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## Controversial Arabic school opens in Brooklyn

BY DANIEL MASSEY

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The reporters and cameras swarming the new Khalil Gibran International Academy in Brooklyn yesterday and the controversy surrounding the school in recent months didn't bother Najat Handou.

What mattered to her is that her son is to learn Arabic.

The boy, Rhounam Adnan, and 54 other students scurried past reporters and dozens of supporters yesterday as they entered the new Boerum Hill middle school.

The city academy, criticized by some for its focus on the Arabic language and Middle Eastern culture, drew the media scrum as some 1.1 million public school kids returned to classrooms around the city for the first day of school.

"We want them to not only speak Arabic, we want them to write and read, which will help them in the future," said Handou, 34, of Brooklyn.

Supporters from a coalition of religious and community groups greeted the sixth graders by waving multicolored signs reading "Welcome" in English and Arabic.

The Department of Education's announcement in February of plans to open the school sparked controversy. The academy's founding principal, Debbie Almontaser, was forced to resign last month after she publicly defended use of the word "intifada" on T-shirts sold by a local youth group.

As the students settled into classrooms yesterday, supporters passed out a statement calling on the City Council to launch an investigation into the events leading up to Almontaser's resignation.

Later in the day, 20 opponents of the school, calling themselves the Stop the Madrassa Coalition, gathered on the steps of City Hall and raised placards that read "Stop the Madrassa" and "Public Schools Should Share Common Values."

"Madrassa" is Arabic for "school." But the word, in some quarters, has become associated with a place that teaches extremist forms of Islam.

Critics denounced the school, saying it was the brainchild of extremists, and called on Mayor Michael



Bloomberg and Schools Chancellor Joel Klein to close it.

"The burden to prove that it's not a madrassa is on them because they refuse to provide us with even the most basic information about textbooks, curriculum and faculty," said Stuart Kaufman, a member of the coalition.

Melody Meyer, a spokeswoman for the Department of Education, said the curriculum is posted on the school's Web site and all teachers are certified. Also, the department has dozens of similar dual-language schools across the city, including ones that teach Spanish and Chinese. "We have more than 60 schools that are successful at doing the same thing," Meyer said.

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