

# Unlocking Potential: A Community Blueprint for Muslim Educational Success

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“Read in the name of your Lord who created.”  
(Qur’an 96:1)

A quiet transformation is gradually emerging in our communities across England. It isn’t televised or trending. It isn’t led by politicians or pundits. But it is visible in rising parental engagement, the growth of community-led educational initiatives, and the increasing strategic focus of Muslim philanthropy. It has its roots in living rooms, mosques, and community halls—where parents are asking better questions, where mentors are offering stronger guidance, and where donors are choosing to invest not in buildings, but in minds. It is a slow but steady metamorphosis, and one which we must nurture.

Muslim communities in England—and quite possibly beyond—are navigating a paradox. We are aspirational yet underrepresented. We value education deeply yet face persistent barriers to academic success. The data is clear. The stories are familiar. What is needed now is not another diagnosis—but a blueprint for change.

## The Landscape of Uneven Progress

According to the 2021 census (which surveyed the population of England and Wales), among major religious groups, including the substantial group identified as “having no religion”, Muslims had the highest percentage of adults with no qualifications. A startling 25% of the over-16 Muslim population had not stepped onto the first rung of the qualifications ladder. That figure has not shifted much over recent years.

32% of those who identified as Muslims reported having a degree or equivalent, similar to the overall population, but much lower than the impressive 59% of Hindus who had reached this level. Encouragingly, Muslim achievement at this threshold has risen by 8%

since the 2011 census<sup>9</sup>; however, in higher education, just 64.9% of Muslim students received a First or 2:1 degree, compared to 76.3% of the overall population achieving at this standard.<sup>10</sup>

These statistics are not just numbers. They are reflections of structural inequality, social exclusion, and squandered opportunity. They speak to the steady erosion of potential—when talent is overlooked, when ambition is unsupported, and when faith is treated as an obstacle rather than a source of strength.

## The Problem Beneath the Surface

The barriers facing Muslim students are not solely institutional—they are cultural, psychological, and narrative. The framing of Muslim identity through a deficit lens is not restricted to England, nor to current times. It is a longstanding subliminal perception that shapes expectations in classrooms, access to opportunity, and the confidence of young people navigating systems that were not built with them in mind.

Within our own communities, the challenge is compounded by fragmentation. Parents often lack the tools to support their children’s learning. Community organisations operate in silos. Philanthropic giving is generous but rarely strategic. The result is a landscape rich in goodwill but poor in coordination.

There is also a silence around success. Too often, the achievements of Muslim students are underreported, their stories untold. This absence of public narrative matters. It shapes how young Muslims see themselves—and how others see them. We must not only close the attainment gap; we must also rewrite the story.

## The Change We Must Lead

The transformation we seek will not come from outside. It must be led from within. It requires a shift in mindset—from reactive to proactive, from

fragmented to focused, from charitable to strategic.

This is not about abandoning the state or retreating into parallel systems. It is about building the capacity, confidence, and coherence to act as equal partners in shaping the future of education.

1. **Parents:** Cultivating a Culture of Learning and Connection

Parents are their children's first educators. Their influence shapes not just academic outcomes, but identity, aspiration, and resilience. In many Muslim households, education is valued—but not always understood in its intricate modern complexity. Supporting a child through GCSEs, university applications, or navigating special educational needs requires more than aspiration. It requires knowledge, networks, and confidence.

We must:

- equip parents with the tools to support learning at home—from literacy strategies to digital skills
- encourage active engagement in school life—governance, volunteering, advocacy
- promote a faith-driven narrative of excellence: that seeking knowledge is not optional, but sacred

This is not about turning every parent into a teacher. It is about making every home a place where learning is loved, effort is praised, and ambition is normalised.

But, today, a new challenge has emerged—one that is reshaping childhood itself. In many of our homes, children as young as two spend hours each day on iPads, immersed in YouTube content. Teenagers navigate social media platforms that shape their self-worth, attention spans, and worldview. Families sit together in one room, each glued to a separate device, yet disconnected from one another.

This is not just a lifestyle issue—it is an educational one. Excessive screen time erodes attention, limits conversation, and displaces play. It undermines the very foundations of learning: curiosity, communication, and human connection.

