

Episode 54: Jawad Khan

[00:00:00] **Rafael Otto:** Hello everyone. This is the Early Link Podcast. I'm Rafael Otto. You can catch us on 99.1 FM in the Portland Metro on Sundays at 4:30pm or tune in at your convenience, wherever you find your podcasts. That includes iTunes, Spotify, Stitcher, and Amazon Music and as always on our website at childinst.org, where you can subscribe to our podcasts and our newsletter and learn more about our work in Oregon.

My guest today is Jawad Khan the chief programming officer at the Muslim Educational Trust and a member of the Trust's board of directors. He has spent 22 years with the Trust as a teacher, college counselor, and administrator, and previously worked in the high-tech industry. He's based in Beaverton, Oregon, and is an advocate for expanding preschool in Washington county,

Jawad, it's great to have you here today.

[00:00:50] **Jawad Khan:** Thank you so much, Rafael. It's a real pleasure to be here and looking forward to the conversation.

[00:00:55] **Rafael Otto:** I am too. And I would love to just start with more about your background. I know that you worked in the high-tech industry. You worked in the startup environment for a while, founded a company, and now you've been in the education world for more than two decades. Tell us about that background and how you came to the trust.

[00:01:12] **Jawad Khan:** Well, you know, I think it's a little bit of a serendipitous journey. I think I look at it that way at least. I didn't intend to work in the nonprofit and educational world when I started out. My parents immigrated here from India in the early seventies. I lived across the United States in multiple cities. Texas, California, Ohio, Colorado, Washington, South Carolina. I think a couple others I'm missing right now.

[00:01:37] **Rafael Otto:** All over!

[00:01:38] **Jawad Khan:** All over, all over. So I got to see a lot of great places. And I came to Oregon in the early nineties and finished high school here and went to college. I was going to, and I did actually, go out and work in the high-tech industry for a bit and then I started my own startup, as you mentioned, and with my friends from college, and we wind up selling that. And I was going to go to business school maybe after that. But I received an email from the Muslim Educational Trust, asking if I would like to teach. And really something like this organization and it's very unique and the way that it addresses holistically, a lot of the challenges that the immigrant refugee population faces in a new world. I would have loved to be part of such an organization or be part of such a school when I was growing up. So I decided to defer business school and go and teach and I've been here ever since. And it's been a real pleasure and a real joy to be part of this, and has also given me that experience about how much difference education can make.

[00:02:43] **Rafael Otto:** Tell me more about the trust. You have preschool classrooms all the way through grade 12. How many students do you serve? Tell me more about what your school looks like.

[00:02:53] **Jawad Khan:** Yeah. So the pre-K to 12th program is one of the programs that the Muslim Educational Trust runs. And so that program, it's the only fully accredited pre-K to 12th Islamic school and the Pacific Northwest. Um, there's some pre-K to eighth programs around. So we have about 200 students, ranging all the way from pre-K to 12th. It's incredibly diverse. Our community service about 48 different ethnicities, yeah, who speak about 78 languages and dialects. So incredibly diverse and it runs the gamut from multiple different communities that we have here in Portland, The Muslim community.

We have the, the community that has been brought here. They came here by choice, received education, now working in the many industries, the high-tech industry, or in medicine, other places. And then we have the population that was, they came here, not by choice, but as refugees. And so it creates this interesting mix and we see this interesting mix at the school.

[00:03:51] **Rafael Otto:** Say more about the role of preschool. Why did the trust decide to focus on Preschool? I think it can be a little bit unusual. I mean, often, if you see a charter school or something like that, they will typically start at kindergarten. Why was Preschool important? And tell me about the experience the kids that you serve have in your preschool environment.

