

NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY

OF THE

BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES

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November 17, 2004

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

We received, with appreciation, your letter dated October 7, 2004, requesting clarification about the relationship between neighborhood and central children's class programs.

These terms are somewhat loosely defined, so to clarify, let us say at the outset that we believe the distinctions between neighborhood children's classes and centralized children's class programs to be largely ones of size and geographic area served. We have heard some distinguish between neighborhood children's classes and larger intercommunity classes, saying that the former arise as a product of individual initiative, and have more of an outward looking orientation than the latter. It is our observation, however, that such a distinction is not merited. Children's classes in this country of all sizes are still largely reliant on individuals arising to serve the children, and equip themselves for the task. As Local Spiritual Assemblies provide greater institutional support, and as the Institute process takes hold, the development of human resources to sustain these classes will become more systematic.

If neighborhood children's classes are understood as small classes, serving a very local population, then the American Bahá'í community has a long history of this sort of activity. The earliest stages in the development of children's classes have typically involved individuals arising to teach children, often parents teaching their own children regularly in their homes. It has not been uncommon for friends and neighbors, as well as non-Bahá'í classmates from school, to be included in these classes. Moreover, whenever we have asked about the origins of the larger, well established intercommunity children's classes that now exist in several communities across the country, we have learned that these 'community schools' usually originated as small 'neighborhood classes', and grew over the years gradually and organically, in response to the needs of the communities they served.

From our perspective, though the vocabulary is relatively new, neighborhood children's classes have long been an important part of the development of children's spiritual education in the American Bahá'í community. For this reason, we have come to view the small, simple, neighborhood children's classes in this country as 'seeds' of the larger intercommunity classes. We do not see these efforts as being in conflict or competition, but rather as different forms of the same activity. The guidance that we have received to multiply children's classes may be understood, within this context, as sowing larger numbers of these seeds. While we do not expect every seed to germinate, or every neighborhood class to grow into a large, complex intercommunity children's class, we do encourage the community to value and nurture all of these efforts as important aspects of a unified system still in the earliest stages of development.

The Universal House of Justice has distinguished between two basic types of education initiatives for children and junior youth, and has encouraged us to open both increasingly to the non-Bahá'í public. The first, Bahá'í education for children and junior youth, is intended to address the

November 17, 2004

Page 2

complete spiritual education of Bahá'ís, and would include study of the Central Figures of the Faith, Bahá'í Teachings, history, administration, and spiritual principles. Bahá'í inspired education would fall into the category of social and economic development, and may focus on character education, literacy, peace, race unity and the like. The Universal House of Justice has clarified that, in its letter of January 9, 2001, it is referring to Bahá'í children's classes as being increasingly opened to the public, saying that many non Bahá'í parents are happy to have their children participate in a full program of Bahá'í education for children. The first priority of the American Bahá'í community must be to provide Bahá'í education for children and junior youth, open to all.

With regard to the multiplication of children's classes during the Five Year Plan in the American Bahá'í community, and how best to accomplish this objective, we must be mindful of the purpose of Bahá'í education for children and junior youth. It is useful to note that, when counting children's classes, an intercommunity school of 15 classes is equal in number to 15 individual neighborhood classes. Accomplishing the goal of multiplying the number of children's classes does not require breaking up large intercommunity classes, and neither teachers nor parents should feel pressured to support neighborhood classes over intercommunity classes in order to meet the goals of the Plan. Rather, the entire community must carefully consider how best to meet the needs of the children, and how best to meet the needs of increasing numbers of children, both Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í. In some clusters, for example, a decision to split a large intercommunity children's class program may provide a way to establish the beginnings of a system of schools within the cluster, and thereby reach larger numbers of children. In other clusters where large intercommunity classes exist, newly trained teachers may arise to establish small neighborhood classes in addition to the intercommunity classes in order to serve new students that are more easily attracted to classes nearby with an intimate, small group of friends.

The Regional Training Institutes, which have been recently directed to take on the role of providing Core Curriculum training for teachers of children's classes, will make this multiplication of children's classes possible. As these Training Institutes become increasingly successful in raising up growing numbers of trained teachers, we are confident that the increase in available human resources will support and strengthen our capacity to sustain and multiply both the small neighborhood classes and the larger intercommunity schools. As such efforts grow and multiply across the country, we must recognize them all as elements of a single unified system of Bahá'í education for children.

You have asked whether it is appropriate for larger, central schools, like the ... Bahá'í School, to serve as a resource for outlying neighborhood children's classes. This sort of collaboration has always been encouraged, and the friends should feel free to avail themselves of the experience and tools of colleagues serving in the field. This is not to suggest, however, that there should be any sense of hierarchy, or status, or that the friends should feel obliged to follow in the footsteps of larger, intercommunity schools. There is much to be learned about successful implementation of spiritual education for children and junior youth, and we must watch for that learning to come just as readily from the small neighborhood classes as from the larger intercommunity classes.

November 17, 2004

Page 3

The selection of a national curriculum is another important step in facilitating more systematic development of Bahá'í education for children, and the decision of the National Spiritual Assembly to establish the Core Curriculum as the national curriculum applies equally to small neighborhood classes and larger intercommunity classes.

Regarding your question as to the role of Local Spiritual Assemblies in the sponsorship and oversight of children's classes, one of the vital responsibilities of Local Spiritual Assemblies is to establish and support schools and classes that provide Bahá'í education for the children within their jurisdiction. It is very important for Local Spiritual Assemblies to be familiar with the efforts to educate children within their jurisdictions, whether they are small neighborhood classes or large intercommunity schools. The support, encouragement, oversight and sponsorship of Local Spiritual Assemblies for children's classes of all sizes, including neighborhood classes, will be vital to the systematic development of Bahá'í education for children, and will be among the signs of the maturation of these divine institutions. Assemblies, however, will have to use wisdom and care so as not to over administer, and thereby discourage, the friends in their efforts to initiate new neighborhood classes. The quality of Assembly sponsorship should be such that it lends impetus and encouragement to the initiative of individuals arising to serve, and would therefore be welcomed by them.

While Bahá'í education for children, open to all, is a priority for development, it is also important to recognize the value of Bahá'í inspired education initiatives. We have seen wonderful examples of excellent initiatives of this sort, such as the Children's Theatre Company, in New York City, or the Children's Enrichment Program in Los Angeles, not to mention the numerous summer virtues camps that are springing up across the country. In many cases, these initiatives have served as 'feeders' into the Bahá'í children's classes.

We are grateful to you for bringing these important questions to the attention of the National Spiritual Assembly, and for your efforts to support the training of teachers and the further development of children's classes. It is important for us all to remember the exhortations of Abdu'l Bahá as we venture forward in this important arena of service, when He said, "Among the greatest of all services that can possibly be rendered by man to Almighty God is the education and training of children...It is, however, very difficult to undertake this service, even harder to succeed in it. I hope thou wilt acquit thyself well in this most important of tasks, and successfully carry the day...." As the community moves forward in this work, we must be ever mindful of the requirements of a learning attitude, so that we may progress in a spirit of loving unity, with patience and humility as we take on such mighty endeavors.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Juana C. Conrad
Deputy Secretary-General