

Students stranded, until a rescue

by [Julia Bergman](#), Mar. 5, 2014



St Thomas Aquinas kindergarten teacher Xiaoyu Ma conducts a lesson with her seven Chinese kindergarten students

Last October, Solomon Charter School closed its doors amid [financial, safety and other concerns](#), leaving 330 students and their parents scrambling to find an alternative.

Some of the most vulnerable students are Chinese, mostly second generation. The closing of Solomon left their parents, many of whom speak little, if any, English, to navigate the transfer process with little support.

Solomon parents soon found that many public and charter schools could not accept more students due to overcrowding, or that their zip code fell outside of a school's catchment area. Parents complained that Solomon staff wasn't providing much help in the way of placement. Apparently one second-grade parent even called Gov. Tom Corbett's office to complain.

Enter [Independence Mission Schools](#) (IMS), a nonprofit organization that has taken over 15 area Catholic schools in an effort to provide affordable and quality education to low-income students.

On one of the last days to collect their children's records from Solomon, parents entered the school to find that IMS staff, not Solomon employees, appeared to be running the show.

These parents were about to experience something unusual. A network of schools that wanted to go out of its way to help them and was prepared to take as many students as it could. Almost all IMS schools are seeing increases in enrollment this school year; about 1,100 additional students in total. The network of schools has more than 4,100 students. About 425 of the new students came from Philadelphia

public schools, and 105 of those 425 students came from public schools that had been closed by the district last year.

Within a week of the Solomon's closing Marie Keith, director of enrollment and marketing at IMS, had been to the school three times.

She coordinated presentations by representatives from Business Leadership Organized for Catholic Schools (BLOCS) and Children's Scholarship Fund Philadelphia, who announced the availability of emergency financial aid.

BLOCS offered 50 scholarships capped at \$2,000 per child to attend any area Catholic school, and CSF offered 50 scholarships capped at \$2,200 per child to any tuition-based kindergarten through eighth-grade school. Many of the parents present that day were Chinese, and Keith arranged for one of the teachers at Solomon to translate for them.

"This is one of the reasons our enrollment is up because we don't wait for prospects to come to us; we go to them and navigate them through the system, since many are unable to do so themselves," Keith wrote in an email shortly after Solomon closed for good.

In total, 45 students from Solomon, 36 of whom are Chinese, transferred to one of the IMS schools. Every one of the students from Solomon is receiving financial aid, which they will continue to receive for at least the next three years. And since the school district doesn't bus kindergarteners, IMS hired a private bus to transport them and the older Chinese students to school everyday.

Twenty-three of the displaced students, including seventeen Chinese students, transferred to Saint Thomas Aquinas School at 17th and Morris Streets in South Philadelphia.

The mission of IMS is best demonstrated in the colorful, spacious room on the first floor of St. Thomas Aquinas that hosts Ms. Xiaoyu Ma's kindergarten class. Four months after Solomon closed, the seven kindergarten students have experienced remarkable growth.

"The first day they come to our school, almost all of the students can't hold a pencil and they don't know the letters. But now they can write very well, and they know all the letters, the sounds, and they know a lot of words," Ma said. "Every week I will send them a book that just has three or four pages, and they can read it."

Above is an audio clip from an interview with Xiaoyu Ma.

The kindergarteners can spell the months of the year and the days of the week. They are able to identify basic shapes. They can count to one hundred, first by ones then by tens. All in English. Ma even hears from parents that some of the students are speaking some English at home.

Ma receives about four to five calls a day from a mix of kindergartner parents and parents of the older Chinese students. They want to know how they're children are doing academically, and what they can do to help them at home. For the older students, Ma talks with their teachers about their progress in order to give updates to their parents.

Ma is currently in the country on a student visa. IMS has hired a Chinese attorney to help her get a three-year work visa, which it is sponsoring. IMS is doing the same for a former Solomon teacher who now teaches Mandarin and does part-time translation work at St. Helena-Incarnation in North Philadelphia.

While the seven kindergarteners at St. Thomas Aquinas spend most of their day with Ma, about six hours out of the school day, they integrate with other students during their reading, English as a second language and religion courses. The goal, Ma said, is to get them ready for first grade.

The good news appears to have spread. IMS is already starting to see increase interest in its schools from Chinese parents. And Keith has asked Ma to craft a letter to the Chinese community detailing IMS and its mission.

“We are already seeing many siblings and friends of the current Chinese students inquiring and/or enrolling their children for next year so we expect to at least double the number at our two schools,” Keith wrote in an email. “Especially since word is spreading that we have a Mandarin teacher at each location.”