Thriving on Difference;

International High Students Speak Language of Learning

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Body

Abdul Samad, a 20-year-old from Afghanistan, went to school for the first time three years ago. He said he did not know a word of English when he was admitted into the ***International*** ***High*** School in Queens. He felt blind and deaf and panicky.

"I was very crazy," said the ***high*** school ***student***, dressed in a black leather jacket and jeans. "I wondered, 'How am I going to ***learn*** this ***language*** or study this? I've never been to school.' I didn't know how to write the alphabet."

Abdul is now a model ***student*** at ***International*** ***High***, an alternative public school that is nationally recognized for the way immigrant ***students*** are taught and valued. He will graduate this spring as a senior, but came to school already a man.

Since age 10, Abdul had fought as a guerrilla rebel against the occupying Soviet forces in his homeland. He saw 10 friends die in combat and was hospitalized himself at age 14 with a bullet in his leg. He recalls precisely how he killed two Russian soldiers at point-blank range. He said they had fatally wounded his mother and seriously injured his father and three brothers in a bombing of his house.

He found his way to America through a network of Afghan contacts, and like thousands of other young immigrants each year, filtered into the New York City school system, where the foreign-born population has more than tripled in the last four years.

As issues such as violence, apathy and disenfranchisement dominate public discussion of the New York City school system, the ***International*** ***High*** School offers a glimmer of hope to immigrant youths on a first-come, first-served basis.

The school, on the sprawling campus of La Guardia Community College, admits only ***students*** who have been in the United States for less than four years and score low in English proficiency on a standardized ***language*** assessment test.

Enrollment reflects geopolitics. The 460 ***students***, who are from 60 countries and ***speak*** 42 ***languages***, come from places often in turmoil. When the school opened eight years ago as a joint effort of the Board of Education and the City University of New York, there were only a handful of ***students*** from Eastern Europe. Now Eastern Europeans

are the third largest group, with 128 ***students***. The biggest representation is from Spanish-***speaking*** countries, followed by the Asian bloc, including China, Hong Kong, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan.

When Abdul arrived, he was met with a swell of support from teachers and other ***students***. He was thrown into classes -- the school does not separate ***students*** according to their varying abilities in English -- and his Afghan-***speaking*** classmates helped him ***learn*** English, even as he went to classes in science, math, history and art. The teachers would ***speak*** slowly, write names and draw pictures to guide him along, and they started him off with easier assignments.

Impressive Academic Record

At ***International*** ***High***, teachers and staff break the mold in the way English is traditionally taught to ***students*** with limited English proficiency. Every teacher doubles as an English instructor to some extent, reinforcing ***language*** development as they teach instruction in the core subject areas.

The school has an impressive record of academic success. Ninety-three percent of the ***students*** go on to college and more than 90 percent graduate having taken at least one regular college-level course at LaGuardia Community College.

"It's an extraordinary place," said Jacqueline Ancess, a senior research associate at the National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools and Teaching at Teachers' College, Columbia University. "This school makes sure these ***students*** have a future and gives them the skills for the future. It lets them know that they are valued."

There is a calm, mature air about the business of education at ***International*** ***High***. There are no school bells. Classrooms are dispersed throughout the campus, and ***students*** carry college IDs, enroll in college courses, eat in the college cafeteria and work out in the college gym. They participate in a career-oriented internship program outside the school for one third of each school year.

The population of the school, which was intended to accommodate between 400 and 500 ***students***, is also small enough so that the staff gets to know ***students***.

Learning to Get Along

It was not long after Abdul arrived at the ***high*** school before teachers and counselors noticed his tenseness around Russian ***students***. "He used to jump on anything a Russian said and make fun of it," said Ruthellyn Weiner, an assistant principal. "He would not get into physical stuff, but there would be verbal sparring."

But Abdul found that his enmity toward Russians had no place in the school. Every day, ***students*** have to work together in small groups to complete assignments. Some of his classmates were Russian.

