



Carlos Rosario Public Charter School: Training a Diverse Workforce



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The Carlos Rosario

International Public Charter School on Harvard Street NW (Courtesy photo)

The Carlos Rosario International Public Charter has helped scores of adults in the District, especially those from immigrant backgrounds, become educated as a means of obtaining employment in the workforce and academically preparing its students for higher education, according to its leader.

Allison R. Kokkoros serves as the CEO of the charter school, located in the Northwest quadrant in Ward 1. Kokkoros said her school has become a noted educational institution in the District.

“Rosario is a national model when it comes to adult education,” Kokkoros said. “We specialize in workforce development that helps workers connect to careers. While we work primarily with the immigrant community, we will help anyone who wants to be successful.”

Rosario started in the 1970s as a small, grassroots organization under the auspices of Sonia Gutierrez, a District public schools counselor who facilitated the Program for English Instruction to Latin Americans and eventually becoming its director. Gutierrez transformed the aforementioned project into the English as a Second Language program and expanded it over time into a comprehensive adult education initiative. In 1996, Gutierrez started a nonprofit as a

result of District leaders cutting funds for adult education programs. She sought public charter school status for her nonprofit group and achieved that goal in 1998, starting the first adult public charter school in the nation. Gutierrez presently serves as president emeritus and founder of Rosario.

Rosario's website said the school has over 2,000 students and 80,000 alumni, one of which, Kokkoros said, has become a vice president for Bank of America. She said students possess backgrounds from 80 countries and speak 50 languages.

The school's curriculum consists of foundational courses in English, the GED, digital technology and online communication tools, according to the school's website. Plus, the citizenship naturalization test and career training in high growth and demand fields such as nursing, technology, culinary arts, bilingual education and construction pre-apprenticeship are offered. Students interested in higher education can participate in the college preparation program, Kokkoros said. She said students have enrolled in higher education institutions such as the University of the District of Columbia, Montgomery College and Georgetown University and in recent years Rosario has played a role in the awarding of 73 scholarships for those who are college-bound.

"Some of our alumni have been on the dean's list at UDC," she said. "When you leave Rosario, we keep in touch. Our alumni come back and talk about their college experiences."

Despite the success, the school has had its problems such as dealing with the coronavirus pandemic that came to the District in mid-March, Kokkoros said. Rosario had to adjust the way it operates, she said.

"We had to pivot and fast," Kokkoros said. "We had to change overnight because of COVID-19. We had to shift from in-person to distance learning. Many of our students do not have access to the Internet at home. Many students work in the hospitality industry and lot of them lost their jobs because of the pandemic. Despite these challenges, our students were determined to learn and so we helped them out."

Kokkoros said the school's computers and laptops became available to the students to work on at home, with the teachers and IT staff instructing on how the tools operate. She said the school raised \$50,000 for a student emergency fund designed to help students meet challenges such as buying groceries and making rent and mortgage payments. Kokkoros said teachers donated their stimulus checks to the emergency fund to help students.

While Kokkoros knows some people in the District see Rosario as an exclusively Latino immigrant school, she refutes that perception.

"We are a charter school and our doors are open to all residents," she said. "We are open to anyone who would benefit from our programs. We have African American students who are in our culinary arts program and have done outstanding. There are a number of African Americans in our IT certification programs, too. Ethiopians are our largest group of African students but we have had students from Cameroon and the Central African Republic and other African countries. We are like a "mini-UN."

One of Rosario's pupils of Ethiopian descent, Kalkidan Weldearegay, has been studying in the nursing aide program since January. Weldearegay, a senior at UDC who hopes to go to medical school, said Rosario has been beneficial.

"My nurse's aide education is more affordable at Carlos Rosario and I managed to get a stipend," she said. "The staff is open-minded and supportive. They have been really wonderful during the pandemic, giving me a laptop to do my work. I am glad I attend this school."

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