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Dr. Richard P. Mills
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Re: Petition to postpone the opening of the Khalil Gibran International Academy (“KGIA”) until the City of New York Department of Education provides a full disclosure of the facts

Dear Chancellor Klein and Commissioner Mills:

We are writing once again on behalf of our clients, a coalition of concerned citizens, including among others, parents, residents and teachers of New York City, to petition the City of New York Department of Education (“NYDOE”) and/or the State of New York Education Department (“NYSED”) to postpone the opening of the Khalil Gibran International Academy (“KGIA”) until such time as the NYDOE provides a full disclosure of the facts to explain the confusion, ineptitude, secrecy and apparent deception surrounding the formation of the school, its principal promoters and administrators, and its agenda.

Urgency of the Petition:

The urgency of this petition is highlighted by the fact that the designated “principal”, organizer, and driving force behind KGIA, Dhabah “Debbie” Almontaser, tendered her resignation under a storm of protests this past Friday, August 10. Her resignation was accepted the same day and announced to the public by Mayor Michael Bloomberg on his weekly radio program.

Ms. Almontaser was forced to resign after she dissembled about her views concerning the term “intifada” – a word she tried to suggest did not have its plain meaning: a violent insurrection against freedom-loving Western societies. As the *New York Post* [editorialized last week](#)¹, “[Almontaser] initially dismissed the significance of the term ‘intifada,’ saying it was merely an

¹ See, www.nypost.com/seven/08102007/postopinion/editorials/whats_arabic_for_shut_it_down_editorials.htm.

Arabic word meaning ‘shaking off,’ and claimed the shirts were ‘an opportunity for girls to express that they are part of New York City society...and shaking off oppression.’ That’s nonsense on its face; anyone foolish enough to believe it isn’t fit to hold a teacher’s license, let alone a principal’s warrant.”

The result of Ms. Almontaser’s resignation is that a public school she designed and developed effectively without any public input, review or scrutiny, is set to open in three weeks lacking proper leadership and oversight. State law mandates that certain standards be adhered to in our public and private schools. Given the public record available today, it appears that these standards have been either ignored by Ms. Almontaser and the NYDOE or simply violated.

After four separate Freedom of Information Law (“FOIL”) requests made by members of our client group or by the undersigned on behalf of our clients over the past few months, the NYDOE has refused to respond in any meaningful way. Given Ms. Almontaser’s resignation and the events and public statements surrounding that resignation, together with the NYDOE’s refusal to allow any public scrutiny of the curricula, teaching plans, hiring practices, and agenda of the school, city and state education officials are on notice that failure to postpone the opening of KGIA until a full and fair accounting can be made by disinterested professionals and the public is tantamount to a reckless disregard of the public trust imposed by statute and regulation.

FACTS.

Background. In the early months of 2007, Brooklyn residents learned of a City plan to locate a New York City public school, to be named the Khalil Gibran International Academy (KGIA), as a school within a school catering to English and Arabic speaking students. The purported mission of KGIA, according to Garth Harries, Chief Executive of the Office of New Schools, is as follows:

[KGIA] will offer a challenging multicultural curriculum through standard and project-based learning. The program integrates intensive Arabic language instruction and the study of Middle Eastern history and historical figures to enliven learning across all subject areas. The goal is to prepare students for college and successful careers, and to foster an understanding of different cultures, a love of learning, and desire for excellence in all of its students.

The development of this new school for Arabic language and Middle Eastern history became a public issue in late spring/early summer because the City had initially chosen to locate the school within a public school in Park Slope. The parents of that school were opposed to this idea because the planning and logistics were poorly considered and inadequately developed. With the intense opposition by concerned parents and the City’s inability to address the substantive issues raised by the community, the City scrambled and decided to use instead an alternative location at 345 Dean Street in Boerum Hill, Brooklyn, a building that currently houses the Brooklyn High School of the Arts and the Math and Science Exploratory School, a middle school.

NYDOE Refuses to Comply with FOIL. Beyond the confusion about the physical logistics of the school, the documented evidence that does exist suggests that the city and state officials charged with establishing a special Arabic/Middle Eastern public school have either failed to properly conduct the necessary background and preparatory work to open such a school, or they are purposefully evading their legal obligations to inform the public of the status of their work

because of a hidden agenda to teach far more than just the Arabic language. We make this serious charge based upon the facts as they exist, notwithstanding the failure of the NYDOE to respond to our FOIL requests. (On August 2, 2007, we filed an appeal on behalf of our clients to the decision by the NYDOE and the NYSED to deny our client's latest FOIL request. As of the date of this petition, we have received no response to the appeal.)

The **only** document provided by the NYDOE to our clients' four FOIL requests has been an "Executive Summary" which was apparently prepared by Ms. Almontaser for the NYDOE as part of a grant application to the New Visions for Public Schools organization (provided in response to NYDOE FOIL request number 5226).

