

City school introduces its newcomers to Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving

About 700 ate turkey, learned about holiday

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Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

Kids who've never celebrated Thanksgiving quickly caught on to what the holiday is about.

"Friends and family," said Edwin Mendez, 12, who came to Rochester from Honduras.

"Thank you for school," said Ghena Halima, 14, a native of Syria who has been in Rochester for 10 months with her brother, sister and parents. "Thank you for teachers. America."

For the seventh year, Rochester International Academy hosted a turkey dinner with all the fixings for students and their families. RIA had two seatings for Saturday's event, and about 700 people were expected.

The Thanksgiving meal is the second- favorite day of the year for principal Mary Andrecolich-Montesano-Diaz.

"Usually the first day of school is my favorite day of the year," she said. "Thanksgiving is my second favorite day of the year. It's my favorite holiday of the year because it gives us a chance to break bread with all of our families. We just all come together."

Members of the Commission on Jewish/Muslim Understanding, which is part of the Jewish Federation of Greater Rochester and the Greater Rochester Council of Masajid, continued its tradition of raising

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Teacher Jenna Treahy helps Dairo Hassn, 7, of Rochester get her meal during An American Celebration Thanksgiving Dinner at the Rochester International Academy. CARLOS ORTIZ/@CFORTIZ_DANDC/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

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the money to donate the turkeys. This year, they supplied 50. The commission has adopted the school and plans ongoing support, according to Karen Elam, community relations director of the Jewish Federation.

“As Muslims and Jews on the commission, we feel that it’s really critical to help refugees,” she said. “Both those religions feel very strongly about welcoming the stranger.”

More than 100 volunteers helped set up the cafeteria and served the turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes, gravy, corn, salad and desserts.

Rochester International Academy, part of the Rochester City School District, teaches the range of academic skills to students newly arrived from non-English speaking countries. RIA provides social and emotional support and promotes community involvement. Andrecolich-Montesano-Diaz said 370 students were enrolled this academic year.

Thanksgiving dinner is only one occasion for those students and their families to learn about America outside a formal classroom setting.

“We do this every month,” the principal said. “We bring families in. This day is like the beginning. A lot of my students are new and their families are new to the country this year. This is their first experience of an American holiday. So part of our curriculum is to teach the acculturation and acclimation to their new country. This is just one day of many for us.”

She and other staffers greeted the students by name and with hugs. The RIA drum ensemble performed, and students also sang a song written by student Ricardo Ndoole.

Halima wondered what it would be like.

“I was excited,” she said through an interpreter. “How many food, how many people come together to say ‘thank you.’” PSINGER@Gannett.com



School principal Mary Andrecolich-Montesano-Diaz jokes with Yasin Hassan, 6, of Rochester during An American Celebration Thanksgiving Dinner at the Rochester International Academy. CARLOS ORTIZ/@CFORTIZ_DANDC /STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER