

NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY

OF THE

BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES

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October 23, 2007

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

The National Spiritual Assembly received your email dated, in which you expressed several concerns about the decision of the Local Spiritual Assembly of to close its Bahá'í school. In particular, you asked about the appropriateness of the decision in the light of the National Assembly's December 20, 2006 letter of clarification on Bahá'í schools and children's classes, which upholds the legitimacy of both centralized and neighborhood venues. You are worried that this step will deprive your children of the opportunity regularly to mingle with other Bahá'ís their own age, an experience which helps to promote their sense of identity and the strength of their bonds with the community and the Institutions of the Faith. You are also concerned that the "experimental" neighborhood classes might jeopardize the quality of their Bahá'í education.

The National Assembly understands and fully appreciates your concern for the spiritual education of your children. There is no issue more essential to the future of society than education, in both the material and spiritual senses. Few themes in the Sacred Writings of the Faith are repeated more frequently and emphatically. Further, there is no question that the Bahá'í community has learned a great deal about how to provide quality Bahá'í education to its own children.

It is also our responsibility as believers in Baha'u'llah to reach outside of our community, offering liberally and generously the Word of God for today. The Institutions, the individual believers, and the community as a whole are responsible for the spiritual welfare of all people. In this sense we have as much duty to provide Bahá'í education to the children of non-Bahá'ís as we do to our own. Having said this, it must also be said that we are still at an early stage in what will be a learning process of many years' duration. The challenge as we move forward will be to build upon what we have learned in the past, acquiring increasing skills and capacities so that we can serve both our own children and the children of others. Given these understandings, we hope that you will find the following remarks helpful.

As you are aware, Bahá'í education for children has evolved over the course of time, influenced in large part by the circumstances of the believers in various countries. In this country, central schools gradually came into being as small groups of families in limited geographic areas came together with the common aim of providing spiritual education for their young ones. As the community grew, so did these centralized schools, usually with

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adult classes as an added component. Eventually the National Spiritual Assembly commissioned the creation of a standardized curriculum for the children's classes, which was subjected to regular evaluation and refinement. The Core Curriculum was the result of that process, and became the most widely used resource in the community. This was a wonderful achievement at a critical stage in the development of the Faith in this country, which laid a solid foundation of experience for the next stage in our growth.

We are now at another critical period in the history of the Faith, the aim of which is to advance the process of entry by troops. In this process we are gradually building our capacity to reach out to ever larger numbers of people outside of the Bahá'í community, to welcome them into our community life, to nurture their spiritual growth, and to invite as many as possible into the shelter of God's Cause. A key component of this process is to make Bahá'í education available to the children of non-Bahá'í families. This naturally means that we have to reach out into neighborhoods where these families live.

Experience has clearly shown the effectiveness of neighborhood children's classes in making Bahá'í education accessible for people who would not otherwise have such an opportunity. These classes, when integrated into a larger pattern of community life that is propelled by the institute process, have proven to be essential wherever sustained patterns of growth have emerged. The Universal House of Justice has placed great emphasis in the current Five Year Plan on the proliferation of neighborhood classes for children. In a July, 19, 2006 letter to this National Spiritual Assembly, the House of Justice stated:

"The Universal House of Justice is aware that, as part of the efforts under way in your country to promote the Five Year Plan, special attention has been given to multiplying the number of children's classes within neighborhoods. This is a most promising development, which will undoubtedly attract to the Faith many families that are concerned about the moral and spiritual education of their children."

We have seen notable progress in this country as increasing numbers of individuals have arisen to teach children's classes in their own neighborhoods or in nearby areas where receptive populations reside. In cluster after cluster we are witnessing an astonishing level of receptivity on the part of parents, who frequently express the desire for their children to have a Bahá'í education. This pattern tends to hold true whether the neighborhood is poor or affluent. Given this experience, we should realize that neighborhood classes are only "experimental" in the sense that we are still learning how to conduct them. But as a feature of the community landscape they are here to stay.

Because much remains to be learned, and because this type of learning must be acquired at the grassroots level of the community, clusters are now experimenting with various approaches according to local circumstances. In some cases, central schools have been closed in order to focus on proliferating neighborhood classes. In others, central schools and neighborhood classes both exist, but alternate their meeting times. In still others, the

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numbers of central schools and neighborhood classes have both increased. In every case, the aim is to provide Bahá'í education for the children of the believers while also including more and more children from outside the community. And in every case the institutions and the friends involved must periodically evaluate their effectiveness, introducing adjustments over the course of time as understanding and skills increase.

What is important is that the friends not consider the issue of central schools and neighborhood classes as ideological positions that are opposed to each other, but rather as practical arrangements designed to meet the needs of all residents. Debates on approach are not productive; rather, what is required at this time is wholehearted participation combined with an attitude of learning. The National Spiritual Assembly itself has learned a great deal since the publication of its letter in December of last year, and better appreciates the need to steer away from policy creation in favor of supporting the consultative process at the level of the cluster among Local Assemblies, the Auxiliary Board and the institute which trains the teachers. The Assembly is confident that practices will soon emerge that effectively address all needs.

You are concerned that your children's participation in neighborhood classes will "degrade" or "sacrifice" their basic Bahá'í education. Our collective understanding of curriculum and classroom dynamics has evolved, and experience in other clusters indicates that children participating in neighborhood classes do not experience an inferior Bahá'í education. On the contrary, what we are seeing is that Bahá'í identity in its strongest form is developed when children from Bahá'í families participate with others, helping to present the history and verities of the Faith to their peers. The resulting enthusiasm for teaching often finds itself being expressed outside of the classroom as well.

The Universal House of Justice has stated that the curricula for children's classes should be fully Bahá'í in content. The sequence of 45 lessons in Ruhi meets that standard, and is the product of many years of field experience. It is designed to start simply, attracting non-Bahá'ís who quickly begin to take on more advanced content. Bahá'í teachers can also supplement them with material taken from the Core Curriculum, the "branch course."

As children reach the ages of 12-14 their educational experience needs to be further strengthened through such elements as artistic expression, service, teaching, and other activities that will help them to shoulder the responsibility to transform their communities and the world. For this reason the House of Justice has singled out junior youth as a population requiring specific attention. Special courses for junior youth are now available, conducted by trained "junior youth animators." Junior youth, when so trained, frequently begin to render important services within their clusters, just as do many of the children who attend neighborhood classes. By age 15 they are ready to engage fully in the main sequence of institute courses and associated services, thereby becoming fully fledged participants in the growth of the community.

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Finally, participation in children's classes is not the only element of a Bahá'í child's education. There is certainly a need for children to interact with other believers their own age, as well as with older members of the community. Such opportunities are surely abundant, or can easily be created, in a cluster as large as yours. There are also such venues as seasonal schools, conferences and any number of other ways in which the education of Bahá'í children can be enhanced. Parents have a responsibility to complement the formal training of their children by establishing regular patterns of study and deepening at home. Many are now arising to become teachers of neighborhood classes, benefiting their neighbors' children as well as their own.

We hope that you will consult with your own Local Assembly and cluster agencies to assess the situation in Can one or more classes be established within your community? Have the individuals in your vicinity who are trained in Book 3 been deployed into the field of service? Might there be others who would be willing to take on this sacred task? Are the children of your non-Bahá'í friends more likely to attend nearby classes, rather than going to? All of these questions should receive due consideration, with confidence that united and persistent effort will yield abundant rewards.

We hope that these thoughts have been helpful to you. Be assured of our sincere love and of our prayers that the One True Beloved will shower His confirmations upon you and your precious children.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Kenneth E. Bowers
Secretary-General