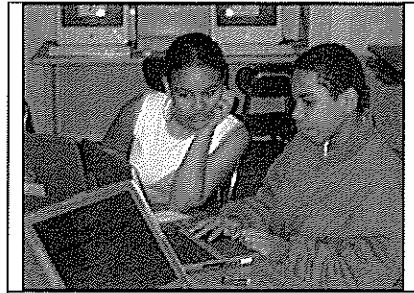


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Flushing School Serves Immigrant Students
By Beth Fertig

NEW YORK, NY, May 23, 2005 — There are more immigrants living in New York City than at any time since the 1920s. Thirty six percent of all New Yorkers were born outside the United States, according to the 2000 Census. The immigration boom has changed the face of the city's public schools. About two out of five city students live in households that speak a language other than English. New schools are opening to meet their needs. WNYC's Beth Fertig visited one of them, which is called the Flushing International School.



Students at the Flushing International School
(Lara Evangelista)

The 100 ninth graders at Flushing International come from literally all over the globe. Together, they represent 24 countries and speak 16 different languages. But one thing they have in common is that all of them arrived in the U-S within the past four years. And they're taking classes that are taught in English.

KESSLER: In the United States we're dealing with president, what political system is it?

KIDS: Democracy.

The students are able to follow along – despite their limited English - by helping each other. Humanities teacher Julie Kessler describes how she clusters them around tables in groups of five or six. Most of her students are from China or from Latin American countries.

KESSLER: We try to mix it up as much as possible, half Chinese, half Spanish and as many other as we can to kind of give them a situation in which they can't just speak to each other in their native language all the time they have to speak to each other in our common language of English.

DAVID: I don't understand your words just tell me.

That means the typical class at Flushing International is an active and noisy cross-cultural experience. At one table Carlos Hernandez of Costa Rica is seated between Erika Lenis of Colombia and David Wu of China. David relies on Carlos to help him read Erika's notes.

DAVID: Cause I don't understand some words then he translate and he tell me how to spell the word

CARLOS: Like he knows a little English so it's easy for me to help him. And I can speak Spanish with her.

Erika also speaks in Spanish with two girls at the table. The kids have tiny electronic translators. Their reports on different political leaders will eventually be written in English. But Erika she says some kids need to use their native language part of the time.

ERIKA: The notes you can write in whatever language you want, like you can understand.

This flexible approach is the hallmark of the International schools. There are now seven of them in four boroughs. The first one opened 20 years ago and the school in Flushing is among the latest. Principal Joe Luft says they all share the same philosophy.

LUFT: You learn language by using the language.

But Luft says his students can't just plunge into an English only environment. They arrived in the United States as teenagers, when it's harder to learn a new language.

LUFT: What I like about walking in a classroom here is that yes you hear Chinese, yes you hear some Urdu and some Spanish and a few other things. But you're also hearing them communicating in English. And the fact that they can sit in a group and they can talk to each other in their native language so they can help each other, or to try to clarify something or to try to discuss something more in depth when they wouldn't really be ready right now to do that in English, we're giving them the freedom and the flexibility to do that.

The also school has a few teachers who are fluent in Spanish, and an art teacher who speaks Chinese. Classes are 90 minutes on average to give the students more time to absorb the material. But English isn't their only challenge.

KESSLER: Hi guys how is everyone doing?

BOY: I am how are you?

Teacher Julie Kessler uses basic reading exercises each week for a handful of kids who need extra help.

BOY: It is hah to - hah,

KESSLER: Hot.

BOY: Hot today it felt like summer.

Kessler says these kids are reading and writing at about a first grade level – even though they're in ninth grade. They all missed a few years of schooling in their native countries, for various reasons.

KESSLER: There are war torn countries where schooling is not available or teachers strikes or situations where there isn't a school for them to go to every day. Sometimes they have to work, help support their families so they're not able to go to school.

Kessler's students include this 14 year old, who is from a Spanish-speaking country.

KESSLER: What's this one?

BOY: Who.

KESSLER: Who.

The principal say the boy is making huge strides. Luft recalls how the shy teenager with deep brown eyes arrived at the school in November.

LUFT: I remember the first day he was just standing outside the classroom he didn't want to go in. And he was very nervous. He didn't quite know what to do when he got into the classroom.

In the cafeteria, these differences don't seem to matter. Like kids anywhere they sit with their friends. Chinese boys at one table are playing cards.

Other kids have formed groups based on language or culture. Joseph Jair Pena is from the Dominican Republic and is president of the student government. He points out some of his friends.

JOSEPH: I sit with Angel, Carlos, Chingunn all those guys right here. All of those.

FERTIG: Where are they from?

JOSEPH: Most of them are from the Dominican Republic, he's from Costa Rica, He's from Mongolia

Joseph nods to Chingunn Bolormaa – who prefers to hang out with the Spanish speaking kids.

CHINGUNN: Like Spanish speak English more than the Chinese so it's easier to communicate.

ANGEL: We play soccer together, he's the only like Asian guy who plays soccer with us.

Angel Arias bonds with Chingunn over sports, even if they don't always understand each other.

ANGEL: What's popular sport in Mongolia?

CHINGUNN: What?

ANGEL: Popular sport in Mongolia?

As the kids struggle with English, it's tempting for some to stick with what's familiar. A few weeks ago the school held parent teacher nights. Julie Kessler urged one Chinese girl to rely less on her native language.

KESSLER: I still think you're sitting back a little bit.

Yili Wei got a B plus and a C on her report card. Kessler thought she could do better.

CONTINUE: You do good work and if you would push yourself harder and press yourself to speak to people who don't speak Chinese, I think your work would get better and that your English would get better.

A translator interprets this for Yili's parents. Afterward, her father - Xing Gao Wei – says he's pleased with her progress and with the school. He was a doctor in China and gave up his profession so his family could have a better future. But he offers a suggestion.

TRANSLATOR: One thing is he thinks maybe if it's possible that the students have also an opportunity to talk to more American students, more interaction so they can learn English even faster in a positive way.

The school's principal concedes some kids could use a more mainstream environment. Or even a more traditional bilingual program. He's also planning to give them internships where they can practice their English outside of school. Luft says it's a challenge to satisfy all the demands facing immigrant students.

LUFT: Our students take on quite a bit coming to the US as teenagers and as immigrants. It's hard enough to be a teenager as it is. I think you add on the other layer of you've come to a new country with a new language and a new culture and you're expected to graduate and meet all the high school requirements in a relatively short period of time, it's a pretty daunting task.

However, he points to evidence showing these international public schools are successful. The non profit organization that works with them says their dropout rate at the more established schools averages just 5 percent – far less than the average. But many students take longer than 4 years to graduate. And that could be a liability down the road under tough standards in the federal No Child Left Behind law.

Flushing International will face other challenges as it gets off the ground. It's housed in a local intermediate school and will need to move once it grows. But for now, students like Divine Grace Juntereal say they're relieved to have a place where they can be themselves. Divine is a Filipino who moved to New York last summer from Vienna.

DIVINE: I was nervous. I mean like maybe everybody would laugh at me because I couldn't talk so much but now I'm okay.

And with that, Divine asks if she can do something she likes even better than school.

DIVINE: OK, can I sing?

SINGS: "A whole new world..."

For WNYC I'm Beth Fertig.

<http://www.wnyc.org/news/articles/47425>