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Flushing International High School welcomes newcomers

By Cynthia Koons

Jonathan, 13, signed up because he heard the teachers were good. Jessica, 14, knew the school had a pool. Alexander, 14, said there were a lot of activities in which he could participate. The three students, all from Ecuador, found themselves sitting at a round table in Flushing Monday on the first day of school at the area's first international high school. They had all originally applied for the International High School at LaGuardia Community College, but when they learned that the program was full, they signed up at Flushing's first school of its kind.

"We don't think you learn language in isolation. You learn it in all your classes," said Joe Luft, Flushing International High School's principal. "We see language learning as the responsibility of everyone on staff."

Luft has spent the past 11 months organizing the Flushing International High School, which is housed in a hallway of JHS 189 at 144-80 Barclay Ave.

The program is open to students who have been in the United States for fewer than four years. Luft said one-third of his students have been in the country for under three months.

Up until this year there were four international schools in the city: in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan and Queens' LaGuardia College. The western Queens high school has seats for more than 400 students as well as a waiting list for hopeful students.

Funding for the Flushing school came last fall from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which has a record of contributing to international schools. Bill Gates co-founded Microsoft, the computer software giant.

Claire Sylvan, the director of International Partnership Schools, an organization that oversees the city's international schools, said she was happy to see a school opening in

northeast Queens, especially in Flushing where there is a large immigrant population.

"It's wonderful. In every class kids are meaningfully engaged," Sylvan said. "They've really forged a common vision to make these kids comfortable."

The goal of international schools, which keep students in classes that incorporate English as a second language in the regular high school curriculum, is to encourage students who would not normally be on an academic track to apply to college.

On Monday, Schools Chancellor Joel Klein stopped by the Flushing school to commemorate its opening.

The junior high school principal, Cindy Diaz-Burgos, said JHS 189 welcomed the opportunity to host the high school. With only 100 seats this year, Diaz-Burgos said the plan was for the school to grow by 100 students every year for the next few years.

At present, the high school students are displacing some of Diaz-Burgos' middle schoolers.

"We gave up a lot, but it's temporary and we wanted to help out," Diaz-Burgos said.

She said that without English proficiency, many junior high school students in grades seven through nine are held back. Some of the students who would have been in her ESL program were actually in the new high school instead.

Next year Luft hopes that with the proper promotion, the school will attract even more students. There are currently six openings in the high school.

"The recruitment was very, very hard," Luft said. "This year now that we have more outreach, we're going to cast a wider net."

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