

Entrepreneur launches school she wanted: Multilingual education is key. Atlanta is a friendly environment for business upstarts.

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Soraya Rouchdi wasn't about to let a recession stall her 3-year-old dream to open a preschool that focuses on multilingual learning this year. She launched the Little Da Vinci International School in August with 28 students, seven above her projected target.

"Some people thought I was crazy, but if we cross our hands and don't do anything, we are miserable. We know there are risks, but we thought the timing was right," Rouchdi said.

She's an entrepreneur who has done her homework, knows her market, and has taken full advantage of Atlanta's friendly small-business climate.

"Atlanta is a good location for this school because of its growing international population," she said. "I've also seen that people come together here to make the community a better place. The idea that retired professionals would volunteer their time to help someone start a business is something specific to the U.S., I think," she said.

When she and her husband, Hamid --- both business professionals --- moved to Atlanta 10 years ago, they could find no preschool that took language instruction seriously for their children. She speaks four languages and her husband, three. Rouchdi, originally from Tunisia, was educated in France.

By teaching languages to her own children and studying other models, she gradually developed a curriculum and discovered other parents who wanted the same educational experience. Her business plan brought rave reviews from other preschool directors.

"I didn't need praise," Rouchdi said. "What I needed was someone who could help me improve it."

She found a mentor through SCORE Atlanta, a nonprofit small-business resource center of the Small Business Administration.

"I had thought I could get an SBA loan, but finding no investors, he encouraged me to become a nonprofit organization, which would make me eligible for grants later. He also told me my startup costs were five times what they needed to be, and he helped me set priorities for what really mattered and what could wait," Rouchdi said.

With the support of her husband, Rouchdi moved forward by investing family funds in the business. She focused on

paying higher-than-average Georgia wages to get the quality teachers she desired. She enlisted the help of professional women friends to market the school.

"A Realtor thought outside the box to help me find the natural setting I wanted for the children," Rouchdi said. Little Da Vinci is leasing a building in the middle of the Blue Heron Nature Preserve, 25 acres of protected land in the heart of Buckhead. She's expanding the preschool with an after-school language enrichment program for older children.

"I'm learning a lot, and I have a better understanding for the administrative challenges now," Rouchdi said. "I'm always energized when I see the children and parents who are happy. I think we're on the right track."

According to the Kauffman Index of Entrepreneurial Activity (1996-2008), she's also in the right place. Among the 15 largest metropolitan areas in the United States, Atlanta had the highest entrepreneurial activity rate in 2008. Georgia ranked first among states increasing their entrepreneurial activity in the past decade.

Activity should not necessarily be equated with small-business success, cautioned Bernie Meineke, director of the Small Business Development Center at Georgia State University, a part of the Georgia SBDC network. "Atlanta has always had very vibrant entrepreneurial activity. There's been a lot of growth, a good economy for goods and services, and support for small business in the public and private arena," Meineke said.

"There are many good role models and places to learn more about entrepreneurship," added Greg Henley, director of the Herman J. Russell International Center for Entrepreneurship at the **Robinson College of Business** at Georgia State University. "In today's climate, we're seeing more displaced workers wanting to be self-sufficient, and working people who want a second stream of income to fall back on. We're seeing more independent contractors and people starting businesses in their basements."

Meineke is observing a growth in "necessity" entrepreneurship --- ventures launched because they seem to be the best employment choice in these times --- while "opportunity" entrepreneurship has decreased with lack of investment funding, and customers being more cautious about spending.

"We want to encourage people to explore the idea of self-employment or small business, but they need to have their eyes wide open," he said. "It wasn't easy starting a business when the economy was stronger. It's even more challenging now."

People need to research their market, evaluate their prospects, write a plan and assess whether they have the skills to find customers, do the work and run the business.

"Fortunately, Atlanta has the resources in place to help," Meineke said.