

New Country, New School -- Immigrant Student's First Day;

Experiment In Teaching Immigrants Gets Rolling

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Body

Smiling shyly in the lacy pink dress she had brought with her from Bangladesh, Tania Islam turned tentatively to a classmate and quietly spoke the **first** words she had learned on her very **first day** of **school** in America.

"Hello, my name is Tania," she said yesterday as she shook hands with the girl, following the instructions that a teacher had delivered in Bengali.

Earlier, in the auditorium, Tania, 15, and most of the other children at the **new school** for **immigrants** in Long Island City, Queens, were too bashful to switch from their native Portuguese, Korean or Hungarian to try singing the words to "This Land Is Your Land," which the teachers had written on posters and handed out on sheets of paper.

Danna Zhang, a 15-year-old from China, whispered in Chinese: "Is that the national song?"

As high **school** students across **New** York City started their **first day** of classes yesterday, **immigrant** teen-agers newly arrived from Venezuela, Pakistan, Myanmar, Ukraine and dozens of other **countries** began an education **experiment** that **school** officials hope will become a model for **teaching** the city's growing **immigrant** population.

Called the Newcomers **School**: An Academy for **New** Americans, it is an attempt to **teach new immigrants** in their native languages, as well as in English, and to help them and their families adjust to living in the United States. The students will find teachers fluent in at least 18 languages; their parents will find a kind of multipurpose orientation program, including English classes, job counseling, health care advice and information on becoming citizens.

At a time when the national hospitality toward **immigrants** has soured, **New** York City, from Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani to the Board of Education, is going out of its way to make **immigrants**, legal and illegal, feel welcome. While local governments across the **country**, including in Long Island, are rigidly interpreting residency laws so as to exclude **new immigrants** from public **schools**, **New** York City has decided it is a wise investment not only to include **immigrants** but to cater to them.

With **immigrants** making up a third of the 153,000 **new** students in the city's **schools** last year, officials have calculated that spending about \$400,000 to start a **school** that aims to integrate them and their families into city life is a wise investment.

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"The Newcomers School is another example of New York being a lot more courageous than other parts of the country in remaining level-headed in the dialogue about immigrants," said Margie McHugh, executive director of the New York Immigration Coalition, a group of immigrant advocates. "The city is recognizing that they are a huge and important constituency that pays taxes for quality services and should receive those services."

Set up in an aging but stately school building, the Newcomers School is, quite intentionally, a work in progress.

Only about 80 students had managed to complete the paperwork they needed to attend class yesterday, but dozens more crowded into the office or milled about the hallways, asking in Haitian Creole about medical exams or in Hindi about academic records.

Officials expect the school's ranks to swell quickly. Any student who has been in this country less than a year and whose English skills are limited can enroll. The school has a capacity of 1,000 students, and the principal, Lourdes Burrows, said she expects to have about 700 enrolled before the end of the first semester.

"People don't come to this country on September 6, they come all year round," said Renee Weisbaum, executive assistant for pupil personnel services for Queens high schools. "With this school, you can come right from the airport."

Some students will stay in the Newcomers School until they graduate. Others, especially those who enter the school as 9th graders, will move on to regular high schools in a year or two.

"People will be looking at this school as a goldfish bowl to see how well we do with immigrant kids," said Steven Feldman, vice president of a nonprofit organization called Federation Employment and Guidance Services, which will provide counseling to students and parents at the school.

Yesterday morning, in classrooms and out, students clustered with their parents, younger brothers and sisters, cousins or friends, all escorts through the first-day confusion and the tangled cacophony of languages.

Orlian Alvarez, 15, whose family came from Cuba as political refugees two months ago, gawked at the brightly painted hallways, the large library and the gymnasium, all things he had never before seen in school.

And Dorian Qiftja, 14, waited patiently in front of the school librarian, Nelida Rodriguez.

"Does anyone speak Albanian," called Ms. Rodriguez, trying to help Dorian become a student on his 10th day in America.

"That we don't have," said Svetlana Livdan, a teacher who speaks Russian, Ukrainian, Bulgarian, Byelorussian and Hungarian. "Yet."

Everywhere there were signs posted in every language imaginable -- signs for the bathroom, the principal's office, the library. There were also posters that were conspicuously absent: Ms. Burrows had taken down the signs that said "No Beepers," "No Weapons" and "Cutting Office."

"I wanted all the 'No's' out of the place," said Ms. Burrows, who moved here from Cuba more than 30 years ago. "We expect them to behave."

The first classes will be what Ms. Burrows called a "survival course," -- how to use a pay phone, take the subway, ask directions to the restroom.

The Newcomers School's first students were recruited from two extremely overcrowded Queens high schools, William Cullen Bryant in Long Island City and Newtown in Elmhurst.

Margaret Harrington, Superintendent of Queens high schools, said the two schools had 70 percent more students than they were supposed to, and over half of the students were taking bilingual or English-as-a-second-language courses, she said.

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In June, teachers identified about 50 students who spoke little English and had been in this country less than a year. Toward the end of the summer, officials advertised the school in foreign language newspapers and on Russian-speaking television. They recruited at Korean and Spanish-language churches in Queens.

And beginning last week, students who went to enroll at the two high schools in Districts 24 and 30 were met by "recruiters" from the Newcomers School.

The Newcomers School is not without its critics, people who fear the school might be too isolating for immigrants, essentially segregating them. Even people like Ms. McHugh, who welcome the idea of the school, have concerns.

Ms. McHugh, whose coalition met with Newcomers School officials two months ago, said she was worried that the school might become a "dumping ground" for immigrants, holding them to lower educational standards than those in mainstream high schools.

Yesterday, though, the atmosphere at the Newcomers School was hopeful excitement.

"I want to learn the way American people speak English," said Tania in Bengali. "I am happy there are other students here like me. Everybody here is new to America."

Graphic

Photos: Tania Islam, 15, left, of Bangladesh, gets acquainted with Xu Xiao Fan, 15, of China, at Newcomers School, which will teach immigrant teen-agers in their native languages as well as in English. At left, a sign indicates the principal's office. (pg. B1); At the Newcomers School, in Long Island City, Queens, most students could only listen yesterday as teachers and other workers sang the national anthem. They were all beginning an education experiment that officials hope will become a model for teaching the city's growing immigrant population. (pg. B4) (Jose Lopez/The New York Times)

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