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When I passed through the gates of the Vahan and Anoush Chamlian school this fall, it occurred to me that I had not visited the campus of the venerable Glendale school for about 15 years, realizing that despite my busy work schedule, I should make time to visit our school campuses more often to gain first-hand insight into the day-to-day educational strides being made at this and other Armenian schools around California.

The Chamlian School opened its door to its 41st academic year in September, which also marked the

beginning of the second year for its principal Dr. Talin P. Kargodorian, who was appointed to that job in 2014, when long-time principal Vazken Madenlian retired after 23 years of service to the school.

Having attended Chamlian and later the Rose and Alex Pilibos School, her new stomping grounds aren't that new after all.

"It's fantastic," Kargodorian told me about her return to Chamlian. Some teachers from her days as a student are still an integral part of the school and some aspects of her childhood still occupy a critical



Vahan and Anoush Chamlian School Principal Dr. Talin P. Kargodorian

part of the school's every-day reality. Kargodorian said those indelible elements have strengthened the Chamlian brand and are a driving force in parents' decision to enroll their children at the school.

As she led me on a tour of the campus, Kargodorian explained that the 1st through 3rd grade classrooms are housed in their own sections on campus, where students in each grade interact and learn with one another. This is designed to make their transitions to higher grades more seamless. It is especially significant for 1st grade students for whom the transition to a larger school can be daunting and provides the students with an opportunity to easily acclimate to their new environment.

This approach has been a mainstay at Chamlian and has become an attractive point for parents to enroll their children at the school. Kargodorian said that Chamlian is also committed to reducing the class sizes, so students can benefit more from individual attention from teacher.

This has meant hiring new teachers, some of whom are also graduates of the various Armenian schools in the community and after honing their educational and professional skills have returned to teach in the very institutions that have nurtured them.

This year, the school's motto is: "Honoring the Past. Enlightening the Present. Shaping the Future."

Kargodorian explained that Chamlian has institutionalized certain aspects of education, which have anchored the school's reputation and drive parents to enroll their children in the school. At the same time, she said, "We are always looking at what's new out there," and adding new elements it.

Kargodorian said some of the traditional aspects of the school—the uniforms, expectations from students on conduct and behavior, Armenian history, religion and cultural education—that are never going to change. At the same time, there is a need to introduce new approaches to make the curriculum and educational standards on par with contemporary educational standards.



Chamlian students during physical education class at the Hacop and Hilda Baghdassarian gym,

One area is the Armenian education, which Kargodorian believes must be accessible to the second

and third generation Armenian-Americans. Chamlian Armenian subject teachers are integrating technology and are incorporating concepts from the Common Core system, or using elements of the curriculum used in the other classes.

“We are taking what is great and just building on the curriculum and improving on it,” said Kagodorian, who explained that parents have come to have certain expectations from Chamlian that include the traditional environment and commitment to advancing Armenian education.

“They [the parents] want that traditional environment, but with that 21st century zing,” she said.

“We are going to work hard to provide that strong Armenian identity, that strong Armenian education—having them learn their history and their culture—and helping them find their balance,” added Kargodorian.

That balance includes catering to a generation of students that is completely immersed in technology and creating an environment where the traditional classroom teaching becomes more interactive for what Kargodorian called an “inclusive classroom.” In addition to the SmartBoards, which were introduced in every classroom several years ago, Chamlian has also purchased two classroom sets of Google ChromeBooks, which will integrate their use in every-day classroom life.

“These technologies aren’t there just to support the creation of the ideal digital global citizens. Yes. That is important. But, the technology is being used as an avenue to make the curriculum more engaging for the students and interactive—to raise the depth, the rigor and the breadth. To change from a teacher-directed classroom to a more inclusive, classroom, where the students have the chance to lead their own learning and to be part of their [own] learning and assessment process. This helps create a more critical thinker,” explained Kargodorian.