Jonathan Haidt's research shows that adolescent depression rates more than doubled between 2010 and 2021, correlating with the rise of "phone-based childhoods."<sup>11</sup> A meta-analysis of 34 studies found that disordered screen use is linked to significantly poorer cognitive performance, especially in attention and impulse control. For children aged 0–3, screen time negatively affects language, motor skills, sleep, and social-emotional development.<sup>12</sup>

We must:

- regulate device usage: Limit YouTube and social media, especially for younger children. Delay social media access until at least age sixteen

- prioritise conversation: Create screen-free zones and times where families talk, reflect, and connect
- encourage play and relationships: Children need to play outdoors, build friendships, and experience the world beyond the screen
- use technology wisely: Online learning platforms can be powerful tools—but they must be used intentionally, not passively

This drive is emphatically not about rejecting technology. It is about reclaiming childhood. It is about ensuring that our homes are places of dialogue, imagination, and growth—not silent rooms lit by soulless screens.

But how do we empower the average parent to enact these changes? Who leads this transformation?

We must now move from awareness to action. This requires:

- Community-led parenting programmes: Evidence-based models—such as peer-led parenting groups—have shown success in improving child behaviour, parent confidence, and family resilience. These programmes are often delivered in schools, community centres, and faith spaces, and are especially effective when led by trained parent facilitators from within the community.
- Faith-sensitive adaptations: Parenting programmes should reflect the values and lived realities of Muslim families. This includes integrating Islamic perspectives on child development, discipline, and emotional wellbeing.
- Local leadership: Mosques, schools, and community hubs should take the lead in convening parenting networks. This includes offering workshops, support groups, and digital resources tailored to different age groups and challenges.
- Learning from others: Other communities have successfully scaled parenting support through national networks, local hubs, and partnerships with schools. These models offer valuable lessons in structure, sustainability, and impact.

Ultimately, we must build a Muslim parenting movement—one that is confident, collaborative, and rooted in both faith and evidence. This movement must be led by a coalition of educators, faith leaders and scholars, community workers, and parents themselves. It must be supported by philanthropic investment and embedded into the wider educational strategy.

While the Muslim third sector and philanthropic efforts often intersect, they play distinct roles in educational transformation. The third sector delivers programmes, builds institutions, and engages



communities directly. Philanthropy, meanwhile, fuels these efforts—shaping their scale, sustainability, and strategic direction.

## 2. **Muslim Third Sector:** Evolving Supplementary Education, Independent Schools, and Community Programmes

The Muslim third sector has shown remarkable growth over the past two decades—particularly in areas such as food banks, refugee support, and humanitarian relief. But in education, its potential remains underdeveloped.

Supplementary education—manifested in weekend and evening schools and *maktabs*—has long been a cornerstone of Muslim community life. It has helped preserve faith, language, and identity. But the time has come to ask: what does the next phase of supplementary education look like?

We are beginning to see promising answers. In cities across the UK, supplementary schools are collaborating—sharing teacher training, curriculum design, and safeguarding practices. Some are embracing technology, offering hybrid models and online access for children who cannot attend in person. Others are investing in outdoor learning, enrichment projects, and creative pedagogy that go beyond rote memorisation.

This evolution is not just anecdotal—it reflects a broader surge in demand.

Participation in supplementary education, youth programmes, and faith-based enrichment has grown significantly in recent years. Waiting lists are expanding, volunteer numbers are rising, and demand for quality provision is outpacing supply. This signals not only a need—but a readiness—for coordinated

growth.

The next phase should include:

- networks of supplementary schools that collaborate locally and nationally
- shared platforms for curriculum, training, and quality assurance
- digital access for children in remote or under-served areas
- a strengthened safeguarding culture: Many supplementary schools have made significant progress in safeguarding policies and practices. This must now be formalised through a community-led self-regulation framework—a process that allows schools to demonstrate their quality, safety, and impact
- character education embedded into every programme, as a matter of urgency

There is a rising tide of concern about a minority of Muslim boys living morally turbulent lives—disengaged from school, vulnerable to gangs, drugs, and online radicalisation. Supplementary schools must become safe spaces for moral development, identity formation, and mentorship. They must offer not only Islamic studies, but also nurture resilience, empathy, and civic responsibility—values that are not separate from the Qur'an and Sunnah, but expressions of it in action.

Beyond supplementary schools, we must also focus on independent Muslim schools. These institutions have made significant strides in academic achievement and faith-based character development. But continued investment is needed—in leadership, governance, curriculum innovation, and accountability

at all levels. The third sector must support these schools to raise standards, share best practice, and build capacity.

Many of these schools are located in disadvantaged areas and charge extremely low fees to remain accessible. There is a difficult balancing act. If fees are raised, pupil numbers drop. If fees remain low, the offer stagnates and quality suffers. This cycle must be broken. No independent school should charge less than the per-pupil funding provided to state schools—and should aim to offer more. To achieve this, we must encourage families to invest their charity, including zakat, into the education of the community's children. This requires a cultural shift: to see education not just as a private good, but as a communal obligation and a sacred trust.

