

Boston Sunday Globe

MARCH 28, 2021

1.2 million estimated English learners nationwide were largely absent from school in the fall.

'It's an enormous number.' Hailly Korman, associate senior partner at Bellwether Education Partners



Fredy Solís, a recent immigrant from Guatemala, spent the last year trying to learn from home. The Globe followed Fredy's 11-member Spanish class at Boston International Newcomers Academy through the pandemic.

Pushed to the vanishing point

The Boston schools — and American education in general — have rarely done right by students needing to master English. But the pandemic year offered an even harsher reality, a Globe review found, setting one obstacle after another in the way of success until some gave up and dropped away.

BY BIANCA VÁZQUEZ TONESS AND JENNA RUSSELL | PHOTOS BY ERIN CLARK | GLOBE STAFF

THE GREAT DIVIDE

The Great Divide is an investigative series that explores educational inequality in Boston and statewide. Sign up to receive our newsletter, and reach out to us at thegreatdivide@globe.com with story ideas and tips.

It sounded easy enough, especially for a smart and motivated ninth-grader like Fredy Solís: *Open the app and click on the invitation.*

But Fredy, an immigrant from Guatemala who was then 15, felt paralyzed at the in-

structions his Spanish teacher texted him last March. First the password didn't work. Then he couldn't figure out how to turn on his audio. Before he arrived in the United States six months earlier, he had never laid hands on a computer.

Perched on a metal folding chair in the sparsely furnished bedroom he shared with his father, Fredy felt awkward and embarrassed. He worried that he would not achieve the dreams he had only recently begun to believe in: that he would learn English and graduate from high school.

Many students like him, striving for a bet-

ter life, felt the same shadow fall across their hopes and plans.

Among the millions of students across the country whose educations were upended a year ago by the pandemic, new English learners like Fredy face the greatest risk. It was true before COVID, but success comes so much harder now. To understand the remarkable forces and obstacles these newcomers to America have to contend with, a Globe team closely tracked one class at Boston International Newcomers Academy — BINca for short — for most of the past year.

ENGLISH LEARNERS, Page A10

Revamp of leading hospitals underway

Goal is more cooperation, less competition for Mass General Brigham

By Priyanka Dayal McCluskey and Larry Edelman

GLOBE STAFF

They promised to become partners but never truly did.

Now, more than 25 years after Massachusetts General and Brigham and Women's hospitals joined forces to boost their clout with penny-pinching HMOs, trustees and executives are making their most sweeping attempt yet to set aside old rivalries and work as a unified health care system.

It is a sharp departure for the company they created — rebranded Mass General Brigham in 2020 after long being called Partners HealthCare — which always did business as a federation of loosely connected hospitals often competing among themselves. The new bid for unity and efficiency spans every corner of the organization, from marketing and IT to medicine and surgery, and it underscores a shift in power from its famed

HOSPITALS, Page B6

For Asian Americans, time to have 'The Talk'

SHIRLEY LEUNG

COMMENTARY

Black parents have long had "The Talk" with their children on how they should behave when pulled over by the police: Hands out of your pockets, do what they say, no sudden moves. Now many Asian Americans, for the first time, are having similar conversations with their children on how to gird themselves against a wave of anti-Asian sentiment, violence, and bullying.

For Mai Du and her 17-year-old son, Thomas Tran, talking about Asian hate may not be new, but playing out the what-if scenarios is.

Over dinner recently, Du asked her son what he would do if someone was being harassed on the T. Would he confront the perpetrator? Would he look the other way? After some reflection, the Dorchester mother and son, who are Chinese Viet-

LEUNG, Page A16

New look, new life for the old Ritz hotel

By Christopher Muther

GLOBE STAFF

Award-winning architect and designer Jeffrey Beers is the visionary behind internationally acclaimed projects such as the Fontainebleau in Miami, the Ritz-Carlton San Juan, and the Four Seasons Vail. But those credentials mattered little to Bostonians when he started designing the public spaces of The Newbury Boston hotel.

The Newbury, which is located at the prime address that once housed the Taj, and is perhaps more fondly remembered as "the old Ritz," holds a special place in the hearts and histories of many locals. As Beers worked to restore the 1927 hotel, which sits grandly at the intersection of Arlington and Newbury streets, he was given a stern and not-so-tactful warning: "Don't screw it up."

"It wasn't one or two people who told me that," he said with a

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK, Page A18



JIM DAVIS/GLOBE STAFF

In one of many small touches at The Newbury Boston, the hotel library features books curated by the Boston Public Library,

It is time to play ball once again.

