



News

Star Academy founder honored as top charter school administrator

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DEARBORN/ DEARBORN HEIGHTS

Nawal Hamadeh, an educator leading three Dearborn Heights/Detroit schools that fill a crucial gap for low-income, often Arab American students, was recognized as Michigan's Charter School Administrator of the Year.

Hamadeh was recognized during the 10th annual Michigan Charter Schools Conference, which drew 3,000 educators to Detroit's Cobo Center Nov. 2.

The schools she founded serve 2,000 K-12 students. A native of Lebanon, Hamadeh serves not only as lead educator, but as a role model to children dealing with economic and cultural challenges.

"Hamadeh talks with students about her own story — about starting with nothing," said Angel Ouza, a 2004 graduate of Star International Academy Dearborn Heights. "She works to inspire students all the time, asking if the education is going well and talking about how important college is."

Ouza, a University of Michigan alumna, has been a substitute teacher at St hopes to return as a social worker after completing her master's degree.

Besides Star International, Hamadeh leads Universal Academy in Detroit Universal Learning Academy in Dearborn Heights. The three schools:

- Immerse students in Arabic and English languages. They learn reading, writing, comprehension and grammar in both. Further, Arabic is taught at beginning, intermediate and advanced levels.
- Promote the study of Arabic and American cultures.
- Have diverse staff members who share their cultures and give children a view.
- Follow the Michigan Framework with a curriculum fully aligned to state standards.
- Meet national and international standards, including adopting and introducing the International Baccalaureate Standards this fall at the middle and high school level.

Earlier this year, the schools received a federal grant worth nearly \$1 million over three years to expand their Arabic programs. Only three such grants were given across the country, part of a national push to increase the number of students studying languages deemed critical to America's competitiveness.

"Nawal Hamadeh is a true, 21st century educator, implementing education ways that position all children for success as adults," said Dan Quisenberry, president of the Michigan Association of Public School Academies (MAPSA). "She builds bridges, connecting students, educators, parents and communities. She is a role model with remarkable lessons to teach all of us in education matters where our students are or where our schools are located."

Erik Garr, a Detroit native who's now a partner with Chicago's Diamond Management & Technology Consultants, worked with Hamadeh recently developing a strategic business plan.

"I was impressed with how well run the schools are, plus they're filling a profound need," Garr said. "When you do business planning, you look at market research, and it's clear — we need Nawal Hamadeh and her schools. They're meeting a need other schools are just not addressing, and it would take too long to get them to change. ... Imagine trying to learn English in a traditional school. We'd lose a lot of these kids. Nawal's not losing them."

According to officials, Star and Universal are "beating the odds," with more than half of their students qualifying for subsidized lunch while at least 60 percent proficient in both math and English language arts. Further, Universal was recognized in May through the Skillman Foundation's Good Schools program in Detroit.

Leila Hamade, director of compliance for the schools, said Hamadeh keep focus on students and continuously finds new tools and methods for staff t in helping students. Students know her and parents trust her. Also, Hamad makes extensive use of data in educational and staffing decisions, a push t permeates each school.

In describing her reason for starting the schools, she talks of strengthening often-elusive connection between disparate cultures.

"We promote peace, not wars," Hamadeh said when the foreign language was announced. "The more we understand each other, and our cultures, th conflict there is. We bring people together, sharing in the process of learni sharing meals, sharing lives. It's a good model for a global world."

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