[00:04:12] **Jawad Khan:** I think looking at this even broadly, uh, a lot of the work in preschool started first when we were doing our other work from our other programs. And most of our work revolves around the social determinants of health and addressing education obviously through the Pre-K to 12 program. But also to our speakers bureau, but also addressing food security, housing security, physical neighborhood, and environment, and then civic engagement and belonging to a community. Because when these things are addressed, we've seen in communities that you have more stability within the families, and this stability leads to long term success in communities. And you see that success and stability manifests itself in first-generation college students applying to all over the country, getting degrees and changing the narratives really of, uh, and the course of their families. But we see that really, that base and stability is built around these factors in the social determinants of health. So for the past 29 years, Muslim Educational Trust has been addressing those things.

And one of the things that we saw and the limited capacity that we have through our school with about 200 students, capacity is about two 220, is we can start early and start those seeds of success. When we look at our population, especially as I just mentioned, we have a population of people who are highly educated and came by choice and are working in fields that they want to be a part of that they have found success in.

But then we also have a large group of families who are refugees and don't know the system, don't know how to navigate it, don't know where to go. And they're already behind the eight ball. This is something that you see in many parts of society. Not just ours, which is that when you have this different challenges and not knowing the steps for success and getting out from behind those challenges, that preschool and early childhood education plays a large role in changing narratives. And we've seen this here at the Muslim Educational Trust. You'll see families that came as refugees. And

in fact, it's really interesting, at the school it's so diverse around the table. It's not homogenous, uh, ethnically or racially, or even socioeconomically. You'll see people who came here by choice their parents, and they're working in the high-tech industry, or they're working in medicine. And you'll see other people who came here recently as refugees. And the children are bonding and creating and learning together.

But one of the things that you really see is that the earlier you start, the earlier the students get to see themselves as learners, and successful learners who have a say in the way that their narrative is going to be written. And then you'll see this long term success of these students. You'll see, they'll come and you might have a family that didn't have the opportunity to go to school from where they were from. And maybe they finished eighth grade, maybe they're finished seventh grade, maybe they finished fifth grade, maybe they didn't even get a chance to do that. This new world now is completely new to them and completely different. Students who start young, they become confident and they see themselves as rooted.

And one of the things that we like to really establish with the community that we serve is that we don't want anyone to be an isolationist and live on their own and say, "This is my community." And we don't want assimilation completely either. So we want people to be proud of whoever they are, whether they're Somali American or Syrian American or Iraqi American or Magali American, Sudanese American, Bosnian American, we want them to be proud of that. And then, so you'll see young people starting to find their identity and seeing themselves as successful learners and then you see them grow into kindergarten and first grade. Finding success in reading, finding success in writing, finding success in math, and then they see themselves as that all the way throughout.

When you see them graduating from high school and then applying to some of the best colleges in the country. Some of our students that have graduated here, many of them who came from immigrant and refugee populations, and that they went onto the University of Washington at Harvard, University of Michigan, Cornell, University of Berkeley, Cal Berkeley, and other places. And now they have changed

that narrative of who their family is and then how they see their outlook in life. And it started with that early education.

They didn't start in going without having this educational prep and then going into an environment where they were behind others. This early step that they had allowed to see themselves as someone who is successful, who is capable, and then that confidence manifests itself into their successful outcomes. And I think now when you look at students who went through this program and the success that they've found. This is the type of opportunities that we want to give. And then of course we have limited space to give to our community members. But because the community is growing and is growing in Washington County, is growing in Portland Metro area, is growing in Oregon, that there was going to be a lot more students when we can't serve.

[00:09:42] **Rafael Otto:** Yeah.

[00:09:43] **Jawad Khan:** But we want them to have the same opportunities of growth and to see themselves successful, and see this generational success that solidifies families and creates these great success stories. And we've seen it and we've seen how important it is. And we want that equity and that opportunity to receive that equity, and be part of that and to create equitable outcomes for everybody.

[00:10:07] **Rafael Otto:** Do... or does the trust, or do you and the trust think of yourselves as cultural brokers, as cultural navigators?