What will this season mean for the Red Sox? **Baseball 2021, Special section.**

Experts say connecting kids with nature is more important than ever. A visit to one of these New England spots is a way to do just that. **Travel, N11.**

Cloud source

Sunday: Windy, rainy. High: 50-55. Low: 40-45.
Monday: Breezy, sunny. Complete report, **B14.**

Deaths, A19-28.

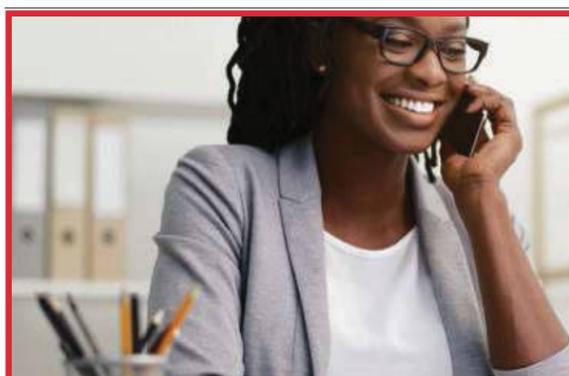
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►CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
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laugh. “I heard it about a hundred times. I actually welcomed it. The last thing I wanted to do was have the design overpower the space or the history. I wanted to elevate the hotel and reintroduce this old grand lady. Put her in a new dress and get her ready to step out and have a great evening.”

The old grand lady in the new dress will welcome her first guests in early May (the exact opening date is still pending). The former Taj, which had started looking a little worse for wear by the time it closed in the fall of 2019, has been completely reimagined. From guest rooms that are larger and no longer butter yellow, to a glassed-in rooftop restaurant with stunning views that will take over the duties of the former street-level cafe. The hotel did not disclose the cost of the renovation, only that it was “significant.”

And although the main entrance of the hotel has moved from Arlington to Newbury Street, some favorites will remain intact, such as Saturday and Sunday afternoon tea in the newly remodeled Newbury Salon, where tea was served prior to the renovation, and the still warm but revamped hotel bar.

“The whole idea was to take a modern, contemporary, and unexpected approach to the interiors,” Beers said. “Obviously it’s all within this rich exterior. I was trying to be very mindful and respectful of certain details. But we played with the furniture, the art, the light, and the color. It was a balance between being respectful and being forward-thinking.”

Despite the pandemic decimating hotel bookings in Boston, the Newbury is one of several high-end properties opening in the coming year. About 70 percent of the Newbury’s pre-renovation staff is returning. The hotel will open with 130 employees, increasing to 200 in the coming months. After the Newbury, the Omni Boston Hotel at the Seaport will open this summer. Also opening this summer is the newly renovated Langham Boston. In 2022, Singapore-based luxury hotelier Raffles will open in the Back Bay.

The endeavor of renovating and rebranding the Newbury was a precarious one. The hotel opened as the Ritz-Carlton in 1927 and served as *the place* to stay and be seen in Boston for glitterati, bold names, and monied travelers, so there was much riding on this spring’s reopening. Go too modern and avant-garde and the hotel loses its

charm, and the memories of nearly 100 years are sullied. Don’t push the envelope far enough and the hotel would be unable to compete against the Langham or Raffles.

Words that come up often in conversation with Beers are “tailored,” “warm,” and “playful.” All of those adjectives fit what he’s done with the space. I’ve walked through the hotel multiple times, and it’s clear that Beers didn’t feel beholden to the stuffy details that would have defined a luxury hotel of the 2000s or even the early 2010s. The Newbury is a hotel that can hold its own against properties in London or New York. I say this as an impartial observer and travel writer who has stayed in many hotels over the years.

Although the Newbury will be managed by the hospitality investment company Highgate, the Newbury hotel brand will stand alone. Highgate has a varied portfolio, including the James, the Knickerbocker, and the Row in New York.

The Taj, the old Ritz, or whichever name you choose to use was taken down to the studs and put back together. In other words, the old dame’s new dress is not off-the-rack. Informational point: Everyone interviewed for this story referred to the hotel as female.

One part of the Newbury that doesn’t feel particularly feminine is the Street Bar. It’s still wood-paneled (although a shade or three lighter) with those gorgeous windows that look out onto the Public Garden. But the clunky Colonial-style love seats and bulky captain’s chairs have been replaced with jewel-tone green banquettes and deep blue club chairs. It’s classic enough to appeal to the bar’s previous clientele, but with just enough sex appeal to speak to younger drinkers.

The bar will be run by Major Food Group, which operates 20 restaurants in New York, Las Vegas, and Tel Aviv. This will be its first Boston outpost. According to Will Nazar, chief operating officer of MFG, the company “took a deep dive” into the menus of the 1920s and 1930s, when the Ritz opened.

