

A touch of Greece in America

Public charter schools supplement state education with Greek language and culture

By Angelike Contis

CHILDREN are filing off of yellow school buses in Wilmington, DE. At the entrance to the Odyssey Charter School, assistant headmaster Jacqueline Pastis greets them with a cheery “kalimera”, or “good morning”. Some children still half asleep respond in Greek, as if it were the most ordinary thing to do at an American public school.

But this is no ordinary place of learning. Odyssey is among seven Greek charter schools launched in the US since 2001. In contrast to dozens of parochial Greek schools in the country, the charter schools are secular institutions supported by US taxpayers. The Greek Ministry of Education provides 60 Greek teachers, an investment targeting the hearts and minds of a new group of Philhellenes.

Children’s parents are lining up for the free schools that supplement state-education requirements with Greek language and culture. At the Hellenic Classical Charter School in Brooklyn, NY, 300 children applied for 50 new spots.

Charter schools operate through a contract with the state. Many focus on a particular subject, activity or theme, including particular cultures or languages. Opponents argue that because the charter schools are usually financed by local school districts, they take funds from other public schools. Despite this, charter schools have increased to some 4,000 since the first opened in 1991.

Demetra Rassia of the Greek Embassy’s education office in Washington, DC, says Greek-themed charter schools are making the grade in terms of academics and ethnic diversity. Rassia is conducting a study of them for Harvard’s Center for Hellenic Studies, where she is a fellow. The first such school opened in Dunedin, FL. Today, there are three more in Florida, and another in North Carolina.

High ranking

In last year’s Delaware State Testing Program exams, Odyssey



Photos by Nicole Hope Matthews



Math teacher Vassilios Guidoglou greets students arriving at the Odyssey Charter School in Wilmington, DE. Left: Folk dance lessons are always popular in the US

Charter School third graders came in 24th in reading (out of about 100 schools), and 12th in math. Second graders were first in math and fifth in reading.

It’s a testing day again when I visit the school where children wear uniforms, and art class often features Greek influences. After the Pledge of Allegiance, a voice over the PA system tells children before the state-wide test to, “Take deep breaths, relax, take your time.”

Before the testing starts, math teacher Vassilios Guidoglou wishes his students good luck.

“I loved the school from the first minute I visited it,” says Guidoglou, a recent arrival from Greece.

Later he challenges his first-grade students with a double-digit calculation. A boy raises his hand.

“Seventy-seven,” he answers in Greek.

Each day students from kindergarten through to fifth grade receive extra math and language

lessons in Greek. Greece sends seven teachers to Delaware and pays their salaries. These teachers face a different system and culture, with longer hours, yet higher pay. Some of them say they wish their visas were for longer than three years.

Cultural fusion abounds. Greek language teacher Kyria Katerina calls out, “Pame!” (Let’s go!) and leads hearty rounds of *Itsy Bitsy Spider* in Greek and English.

Headmaster Anthony Skoutelas believes learning foreign languages stimulates young minds.

“Parents are seeking out our school,” he says. “They want something different.”

Skoutelas was among the members of the local American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association branch who founded the school.

‘Superior learning’

“The school wasn’t necessarily set up to provide an opportunity for just

employs both the Socratic method and interactive SMART Board screens. Greek lessons begin in kindergarten, with some seventh graders prepping for Greek proficiency exams. In sixth and seventh grade, there is also Latin. Children learn Greek folk dances, but benefit too from a partnership with the New York City Ballet.

When two African-American girls eagerly demonstrate their Greek, but say they don’t hear it in the city, Petrakos reassures them. She says it’ll be handy in college. Petrakos always tells students: “Greek is the basis of all languages and history.” Teacher Eva Panagi chimes in: “Greek is the mother.”

For 33 years, Cyprus-born Panagi taught at Soterios Ellenas Greek parochial school, which was located on the premises of the new school. But Greek immigration decreased and the school struggled.

“At least we didn’t lose the school,” Panagi says. “We spread Hellenism.”

The Greek Orthodox Church next door rents the building to the charter school.

The charter school relies on receiving \$12,000 per student each year from the state, plus other grants. Greece provides 10 teachers - about 30 percent of the total staff.

“We are very grateful to the Greek government,” Petrakos says.

However, she notes that teachers could be better prepared.

“I know that in Greece, the mentality is that the teacher comes first. Here in America, the child comes first. And the child has superior rights over the teacher’s.”

As more Greek charter schools open, facing challenges like finding books and shaping lessons, Washington is sending positive signs.

“President Obama is supporting the charter schools,” Petrakos says. “So that’s good, the funding will increase.”

A little later, a couple rolls their baby stroller into the school’s entrance. In broken English, they ask about enrolling their eldest child. A parent at the book sale helps them in Spanish. Welcome to the new face of Greek schooling.

Greek-Americans,” he says. “It was to create a superior learning experience for all kids.”

Of the 293 children, about one-third are from ethnic minority groups. Though in the admissions lottery preference is given to the children of staff and founding board members, only about one in 20 students are of Greek origin. School district residents and student siblings also have priority.

Next year, as the school grows, older students will attend classes in a building that used to be a Catholic school.

The Hellenic Classical Charter School is also expanding, with a new wing. Joy Petrakos, director of operations, says Greek-Americans founded the school in 2005 but a diverse Brooklyn embraced it.

Ancient Greek figures decorate the hallways at the school, which

Learning the Greek alphabet



Finding the way through a Greek calendar