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I regret that my teaching responsibilities at the Graduate Center, CUNY prevent me from joining you this morning. As Distinguished Professor of Psychology and Urban Education at the Graduate Center, CUNY, a long time researcher of small schools in New York, a social psychologist who just completed sabbatical at the Jewish-Arab Center at Haifa University and co-author of a forthcoming book on Muslim American youth post 9/11, I am most eager to join the diverse chorus of voices that support both the Khalil Gibran Academy and the leadership of Debbie Almontaser, and call on the Department of Education to re-appoint Ms. Almontaser as Principal of the school.

Let me begin with the school. New York City has a long and rich history of creating small, themed high schools, dedicated to deep inquiry into diverse topics: youth leadership, culture, language, community development, social movements, global studies, aerospace, food and finance, fire and safety, contemporary arts and conflict studies, to mention just a few. Many public schools are named for poets, artists, philosophers and activists; consider the Pablo Neruda School, Fannie Lou Hammer, Maxine Greene, Eleanor Roosevelt and now Kahlil Gibran. A number of these small schools are committed to sustained investigations of culture and history. Indeed New York City currently sponsors 65 dual language programs, including the Dual Language and Asian Studies High School, the Amistad Dual Language School (K-8) and a series of newly created French-English dual language schools.

With this abbreviated version of small schools' history in New York City, suffice it to say that The Khalil Gibran International Academy was conceived within the context of a rich legacy of New York City small schools, with significant support from New Visions. Dedicated to open admissions, the standard NYC curriculum, democratic inquiry, community and parent involvement, the arts and respect for teacher knowledge, the Kahlil Gibran International Academy (KGIA) further supports cultural diversity, students' access to global languages and their serious engagement in cross-cultural dialogues. The range of organizations and individuals who support the school, including varied community-based and religious organizations from many faiths, reveals the depth of institutional and personal support for the school.

Turning to questions of the school's leadership, I had the privilege of working with Debbie Almontaser on a book project, *Forever After: New York City Teachers on 9/11* (Teachers College Press, 2006). Prior to this, I knew of Almontaser as a well respected New York City educator who worked in and across communities to foster cross-cultural understandings. Co-founder of Brooklyn Bridges, the September 11th Curriculum Project and the We Are All Brooklyn Coalition, in June of 2002 Almontaser coordinated a mural-making project at PS 230 to document the cross-cultural friendships and alliances that flourished in the aftermath of September 11th. Of this project, Almontaser wrote:

"On June 3rd, students and their families began arriving bright and early at PS 230 in the Kensington area of Brooklyn, where there is a large population of South Asians as well as people from various other

cultures. They were there to create a mural on one of the school's outer walls that would stand as a testament to the friendship and understanding that endured across cultures in spite of the September 11th attacks and their aftermath. As the paint and brushes were distributed, there was an energetic charge in the air. Everyone was excited about the idea of painting what was near and dear to them on a wall that would testify to their existence.

It was an exciting day for me.. because the mural-making session represented a culmination of all the work I had done since the September 11th attacks to help build cross-cultural understanding. It was a day for the children and their loved ones to tap into the healing power of art and it was also a day for me to reflect on the long road I had traveled since that tragic day when the Twin Towers fell." (p. 123 in *Forever After*, New York City Teachers on 9/11. Teachers College Press, 2006)

KGIA was organized around a vision articulated by Almontaser in the conclusion of her essay:

".. it is a comfort to me to know that I have the privilege of doing work that can bring those vision of peace and harmony to others who have suffered. I like to think back on those days of mural-making at P.S. 230 as an example of what can happen when we carve out the time and space for healing: How often do we give our students and their families the opportunity and time to share what is important to them, to engage in activities that help them forget about everything else, and to think about all the things in life they love?" (p. 140)

Those of us committed to democratic, inquiry based public education in New York City should be most grateful to Almontaser, for designing and her willingness to direct the new Khalil Gibran International Academy. But instead of gratitude, Almontaser and the school have been served a vicious smear campaign. Hate-filled blogs and media criticisms of school ironically reveal just how desperately NYC needs the KGIA.

Given her long history as a peace educator in New York City, and her vital role in coalition building post 9/11, the loss of Almontaser as Principal of KGIA throws a shadow of shame on us all; what my mother, Rose Fine, a Jewish immigrant from Poland would call a "shanda" – a deep, penetrating shame that saturates the soul of our civic community.

The lack of an aggressive defense of Almontaser, by the Department of Education, signals an insidious nod to those extremists who seek to undermine public education by silencing, censoring, intimidating and demonizing many – including disproportionately Arabs and Muslim Americans. These extremists pose a fundamental threat to democratic education K – 12 and higher education. They are accountable to no one, and their influence is toxic. Indeed they must be answered with a firm and loud commitment to public education for all students, all cultures, all languages and ongoing dialogue toward what philosopher Maxine Greene would call a world-not-yet.

Today we call on The New York City Department of Education to stand firmly behind this school and the leadership of Almontaser. Perhaps the curricula of KGIA, and many of the other small schools, could be made available city-wide so that the children of New York City, and beyond, can learn how to challenge the stereotypes that pollute the public imagination about Arabs, Muslims and Islam. And then, maybe, the children will teach the rest of us.