According to the Pew Research Center, the number of assaults against Muslims in the U.S. rose significantly between 2015 and 2016, actually surpassing the height of 2001 assaults.

Our school, along with other Muslim schools in the United States, have had to face these realities with a new imperative: to equip our students with the social and emotional tools they may need to manage the challenges of BEING A FORCE FOR CHANGE

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their world while also preserving some of their childhood innocence and their belief in the principles of the America we know and love.

Part of a necessary toolkit for any school to broaden understanding of the rich diversity within our world is the inclusion of a world religions class or program. According to Mark Wallace, Professor of Religion at Swarthmore College, “Serious study of the world’s religions inculcates unique cultural sensitivities among students.” Such programs enrich our students’ knowledge of beliefs and practices that impact the ways our friends and neighbors live every day.

Additionally, a new study by CMRubinWorld and Top Global Teachers notes that finding common ground with fellow students has become a crucial global competence, especially as migration is increasing our cultural and social diversity. Students’ ability to cope in this world full of differences will determine how well they will thrive in society.

“...finding common ground with fellow students has become a crucial global competence, especially as migration is increasing our cultural and social diversity. Students’ ability to cope in this world full of differences will determine how well they will thrive in society.”

At New Horizon, we take our comparative religion classes one step further. We incorporate an interfaith program with the goals of promoting mutual love, respect, and understanding for people of other faiths and developing attitudes and actions that help create a more peaceful world.

Our program begins in fourth grade and uses the California Social Studies focus on the missions of California as a stepping stone to discuss Christianity with students. Teachers discuss the similarities and differences between Islam and Christianity and emphasize the importance of showing respect in their visit to a local mission.

The California Social Studies standards continue in grades six and seven to serve as a catalyst for discussions on the religions and philosophies of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism, and our seventh graders visit a Buddhist temple.

For the past twelve years, New Horizon’s fifth and sixth graders join in a fellowship of song at the Daniel Pearl World Music Concert with stu-
Students from Saint Mark’s Episcopal School and facilitated by the Weizmann Day School in Pasadena. The program is attended annually by Judea and Ruth Pearl, who founded the Daniel Pearl Foundation and the World Music Days to celebrate their son’s life and to promote mutual respect and understanding through music. Afterward, students eat lunch together and engage in ice breakers and games.

The culminating activity of the middle school is an Interfaith Exchange Program between seventh and eighth graders at New Horizon and seventh graders at the Alice and Nahum Lainer School, a Jewish day school. Students spend a day at each other’s campuses engaged in service learning, art, and games to get to know each other and to learn about each other’s faiths. These experiences can be life-changing. One student shared her own transformation with these simple words, “I came into the school with stereotypes, and I left without them.”

While not every school can find a partner school for such activities, through the world religion class and supportive leadership for building understanding, a school can invite guest speakers for assemblies, arrange visits to houses of worship, and give their own students of different faiths the opportunity to share their special celebrations.

I hope our experience and practices can serve as a reminder that rather than being surprised and shocked by the world we live in, we can be forces of change to impact and improve the world we live in by laying the groundwork for deeper understanding and mutual respect among one another.

Amira Al-Sarraf is the Head of School at New Horizon School in Pasadena. She has been actively involved in interfaith projects with the Skirball Cultural Center, Weizmann Jewish Day School, the Interfaith Peace Academy, the Guibord Center, and the Alice and Nahum Lainer School. In addition to serving on the CSEE Board, she also serves on the Board of the Western Justice Center and served for three years on the Board of Alverno Heights Academy, an all-girls Catholic high school. She is also a member of the Los Angeles Department of Mental Health Interfaith Clergy Roundtable Project in Arcadia. She initiated and supervised the creation of a Peace Garden at New Horizon which provides an inspiring space for the school’s community and interfaith activities. Born and raised in Los Angeles, she grew up in a mixed faith household.

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