

Proposed NYC public school causes stir

NEW YORK (AP) - This city has dozens of small public schools that focus on themes — sports careers, the arts and social justice. Few generate controversy.

Then, someone decided to start a Middle Eastern-themed school.

"Labels of 'Jihadi,' 'public madrassa,' and 'segregationist' by some detractors have been tossed at the plan. Conservative websites have ranted against the idea, as have some members of the public. Even concerns about finding space for the school have been coupled with questions about security.

All this before the school has enrolled a single student.

"It's hard not to believe that this is in some way a political statement," said one opponent, 72-year-old Lorna Salzman. "I think it can very easily deteriorate into something that people could see as confrontational."

Debbie Almontaser expected the reaction. The New York City teacher, a Muslim of Yemeni background, will lead the Khalil Gibran International Academy, which is expected to open in the fall. She has done extensive interfaith and cultural work to fight stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims since Sept. 11.

If anything, she says, the

school is needed more than ever.

"It is a school that is going to be working quite hard in building bridges of understanding, tolerance and acceptance, valuing diversity and truly just developing students into global citizens," she said.

The school, which is named after the famed Lebanese-American Christian poet who promoted peace, would be one of a few nationwide that incorporate the Arabic language and Islamic culture, Almontaser and city Department of Education officials say the curriculum will be in line with basics required from public schools while integrating elements of its theme.

For instance, the role of Arabs in developing algebra would be explored in math. In history, students may study Egypt's extraordinary past. And Arabic will be offered as a second language. The goal is to teach half of the classes in Arabic eventually.

Plans are to open this September with a sixth grade and gradually expand into a middle school and high school.

About half the students are expected to be of Arab heritage, though the school

will have open admission.

New York already has schools specializing in Asian culture and Chinese language, and is opening one that centers on Latin American culture. When the education department revealed plans for the Middle Eastern school earlier this year, the reaction was fierce on right-wing websites.

Daniel Pipes, a conservative commentator who frequently rails against militant Islam, wrote on his blog: "In principle it is a great idea — the United States needs more Arabic-speakers. In practice, however, Arabic instruction is heavy with Islamist and

Arabist overtones and demands."

Critics question whether the school can separate religion from Arab culture and language in its teaching.

"Being that we are a public school, we certainly are not going to be teaching religion," said Almontaser, 39. "Islam does not have a culture. Islam is a religion."

She said the school won't shy away from sensitive topics, such as colonialism and the Israeli-Palestinian crisis.

"Teachers are going to be expected to provide students with multiple perspectives on whatever the issue is," Almontaser said. "Students

will, through the critical-thinking skills that they will develop, make informed decisions on the perspective that they want to believe."

Almontaser said she has heard interest from parents of all backgrounds, and stresses that a multi-ethnic, multi-religious group of people played a role in the devising the school. She expects to fill 81 slots this year easily — if the academy finds a place to teach the students.

The education department has proposed that the school share the Public School 282 building in Brooklyn's Park Slope neighborhood for the first three years.

Parents of students at PS 282, an elementary school, say squeezing another school inside the building would hurt resources available to their children.

Some have noted that the school has generated ideological controversy, and have questioned if that could mean a security risk. And some say they don't want older students sharing a building with their young children.

Almontaser said she hopes the space issue will be resolved to everyone's satisfaction. And she has a suggestion for those who persist in questioning her school's existence: "Come visit us."

Your Horoscope Says... April 19-25

ARIES

Stay on course with your current decisions and dreams. You may doubt your progress this week but you really are moving toward a better tomorrow with your determined attitude. Keep your emotions under control this week for sure.

Soul Affirmation: I enlarge my happiness by forgetting about myself this week.

Lucky Numbers: 23, 28, 31

TAURUS

You did the right thing if you went on that much needed break. You needed the freshness of mind that a new environment always brings. If you meditated you learned that the calamity in your life will settle down very soon. Handle what you are able to handle and leave the rest in God's hands.

Soul Affirmation: Facing down challenges makes me feel good about myself.

Lucky Numbers: 10, 50, 52

GEMINI

A super productive week is in store for you, so get charged up! You'll be positively bristling with energy and the ability to "fix" stuff. Channel this energy into projects of your own making, like organizing your financial situation or beginning a memoir of the experience or really anything challenging along those lines.

Soul Affirmation: Cheerfully handling what comes at me is the test of who I am.

Lucky Numbers: 4, 14, 40

CANCER

This trend toward general busyness will continue if you want it. You could also change direction easily and begin working a little less and enjoying the evenings a little more. If you stay organized, you'll certainly have time for both. On a romantic note, a partner from your past may reappear and want to stay.

