



FAME Public Charter School soars

By Miriam G. Mazliach

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Photos By courtesy of Maram Alaiwat

"I believe for a whole variety of reasons that small class size and personalized attention are some of the main reasons parents select us; but the safety and comfort level of their children is also a major consideration," says Maram Alaiwat, founder of FAME Public Charter School.

FAME, not to be confused with the Fine Arts school, stands for "Families of Alameda for Multi-Cultural/Multi-Lingual Education." The school's students represent the new immigrant community from the Middle East and Southeast Asia.

According to Alaiwat, parents say that as immigrants, their children have sometimes been bullied at other schools. Students feel less stress at FAME and are happy to attend.

"Unless a student is emotionally safe, they can't focus on academics," says Alaiwat. "They can express themselves here and take pride in their identity as acculturated Americans."

Twelve years ago, FAME founder Alaiwat moved from Florida, where she was a hospital administrator, re-locating to San Leandro with her then five- year-old. She visited local school districts before deciding to home school her son after seeing the classroom ratio of 30-35 students. Later Alaiwat moved to Fremont where she has resided for 11 years.

At the time, Alaiwat began researching options and realized that there was a great-unmet demand in the community. Seeing so many parents interested in home schooling, she first developed the "B.A. School for Independent Study" and ran it as a small group with social activities and workshops. Parents and children met at public libraries and parks. Alaiwat spent a year helping others connect to resources and the number of participants grew from 200 to over 700 students in over three years.

Alaiwat began to wonder how to serve kids who didn't speak English or whose parents felt uncomfortable with the traditional public schools. "I grew up as an Arab-American and know that parents need to be able to communicate with the teachers and staff to help their children with their aspirations and contribute to their education," says Alaiwat.

"We opened up an Independent Resource Center in Oakland," adds Alaiwat. "There were many immigrant families, economically disadvantaged youth, at-risk kids, foster kids, and non-English

speaking families. After creating our drop-in center, it became very popular and the numbers of kids coming in for activities increased from 70 to 240 kids a day."

"To better serve the students who needed daily support, we decided to petition Alameda County in 2005, to open a school." Alaiwat explains, "As a countywide school, you can open a school in any district as long as it's put in their charter and we then became fully chartered."

As a public charter school, FAME does not charge tuition; it has a secular curriculum and is funded by the state.

"We receive only 70 percent of the funding that districts receive," says Alaiwat. "We have an extremely committed board and staff. We're here for the kids. Books, teachers and kids don't get cut. We make cuts in administration, facilities and extras, anything that doesn't impact the students."

FAME has made a commitment to smaller class sizes. The school limits grades K-3 to 20 or fewer students, grades four through eight from 20 to 25 students per class and the high school ratio is one teacher for every 18 students. Alaiwat says, "High school students also need more attention as they prepare for college and we take the time to speak with them."

A student can come to FAME from any of the seven counties it serves from San Francisco to Santa Clara. Fifteen hundred students attend the three campuses; two in Fremont and one in San Leandro. Home-based education and administrative offices are located in Dublin.

One of the most unique aspects of the school is that Arabic is offered as a second language. No other K-12 public school in California offers that opportunity. Also, Alaiwat says that the staff speaks 11 - 14 different languages, to ease communication with parents and students.

Of note, FAME is the first school in ten years to be adopted by the F.B.I. This collaborative effort involves the school's 5th graders in the Junior Agent Program. The students learn some Forensic Science and also what the F.B.I. is all about, helping to demystify the agency and show how government works. The students will even get an opportunity to visit the F.B.I. office.

Alaiwat sums up, "Many of our students had been home-schooled previously because of various issues. We feel we're providing a real opportunity to serve them in a specific way that was not an option in the county elsewhere."

FAME's five-year charter is up for renewal with the current contract expiring in June 2010. They are going through the renewal process with November 10 set for the first public hearing.

To contact FAME go to their website: www.famecharter.org