[00:10:15] **Jawad Khan:** We really do. And it's always interesting because there is this wealth and diversity of thought, and diversity of experience, and diversity of living. But also comes challenges as well because you have multi-tiered layered views of how the world works from a specific cultural standpoint, so you do have to navigate those things. But one of the things that you really see with the students and the families is that there's a new culture that grows. There's a culture where you have the parents and, and, you know, there's intersectionality amongst the parents as well. So we see now there'll be, um, you know, a mother from one country and a father from another

country, parents from two different cultures now having children and they have their own culture here now.

So you see these different viewpoints based around how they're going to look at the world, and then every one of course is, is going to be a little bit different. The students, even though they might be Muslim, there's no one monolithic view of anything. So we really want and encourage them to celebrate who they are culturally. But at the same time you also understand that they're forming a new culture. They have this loyalty and culture to things that they've learned from their family. But now they're also creating their own unique set of mores and values based on what they've learned and based on what they're learning, and combining things from different worlds.

But when you see it, you really see some really incredible things. And you see this strong cultural identity that they have, but they see themselves as Americans, but they're very proud to also be Sudanese, and they're also very proud to be Algerian, to be proud to be a Pakistani, and so on and so forth. But navigating around those areas and the challenges that are in there as well is challenging at times, but very rewarding. And seeing long-term success of these families, we're proud of who they are, proud of the culture that they've established and how rooted they become in society, and become value added to everybody here in the Portland Metro area and beyond. We see people now who are doctors, they're lawyers, they're teachers, they're social workers, they're entrepreneurs. But they're proud to be whoever they are and it's great to see that.

[00:12:33] **Rafael Otto**: There's a certain benefit to being able to, or a strength to be able to run a school that has a cultural focus. And I'm just curious if you see... I mean, I'm assuming you can't serve all the kids that might want to be attending your school. But say more about why the culturally specific approach is effective, and maybe what some of the challenges that you see for students who aren't in a culturally specific setting.

[00:13:01] **Jawad Khan**: Right. The beauty of really what we see is how they get to learn from each other. And it's almost as if you are in a mini UN school, and you get

through your experiences by learning together, becoming friends with other people, eating together. About the various cultures around you and how different people look at different things.

And it's really interesting because, you know, you'll have this larger umbrella of Muslim and students who are Muslims. Although we have a few students who are, are not Muslim, too. But learning about specific ways in that they'll celebrate holidays, the foods that they make and then the foods that they share; the cultural clothing that they have and that they learn about. And they experience the differences of other people, and then that those differences are not as important as the commonalities. Because you'll sit in a classroom and you'll have somebody from everywhere. But you see how togetherness, that they are in the school and a lot of the shared values that they have and we want to celebrate that, definitely.

And then also you create a culture of success. We want all the students, regardless of, and we know longitudinal studies have shown that educational attainment by parents is often a very good predictor of educational attainment of children. But here we are, working with a lot of students where perhaps the parents have not had that opportunity, have not been lucky enough to get that education. So we are the ones now establishing that pattern for these students. So, we get to do that and we get to work, as you mentioned, from molding that. And so creating a culture of not only of success, where the students see themselves as being successful, from our high school program and, as you mentioned, we can serve everyone there. So there's a waiting list, but every student now, after this year, there's going to be 53 students have graduated from the high school. Every single one of those students has gone on to a four year university or college. A hundred percent rate so far.

[00:15:05] **Rafael Otto**: That's great! Congratulations on that. That's an accomplishment, that's amazing.

[00:15:08] **Jawad Khan**: Definitely. We've been really blessed to be partnered with community members and many different people who have made this possible. The staff here and the leadership that's been really incredible to provide this space for students to express where they are culturally, express who they are religiously,

express who they are in their very multi interests that they have. But also foster this culture of success.

Some of the challenges sometimes is that, when you look at Islam itself, we got a 1.8 billion Muslims across the world. The way that faith is looked at, it's not monolithic in any way. I mean, it's difficult, I think, to be monolithic in anything, views of anything. Within our own families, we can remember some family vacation that we had, 15 years ago, and you're saying this happened here. But there's like, "No, I know that it happened this way," your sister says, "No, it happened this way." So sometimes you have, you know, different ways. And we have, people who have one view maybe on this side of the spectrum, and another view about how to do things and look at things from this other side of the spectrum. But the majority of the people are right in the middle, and very moderate in the way that they approach things.

