

Rustam School: Celebrating Academic and Community Impact

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I first entered Rustam School on a spring morning, twenty years ago. It was almost 5 years after my migration from Iran and I was beginning to make London my new home, uncertain but hopeful about the future. The headteacher and her deputy interviewed me with kindness and care. Although there was no formal role available, I was offered the opportunity to volunteer in a one-to-one support role, helping students with their learning. It was a small beginning, but it meant everything to me - it gave me a place to belong, surrounded by the language I love, and a renewed sense of identity during a time of transition and

uncertainty.

Since that day, I have spent every Saturday at Rustam School. For two decades, it has been my second home. What makes Rustam so special is not only the education it provides, but the spirit of family it nurtures. Within its walls, I found a place where I could grow, where I could redefine myself in a new society. It gave me a voice, a sense of purpose, and the confidence to become a contributing and compassionate member of the wider community.

A former student, now at university, writes:

In the midst of a difficult family crisis, when everything felt uncertain, it was the Persian school that gave me stability. It became more than just a place to learn—it became a sanctuary. Being part of that community gave me the strength to face my fears and refocus on my education. Without the comfort and encouragement of the friends and teachers I found there, I wouldn't be where I am today.'

Persian, the official language of Iran, is spoken by over many people around the world, including communities in Afghanistan and Tajikistan. It is one of the world's oldest literary languages, with a rich cultural and poetic heritage that spans centuries.

Rustam school has been serving the Iranian community for more than four decades. It was established in 1981 by Iranian educators to support and create a sense of belonging for the children of families who left their homeland. This school has expanded from a modest language school to a highly respected and well-known supplementary school with over 300 students and 60 staff members. The school has continued to grow and reinforce its mission and educational goals over the years.

The school premises are typically rented from a mainstream school, which incurs significant costs. Due to frequent changes in the management of the host school, the school has had to move to new locations.

Although the school officially operates for only four hours on Saturdays, it functions as a well-structured and deeply committed organisation. The dedicated team behind it pours countless

unseen hours into their work - crafting tailored teaching materials to meet each child's unique needs, engaging in professional courses to deepen their understanding of innovative teaching methods, and using art and drama activities that inspire creativity and expression. They also prepare hybrid classes, which combine in-person and online learning formats, to accommodate students who cannot always attend physically, so that every student remains engaged and included, regardless of circumstance.

Parental involvement is pivotal to our success; parents often volunteer in roles such as website management, online marketing, and teaching assistance. Through activities like Persian buffets featuring delicious dishes such as *ghormeh sabzi*, saffron rice, and fresh *barbari* bread, clubs, and assemblies where popular songs like '*Ey Irani*' are performed, the school fosters a strong sense of community, giving students and families a shared space for cultural engagement.

Our teaching resources are specifically created to meet the needs of bilingual learners, recognising that commercial teaching materials often fall short in addressing their unique linguistic and cultural experiences. Born out of necessity to support the learning of our own community, Rustam Publications has developed a comprehensive set of books from Year 1 through to A Levels. These have become valuable tools for other Persian schools across the UK, e.g. in Manchester and Birmingham, and in countries such as Sweden and Canada.

Online platforms complement these resources by allowing teachers to share educational materials that are tailored young learners including learners with mixed-language backgrounds or limited exposure to Persian at home. Most teachers are native Persian speakers with teaching backgrounds, including those who hold Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) and teach in UK mainstream schools. We run regular teacher training sessions ourselves to make sure that teaching approaches are up to date and based on the needs of students. For example, a recent session focused on using storytelling and visual aids to support language acquisition for students with minimal exposure to Persian at home, equipping us with teaching strategies. Rustam School puts an emphasis on lesson planning, classroom management, and the use of teaching aids which engage bilingual students effectively.

We boast our own library, housing over 1,000 books to cater to a wide range of learners and their families. The collection includes everything from children's storybooks and poetry to precious legacy and contemporary literature for adult readers. The library organises various reading events, such as competitions and storytelling sessions, and plays a vital role in enhancing students' language skills, encouraging them to apply their knowledge to read and comprehend unfamiliar texts.

In addition, Rustam School serves as an approved examination centre, offering GCSE and GCE Persian exams for many students each year. This benefits other Persian schools in the UK and abroad, as students can sit their exams in a specialised Persian centre.

One notable initiative is the '*Open Horizon*' event, held annually to introduce students to various

university subjects and career opportunities. Students interact with successful Persian academics and professionals, gaining valuable insights and inspiration. Rustam School also celebrates its students' accomplishments with a graduation ceremony, recognising their hard work and success, and demonstrating how effort can open doors to future opportunities.

At Rustam School, many students who struggle with their study at their English school gain confidence through their success in Persian. This strengthens their 'can-do' attitude, and helps them perform better in other subjects. Achieving a high grade in Persian also secure access to higher education, transforming their academic and personal journeys.

Sara, an A-level student, says:

I never thought I could achieve a good grade in any subject, but I did it in Persian. Now I've learned how to study and practice to achieve better grades.'

Another key benefit of attending Rustam School is the strengthening of familial bonds. This is crucial for children's identity development (Nicholls, 2005) and provides cognitive benefits, such as enhanced multitasking and problem-solving skills (Adesope et al., 2010).

Ali, a Year 4 student, says:

'My paternal grandmother was a teacher. She's always curious to know what I've learned at Persian school, and I love explaining it to her. Sometimes, she even helps me.'

At Rustam we celebrate Iranian culture through traditions and events - Nowruz (Persian New Year), Yalda Night, or cultural poetry and music gatherings, where students wear traditional clothing, recite classic Persian literature, and perform music or dances rooted in regional heritage. These practices not only educate students about Iranian customs but also help construct a shared cultural memory that may differ from the lived experiences of Iran today. In doing so, Persian schools create a symbolic version of Iran that represents pride, continuity, and cultural identity for diaspora communities.

Supplementary schools play an essential role in preserving the rich linguistic and cultural legacy of different communities while equipping students with the skills to thrive in a multicultural society. However, these schools face ongoing struggles such as suitable premises, lack of government support, and limited academic resources. Further research into effective teaching strategies and student engagement is necessary to support the challenges faced by the younger generation of learners.

Creating a healthy, caring, and inclusive society where future generations can flourish is an aim Rustam school strive for. To achieve this, it is essential that supplementary schools, receive the recognition and support they deserve from mainstream education systems, teachers, educators, and policymakers.