“We found great cocktails, similar to other fine establishments from the time period,” Nazar said. “For food, we reinvented their classics: deviled eggs, beef tartare, lobster chowder.”

While the bar will open with the hotel, the rooftop restaurant (the name of which has yet to be announced) will be a trattoria “inspired by the old-world resorts of Europe.” An executive chef has been chosen but not yet announced. The restaurant will



PHOTOS BY JIM DAVIS/GLOBE STAFF



THE NEWBURY BOSTON

Clockwise from the top: a place setting in the Assembly Room, a corner suite, and a view of the bar.

likely be the biggest draw for locals when it opens in June. Also run by MFG, it has retractable glass ceilings and oversized windows that will be opened on warm days, plus one of the best views of the Public Garden that you can legally enjoy with a glass of bourbon in hand. It’s a modern homage to the warm summer nights of yore when the Ritz held events on the roof under the stars.

There are touches, such as art commissioned for rooms highlighting scenes of Boston, a library with books curated by the Boston Public Library, a line of bespoke toiletries from Byredo with a scent created for the hotel, and, of course, a butler to tend to your fireplace — if you’re lucky enough to be staying in a room with a fireplace — that elevate the renovation beyond surface changes. If you’re wondering, and I know you are, room prices will begin just shy of \$600 a night when the hotel opens, and range up to \$10,350 a night for a rambling suite humbly called “The Mansion.”

The rooms at the hotel were reimagined by Alexandra Champalimaud, the award-winning founder of Champalimaud Design. One of the more pressing and technically challenging issues faced by Champalimaud and her team was making the guest rooms larger. When the hotel opened in 1927, the



The hotel, which opened as the Ritz-Carlton in 1927, was taken down to the studs in the current renovation.

phrase “spa-like” was not used to describe the bathrooms. It can be now.

“The idea of luxury stays has evolved over time,” said Ed Bakos, partner and CEO of Champalimaud Design. “So there’s a point when a historic hotel is not really offering the amenities that travelers in 2021 expect. The bathrooms, and the rooms, are small in the buildings from that era.”

Fortunately there was a way to make the rooms larger, which was to narrow the hallways. When the hotel was built, guests needed those larger hallways to wheel their steamer trunks to their rooms. The grander the hallway, the grander the hotel. Not so much in 2021. The hallways are now 18 inches narrow-

er, and, as a result, the rooms are more spacious.

The team from Champalimaud has tackled the Hotel Bel Air, the Beverly Hills Hotel, the Pierre, and the Carlyle. More recently they redesigned the Raffles hotel in Singapore, which is arguably the most romantic hotel in Asia. Their method of design at the Newbury was to determine how travelers to Boston spend time in their hotel rooms.

“How do you get up in the morning and start your day? And what can we as designers do to make a room cater to your needs?” said Elisabeth Rogoff, principal at Champalimaud Design. “We turned the entranceway into a dressing room with closet space because that’s what

you do when you get out of the shower.”

Much the way Beers took on the common spaces, the Champalimaud team needed to give the Newbury a local voice by interpreting what luxury means in Boston. This is where the words “charming,” “tailored,” and “intimate” reemerged.

“Making an old hotel new again is really looking at what charms you can bring back to life,” Rogoff said. “There were these gifts just waiting to be taken advantage of. The molding, the beautiful bay windows looking out onto the park. We didn’t have to create them.”

Another gift she found was being able to talk to the staff, some of whom were at the hotel when it was still the Ritz, to learn about its history and its guests. Perhaps their opinion of the hotel’s transformation is what matters most. So what do they think?

“I absolutely love it,” said Maureen Albright, who has been at the hotel nearly 20 years as its director of engineering and was named its official historian. The enthusiasm, like Albright herself, seemed completely genuine. “This is more than I ever could have imagined.”

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Can’t take the heat? A taste for spicy foods can be learned

By Daniel Victor
NEW YORK TIMES

The sauces on the table remain untouched — plain is fine, thank you.

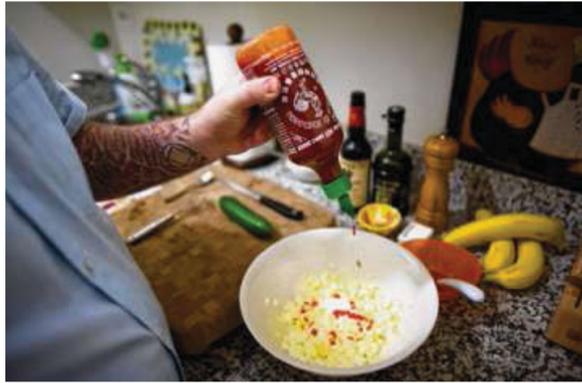
Is that some sort of red flake? Better pick around it.