But sometimes that's a challenge when you have all the different ethnicities and you have all the different viewpoints, and some of the instruction, and some of the, that outlook on things so... that could be a challenge sometimes. But also, you try to heal a lot of the differences in the world that's happened.

And we've had, when we look at the world and the many of the regions where like Muslims come from, you have a lot of internal conflict that have happened that has happened because of political reasons. And you'll have one group that's been pitted against another. And sometimes those feelings last. Even when you're in a new world where nobody knows about those things but you still know about those things.

And so you have to understand those things. Be cognizant of them. But also have a plan to address them and to bring people together. And we've been able to be really successful in that front for the most part, I think. Especially, I think, in the students.

[00:17:09] **Rafael Otto:** Yeah. And it's that idea around creating connectedness. That's something that you mentioned to me, that creates such powerful bonds between people. And I know we were talking about the environment that oftentimes we're encountering. There's an anti-immigrant sentiment or an anti-Muslim sentiment and

I know that can create challenges for you. Just talk a little bit about that and how you address that, how you work with your students.

[00:17:33] **Jawad Khan:** We want really to have the students look at themselves and see themselves in that they can do anything that they want, and that they will be judged by the content of their character, and who they are when we know in the reality there's a lot of education that has to be done. This was one of the founding principles of this organization- it was founded in 1993 by the three co-founders- is to dispel myths and stereotypes. And in the current environment in which they live and- even though it's not fair that they should not have the burden to educate others to not be biased and to not be prejudiced- this is what every group has had to take on. They're no different in that case and whether it's fair or not, it's the reality.

We've seen research out there, Pew Research, had researched 10 years after 9-11. And then, you know, the next research is going to come out, study that's going to come out and show that, you know, 43% of Americans in 2011 said that they either had a somewhat unfavorable or very unfavorable view of Muslims. And that's challenging and that's troubling because most people don't admit to being prejudiced so that 43% might actually be higher. And if you're looking at half of people, this is everyone around you. This is your physician, this is your caretaker, this is your employer or your neighbor, your teacher, your law enforcement. This is the people whom maybe you've elected into office. So knowing that and understanding that reality, that this is a beautiful faith and so many different beautiful ethnicities that make up our community, that we want this center to be completely open. And we have this sign out front that says we're always open and to all visitors who want to come in and visit us and see our programs. Whether it's our Halal food pantry program that sent out 12,000 food boxes, since the pandemic began...

[00:19:28] **Rafael Otto:** Wow

[00:19:29] **Jawad Khan:** Our rental assistance program that's partnered with county and city to stand out about \$1.7 million in rental assistance to vulnerable family members. So through our counseling program for marriage counseling, domestic violence counseling, intervention programs, all the different programs that we have,

we want people to come in and see. That the challenges that we face or the challenges that the broader community faces, but this is a loving and beautiful community.

A very generous people who are part of the fabric of the society, running restaurants, part of the service industry, doctors, lawyers, nurses, healthcare, and everything in between.

[00:20:07] **Rafael Otto:** Yeah.

[00:20:07] **Jawad Khan:** And we want our students to be a reflection of that and we want them always to be educated about the topics. And a lot of them, most of them, almost all of them, I'll say all of them, articulate enough where they can express themselves confidently and proudly and say, "Hey, you know what? This is who we are. We believe in this." But we are adding to the society and the people who still harbor prejudice and bigotry and racism. And we've seen that.

We saw that at the Max attacks in 2017. A lot of people didn't expect that to happen in a place like Portland, a liberal city, open city, progressive city. But while those things are true, it doesn't exclude anybody from this type of hatred, individual hatred that people harbor. We saw the response to that too. We set up a fundraiser. That original target was about \$25,000 to \$50,000. And we saw people donate to the two men who had lost their lives. And the other one who was injured grew up to more than \$650,000~ \$680,000. This was Muslims donating to this cause to show the people their appreciation for the ones that had stood up for us.