"Just because of the constant working in groups, conflicts couldn't exist in that fashion," said the assistant principal. "He dealt with it. It was not even acceptable to him."

Abdul has now set his sights on life after ***high*** school. He aspires to be a pilot.

"I'm here to get an education and to get something for the future," he said during a class break. "In America, anything you want to do is possible."

Optimism Encouraged

Abdul's optimism is echoed by many ***students*** in the school, as they stride the hallways and listen intently in class. The feeling does not come by accident, teachers and administrators say.

"The optimism is infectious," said the principal, Eric Nadelstern, whose own parents were Holocaust refugees from Poland and Romania. "To the extent that we are successful, ***students*** leave us as competent learners and competent individuals. The spirit that is shared by the entire faculty is that our ***students*** represent the future."

In a classroom humming with Polish, Spanish and Chinese accents on a recent morning, ***students*** expressed a litany of hopes and dreams in response to a math teacher's question about what kind of ***student*** they wanted to be.

"I want to be the best I can and I want to be an A-***student*** and always improve," 15-year-old Maria Christian of Ecuador said in one happy breath.

"The more you want, the more we have," assured the teacher, Simon Cohen.

International High is constantly evolving to meet the needs of ***students***. Over the years, the class periods have gone from 35 minutes to 70. This year, for the first time, the curriculum has gone entirely interdisciplinary, with instruction in core subjects linked by themes.

The school is now broken into six thematic clusters in what amounts to six mini-schools. Each trimester, a small team of teachers from each cluster is responsible for whta happens to about 70 ***students*** in the core subject areas during the day.

During their four years, the ***students*** cycle through 12 clusters to accumulate the credits needed to graduate. In one cluster called "Beginnings," incoming ***students*** like Rafael Dobrowolski explore their immigrant experience through lessons in English, math, science and art.

Remembering Homelands

Rafael is a 15-year-old Polish boy. As far as he is concerned, the future shines bright. A year and a half ago, Rafael left Poland where there were soldiers on the street and the outlook was bleak. His father has found a job cutting grass in a Queens cemetery and his mother works as a secretary. Rafael, who was once ashamed to ***speak*** because of his hobbled English, is ***learning*** big new words like "sophisticated" this year.

"I say it quite a bit," Rafael boasted the other day.

Even as ***students*** labor over their English-***speaking*** skills, ***International High*** makes a point of fostering the memories of homelands around the world. Teachers don't get upset if ***students speak*** in their first ***language*** in class. At a native ***language*** celebration at the school earlier this month, Martin Vu rose to read an essay he had written about his native country, Vietnam:

". . .Only deep, deep inside my heart actually knows how I miss those coconut trees running along the river side, those tenderly sweet taste of the mango, those intensely warm flavor of the durian. I don't want to recall any further because this makes me sad."

The voice rising with emotion came from a quiet 18-year-old who left Vietnam because he said he was not allowed to attend college. His father had served as a surgeon in the South Vietnamese Army and is still regarded as the enemy, he said. At age 13, Martin was imprisoned for 2 1/2 months as he tried to flee the country. When he finally did leave Vietnam in 1988, he spent two years in refugee camps in Malaysia and the Philippines.

Martin now lives in Queens with his mother and three sisters but his heart remains in Vietnam. His father, who is unemployed, and brother subsist there on financial support from relatives in America.

". . .I just want to say to all immigrants that America may be your home for the rest of your life, but don't forget where you came from," Martin told the assembly. "It's like you're in the present and heading to the future, but don't forget your past no matter how good or bad it was. You can't go forward unless you know what steps you have passed. Everyone has a country!"

Graphic

Photo: In the city's school system, where the foreign-born population has more than tripled in the last four years, the ***International*** ***High*** School offers a hand to immigrant youths. Abdul Samad, a 20-year-old from Afghanistan, said, "I'm here to get an education and to get something for the future." He greeted a classmate. (Ruby Washington/The New York Times)(pg. B1)

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