The Evidence of a Hidden Agenda. The Executive Summary explains its mission as follows:

KGIA's mission is to prepare students of **diverse** backgrounds for success in an increasingly global and interdependent society. Our focus is on holistic student development and rigorous academics. Through **multicultural** curriculum and intensive Arabic language instruction, students graduate with the skills they need to become empowered independent thinkers who are able to work with cultures beyond their own.

Yet throughout the Executive Summary, there is little mention of "diversity" or "multiculturalism". Instead, there are guideposts to direct the reader to the real underlying agenda.

For example, the following is provided as an explanation of the school's uniqueness:

One of the unique educational experiences of the Academy will be learning the **history, culture** and official language of the Arab Nations. Our students will, therefore, be able to appreciate the similarities and differences of the many peoples that make up the Middle East and North Africa as well as learn about the history of Arabs in America. (Emphasis added.)

Further, in the course descriptions, the **only** courses in the "Arts" are:

Visual arts of Arab nations, Arabic Music, Playwriting & Drama Workshop

Why does the Executive Summary, which apparently went through several careful rewrites and amendments, speak in the singular as if there is only one history and culture in Arab countries? Is not one of the more salient facts about this region that its history is a political minefield due in large part to the diversity of cultures that have either been at war or lived in submission under tyranny? Which historical narrative will be taught? Have the text books for this narrative been reviewed? Is there but one culture in any given Arab state? In Iraq, the internecine battle of cultures and religion is on display daily. What will the students be taught of these differences? Or, why, for example, has political and religious liberty never been a part of the Arab world?

Moreover, the KGIA teachers are expected to participate in special workshops provided by Columbia University's Teacher's College Department of International and Transcultural Studies and described as follows:

...teacher professional development workshops in Arabic literature, the Arab Diaspora, art and music, education, economy/oil, **Islam, Israeli Culture, Middle East history**, political systems and reform, and women. (Emphasis added.)

Why will the teachers only learn about “Islam”? Are there no other important religions in the region? What of the Sephardic Jews who were so important in all the countries that now make up the Middle East prior to their forced exodus upon the creation of the State of Israel? What of the unique Christian communities, including the Coptic Christians and the Maronite Christians? Will the teachers and students learn of [the persecutions of the Christians](#)² in the region?

Is it not still stranger that given the failure to reference any other religion, “Israeli Culture” follows Islam as a kind of juxtaposition? What does Israeli Culture have to do with the agenda of an Arabic language school? Finally, which version of “Middle East history” will the teachers be teaching? Who will provide the course material? Who will provide the instruction?

If in fact such instruction comes from Columbia University as the Executive Summary suggests, it is likely to be the product of the Middle East Institute, which sponsored a special [New York City teachers’ forum](#)³ described as follows:

On February 14, 2002, Columbia University's Muslim Communities in New York City Project, supported by the Ford Foundation, hosted a one-day in-service training for over one hundred New York City high school teachers. This special program, (Re)embracing Diversity in New York City Public Schools: Educational Outreach for Muslim Sensitivity, provided teachers with a fully integrated mini-curriculum that addresses the problem of intolerance towards Arab-, South Asian- and Muslim-Americans in the wake of the tragic events of 9/11.

Dhabah Almontaser was part of the [curriculum design team and one of the instructors](#)⁴ for the project. Two of the handouts provided as part of the curriculum, are illustrative of the problems of a uniquely Arab-Islamic historical narrative:

[Handout 9](#)⁵ (from the Council on Islamic Education): Entitled, "What is Jihad?" The answer provided: "Systematic, forced conversion to Islam is a historical myth. Muslims defeated hostile forces (Byzantines and Persians for example) and gained control of new lands where Islamic rule was established, yet non-Muslim inhabitants were not forced to become Muslims. . . . For various reasons, and in the course of time, many non-Muslims did find the message of Islam appealing, and converted to Islam, resulting ultimately in the transformation of society at all levels."

[Handout 14](#)⁶ (from the Islamic Affairs Department, **Embassy of Saudi Arabia**): Entitled, "**Islam - A Global Civilization.**"

² See, <http://www.peacefaq.com/christians.html>.

³ See, <http://www.sipa.columbia.edu/regional/mei/research.shtml>.

⁴ See, http://www.sipa.columbia.edu/regional/mei/INSTRUCTORS_GUIDE.PDF.

⁵ See, <http://www.sipa.columbia.edu/regional/mei/HANDOUT9.PDF>.

⁶ See, <http://www.sipa.columbia.edu/regional/mei/HANDOUT14.PDF>.

But even more fundamentally, the question remains: will the focus of KGIA be on teaching **American** students how to be good, civic-minded citizens of the United States of America who will be trained in the Arabic language or will it be inculcating an **Arab-Islamic agenda** on vulnerable young people suggesting their true allegiance is not to **their country** as patriots but to some global notion of the Arab People or Ummah? This question is put in context given the strange quotation which headlines the KGIA brochure:

“The universe is my country and the human family is my tribe.”