At the same time, we must not overlook the reality that the vast majority of Muslim children are educated in mainstream schools. Here, the third sector has a vital role to play: supporting school improvement, offering targeted interventions, and advocating for inclusive policies.

This includes:

- providing mentoring and tutoring programmes in partnership with schools
- supporting teacher training on faith literacy and cultural competence
- engaging parents and communities to strengthen home-school relationships

Across the UK and Europe, we have built a vast network of Muslim relief charities delivering aid to millions globally. Their reach is extraordinary. Their impact is undeniable. Yet many of these organisations operate in communities where Muslim children face educational disadvantage and rising vulnerability—but rarely engage in local educational provision.

What if each of these charities dedicated part of their operational focus to local educational and enrichment programmes? What if they directly ran mentoring schemes, tuition support, and youth social action projects for Muslim children in their own countries—while extending access to non-Muslim pupils as well?

This would not dilute their mission. It would deepen it. It would affirm that charity begins not only at home, but with a vision for the future. It would connect global compassion with local transformation.

### 3. **Philanthropy:** Investing in Minds, Not Just Projects

Muslim philanthropy is generous and growing. But it is often reactive—focused on immediate relief rather than long-term transformation. Giving tends to

be driven by personal relationships or urgent needs, rather than aligned with a shared vision for educational renewal. This limits impact, sustainability, and the ability to scale up.

In recent years, several Muslim-led foundations have launched multi-million-pound education funds, supporting hundreds of grassroots organisations with grants for mentoring, tutoring, and enrichment. This signals a growing maturity in Muslim philanthropy—a move away from reactive giving toward long-term strategic investment.

To build on this momentum, we must cultivate a culture of collaborative giving—where philanthropists, foundations, and community organisations align around common goals, share data, and invest in scalable solutions. This is especially urgent in education, where long-term transformation requires sustained funding, not just short-term interventions.

Strategic philanthropy should prioritise:

- research initiatives that generate data on Muslim educational outcomes, barriers, and enablers
- scholarship funds that open doors to elite institutions and underrepresented fields
- innovation grants that support edtech, leadership development, and school improvement

There is a powerful opportunity to partner with universities. Muslim charities and foundations can:

- co-fund research centres focused on Muslim education, identity, and civic engagement
- sponsor academic chairs and fellowships in Islamic studies, education policy, and social justice
- collaborate on widening participation programmes to support Muslim students from disadvantaged backgrounds
- develop leadership pipelines by connecting university students with mentoring, internships, and community service opportunities

These partnerships not only elevate the academic profile of Muslim communities, but also embed their contributions within the intellectual and civic fabric of society.

To ensure long-term impact, we must also build community-owned endowments—professionally managed, transparent, and aligned with educational priorities. While interest in Islamic endowments (*waqf*) is growing, few models are structured as true perpetual funds focused on education. Most giving remains project-based. What's needed is a strategic fund that supports scholarships, school improvement, leadership development, and educational research—year after year, generation after generation.

This fund should invite contributions from

philanthropists, businesses, and ordinary families—creating a shared legacy. It must be governed with integrity and designed to grow over time, reinvesting returns to expand its reach.

And we must tell our donors a new story: that the most powerful *sadaqah* is not a meal or a blanket, but a mind awakened, a life transformed, a legacy built.

### **Conclusion: A Legacy Worth Building**

We are not short of talent nor deficient in faith. What we lack is coordination, investment, and vision.

Our faith teaches us that the pursuit of knowledge is a sacred duty. Excellence—*ihsan*—is not elitism, but the standard we are called to uphold in all things. As we build systems and strategies, we must also nurture a moral vision: one that sees education not just as a tool for success, but as a path to service, dignity, and divine reward.

This growing engagement in societal structures, the opening of our own spaces, and the long-term investment in minds over monuments reflect a maturing community—one increasingly confident in its place, purpose, and potential.

The next chapter of our educational story must be written by us—parents who believe, organisations that build, and donors who invest in futures. It must be shaped by a theology of excellence, a politics of inclusion, and a strategy of scale.

This is not just about grades or university places. It is about dignity, opportunity, and influence. It is about building a generation that is confident in its faith, competent in its field, and committed to the common good.

If we act together—with purpose and resolve—we can unlock the potential of a generation. Not just for personal success, but for communal renewal and global impact.

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