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# An Unorthodox Choice

Posted by [Elaine Meyer](#) on 3/07/09 • Categorized as [Charter Schools](#), [Features](#), [Inside NYC Schools](#)

*This story is part of a series of posts on School Stories about the growth of charter schools and their effect on the public school system in the New York metro area. Charter schools, which are publicly funded but privately managed, have been expanding rapidly in the city.*

By **ELAINE MEYER**



Maureen Gonzalez-Campbell, the principal of the new Hebrew Language Academy.

ELAINE MEYER/Covering Education

Maureen Gonzalez-Campbell is an unorthodox choice to be principal of the **Hebrew Language Academy**, a new public charter school set to open next fall in Brooklyn. She does not speak Hebrew, she is not Jewish, and she has never been to Israel.

She is, in fact, the daughter of Jamaican immigrants—one a poet, the other a pianist—with 22 years of experience as a New York City educator charged with shaking things up. For two of those years, she ran a new dual language program in Rockaway, Queens.

“What’s most attractive about the school is being able to nurture thinkers who will make sound judgments within the context of a local community,” said Gonzalez-Campbell, who looked calm but attentive in an Upper West Side Barnes & Noble in February, the day before she would start her new job.

Dressed in a blue and white woven jacket, the energetic 48-year-old searched for Doris Kearns Goodwin’s “**A Team of Rivals**,” a book about Abraham Lincoln that she heard President Barack Obama was reading to prepare for a cabinet of people with diverse views and backgrounds. Gonzalez-Campbell frequents the bookstore alongside her 24-year-old daughter and 4-year-old granddaughter once a month.

Her purchase may help her in dealing with the varying opinions about the school, which has not been without controversy. Critics charge that because it is designed around the Hebrew language, it cannot help but cross the line between a public school and a religious one. Defenders point to the positive effects that acquiring a second language at a young age has on brain development and academic performance. Also, many Hebrew-speaking Jews are not religious, particularly among the Russian immigrants who live near the school’s future home in **Mill Basin, Brooklyn**.

No matter the detractors, Gonzalez-Campbell emphasized bilingualism instead of the Hebrew language and said that the fact that she was hired demonstrates the charter school board’s commitment to diversity.

**Sara Berman**, the chairwoman, said in a phone interview a few days before the school announced Gonzalez-Campbell’s hire, “She is fantastic, excited about the school, and I think she is a great asset to us.”

Before Berman became the lead applicant for the Hebrew Language Academy, she wrote a parenting column for the now-defunct “New York Sun.” Its editorial pages stoked criticism against another hotly contested dual-language public school, the **Khalil Gibran International Academy in Brooklyn**.

The choice of a non-Jew and non-Hebrew speaker as principal runs in contrast to Khalil Gibran, which opened two years ago as an Arab-language school under its founding principal, **Debbie Almontaser**, a Muslim educator of Yemeni descent. The school, and Almontaser in particular, drew fire from various media outlets like “The Sun,” the “New York Post,” and an organization called **Stop the Madrassa**, and she was eventually forced to resign by Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Chancellor Joel Klein.

Stop the Madrassa, a coalition led by **Daniel Pipes**, a conservative Middle East scholar, had been formed expressly to fight against the school, and both a lawsuit that it filed against Almontaser for access to more detailed information about Khalil Gibran and a suit Almontaser filed against the Department of Education are still pending.

In this way, Khalil Gibran’s struggle casts a shadow over any other dual language schools that follow in its wake—particularly one with connections to a religion.

Gonzalez-Campbell said that the Almontaser controversy is not relevant to the Hebrew Language Academy.

“I’m not here to speak about her or the school. I don’t define the identity of the HLA based on that school.”

She added, “This is a public school, it is a non-religious school. People will have their views, but they will contain their views after having seen us as well.”

Though the **Department of Education** did have the power to ask Almontaser to resign, Gonzalez-Campbell could not face the same fate, according to spokeswoman Melody Meyer, because, as principal of a charter school, she is hired by the school’s board of trustees, not the Department of Education.

Meyer added that Gonzalez-Campbell is a qualified candidate with a strong background in bilingual education. “In terms of public perception and how her appointment is treated, that’s beyond my scope,” she added.

Gonzalez-Campbell’s hire does not assuage one of the Hebrew Language Academy and Khalil Gibran’s chief critics, **Diane Ravitch**, a professor of education at New York University and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, who wrote in an e-mail: “Appointing someone who doesn’t know how to speak Hebrew to run a ‘Hebrew Language Academy’ makes as much sense as appointing someone who can’t speak Spanish to run a Spanish language program.”

She continued, “The fundamental nature of the school is contained in its name. The Hebrew language is the language of the Jewish religion. It is not spoken in Asia, Africa, Latin America, or anywhere else except by rabbis and religious Jews.”

