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Push to reinstate Khalil Gibran school's principal

BY DANIEL MASSEY Special to Newsday
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A group of elected officials called on the city's mayor and schools chancellor to reinstate the former principal of the embattled Khalil Gibran International Academy, a Brooklyn school that emphasizes Arab studies, culture and language.

The demand, made yesterday outside Department of Education headquarters in lower Manhattan, marked the first time local elected officials have publicly backed ousted educator Debbie Almontaser.

She resigned from the new school in August, before it opened, amid an outcry over her defense of the word "intifada" on T-shirts sold by a local youth group.

Councilman Robert Jackson (D-Manhattan), who chairs the Education Committee, called for a meeting with Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Schools Chancellor Joel Klein to discuss the Boerum Hill academy's future.

"I'm going to ask them to give the school the support it needs to grow and succeed," Jackson said. "And I'm going to recommend they stand with me in order to reinstate Debbie."

Jackson, who was joined by City Councilman John Liu (D-Flushing), state Sen. Bill Perkins (D-Manhattan) and Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz, said they did not speak out earlier because they did not want to jeopardize the school's opening earlier this month.

The officials also conceded they had been hesitant to enter a contentious public debate.

City Education Department spokeswoman Melody Meyer said the agency will not invite

Almontaser back, though the department has supported the school since its inception and remains committed to its success.

"We have no plans to reinstate the former principal," Meyer said.

The public school, criticized by conservative groups and some media for its focus on Middle Eastern culture, opened with 55 sixth-grade students. Plans call for the school eventually to expand through 12th grade.

Almontaser did not appear at the news conference. Donna Nevel, a member of Communities in Support of Khalil Gibran Academy, read a statement suggesting that the former principal wants to return to the school. She reiterated a call that the City Council investigate events leading to Almontaser's resignation.

"Khalil Gibran International Academy has faced unfair attacks," Nevel said. "That has created a pressure that the DOE has not stood up to."

The school's opponents continued to claim it would teach extremist strains of Islam and again called on the city to shut it down.

"I don't give a damn who runs it. I don't care if Anwar Sadat runs it. This is not the issue," said Jeffrey Wiesenfeld, referring to the Egyptian politician who initiated peace negotiations with Israel and shared the 1978 Nobel peace prize with Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin. Sadat was assassinated by Muslim extremists in 1981.

Wiesenfeld, who was an aide to former Gov. George Pataki, and is a member of Citizens for American Values in Public Education, an umbrella group of opponents, said, "Arabic should be taught in the rubric of

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Meanwhile, family members of students and religious leaders joined the elected officials in seeking Almontaser's reinstatement.

Sara Said, 21, a college student who emigrated from Yemen 12 years ago and lives in Brooklyn, said her brother, 11, is learning math and science as well as Arabic at Khalil Gibran.

"I want him to be in an environment where he learns about Arabic culture," she said. "That way he'll be proud of who he is."

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