



Shereen Salam is principal of the new Amman Academy. Photo by BOB ANDRES / STAR

Start-up charter school to teach Arabic language

By DIANE R. STEPP
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Russ and Dee Dee Thomas were looking for something different for their daughter Lindsay's education.

She had a good start in kindergarten last year at Roswell North Elementary, but the Thomases were intrigued with a Fulton County start-up charter school opening in August off Hickory Ridge Road near Ga. 400.

Lindsay will be in the transitional class along with an anticipated 175 other students in kindergarten through sixth grade, predominantly from north Fulton.

Amman Academy will be unlike almost every other school in Georgia. The Fulton County public school will offer 30 minutes of mandatory Arabic language instruction each day. It will be one of only two schools in the state to teach the language.

North Atlanta High offers Arabic in its agriscience college-prep International Baccalaureate program.

Workout for the brain

Arabic is one of the hardest languages to learn, experts say. Reading is from right to left, and the symbols in its 28-character alphabet bear no resemblance to the ABCs.

"Both sides of the brain will be working," principal Shereen Salam said as she looked at a colorful number chart with animals and fruits, the those typically seen in kindergarten rooms.

Salam's educational worldview developed after she taught diplomats' children at an American school in Cairo, Egypt. Before that, she earned a master's in school administration from Columbia University in New York. She's also taught in New York City and in Fulton and Cobb counties. Her parents are Egyptian; she was born in Atlanta and speaks Arabic fluently.

As unusual as the chance to learn Arabic might be, that's not the only factor that attracted the Thomases. "It was probably third on our list," said Russ Thomas, an ATRT manager. The big draw was the way kids will be taught, which relies less on textbooks than on learning reading, writing, math, science and social studies through active, hands-on projects that typically last eight to 10 weeks.

The teaching approach,

called Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound, is central to the mission of the school, said board president Elton Jinedi, a marketing manager for Coca-Cola North America.

"Each individual has a role to play, no matter the task. When they start off, they may not feel confident that they can succeed, but when they finish, they find that they can. When kids finish a project, they review it talk about how they can make it better, step back and reassess. They go through that cycle a few times, and in the end, the product is much better," he said.

At the end of each project, students will report their findings and what they've learned to assembled classmates and parents.

Help with start-up

One of the school's partners, the Chattahoochee Nature Center, will send staff to help students start their own on-campus garden as her students begin a study of soil science, middle school science teacher Jennifer Lang said.

Students will keep the same teacher for two years, an approach that's called looping in education circles. School organizers had wanted to separate boys and girls in later grades, but that part of the charter proposal was nixed by the state Department of Education, which had to approve the plan, as did the Fulton County school board. Fulton will monitor the school's progress.

Amman students will be held to the same state testing standards as those in other Fulton County schools, and the district will keep an eye on the school's budget as well, said Annie Duvall, who oversees charter schools for the Fulton school district.

Blue and white plaid uniforms will be the dress for students.

The start-up charter will be funded on a per-pupil basis by Fulton County schools as tax dollars follow students who live in the county. The state is helping with a \$600,000 federal grant for start-up, and the school has won a \$180,000 Walton Foundation grant, Jinedi said.

Last weekend, parents pitched in to move desks, roll weeds and help set up equipment for the beginning of the school year. "It was a very diverse group, a great mix of people," Thomas said.

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