

Helping Nonprofits Thrive: A Profile of Success

TWIN CITIES INTERNATIONAL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL & MINNESOTA INTERNATIONAL MIDDLE SCHOOL

The **Twin Cities International Elementary School and Minnesota International Middle School** (International Schools) were founded in the fall of 2001 by a small group of parents and educational leaders from East African immigrant communities. These Minneapolis charter schools provide a rigorous American education for immigrant and refugee children in a culturally sensitive environment.

Theirs is a story of tremendous, and fast, growth. The first site had only eight classrooms for 153 children in grades kindergarten through sixth. By the third year, enrollment had more than doubled. "It's been a whirlwind growth story and after making the decision to move for the third time in three years to meet the needs of our increasing enrollment, we knew we needed to find a space we could grown into," Co-director Helen Fisk said.

A myriad of challenges exist for charter schools—including complicated school finance, state and national accountability standards, and rapid changes in the communities they serve. In addition, state law requires charter schools to lease their space, and large facilities with classrooms, gymnasiums and lunchrooms are hard to find outside of the traditional public schools.

For the International Schools, families made it clear that they wanted to stay within the urban center, and an empty former mail sorting facility near Minneapolis' warehouse district was the perfect spot. But two floors of open space that was ideal for sorting mail required extensive remodeling. While the owner was willing to invest a significant amount of money for the remodeling, he wanted the schools to pitch in. The schools turned to Nonprofits Assistance Fund (NAF) for help.

"We believed we would be able to double our student enrollment with the new facility, which would generate more revenue to pay back a loan, but traditional banks weren't willing to take the risk on such a young charter school," Fisk said.

NAF is a local nonprofit community development organization that helps build financially healthy nonprofits. In addition to other nonprofits who are seeking to improve their capacity to carry



Small classrooms offer students the individualized attention that parents desire.

out their mission, NAF has provided access to credit and expert financial advice to nearly 30 charter schools in the past five years.

"We have enormous expertise in charter school finance," NAF Executive Director Kate Barr said. "Charters have very complex accounting, but we know the world they live in and really understand all the challenges to keeping all the balls in the air. From providing a solid educational program to managing how their cash flows throughout the year, we can step right in and help."

The International Schools administration impressed Barr with their knowledgeable financial management staff. She also recognized that the schools have a solid academic program and student enrollment. Growing this nonprofit was a risk NAF was willing to take and they have granted two pivotal leasehold improvement loans over two years to accommodate their growth—including remodeling the second floor in 2004 for high school classrooms.

The International Schools have exceeded their enrollment projections and now educate 950 students. They will have their first graduation in the spring of 2007.

Nonprofits Assistance Fund is a nonprofit community development organization that fosters community development and vitality by building financially healthy nonprofits. NAF provides financing for working capital, cash flow, equipment and facilities projects with a focus on strengthening the operation and mission of nonprofits. They also offer financial management workshops and advice that improve nonprofits' capacity to carry out their mission. Find out more about NAF at www.nonprofitsassistancefund.org.