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Rukaya Al-Fanharawi studies in her driver's education class. The company that operates the academy has recently been honored.

Charter school operator honored

Parents enthused about multicultural curriculum at facilities in Detroit and Dearborn Heights.

Karen Bouffard / The Detroit News

DEARBORN HEIGHTS -- The company that operates the 1,200-student Star International Academy has been named one of the 15 most promising charter school groups in the country by a national philanthropy that supports charter schools.

Star Academy is run by Hamadeh Educational Services, which also operates two smaller Metro Detroit charter schools: Universal Learning Academy, with 150 students in kindergarten through second grade in Dearborn Heights; and Universal Academy, with about 330 students in kindergarten through 11th grade in southwest Detroit. A 12th grade will be added in the fall.

The Charter School Growth Fund will offer advice to each of the 15 chosen charter school companies on developing a financially sound business model to help them grow.

After six months, the fund will decide which of the companies it will support financially for the next three to five years.

Although Michigan was among the pioneering states in charter schools, Hamadeh is the only

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Michigan company chosen for the development program.

The Dearborn Heights company was founded by Nawal Hamadeh of Northville, who holds a master's degree in educational leadership from Eastern Michigan University. She was previously a teacher and administrator at several Metro Detroit private schools.

Hamadeh opened Star International with about 345 students in 1998. She opened the southwest Detroit school the same year with 99 students. The second Dearborn Heights school opened with 160 students in 2004. Together, the three schools now enroll more than 1,700 students. Michigan has about 85,000 children enrolled in 220 charter schools, according to the Michigan Association of Public School Academies.

Hamadeh attributes her schools' growth to their focus on meeting the needs of a culturally diverse student body, although about 90 percent of the students are Arab-American.

"The service is tailored to the specific needs of the students, while at the same time focusing on the state curriculum and standards," Hamadeh said. Star International, she noted, has a special-education program, as well as sports and clubs.

"We teach Arabic as a second language in K-8, and also at the high school level, and we also offer European languages. They can choose from French, Spanish or Arabic," Hamadeh said.

"We also have single-gender classrooms as an option; they can choose from all male, all female or coed."

Angela Elkordy of Ann Arbor drives her two children 35 minutes each way to attend the school. She chose it for her fourth-grader, Zachariah, 9, and third-grader, Sara, 8, because of the multicultural focus.

"I see a lot of celebration, and honoring and teaching of multicultural subject matter," Elkordy said.

"The kids have worked on African-American celebrations, the Chinese New Year. They have Arabic classes, Spanish and French.

"There's a great deal of respect for all cultures, and I really believe that's important for our society."

Kamal Kassem, 18, of Detroit will graduate this year from Star International.

He said he has been able to take a full load of pre-college classes including Advanced Placement courses and received a \$7,000 scholarship to attend the University of Michigan in the fall.



Max Ortiz / The Detroit News

Star International Academy teacher Kristen Carulli helps fourth-graders in the library at the Dearborn Heights campus. ▶ [See full image](#)

Hamadeh charter schools

Star International Academy:
 Kindergarten through 12th grade
 24425 Hass , Dearborn Heights
 (313) 724-8990

Universal Learning Academy:
 Kindergarten through 2nd grade
 22579 Ann Arbor Trail, Dearborn Heights
 (313) 724-8060

Universal Academy:
 Kindergarten through 11th grade
 (12th grade in the fall);
 4612 Lonyo, Detroit
 (313) 581-5006

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"They always emphasize success in the future," Kassem said. "They offer more than three languages, AP (Advanced Placement) calculus and AP literature. We have computer classes, we have sport programs. They offer so many different things."

To make the fund's list, applicants had to demonstrate achievement gains among students, offer a full array of academic and extracurricular programs, and be financially solid.

Hamadeh said the fund will provide her with the expertise to improve the schools, and possibly the money to expand.

"This is to help the organizations that have founded charter schools, to help them expand on their programs," she said. "I would like to grow in the future so that we can accommodate as many parents and children as who want it."

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