Globalism or universal religious creeds which disdain nation-state affiliation and patriotism might be an interesting topic for university students, but the New York State Education Law quite clearly prohibits this type of education for public school students:

§ 801. Courses of instruction in patriotism and citizenship and in certain historic documents. 1. In order to promote a spirit of patriotic and civic service and obligation and to foster in the children of the state moral and intellectual qualities which are essential in preparing to meet the obligations of citizenship in peace or in war, the regents of The University of the State of New York shall prescribe courses of instruction in patriotism, citizenship, and human rights issues, . . .

See, also, New York State Education Law, §704 (“statements of any kind which are seditious in character, disloyal to the United States or favorable to the cause of any foreign country with which the United States may be at war” are forbidden).

Religious Focus – Halal Food. The Executive Summary and [public pronouncements](#)⁷ of NYDOE officials, including those of Mayor Michael Bloomberg, assert the school is not about religion, or Islam in particular, but rather a way to train a new generation of American students to speak Arabic. Yet, the carefully drafted and edited Executive Summary states that it will serve its “diverse”, “multi-cultural”, and presumably non-sectarian, student body, Shari’a approved “halal and vegetarian food.” While it is true that a recent [New York Post article](#)⁸ suggests (without citing sources) that the NYDOE refused Ms. Almontaser’s request for a Shari’a approved Halal kitchen, the question must be asked: What were her superiors thinking as she documented time after time the obvious Islamic bias of the school?

Religious Focus – Advisory Board. Yet another troubling imprint left from Ms. Almontaser’s organizational work establishing the agenda and framework for the school is the advisory board. Everyone of the members are religious leaders without any professional public education credentials. Moreover, the three imams representing the Islamic community on the KGIA advisory board are at the very least suspect, at least as board members of a public school teaching Arabic language and culture. As [one expert described](#)⁹ the trio:

⁷ See, <http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/08/10/under-fire-arabic-themed-school-principal-resigns/?hp>.

⁸ See, www.nypost.com/seven/08102007/news/regionalnews/city_arabic_school_is_short_on_um_arabic_region_alnews_chuck_bennett.htm.

⁹ See, <http://www.danielpipes.org/article/4581>.

. . . all 12 members of KGIA's [advisory board](#)¹⁰ are connected to religious institutions validates concerns about its being, in fact, a religiously oriented school.

The advisory board's three Muslim members all have Islamist connections unsuited to a taxpayer-funded school. The imam of New York University, [Khalid Latif](#)¹¹, warned the NYU president that should a student event displaying the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad take place, "the potential of what might happen after they are shown" would be "not taken lightly." [Al-Hajj Talib 'Abdur-Rashid](#)¹² belongs to the "National Committee to Free Imam Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin" (Amin being a [convicted cop-killer](#)¹³). [Shamsi \(or Syamsi\) Ali](#)¹⁴ runs a madrassa in Queens where an almost exclusive focus on memorization of the Koran might be breaking state educational laws.

Chancellor Klein's Commitment. Now that Ms. Almontaser has resigned as a result of the public outcry over her politically-nuanced remarks attempting to ignore the real meaning and effect of the word "intifada", the question remains: What of her imprint? What does the public -- or for that matter, the NYDOE or NYSED -- really know of the underlying agenda of KGIA? Certainly the public knows nothing. But even those city and state officials charged with the responsibility and safekeeping of New York school children do not really know what will go on in the school since all of its Arabic material will necessarily come from "outside" sources. Given what we do know from just one document, it is not unreasonable to conclude that these sources will produce texts and handouts which come with a natural Islamic bias and perspective. That kind of political-religious slant is precisely why KGIA is a bad idea for a public school.

On behalf of our clients, we remind Chancellor Klein that he has on more than one occasion been quoted as saying that if the school develops a religious or political-national bias not appropriate for an "American public school", the City "would shut it down." Given the evidence presented by the statements of the founder and former principal of KGIA, and given the obvious religious and political bias presented by the sole document the NYDOE has provided to the public about this school, there can be no serious doubt that the proper course of action is to put the opening of KGIA on hold until a more thorough examination by independent professionals can be carried out together with a full disclosure to the public.

The time is now for Mr. Klein to abide by this commitment to the people of New York.

On behalf of our clients, we respectfully petition that the NYDOE and/or the NYSED postpone the opening of KGIA until the facts surrounding the mystery of KGIA are available for public and professional scrutiny. Our clients reserve all rights accorded them under state and federal law to seek immediate equitable relief in the event this petition is denied.

¹⁰ See, <http://www.nysun.com/comments/21747>.

¹¹ See, <http://www.hahmed.com/blog/2006/03/26/danish-cartoons-on-display-at-nyu-this-week/>.

¹² See, <http://www.mcny.org/imam.html>.

¹³ See, <http://www.danielpipes.org/article/97>.

¹⁴ See,

<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/16/nyregion/16koran.html?ei=5088&en=bfd66b91de7a7870&ex=1313380800&adxnlnl=1&partner=rssnyt&emc=r&adxnlnx=1186935091-WjTjTK4plhK4ZO+mH14TMO>.

Petition to Chancellor Klein and Commissioner Mills
Subject: Postpone opening of KGIA

August 12, 2007

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We thank you in advance for your immediate attention to the matters raised herein.

Sincerely,



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