

## Charter school chief under fire in Greece

### Charter

### Critics fault turnover among black staffers

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The founding leader of Renaissance Academy Charter School for the Arts in Greece is under fire from some parents over what they see as a pattern of turnover among employees of color.

Donna Marie Cozine co-founded the school in 2014; it now serves about 340 children in grades K-4.

While the school's own survey data shows widespread satisfaction among staff and parents, a sizable contingent of

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**Oscia Miles reviews with the first-grade class a lesson about the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.**

TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/@TYEE23/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



**Donna Marie Cozine is co-founder and CEO of Renaissance Academy Charter School for the Arts in Greece.**

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parents and former staffers spoke out at Thursday's school board meeting, protesting in particular the departure of Family Services Coordinator Darryl Kittleberger.

Kittleberger, a former longtime placement official in the Rochester City School District, left Renaissance earlier this month. Cozine said he did so under his own prerogative; Kittleberger said he was "completely blindsided."

He decided to speak out even though it means risking forfeiture of several thousand dollars for breaking his confidentiality agreement, he said.

"This is (Cozine's) twisted attempt to remove me and gain control," Kittleberger said. "I should have said something a long time ago, and now it's got to be said."

He, other departed staff and at least one parent described Cozine as controlling and vindictive. They said Kittleberger's departure is only the most recent in a troubling pattern of staff turnover, and noted that many of those who left were black, including Kittleberger.

"He was the last person we felt we had who was making sure our babies were being taken care of," the parent, Ja'Mia Hewitt, said. "The fact that he's not there is unacceptable. ... That was absolutely the tipping point." They demanded at Thursday's board of trustees meeting that Kittleberger be reinstated. Hewitt also has asked that Cozine be removed from her position. For her part, Cozine said the claims against her are "completely false ... and absolutely ridiculous."

She shared surveys of students, parents and staff from the last two years that showed an overwhelming majority in support of the school and its leadership. For example, when asked anonymously last March whether Cozine "promotes a positive school environment," 31 of 37 respondents responded affirmatively.

She acknowledged problems with turnover — 33 percent of teachers left after the school's first year, and 19 percent after its second year — but noted that it is a common problem among charter schools, which generally hire teachers with less experience willing to work longer hours for less money. A survey in 2013-14 showed that 38 percent of charter school teachers were in their first year in their building, compared to 25 percent in city schools. Ruth Washington, a first-grade teacher who has worked at Renaissance Academy since it opened, said it is a "family- oriented

environment” and rejected the notion that school leaders are autocratic or bigoted.

“Basically, the administrators say, ‘Whatever you need, we’ll be here for you,’ ” she said. “Just like we teachers say to the kids.” The school has 45 percent nonwhite staff, a significantly higher rate than other schools in Monroe County. In the Rochester City School District, for instance, only about a quarter of teachers are people of color. Cozine also shared data showing that a plurality of departed employees were white. “To make truly false allegations — and allegations with racist undertones — is unacceptable and libelous,” she said. “This is a personal vendetta (Hewitt) has had with me since the very beginning. ... I worked extremely hard to start this school, and I will not stand down if someone is defaming my character.”

Ja’Mia Hewitt said that, on the contrary, she initially helped Cozine with school recruitment and only soured on her when she began to notice staff leaving. She questioned whether dissatisfied staff had filled out the surveys at all, and reported that more than a dozen ex-employees have told her Cozine’s style of leadership was the reason they left.

“I’d love nothing more than to have a good relationship with Dr. Cozine,” she said. “But until I see her and the board of trustees’ actions align with what they’re saying, that won’t be the case.”

After the board of trustees took no action on the demands Thursday, Hewitt said she is writing to the Board of Regents, which authorized the school’s charter in 2013.

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**Coats are tucked into cubby spots outside the classroom in the kindergarten through fourth-grade school.**

TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/@TYEE23/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



**Jacqueline Moe leads kindergarteners in dance class at Renaissance Academy Charter School of the Arts in Greece.**

TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/@TYEE23/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

**“I should have said something a long time ago, and now it’s got to be said.”**

**DARRYL KITTLEBERGER**

FORMER PLACEMENT OFFICIAL, ROCHESTER CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT