

Adult Charter Schools Address Post-COVID Workforce Development



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Olianka Wingate,
student services director at Carlos Rosario International Public Charter School, talks with a student.
(Courtesy photo)

As the District embarks on a return to pre-pandemic conditions, the public and private sectors are collaborating on matters of employment and workforce development. Local adult charter schools have also been on the frontlines of these ongoing efforts.

At Carlos Rosario International Public Charter School for instance, Olianka Wingate and her colleagues have continued along in their attempt to remove barriers to employment for adult students, many of whom emigrated to the U.S. from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America.

Throughout the pandemic, many faced hurdles of competing demands to meet their academic obligations simultaneously with their children who are learning virtually at home. With much of the world reopening, the race to reenter the workforce has intensified among the students Wingate encounters.

“Before the pandemic, competition was normal, but now it’s getting tougher,” said Wingate, director of student services at Carlos Rosario International Public Charter School, where students can take language courses, or acquire their GED along with certifications in health, IT, culinary arts and education.

While helping some of the more than 2,100 students navigate the school’s curriculum, Wingate, a native of the Dominican Republic and District resident of 13 years, reflects on her own experiences as a student.

Upon graduating from Carlos Rosario in 2011, Wingate obtained an associate’s and bachelor’s degree from the University of the District of Columbia before returning to her alma mater as a bookkeeper and later ascending to her current role.

“Higher education is more in demand than before,” she told The Informer.

“Our Department of Student Success connects students with scholarships and helps them get their credentials validated. If they don’t have that, we provide them with GED. We guide them all the way to the end.”

RESOURCES, FLEXIBILITY NEEDED

Carlos Rosario International Public Charter School counted among the groups represented on a virtual panel titled “DC’s Post-COVID Economy: Adult Charter Schools and a Resilient Workforce.” The discussion, which took place on June 10, featured D.C. Council member Elissa Silverman (I-At large).

At the Goodwill Excel Center, that also means providing students with a flexible academic environment that doesn’t compete with their priorities as parents and leaders in their families.

On July 15, a second cohort of graduates for the 2021-2022 academic year will mark their milestone at Nationals Park. Fifty adult learners completed Goodwill Excel’s program at their own pace as part of an extended-year model where enrollees can take on as many courses as desired during five eight-week grading periods.

This course load, Goodwill Excel Center Director Chelsea Kirk told The Informer, merges secondary and post-secondary instruction, along with access to a childcare center and travel stipends.

Kirk said that these offerings have been of particular benefit to students during the pandemic that opened their eyes to a world of new possibilities.

“That has been a big shift for the adult learner. People leave school because of school structure, family situations, employment, and health [along with] not having a good relationship with people at their old schools,” she continued.

CHANGING LANDSCAPE INCREASES COMPETITION

Research conducted by McKinsey & Company showed that more than 25 percent of workers than previously estimated will have to make a career shift due to trends in remote work, e-commerce and automation.

Experts said these changes would affect workers in the healthcare, food services and hospitality fields where human contact stands at above 80 percent.

In anticipation of these trends, administrators at The Family Place Public Charter School are trying to help members of their multigenerational, multi-ethnic student population acquire the computer skills they need to compete in the digital realm.

In addition to the English language learner coursework, students learn how to use Chromebooks, navigate Zoom video conferencing and tackle the sometimes mundane aspects of the job search, including filling out online applications.

For Haley Wiggins, executive director of The Family Place, a three-year-old charter school, the adult students who come through the doors of the school need these resources now more than ever, especially given what many of them as English language learners had to endure throughout the pandemic.

“People have lost jobs and they’re starting to go back but they’re getting less hours. They’re picking up work wherever they can but it’s interrupting their studies,” Wiggins told The Informer.

“There are a lot of hard decisions being made, and priorities are shifting to take any job. [That’s why] we’re trying to stay in touch with people with food support, training and other resources to encourage them to keep studying so when the opportunity arises, they can advance.”

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