

EDUCATION

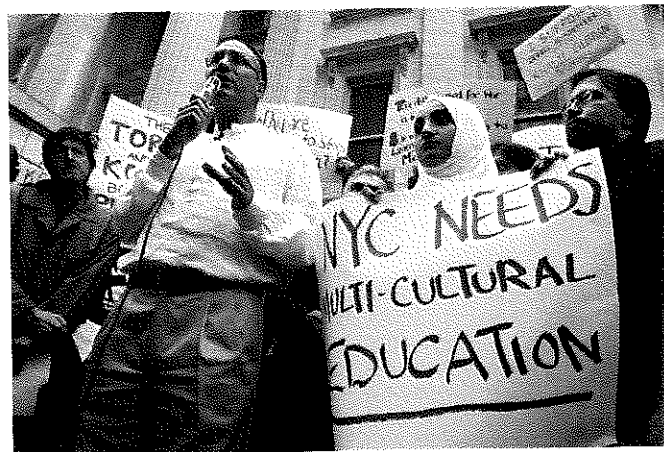
Speech Impediment

LOST IN THE RECENT firestorm over the nation's first bilingual Arab-English public school—the Khalil Gibran International Academy in Brooklyn, N.Y., which opponents have argued will become a breeding ground for militant Islam—is the statistical truth that Arab-language programs are already on the rise. The National Capital Language Resource Center (NCLRC) in Washington estimates that the number of public schools offering full-time Arabic instruction for K-12 students has quadrupled from less than 10 in 2001 to more than 40 today. With enrollment up some 150 percent in university programs since 2001, the Department of Education is scrambling to meet the demand. Most of the growth in higher-education Arabic programs comes from non-Arab and Muslim students, says Kirk Belnap, director of the National Middle East Language Resource Center in Utah, an organization created after the 9/11 attacks and funded by the Department of Education. “Some kids do look at it as an employment skill,” says Belnap, “but most want to be engaged so they can promote East-West understanding.”

But not everyone is onboard. Though the Khalil Gibran middle school claims no religious affiliation—it takes its name from a secular Christian poet—an organization called Stop the Madrassa Coalition wants to shut it down. Its campaign attracted worldwide media coverage and successfully pressured the school's Arab-American principal, Debbie Almontaser, to step down after she defended her interpretation of an INTIFADA NYC T shirt popular with many local Arab women. “No matter

how you slice it, a lot of this is about Islamophobia or a fear of Arabs,” says Dora Johnson, project director of the K-12 Arabic Network at the NCLRC. “It’s not about how a language is taught. It’s about bias, and how do you deal with that?”

Many parents, students and educators are asking the same question, especially since the federal government is firmly supporting the notion of Arabic instruction in public schools. Two years ago, after the State Department discovered, to its chagrin, that only 10 of its 34,000 employees were fluent in Arabic, it launched the \$114 million National Security Languages Initiative, which includes Star Talk, a nationwide program designed to promote “strategic



CULTURE CLASH: Supporters of the first Arabic-English public school

languages”—Chinese and Arabic—for kindergarten to college students. But as the number of Arabic-language students and programs increases, small but media-savvy groups like Campus Watch, a university-focused organization, and the Madrassa Coalition (the word “madrassa” may

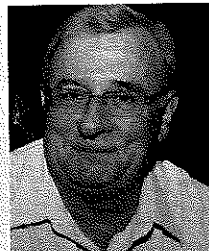
evoke images of militant Islam in the West but it simply means “school” in Arabic) have vowed to step up their fight. The coalition has gone nationwide as the Citizens for American Values in Public Education (CAVPE), claiming that its mission is to halt radical Islamist agendas in curricula. “We do not oppose teaching of Arabic in public schools,” says Stuart Kaufman, president of CAVPE. “But we are at war with a branch of Islam, [and] a tactic they intend to use is education and the inculcation of children. Look at the madrassas in Pakistan. The fear ... is not ill founded.”

So will conflict-wary public schools think twice before implementing Arabic programs? Seasoned educators aren’t too worried. “Academia is well aware of these groups that try to create a sort of academic censorship,” says Mahmoud Al-Batal, associate professor of Arabic at the University of Texas, who has been teaching his native language to Americans for more than 20 years. “They have a small impact, but students are much more sophisticated than the people behind Campus Watch. Their sheer numbers are saying that this language is important, so please, step aside and just allow us to learn.” More and more schools are starting to listen.

—LORRAINE

A LIFE IN BOOKS

It’s no surprise that **Edmund White**, admired for his exhaustively researched historical novels “Fanny: A Fiction” and this year’s “Hotel de Dream,” would spend four of his five picks for all-time must-reads on classic works from the past.



MY FIVE MOST IMPORTANT BOOKS

- 1 “Lolita” by Vladimir Nabokov. So funny, so extreme, so dangerous that its very outrageousness makes its classic love story viable.
- 2 “Madame Bovary” by Gustave Flaubert. Out of gimlet-eyed scorn arose a novel of bourgeois life that is a controlled work of art.
- 3 “Anna Karenina” by Leo Tolstoy. Anna and Vronsky are so real you can smell them!
- 4 “In Search of Lost Time” by Marcel Proust. A long masterpiece that’s a short alternative life for the reader.
- 5 “The Savage Detectives” by Roberto Bolaño. The living heart of this book is the knowledge of what it would be like to be young and poor, and in love with art and sex.

► **A classic book that, upon rereading, disappointed:** John Fowles’s “The Magus” was thin at a second look.

► **A much-recommended book that you’ve resisted reading:** I’ve never read anything by Margaret Atwood—maybe because I found her double reputation as a feminist and a Canadian daunting.

(N) Read an excerpt from White’s novel “Hotel de Dream” and check out the Life in Books archive at xtra.newsweek.com