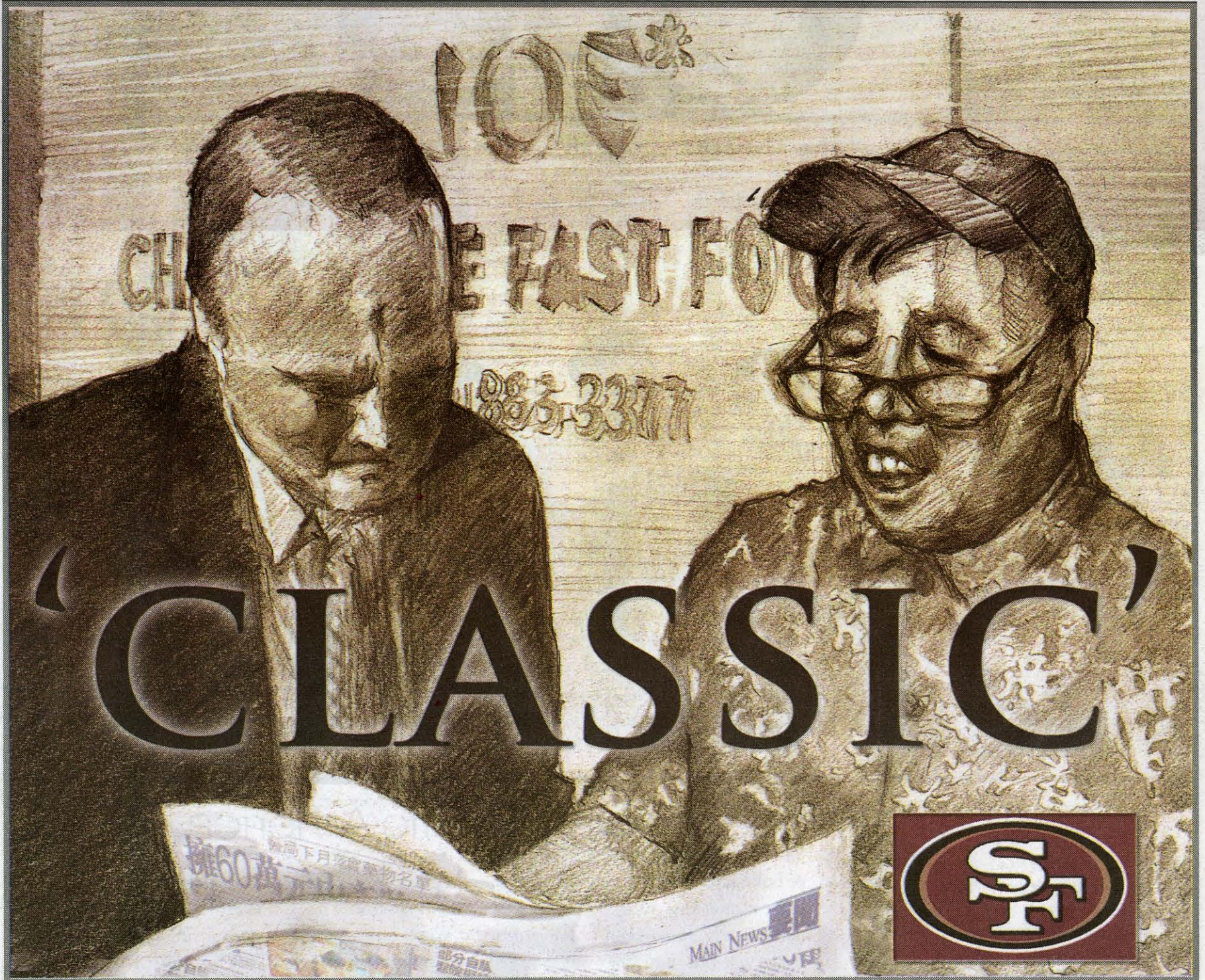


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Philly Approves Chinatown Charter School

BY LISA WONG MACABASCO

When it opens in September, the controversial Folk Arts Cultural Treasures Charter School will become the first public school in Philadelphia's Chinatown, and the first public institution in the 135-year-old neighborhood. It will become the first of its kind in the nation by focusing on the needs of immigrant parents and students, with a curriculum emphasizing folk arts and cultural traditions.

Everything about the school, from its origins, to the tumultuous debate over its creation, and what it represents for the future, has significance for the APA community.

The idea of running a charter school came five years ago from the group Asian Americans United (AAU). "We realized we were still going over the same issues," says board member Helen Gym, citing lack of support for limited-English-proficiency students and low-income immigrant families in the district. "They had not been resolved in 2 decades."

AAU decided to put their educational mission into practice. Charter schools are independent public schools, designed and run by groups of parents, educators and community leaders but funded by taxpayers. School organizers such as Gym and AAU founding member Deborah Wei, believed Chinatown children, especially those from low-income families, had a right to free education within their own neighborhood. They also said immigrant parents and students deserve culturally sensitive teachers and administrators who want to retain ethnic culture.

"If they don't get the skills and knowledge they need, our communities are screwed in the future," Wei says. "This is a long-term investment in human resources in our community."

AAU envisions the school as a multiracial, multicultural school, drawing from students citywide, not



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a tuition-funded Catholic school. In a *Philadelphia Inquirer* op-ed, John W. Chin, executive director of the Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation, wrote that increased competition for Chinatown's 300 school-aged children "could weaken existing educational institutions ... and create inefficiencies and duplicate services." "When you look at the numbers, you scratch your head," Chin wrote. "It comes down to simple business models. Is there enough demand to meet supply?"

