

Middle East studies in the News

What's Wrong With Arabic-Language Public School [on Khalil Gibran Academy]

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A new school in Brooklyn hasn't even opened yet, and it already has parents fuming.

The Khalil Gibran International Academy is a middle school set to offer instruction in Arabic language and culture. The city's Department of Education planned to locate the school in the same building as Public School 282 in the Park Slope neighborhood.

But P.S. 282 parents complained that their kindergartners would be exposed to unruly preteens. The city relocated Khalil Gibran to a large multischool complex in another Brooklyn neighborhood, Boerum Hill. Parents there too rose up, arguing that there wasn't enough space.

These are pretexts. But pretexts for what? Khalil Gibran's supporters say that what the opposition really wants is to trash Islam after Sept. 11. Such hostility, they argue, is the wartime price that Muslims are paying for the conflict in Iraq. After all, they point out, the school is named after a Lebanese mystic who lived and died in New York, not a jihadist. Principal Debbie Almontaser has sworn her school won't teach religion, just culture.

But there is a justification for the parental concerns, and it predates 9/11. The justification has as much to do with, say, Spanish as it does with Arabic. What's wrong here is the public schools' bilingual and bicultural education.

Go back more than a century to the establishment of public schools in cities such as New York. In those years educators, lawmakers and citizens alike believed strongly that schools' job was to Americanize -- they used that word. New York's tradition of numbering most schools reflected a conviction that the stamp of uniformity would yield better citizens.

Coming to America

After the turn of the century, civic leaders from Thomas Edison to Cardinal Gibbons sat on a non-profit organization called the National Americanization Committee. The

committee published pamphlets on citizenship, admonishing adults to study "the greatness of America."

During World War I, at a time when New York's population contained a greater share of immigrants than now, Mayor John Purroy Mitchel grew impatient at assimilation's gradual pace. He called for a powerful drive to drill English into the heads of German-born children: "The melting pot must be made to melt." One headline read: "For a One-Language City." Former President Theodore Roosevelt was blunter: "Let us say to the immigrant not that we hope he will learn English but that he has got to learn it."

Strong Language

Strong language to the modern ear. Lots of 70-year-olds will now tell you they regret that they lost their parents' language in their zeal to fit in sixth grade. But the traditional Anglo-style public school worked, preparing immigrants for the workforce, and as it turns out, prosperity.

The country began to turn away from schools as assimilation vehicles when it introduced bilingual education in the 1960s.

Herman Badillo, then Bronx Borough President, was one of the most vociferous advocates of Spanish-language classes. California adopted parallel efforts. President Lyndon Johnson proposed a \$5 million federal bilingual-education program to help "Mexican-American, Puerto Rican and other children who are separated by the language barrier from a good education."

The programs that followed had the effect of making English co-equal, or even subordinate, to Spanish. Schools began to send a mixed message.

Today, some politicians and teachers still remain fond of bilingual public schools -- hence Khalil Gibran. Politicians believe that such ethnic schools produce voters loyal to ethnic blocs. And there is something about the challenge of a dual- culture curriculum that educational professionals can't resist.

'Bi-Illiteracy'

But the rest of the country has become skeptical. It turns out many kids can't do two things at once. Many Hispanics didn't learn English well. They found themselves second-class products in the job market. They suffered from "bi-illiteracy," as some said.

With a few notable exceptions, immigrants from Asia and Africa got the hint and kept their kids out of bilingual classes when possible. By this decade the same Herman Badillo who had backed the original bilingual laws would be publishing an anti- bilingual-ed book with a title worthy of TR or the National Americanization Committee: "One Nation, One Standard."

Most of us believe in transmitting ancestral culture to kids. We also have found that formal instruction works better in the private sphere -- at home, at places of worship, at parochial schools. Public schools do best when they concentrate on pulling kids into a common culture.

Arrows From the Bow

Once you acknowledge all this, the anxiety of the Brooklyn parent comes into focus. The parents fear that creating an Arabic-language school will produce a politicized bloc of kids --and worse, parents -- at odds with the rest, compromising their own future.

The New York Times reported recently that no family had yet signed up for the new school. That's probably because some Muslim families want to send their kids to Islamic religious schools, perhaps even deplorable fundamentalist ones. Other families are simply keeping their kids in regular public school, hoping they turn out students who function well as adults in America.

That is a responsible decision, for as a philosopher once said, "You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth." His name was Khalil Gibran.

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