

Education

D.C. school for immigrants, adults could see expansion in its future



The Carlos Rosario International Public Charter School has two campuses, with its flagship one on Harvard Street NW in Columbia Heights.

CARLOS ROSARIO INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL

IN THIS ARTICLE

- **Diversity, Equity and Inclusion**Topic
- **Carlos Rosario International Public Charter School, Inc.**Company
- **Allison Kokkoros**Person
- **Sonia Gutierrez**Person

By **Jin Ni** – Contributing Writer

Jul 13, 2021 **Updated** Jul 13, 2021, 4:31pm EDT

At a time when many employers are facing labor shortages in the post-Covid economy, adult education schools such as Carlos Rosario International Public Charter School are becoming instrumental in helping train an often underemployed population: immigrants.

And the demand for such training has only grown through the pandemic, according to school officials.

“Employers have come to us saying they’re desperate for employees,” said [Allison Kokkoros](#), CEO of the Carlos Rosario school, which operates a campus in Columbia Heights and another in Eckington. “They’ve told us that they’ve come to need their employees to become generalists instead of specialists, for example — someone who can wash dishes and then transition to being a hostess. They also tell us they rely on us to provide people who can do the work confidently and address worker shortages.”

Throughout Covid, Carlos Rosario’s adult education program partnered with a number of local employers to adjust its skills training curricula to better meet their needs as the businesses evolved during the pandemic. Those partners included MedStar Washington Hospital Center, local government institutions such as the D.C. Office of Unified Communications, and multiple food and drink establishments, from the Panera Bread at George Washington University to Le Caprice D.C. Bakery.

It’s gotten to the point where Kokkoros said she’s heard from potential backers in Maryland, and even Florida and Arizona, to set up similar schools there to meet the need. The Carlos Rosario board of trustees, during its May meeting, discussed possible steps to expand into those markets, while also emphasizing a need for more leadership development and diversity and inclusion initiatives for staff and students.

“D.C. is different in that we have invested in adult education, in charter schools. But other places are not as lucky,” Kokkoros said. “So we’re looking for a way to expand that is differentiated for each of those areas and the communities they serve. We’re also looking for key partners and underwriting partners to make that all possible.”

The D.C public charter school, which had even gained attention from as far away as Wales when Prince Charles visited from there in 2015, offers curriculum for the local immigrant population in industries such as health care, information technology, hospitality and education. It also offers more than 40 scholarships totaling \$125,000 through its Transitions program for those who want to pursue higher education, hoping to fill what’s long been a financial gap for older immigrants who want to attend college.

In 2016, immigrants added nearly \$2 trillion to the U.S. gross domestic product, accounting for 19% of jobs in manufacturing, 17% in health care and 25% in construction, according to [a 2020 study](#) by the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School. And while immigrants make up 15% of the U.S. workforce, they are 80% more likely than American-born workers to become entrepreneurs.

But like the rest of America, the 1,800 students currently enrolled at Carlos Rosario — representing 80 countries and 50 languages — did not escape unscathed from the pandemic. Many of them were working in hospitality, the sector that was hit hardest by the coronavirus and [lost nearly 7.7 million jobs in 2020](#). Others lost their lives working in health care, and still others struggled to balance work, family and their safety all at once, Kokkoros said.

During the pandemic, the school moved to virtual instruction, spending \$1.6 million to acquire internet-enabled laptops for each student and providing one-on-one instruction on how to use it and become digitally literate. It also created workshops for parents with children in K-12 schools.

Carlos Rosario was able to fund those efforts, in part, with the Bowser administration's allotment of federal funds to support adult education, as well as a combined \$372,000 grant from the D.C. Education Equity Fund and Scholarships for Opportunity and Results Act funding. Since then, the school has also received an Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief fund grant of \$1 million from the U.S. Department of Education. Those dollars will go toward technology, staffing and acquiring personal protective equipment to keep the school environment safe for the fall semester.



The Carlos Rosario school held some virtual and some in-person classes through the pandemic with social distancing and mask requirements in place for students and staff.

CARLOS ROSARIO INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL

For the 2021 fiscal year, the school has a \$30 million operating budget, forecasting that it will be roughly \$600,000 under budget for the year. That's despite projections that its direct student expenses will nearly double to \$1.4 million in fiscal 2021, from [fiscal 2020's \\$780,000](#).

This fall, Carlos Rosario will run three instructional tracks concurrently — fully in person, fully virtual and a hybrid of the two — to give its students the most flexibility to navigate personal and professional challenges.

“When the pandemic hit, and we saw this was going to be longer term, there were some in our field of adult education and workforce development who said it would not be possible,” Kokkoros said. “Some people would just have to stop their career training and adult basic education until classes were back in person. And we didn’t take that as a fait accompli. Our teachers and our students both persisted.”

Since the pandemic, the school said, 150 students have passed their GED subject exams, 41 have passed the official U.S. citizenship exam, and 22 bilingual teaching assistants have graduated and are now applying to enter the education field.

The Carlos Rosario charter school was co-founded in 1970 by its namesake, a Puerto Rican native, World War II veteran and former government worker, as PEILA, or the Program of English Instruction for Latin Americans, and one of PEILA's founding counselors and directors, [Sonia Gutierrez](#), now its president emeritus. Since the school's start, it counts more than 70,000 graduates and nearly 2,500 enrollees annually, as well as 250 teachers and administrative staff. Some alums go on to open their own businesses locally — Daniela Moreira, a graduate of the Carlos Rosario Culinary Arts Program, is the chef and co-owner of popular eateries Timber Pizza Co. and Call Your Mother.

The school has drawn its funding from several sources and D.C. employers, including the Hotel Association of Washington D.C., Downtown D.C. Business Improvement District and Moya Design Partners. It’s also funded through federal and local grants, fundraisers and individual sponsors.

<https://www.bizjournals.com/washington/news/2021/07/13/dc-carlos-rosario-international-charter-school.html>