"We know that Chinatowns are hubs for social activities, but instead of forcing parents to bus their kids, ... it would be more fair to implement these programs in the neighborhoods they live in," Chin wrote, saying a new school might work better in

northeast or south Philadelphia, which have large and underserved Asian populations.

Some critics also felt AAU would have too much influence on future students. One Chinatown resident told the *Philadelphia Inquirer* that parents were "concerned that their children will be indoctrinated in an ideology of protest."

Wei laughed off the criticism. "We intend to indoctrinate our children with critical thinking and literacy and high academic standards," she said.

With 95 percent of the Chinatown family associations and more than 1,500 letters supporting the school, Philadelphia's School Reform Commission eventually approved school plans.

"Is there a different way to develop the community besides property value and real estate?" Gym asks. "Can a public school revitalize a community?" Gym sees the school as an alternative model to the development and gentrification going on in the struggling neighborhood.

He points to Chinatowns in New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles that "are stronger and richer and more vibrant communities because they have

[their own] schools that nurture the children, where people feel comfortable knowing there's a school responsive to their needs," she said.

The presence of the school may also stop the flood of Chinatown families relocating to areas with better schools, according to University of Massachusetts professor Andrew Leong, a consultant for AAU. "Why not just resolve the issue of improving the school system in the current places where we live in lieu of moving to a new system?" Leong asked. "It's an investment in that community. It's not about running away when there are problems."

Some charter school supporters had reservations about the Chinatown location. "I'm not sure I'm 100 percent supportive of a charter school that is deep in the heart of Chinatown," said Thoi Nguyen, executive director of Philadelphia's Southeast Asian Mutual Assistant Association Coalition

"You can't please everyone, but having it in Chinatown makes a very strong statement of association and even learning," he said.

Nevertheless, for Nguyen, supporting the school was a "no-brainer." "If there were 10 other charter schools that served that population, I would say no, but last time I counted there were zero," he said.

Nguyen and others are also concerned that the Philadelphia Asian American community has lost an advocate with AAU consumed in running the charter school. "I'm worried they will have less of an impact in reconfiguring the system now that they are part of the system," he said.

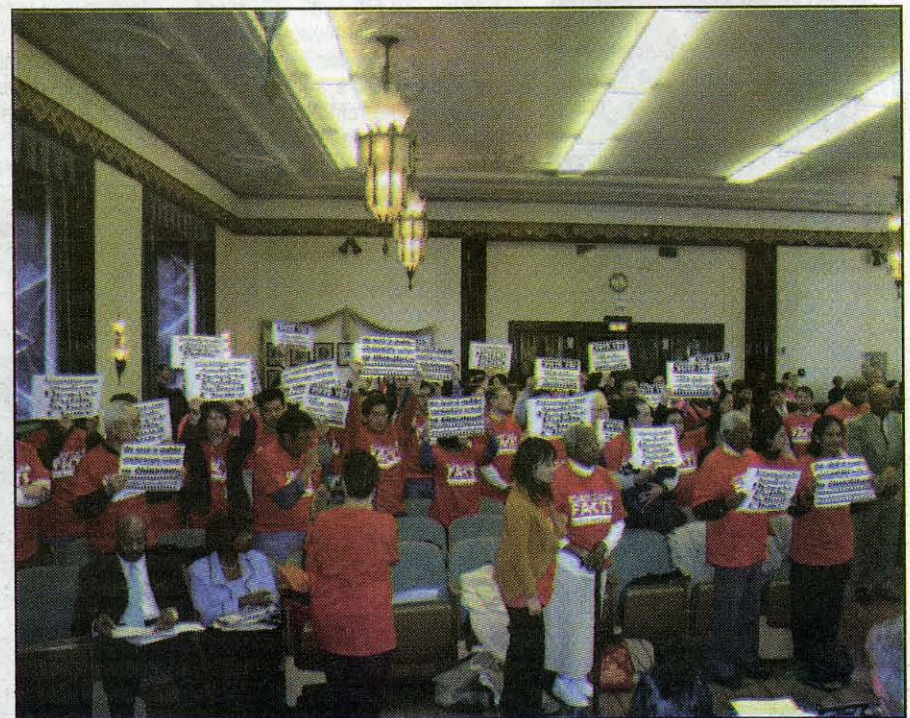
But others may follow AAU's example. Multicultural alternative schools and curricula may become a trend in cities across the country, according to Leong. "They're really way ahead of everyone else," he said. "Not many people talk about multicultural-



only from Chinatown. School organizers expect 286 kindergarten through fifth grade students with an estimated \$1.8 million budget. Within four years, they hope to grow to 436 students and go up to 8th grade classes. The school will emphasize community, family, intergenerational relationships and learning passed-down cultural traditions from authentic sources — for example, a Cambodian court dancer who survived the killing fields or an black gardener who practices "heritage gardening," the retaining of seeds from her enslaved ancestors.

The school will cater to Philadelphia's booming immigrant population. From 2000 to 2003 alone, 19,000 new immigrants moved to the city. Philadelphia's Chinatown in particular has experienced a dramatic population increase in recent years, but still remains without recreation centers, public playgrounds or parks. "The lack of public services there are the same as a century ago," Gym said.

AAU plans met stiff opposition from those who said the area was already well-served by McCall Elementary School, where Chinatown schoolchildren are bussed to 1.4 miles away, and Holy Redeemer,



and former AAU board member.

Nguyen thinks other locations may have been more appropriate and more accessible to a wider community of immigrants. Chinatown also invites an assumption that the school is Chinese-focused.

ism in the 21st century — they're dealing with it on the grade school level."

"Parents can see which system will fit their own values better. Competition is better for the consumer," Leong adds.