This, of course, is a view that both Gonzalez-Campbell and Berman reject.

Gonzalez-Campbell’s own commitment to Hebrew and bilingual education comes from a personal place. She is fluent in Spanish and also proficient in sign language, a skill she learned in order to communicate with her daughter, Mia, who is deaf. She plans to learn Hebrew from a tutor and is entertaining the idea of forming an adult language group with students’ parents who want to learn the language.

The school will open this September with 150 students in the kindergarten and the first grade. Each class of 25 children will have two teachers—one a Hebrew speaker and one an English speaker. Students will learn in a “partial-immersion environment” that will require them to communicate exclusively in Hebrew with the Hebrew-speaking teacher, which is different from the way a second language is taught at other schools like Khalil Gibran and the **Hellenic Classical Charter** School, a Greek language school in Park Slope.

It is clear from talking to her colleagues that Gonzalez-Campbell has a history of quelling troubled waters. In 1998, when she worked as the director for bilingual education for over 25 schools in **Queens’s District 27**, she started a language program for English-speaking students from the Caribbean who had missed years of education in their home countries and could not read at grade level. The English for Communication Arts program, as it was called, spanned five schools.

However, it was not eligible for federal money that normally funds bilingual education, because the students were learning in English rather than a second language, so Gonzalez-Campbell got her district to support her with its general funds.

“I didn’t propose a problem, I proposed the solution,” she added. “And that’s the way I work.”

As a result, the district’s superintendent Matthew Bromme, decided to promote Gonzalez-Campbell to **P.S. 104 in Rockaway**, a school that had seen nine principals in seven years.

“I thought she was very good, that’s why I made her a principal,” he said. “To be honest with you, I was not an easy boss, and P.S. 104 was not an easy school. The parents were not happy with my decision, because she was succeeding a person who was well-liked.”

During her tenure, P.S. 104 was moved off of the list of schools under “corrective action,” a designation it had earned by failing to meet **No Child Left Behind** standards.

“I think she’s hard working, I think she’s diligent,” said Bromme. “I don’t think she’ll always have everyone’s agreement. And she’ll do what she feels is best for the kids.”

Gonzalez-Campbell comes from a family of artists. Her mother was a classical pianist, and her father, **George Campbell**, was a poet laureate in Jamaica who worked as a custodian after they moved to New York. She and her two sisters were raised in Harlem, and she attended the elite **Hunter College High School** and won a full scholarship to Vassar College. She studied philosophy at Oxford University for a semester. After college, from 1981 to 1982, she got a master’s degree in Curriculum and Instruction at **Columbia University’s Teachers College** as part of a program for minority women.

In 1985, Gonzalez-Campbell went back “up the hill,” to Harlem, to teach at the elementary school that she attended as a child, at 133rd Street and Amsterdam Avenue.

“Harlem of that time was a place of vitality and a lot of arts and learning and engaging, and I think it was quite natural of me to want to be a catalyst of change,” she said.

She again went back to school, in the early 1990’s, for a degree program for minorities in education administration at the **City College of New York** even though the youngest of her four children was still in diapers. Today, her only son, a graduate of West Point, is serving in Iraq.

Her most recent position was as deputy superintendent at the **Mount Vernon school district** in Westchester. There, Gonzalez-Campbell dealt with what she called an “excess staff” and chronic absenteeism. She had to trim the staff and encourage punctuality, though she said she was able to avoid using remedial measures like requiring teachers to punch in on a time clock.

“She’s wonderful with special education,” said Teresa Scott, who supervises that program for some of the middle and elementary schools in the district and who was managed by Gonzalez-Campbell.

“She’s tough. I used to call her the pit-bull. Anything we wanted done she got done for us. Everything that was out of compliance, she made in compliance.”

Many of her moves at Mt. Vernon and Far Rockaway could have made her unpopular as a newcomer, but Gonzalez-Campbell said she built a rapport with everyone from teachers to custodians.

“Say, I walked into the boiler room and they told me the doorknobs are missing,” she said. “I didn’t just write it down, I made sure that he got those knobs, and he was like, wait a minute, she listens me and she acknowledged me.”

Back at the Barnes & Noble, Gonzalez-Campbell has settled in to read to her granddaughter Liya, whom she says is tri-lingual—in English, Spanish and sign language. She encourages Liya to read a page, but Liya just squirms, happily pointing to the pictures. It remains to be seen whether she and her grandmother will add Hebrew to their list.

**Tagged as:** [charter schools](#), [Deborah Almontaser](#), [dual-language schools](#), [Hebrew Language Academy](#), [Hellenic Classical Charter School](#), [Khalil Gibran International Academy](#), [Mill Basin Brooklyn](#)

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