



For years, Nawal Hamadeh has inspired her students to excel far beyond the low expectations often placed on children. Now, her hard work is showing up among her peers.

Hamadeh has been awarded the Charter School Administrator of the Year Award for the state of Michigan.

Hamadeh is the founder, superintendent, and CEO of three charter schools — two in Dearborn Heights, and one in Detroit.

She was chosen from among 18 candidates nominated by parents, students, and principals and other school personnel.

A Michigan Charter School official made the surprise announcement to Hamadeh at the 10th annual Michigan Charter Schools Conference on Friday, Nov. 2.

"She builds bridges, connecting students, educators, parents and communities," says Dan Quisenberry, president of the Michigan Association of Public School Academies. "She is a role model with remarkable lessons to teach all of us in education, no matter who our students are or where our schools are located."

Hamadeh expects a lot from her teachers and students, and she gets it. Graduation rate is high and the dropout rate is low.

Angel Ouza is one of Hamadeh's former students. She's now working on her master's degree in social work. "She works to inspire students all the time, asking if their education is going well and talking about how important college is," says Ouza.

Hamadeh started with fewer than 400 students in 1998. Today, her three schools — Star, Universal Learning Academy in Dearborn Heights, and Universal Learning Academy in Detroit — now enroll nearly 2,000 K-12 students. Nearly 77 percent qualify for free lunch. All are from immigrant families, primarily Arab. It's no coincidence Hamadeh's own life's work is devoted to children with the same background as hers. At 16, she was an immigrant student in this country.

"It was hard," Hamadeh said during an interview last year. "I came to this country not understanding the culture, the differences. My family was supportive, and wanted me to continue my education."

So she pushed a smile across her face and eventually blossomed into a star educator, who has literally brought the world to her community's doorstep with teachers and students from all walks of life.

"The more we understand each other, and our cultures, the less conflict there is," says Hamadeh. "We bring people together, sharing in the process of learning, sharing meals, sharing lives. It's a good model for a global world."\*



*Photo by Atef El-Sayed • Story by Raad Alawan*