Traveling to a country known for its red-hot cuisine? Cross your fingers that you can find the one mild dish on the menu.

Those who love spicy food might find these behaviors pitiable. But to those who struggle with spiciness and culinary heat, they may be part of a routine mealtime negotiation that involves stepping around potential land mines that will produce agonizing pain and make the food all but inedible.

A resistance to spiciness can produce shame as well as taunts from others who see their love of spiciness as an act of courage or a mark of more refined tastes. Others who don’t like the spiciness — myself included — might counter with, ow, it really hurts, and how could anyone possibly enjoy this sensation?

But for those who would like to wipe their aversion away, opening themselves up to a much fuller world of flavors and experiences, experts offer some solace: Most people can train



KARSTEN MORAN/NEW YORK TIMES

Adding hot sauces like sriracha to dishes is one way to overcome an aversion to spicy foods.

themselves to eat spicy food.

“It is absolutely possible to do that,” said John E. Hayes, a professor of food science and the director of the Sensory Evaluation Center at Penn State University. “We have the laboratory data to show that even in a few weeks you can increase your tolerance.”

For some people, it may take much longer than a few weeks. But experts say there do not appear to be any genetic factors preventing most people from liking spicy food. It’s more about repeated exposure.

Alissa A. Nolden, a UMass

Amherst professor of food science, conducted an experiment with people who reported not liking spicy food.

For three weeks, the researchers had the subjects rinse in the morning and at night with a mouthwash containing capsaicin, the active component in peppers that creates a burning sensation. They were asked to record how intense they thought the heat was each time.

The researchers observed “a huge change in intensity rating” toward the end of the experiment, Nolden said.

Much of the disparity in people’s perceptions traces back to what kind of food they ate as children, said Mary-Jon Ludy, a professor and chair of the department of public and allied health at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. A child raised in Mexico or India or raised in the United States by parents who cooked spicy food is more likely to seek out spiciness as an adult than those raised on blander diets.

Ludy herself grew up without spicy food, not trying it until she went to an Indian restaurant in college. It “set my mouth on fire,” she said. Although she likes spicy food now, she still does not enjoy more intense heat.

“For folks who don’t consume spicy foods on a regular basis, even a small amount seems to overwhelm the ability to experience flavor and enjoy the other components of foods,” Ludy said.

Those who have learned to like spicy food as adults often tell a similar story: They slowly ramped up their exposure, trying medium Buffalo wings after they became accustomed to mild Buffalo wings or progressively adding chili flakes to their meals. Some people say they rap-

idly adapted their tastes. Others say it took them years.

Hayes of the Sensory Evaluation Center says there is little to immediately show for the efforts. Unlike beer or coffee, which some people find distasteful at first but come to appreciate for their immediate effects, spicy food doesn’t leave reluctant people feeling anything positive after trying it, he said.

Sara Kay, a 32-year-old in Bratislava, Slovakia, who was raised in Rockville, Md., said it was not hard avoiding spicy food for most of her life. Her parents’ cooking was not spicy. Later, she attended culinary school in France, where the cuisine did not require much spiciness.

Her turning point came in 2013 when a friend took her to Xi’an Famous Foods in New York. She tried a salad that was numbingly hot, but despite the pain she still loved the taste of it.

“I’m crying while I’m eating this salad, but I felt like I needed to embrace it,” she said.

After that, she started adding Frank’s RedHot sauce to more of her dishes, and then sriracha. She has trained herself to enjoy it more and more and now appreciates that she can order more items off menus, she said.

For Shane Leigh, 46, his longtime distaste for spicy food was wrapped up in his identity issues, he said.

The son of two Jamaican immigrants who often cooked with jerk sauce and made curried goat and chicken, he grew up in the Kensington neighborhood of Brooklyn around people who were mostly of European descent, many of them Italian or Irish. To fit in, he thought he needed to shy away from his heritage, including its food.

“There was a disconnect for me with what I was living at home and what I thought was the path to popularity when I left the home: hamburgers, hot dogs, and pizza,” he said.

But in his 30s, he became more interested in his heritage. And his wife, the daughter of immigrants from Hong Kong, also had an aversion to spicy food.

So they slowly worked to embrace spiciness together, gradually building up tolerance over several years. Now they have both adjusted and even crave foods they couldn’t stand before.

“Embracing the food from the place where my parents are from is sort of like a homecoming that you didn’t know you needed,” Leigh said.