So we have a lot of different issues. And we have the students and others who are in leadership positions be cognizant of these areas, and always be on the ready to articulate who we are, what we believe in, please come and visit our center. Please come and visit our houses of prayer and see that we are a diverse, vibrant community who are adding to our society.

[00:21:35] **Rafael Otto:** Part of what you're working on... I appreciate that, Jawad... and I know that part of what you're working on is expanding preschool. As an advocate,

you're expanding preschool in Washington County. There's a Preschool for All effort that's underway. Say more about that effort. How's it going? What are you hoping to accomplish? What would you like to see actually unfold in Washington County?

[00:21:57] **Jawad Khan:** Well, currently we're working through plans of what it would look like and how long it would take to roll out. And we're looking at currently right now, a program that would address either all three and four year olds, or perhaps, maybe just four year olds. But what we'll do though, is take a priority group that hasn't had the opportunity traditionally, to have an experience that sets them up for educational success, that other groups that have had this opportunity and set them on equal footing. If we're talking about equity and if we're talking about creating just and fair societies, this is where we need to start with. So we're in the planning process of what this would look like, how would it be rolled out, how long it would take to do that.

And we're looking at multiple different funding strategies for this, and we're also looking at how the mechanisms that would work. Because part of this would also include hiring staff that are going to be the ones who are going to work in direct line with these students. So it's a very thorough process and very engaged process. And there's a lot of decision makers from a lot of different areas who've been part of this task force that I've been so proud to be part of. From educators to CBO community-based organization leaders, executive directors, elected officials, mayors... working on and saying, "Hey, you know what? This is something that we believe in. This is something that we need. How is it going to look like if we got to work through that?" And that's part of their little program meeting minutes and what that looks like.

But it's going to be when it's fully finished, it's going to be, I think something that the public and everyone is going to be very proud to look at and say, "Hey, this is something that we can get behind. This is something that we can support," and whatever that support is going to be. From people who have personally seen the effect and power that early childhood education can have on the long term success of families, especially in our case, families who came here with nothing.

[00:23:57] **Rafael Otto:** Right. And I know there are many people, you talked about the supporters who are involved in this project, and I know there are many supporters. I'm curious about some of the challenges that you're running up against. And I know you've done some work talking with commissioners and talking with people to get the message across.

So what are some of the challenges and what are... how do you get the message across? How do you get people to understand the importance of this for children and families and for our communities?

[00:24:23] **Jawad Khan:** Well, I think, you know, whenever you have initiatives such as this, the challenge always runs into you have a philosophical idea that most people can get behind. A lot of people, I would say the majority of people, can get behind. Yes, we want Preschool for All. I think the challenge lies in always well, who's going to pay for it and is that cost effective? What we've been trying to get across, in multi-tiered ways, is to say this is going to pay for itself, because it's going to enhance the communities in which we live in.

We have seen the data that shows early childhood education effectively changing the lives, especially of families who might be high priority families who don't have the opportunities to engage and be part of such programs where other families do. And then that this program is going to be that first stepping stone to educational success, which we know then brings longitudinal long-term success and stability in families. Investing in this will invest in a stronger culture of student success, higher educational attainment; more students who see themselves as successful students who want to further education and then who are going to go get the type of skills that are going to come back and bring into our community. That's going to make it successful.

And so sometimes you have to... maybe even if, and it's not everybody, but as the saying goes, sometimes a society grows great when we plant trees that we know that we're not specifically going to get to sit under the shade of. But in this case, I think we will. It'll be soon enough. This is sometimes the things we have to sacrifice. So we can always say we want justice, we want fairness, we want equity, but at the

end of the day, it's going to have to be funded in some way. And that's something that's being ironed out right now.

