

# New East-West Center Program Fosters Understanding Between American and Indonesian Muslim Educators





“We discovered the similarities in our lives and how we all want to have a positive impact on the lives of our students,” noted Wendy Lockard in her weblog posting for the Partnership for Schools (P4S) Leading Change program. A teacher at St. Jerome School in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, Lockard was one of several dozen American teachers who welcomed Muslim Indonesian educators into their classroom and homes as part of their participation in the 2008 P4S program, a new East-West Center AsiaPacificEd initiative designed to foster cross-cultural learning and mutual understanding at the grassroots level between Indonesian Muslims and Americans.

During October, 45 educators from 31 private *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) throughout Indonesia, the country with the world’s largest Muslim population, visited schools and lived with host families across the U.S. Twenty American schools in 12 states participated in the program in places as varied as Berkeley (CA), Bloomfield (CT), Fayetteville (NC), Hilo (HI), and Indianapolis (IN). The participants, including Muslim clerics, gathered first in Indonesia for orientation meetings, then spent a week attending a “best practices” workshop with the group of U.S. host teachers at the East-West Center in Honolulu before traveling to their host schools in small teams. They later reconvened at the Center to compare notes, plan follow-up projects, and visit several Hawai’i schools.

Rusydi Sulaiman, the curriculum advisor at Al-Islam Kemuja, commented how his P4S participation made him “... more conscious of the value of reaching across cultural and other divides, such as religion.” He added, “My American host school’s mission is to support each student’s individual development, enabling the student to be an effective contributor in a democratic society within an interdependent world. I hope to apply these ideals in my *pesantren*.”

Enhancing American awareness and understanding of Indonesia’s Islamic culture, and improving Indonesian perceptions of the United States by engaging in

*Top Left: Namji Steinemann, director of EWC’s AsiaPacificEd Program, with students at P4S partner school Pesantren Darul Ulum, Jombang. Bottom Left: Students gather during a follow-up visit of P4S partner school Pesantren Asshiddiqiyah, West Jakarta. Top Right: P4S participants at the East-West Center learning how to use Webquests in the classroom. Bottom Right: Steinemann addressing students and faculty at Pesantren Madinatunmajah, Tangerang during a P4S follow-up visit.*



meaningful interactions, was a primary goal of the 2008 P4S program. Through the program, Indonesian and U.S. educators built professional, institutional, and personal relationships as they worked together to develop practical solutions to the shared challenges of educating youth for responsible citizenship in today’s globalized world.

For both the Americans and Indonesians, these up-close interactions helped to personalize the images of “the other” and did much to dispel prevailing stereotypes on both sides. “The interactions with our Indonesian visitors showed our students and teachers that many perceptions about Muslims since 9/11 were unfounded,” explained Grace Chao, a teacher from Connections Public Charter School in Hilo, Hawai’i. “This program helped erase prejudice and closed-mindedness that stemmed from a lack of knowledge that we had about each other.” Lockard added, “Their experiences in our school, our homes, and our community generated an understanding and appreciation ... We now share a friendship that transcends distance and differences.”

Ahmad Solahoudin, a teacher from Pesantren Madinatunajah in Banten Province reflected on his P4S program experience: “I believe we have started something good toward building a better relationship between Americans and Indonesians. The connection that we have made is like a ‘bridge’ to fostering mutual understanding and cooperation among communities in the U.S. and Indonesia.”

The program was organized with assistance from Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University (UIN) and the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta, Indonesia. Funding for the program was provided by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, U.S. Department of State.

