

# American Schools abroad Have a Big Part to Play

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Dec 23, 2003

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## Articles & Testimony

Like legions of other proud parents, my wife and I sat beaming in the audience earlier this month, video camera in hand, as our son Benji, 6, stood with his fellow first-graders on the stage of his school auditorium and sang a medley of holiday songs. The adorably cute, multicultural program included Christmas favorites, a few Hanukkah melodies and even tunes in Swedish, Japanese and Arabic.

What made our son's concert special is that he is a student at the Rabat American School, in the capital of Morocco, a country of 30 million Muslims, a population rattled by a wave of suicide bombings just six months ago. In this context, Benji's elementary school winter concert was an event of prime importance to U.S. national security.

Ever since Sept. 11, experts have debated how to win the battle for hearts and minds among the world's 300 million Arabs and 1.2 billion Muslims. Everyone seems to have the magic bullet -- from creating Arabic language satellite television stations to counter sensationalist local media to building American style universities overseas so local students don't have to run the visa gauntlet to come to the United States. Many of these ideas have multimillion dollar pricetags.

When I saw young Ahmed introduce a chorus of "Dreidel, Dreidel," I realized that American schools, 185 spread over 132 countries, are already playing a vital role in the international culture wars and deserve more support.

Most American schools are nonprofit, nondenominational, coeducation institutions founded by overseas communities of American citizens and usually owned and operated by local parents associations. They are designed to provide a fully accredited, English-language, U.S.-style curriculum, leavened with study of local languages, to prepare students to enter higher education in the United States.

What makes American schools a strategic asset is the fact that non-Americans flock to them. Of the nearly 100,000 students enrolled in such schools around the world, more than 70 percent are not American, fairly evenly divided between local and third-country students. My son's class of 21 kids, for example, has a half-dozen Moroccans plus students from Algeria, Brunei, Italy, Sweden, Britain, Germany, Japan, and South Korea -- with just four Americans.

Students at these schools learn how to ask questions, be curious, solve problems and accept differences. They study Thanksgiving, George Washington and Martin Luther King while finding a way to celebrate the various nationalities each brings to the classroom. Every student leaves with a facility in English and an appreciation for critical thinking

and cultural diversity that represent American education at its best. While these schools may only benefit relatively few children, their impact is profound. In Morocco, for example, local parents make a weighty political cultural statement by enrolling their children in these schools.

Encouraging that affinity for America should be a high priority for U.S. policy. Shockingly, however, annual U.S. assistance to American schools abroad is only about \$8 million, less than 2 percent of the schools' combined \$450 million operating budget. Even with the inclusion of noncash support, like tariff-free imports and corporate donations, the value of outside assistance is still a pittance.

That is especially scandalous given that American schools don't need much additional money to maximize their potential. The Rabat school, for example, has 389 students but room for another 10 percent. The main deterrent is tuition, which is a hefty \$11,000, several times the local per capita income. While fees for non-Moroccans are usually paid by their parents' employer -- a foreign government, multinational corporation or UN agency -- Moroccan students almost always hail from wealthy families. With no endowment and very limited scholarship funds, the school lacks the means to reach out to other segments of the local population.

With an additional \$200,000 -- or 5 percent of its budget -- the school could provide half-tuition scholarships to fill the empty 38 slots with local students whose families are eager to enroll their children in the American school, if they could afford it. These are middle-class Moroccans who currently scrape together the money to pay the lower tuition for other local private schools -- French and Arabic -- whose curriculum, to put it politely, lacks a certain appreciation for American values. If Washington were to allocate funds on that magnitude to the 50 or so accredited American schools in countries with sizable Arab or Muslim populations, that would amount to just \$13.5 million.

For our family, nothing can erase the image of Benji and Muhammad standing next to each other belting out "One Little Candle." If the government can find the resources to replicate that a thousand-fold, then we will be a thousand steps closer to winning that hearts-and-minds fight.

The writer telecommutes to his position as director for policy and strategic planning at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

International Herald Tribune

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