Soul Affirmation: I face each day with a smile, and the day smiles back at me.

Lucky Numbers: 16, 28, 43

LEO

Try to see people as they are, not how you wish they were, and you'll know exactly what to do. Again, your ability to analyze quickly and sum up situations will be in great demand in both your private and professional life. You go! Bless the past and move on.

If the home folk need attention be sure to give it.

Soul Affirmation: Emptiness inside creates the space that I can fill with love.

Lucky Numbers: 5, 12, 27

VIRGO

Change is the word this week. You'll be surprised by an unexpected gift, the possibility of an unexpected trip or a voice from out of the blue. You'll rise to every occasion because you are prepared for every eventuality. Your life is taking on a very enjoyable hue, isn't it? Make peace with your inner child.

Soul Affirmation: I go along to get along.

Lucky Numbers: 23, 34, 41

LIBRA

There will be kindred spirits all around you this week, but you are likely to clash with the most important one of them. This could be your lover or your boss. The clash promises to be over quickly but it will yield important insights into how you operate. This is a great week for second chances. Look around for some.

Soul Affirmation: I let my friendships guide my way.

Lucky Numbers: 7, 49, 52

SCORPIO

It's good to feel needed and wanted and admired. Practice some objectivity so that you don't wind up spending all your good feelings in a place where an emotional struggle may have once taken place. Appreciate yourself for your abundant generosity. Spend your time in new situations where there is more emotional clarity.

Soul Affirmation: I open myself up to the vibrations of love.

Lucky Numbers: 14, 22, 31

SAGITTARIUS

You're going to be surprised at what your mere presence can attract. Keep

in the public eye. Your demeanor will give confidence to someone who wants to enlist you in an important project. Be prepared. Cultivate a sense of acceptance. Think deeply about financial gains. Your own sense of inner splendor is the key to making yourself some money to be even more splendid.

Soul Affirmation: I open up to the love that is all around me.

Lucky Numbers: 15, 49, 54

CAPRICORN

Feel good about yourself because of your ability to work hard. Results are important to you this week, and you may not see how your work is getting you to where you want to go. Look deeply into what you are doing, and find joy in doing it for its own sake. No need to be impatient. Your brilliant imagination is going to kick in, and you may suddenly visualize a way to streamline your process.

Soul Affirmation: I listen to the sweet music of the life all around me.

Lucky Numbers: 26, 31, 42

AQUARIUS

Sensitive ones, don't be blue. Be active. Bake a cake, plan a party or start an exercise program. Nurturing those around you will help you find your balance during any emotional days. Daydreaming will not serve your best interests this week. Keep it real!

Soul Affirmation: I enjoy working with others this week.

Lucky Numbers: 3, 4, 11

PISCES

You'll more than likely have an empowering conversation with a special partner, and there's a good probability of advancement at work. You've got it going on! The single challenge you might face is the envy of an older female who might try to spoil your sunny mood with a gloomy remark.

Soul Affirmation: When I reach out in love, someone is always there.

Lucky Numbers: 1, 13, 42

Community

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lence, Harris said in the statement.

"Things change when people unite and fight for justice because they are fed up with the status quo and have reached a new level of consciousness," he continued.

"Unity in our community, however, cannot be reduced to residents of a particular neighborhood. It must include all of our institutions, families, schools, churches and mosques."

Harris took the first step: a community awareness rally held recently to attain the "consciousness" about the problems and to focus on a plan of action, he said.

Harris told a *Free Press* reporter that the coalition's goal is to revive the spirit of togetherness that infused the community during the Civil Rights Movement.

"We need to unite so we can collectively transform the Black community," Harris said. "We need to create the conviction of success and purpose."

That need, he said, is reflected in the current state of the community. "In almost every aspect of our society, [the Black community often] has the most dubious distinctions, whether it is high school dropouts to health to poverty to Black males in prison," Harris said. He said that some of the blame needs to be laid at the community's doorstep.

"The sad and depressing truth is that many Black people actually participate in maintaining and facilitating their positions of oppression and suppression," he said.

In his statement, he said for too long, many African-Americans have sought to ignore the statistics and hope for change because of "some mysterious power."

"It is time to liberate and transform our people," he stated.

"This is the urgent mandate that we are compelled to adhere to," Harris continued. "It is our desire to band together with people who love freedom and justice to make sure the issues we face are spelled out, debated and acted upon in ways that will make a difference."