

**The New York Times**

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com) for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

PRINTER-FRIENDLY FORMAT  
SPONSORED BY 

**January 10, 2009**

## For Immigrants, Best of 2 Worlds in Charters

**By [SARA RIMER](#)**

MINNEAPOLIS — Fartun Warsame, a Somali immigrant, thought she was being a good mother when she transferred her five boys to a top elementary school in an affluent Minneapolis suburb. Besides its academic advantages, the school was close to her job as an ultrasound technician, so if the teachers called, she could get there right away.

“Immediately they changed,” Ms. Warsame said of her sons. “They wanted to wear shorts. They’d say, ‘Buy me this.’ I said, ‘Where did you guys get this idea you can control me?’ ”

Her sons informed her that this was the way things were in America. But not in this Somali mother’s house. She soon moved them back to the city, to the International Elementary School, a charter school of about 560 pupils in downtown Minneapolis founded by leaders of the city’s large East African community. The extra commuting time was worth the return to the old order: five well-behaved sons, and one all-powerful mother.

Charter schools, which are publicly financed but independently run, were conceived as a way to improve academic performance. But for immigrant families, they have also become havens where their children are shielded from the American youth culture that pervades large district schools.

The curriculum at the Twin Cities International Elementary School, and at its partner middle school and high school, is similar to that of other public schools with high academic goals. But at Twin Cities International the girls say they can freely wear head scarves without being teased, the lunchroom serves food that meets the dietary requirements of Muslims, and in every classroom there are East African teaching assistants who understand the needs of students who may have spent years in refugee camps. Twin Cities International students are from Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia and Sudan, with a small population from the Middle East.

Amid the wave of [immigration](#) that has been reshaping Minnesota for more than three decades, the International schools are among 30 of the state’s 138 charter schools that are focused mostly on students from specific immigrant or ethnic groups. To visit a half-dozen of these schools, to listen to teachers, administrators and parents — Somali immigrants who are relatively new to Minnesota, as well as the [Hmong](#) and Latinos who have been in the state for decades — is to understand that Ms. Warsame’s high educational aspirations for her children, and her fears, are universal.

“The good news is that immigrant kids are learning English better and faster than ever before in U.S. history,” said Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco, the co-director of [immigration studies](#) at [New York University](#) and co-author of “Learning a New Land — Immigrant Students in American Society” (Harvard Press, 2008). “But they’re assimilating to a society that parents see as very threatening and frightening. It’s anti-authority, anti-studying. It’s materialistic.”

Some critics argue that these kinds of charter schools are contributing to a growing re-segregation of public education, and that they run counter to the long-held idea of public schools as the primary institution of the so-called “melting pot,” the engine that forges a common American identity among immigrants from many countries.

“One of the primary reasons that American society supports public schools is to give everyone a solid civic education,” said [Diane Ravitch](#), an education historian, “the sort of education that comes from learning together with others from different backgrounds.”

But Dr. Suárez-Orozco says the reality is that most new immigrants become isolated in public schools, and that large numbers of them become alienated over time and fail to graduate.

A place like Minnesota, with its strong charter-school movement, offers immigrant parents, who have long been conflicted about their children becoming Americanized, a strong voice in their children’s education, Dr. Suárez-Orozco said, and shows their eagerness to participate in democracy.

“What the parents are saying,” he said, “is, We want our children to assimilate, we want them to acculturate, but we want to be proactively engaged in shaping that process.”

Ali Somo, a 70-year-old father of three children at the International Schools, put it this way: “We bring our children here because we want them close to us so they don’t get lost.”

It was a weekday morning, but Mr. Somo and Ms. Warsame and a group of other parents, some holding down double shifts as cabdrivers, hotel housekeepers, and parking lot attendants, were squeezing in a meeting in the school library, with its shelves lined with “Huckleberry Finn,” “The Red Badge of Courage,” “Little House on the Prairie” and other American classics.

Getting lost in America, Mr. Somo explained, means losing your culture, your language, your identity. It means acting like the teenagers the parents see on the street — wearing baggy jeans, smoking, using drugs, disrespecting elders.

“I have been in America, and I have observed,” Mr. Somo testified. “I have seen children with their pants falling off. I have seen them doing drugs.”

The parents around him nodded. Another father, Jelil Abdella, talked about how it saddened him that his two grown children, who had attended large district schools, did not know how to speak Somali. “They’re neither American, nor Somali,” Mr. Abdella said.

As a newcomer, he said, he was too busy going to school and earning a living — driving a taxi, cleaning floors, working in a factory, picking blueberries — to supervise their educations closely.

“I don’t want to make the same mistake with my younger children,” he said. “I want them to keep the good things we used to have back home — respecting their parents, helping each other, respecting their elders.”

Another father, Mahamaud Wardere, said: “It is important that they all know they’re American. It is equally important that they know they’re Somali.”

It is this dual identity that the International Schools work to encourage. There are lessons in snowshoeing and baseball, and field trips to the Mall of America, where instead of shopping, the students participate in another American ritual, the charity fund-raising walk. There are also teen-agers complaining that their parents worry too much.

“I can at least account for more than 200 lectures I’ve had from my mom and dad about American culture here,” said Omar Ahmed, a 14-year-old eighth grader. “My dad always says, ‘Back in Somalia, when I was 14, I could see myself running my own business, having my own children. You’re 14, you can’t get your studies done.’ ”

“Every time my mom sees something bad about teens in the news,” Omar said, “there’s another lecture on that subject.”

Perhaps nothing more vividly demonstrated the students’ enthusiasm for American democracy than a debate this fall in Elizabeth Veldman’s eighth-grade social studies class about the presidential race. The two teams of students had spent days preparing.

“Look at our history — look at what happened with the Vietnam War,” said Yaqub Ali, 13, a fervent supporter of Senator [John McCain](#) who arrived four years ago from a Somalian refugee camp in Kenya, knowing no English. “Do you want to lose a war?”

“Sit down, Yaqub!” commanded Ridwa Yakob, who describes herself as “a girl who loves to talk.” She argued that Senator [Barack Obama](#) would fix everything from education to the economy.

Yaqub, wearing a dark suit for the occasion, rose again. “John McCain is old,” he said. “It is better to be old.”

At the International school, where elders are revered, even Ridwa was silenced.

At their meeting, the parents talked of the importance of speaking English at school — and Somali or Oromo at home. At other charter schools, Hmong refugee and Latino parents expressed the same wish, the difference being that they want their children to speak Hmong, or Spanish, at home, the other difference being that many of their children are already so Americanized that they are learning their parents’ languages in school.

“The other day a spider fell from the roof and my son picked it up,” Mr. Somo said, referring to his 13-year-old, Hussein. “What do you call it in English, I asked him. He told me. How to say it in Oromo — I told him myself. How to say it in Arabic and Somali — he learned it himself. He was able to say the word for “spider” in four languages.”

With that kind of linguistic talent, Mr. Somo said of his son, “he can work for America anywhere in the world.”

Dr. Suárez-Orozco said: “What these parents are doing, in taking ownership of their children’s schools, is as American as apple pie. They’re doing what soccer moms and dads in Lexington, Mass., and Concord and Cambridge do day in and day out. They’re modeling for kids the story of acculturation and how it works.”

Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)

---