Chamlian 8th grade students at Sardarabad during their trip to Armenia

The technological changes initiated at Chamlian also impact the interaction with parents and the way

in which they can receive up-to-the-minute reports about their children. Through an online parent portal, parents can monitor their children's grades, deposit money in their lunch account and keep track of their attendance record. This system has elevated Chamlian's commitment to "go green," with the system eliminating the need for mailing materials to homes.

Our tour of the campus also included a stop to the Hacop and Hilda Baghdassarian Gymnasium, which was inaugurated in May 2014.

The addition of a gym to the campus has prompted administrators to restructure the school's physical education program by bringing on a new athletic director, whose own youth encourages the students to become motivated within the new physical education curriculum offered at Chamlian.

Kargodorian explained that beginning with this school year, the students participate in an inclusive physical education classes, with an uptick in afterschool sports activities.

"The after school athletic program will focus on providing additional opportunities for students to participate in sports activities with their peers," explained Kargodorian, who said that Chamlian students participate in any number of sports and are also part of a local league that includes other private and public school sports teams.

In addition to the expanded athletic program, Chamlian has also introduced an after-school enrichment program that includes iron chef cooking, sculpture, comic book creating, mock trial. Spanish, Armenian dance.

"It's great for students to be exposed to different opportunities," said Kargodorian, who also explained that the school is providing opportunities for outside classroom learning. This aspect includes an annual Sacramento trip for sixth graders, a retreat for the seventh graders and the long-held tradition for 8th grade students who travel to Armenia before graduating from the school.

"We are not just teaching our students to prepare academically, but as individuals, as citizens—their morals, their values, their emotions," said Karagodorian who highlighted the school's character education program, which include the "word of the month," around which students—individually and collectively as a class—perform activities using the word to enhance their character and add to the spirit of the school community.

Another improved addition to the school this year is the newly-renovated cafeteria, which only complements the already ongoing "farm to table" approach to the school lunch program. Every day fresh produce and ingredients are delivered to the school, where the cafeteria staff prepares the meals and the snack with parents volunteering in the service of lunch to students.

Chamlian parents are asked to commit to 40 hours of service to the school, with some parents going above and beyond the expectations placed on them.

"One of Chamlian's big successes is the strong parent and community involvement. When I came here I was overwhelmed with the amount of support. There are so many positive supporters who push the school forward and making sure that it continues on its path of success. Knowing that you have such a strong backing, makes you want to work even harder," said Kargodorian, who explained that this involvement strengthens the Chamlian community and brings its members—students, teachers, administrators and parents—closer together.

That is why when the school was rocked by tragedy this summer, with the sudden death one of the

more beloved educators, Anita Torossian, the Chamlian community came together to mourn and support each other..

Kargodorian was deeply affected by Torossian's passing, referring to her as her "best friend," a characterization that emerged to be a common one among the faculty when describing Torossian.

"You know that a person is a true leader and an amazing teacher when their work continues when they are not there. She had worked so hard and she had placed such strong foundations that even without her, her work was able to continue. Her legacy is living on," said Kargodorian.

"It was very important for everyone to continue her legacy. She had touched so many lives—from the youngest students to some of our most seasoned veteran teachers. Everyone would say 'she was my best friend.' She made everyone feel that important," recalled Kargodorian.

The key challenge for Principal Kargodorian is ensuring that Chamlian continues its advancement, with technology playing a key role in the lives of students and parents expecting their children to be competitive with their counterparts in the best private American schools and the best public schools.

"We are trying to create the leaders who are going to take the reign and the concept of new Armenia to the next level. It starts with a strong education. That's the first thing," said Kargodorian.

"It's been very exciting for me to see how Armenian schools have been improving.. I don't want people to just say 'Chamlian is the best Armenian school.' I want them to say 'Chamlian is the best school—a school with a strong education that prepares students socially and emotionally for the world,'" explained Kargodorian.