But there's some of the things that we run into, because this eventually has to go to the ballot and you accept that it's going to be funded this way. But this is the importance that we want to get out to everybody. And everyone who's in this committee has seen the educational impact, and we want to bring this educational impact and these opportunities to families who don't get to take part in this. We think that's fair. And we want to live in a place, you know, Washington County, that offers that type of fairness and equity of opportunity

[00:26:38] **Rafael Otto:** And creates those kinds of opportunities for families, right? It's the opportunity. It is about equity and opportunity. And in terms of an investment, it's an investment in our communities. It's an investment in the state at a very high level, but in a way that begins with the local communities in Washington County. I know there are other examples of Preschool for All. We have a version of that in Multnomah County, it might not look the same as it does in Washington County, but it really is an investment in the future of our children and our families and the state.

[00:27:09] **Jawad Khan:** Absolutely. And you know when we mentioned that, uh, we can't serve everybody because we have limited space and long waiting lists now. But we've seen also a growth of refugee families and immigrant families in Washington County. And those families tend to have larger families and more children. And so these children usually don't get the opportunities for this early childhood education. These children are a fabric of this society now.

And then how is it that we are going to ensure the success, the integration by design into a way where they see themselves as successful and rooted in this society, and they see themselves as whatever they are, hyphenated Americans, they see themselves as successful members of this society.

We can start that. We can give that opportunity when we have Preschool for all. This starts before you even form an identity of who you are as a student. You're young enough where everything is new, and then you can get that right at the beginning,

rather than you not learning, not knowing how to speak English, for example. And then going into a school where your classmates do know how speak English. And then you are behind, you know, a little bit, and then that snowballs. I'm always behind. I don't see myself as successful. Here's the opportunity to nip that right in the bud, right at the beginning, and invest in this. That's going to pay off multiple-fold in multiple layers.

[00:28:34] **Rafael Otto:** Well, I like the phrase that you used just a moment ago: Integration by design or opportunity by design. Let's be intentional about the opportunities that we want to create for our kids.

[00:28:44] **Jawad Khan:** Yeah. Uh, you know, this is the work that we've been able to do at the Muslim Educational Trust. And that phrase I have to, uh, to credit to our, one of our co-founders uh, Wadji Said, who was mentored by the late founding dean of the college of, urban studies at Portland State, Dean Toulan. Nohad Toulan. He always talked about when we have this group of people, how is it that we are intentionally going to give them the services and get them integrated into a society where they see themselves rooted in it? And if they see themselves rooted in it, they are going to contribute to it because they're going to take ownership of it.

Whereas those services aren't intentionally designed, intentionally allocated, intentionally serviced up. Well, you have people who are going to be marginalized and marginalized people are often going to face a lot of the struggles that marginalized communities throughout the United States and other places face. And those obviously are not going to lead to positive outcomes, and those outcomes are going to have to be dealt with in a different way. But here we have an opportunity before we get to those things to intentionally get the services to the people who need them and set up that future success, and have a designed out when we have the opportunity to do this, rather than having to deal with it in other ways, 10, 15 years down the road, which, we of course will have to pay for as well. So we can pay for it now in the one that sets up success or pay for it later. And when we have to address the challenges that were caused by families that did not get the stability that they needed, one of the ways to create that stability, as we've seen, is early childhood education.

[00:30:31] **Rafael Otto:** Well, Jawad, I'm going to end it there. Thank you so much for your time. I appreciate your perspective and it's great to have you on the podcast today, thank you.

[00:30:39] **Jawad Khan:** Thank you so much for having me and thank you for hosting, and the opportunity to share some of experiences here at the Muslim Educational Trust and what we've seen with Early Childhood Education. Thank you so much.

[00:30:50] **Rafael Otto:** Yeah, and wish you the best of luck with your efforts and I would love to come out and visit the Trust one of these days.

[00:30:55] **Jawad Khan:** We're always open. You're always welcome.

[00:30:57] **Rafael Otto:** Thanks so much.

[00:30:58] **Jawad Khan:** Thank you so much. Bye bye.