

Charter: Elementary kids would learn Arabic

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Georgia feature Arabic, including North Atlanta High School, where it is taught as part of the rigorous, college-prep International Baccalaureate program.

Students there said they wished they'd had some exposure to the language as children.

Arabic has the same number of letters as the English alphabet. But they change shape as they are grouped together to form words and phrases. Arabic text is read from right to left, back to front. And it requires sounds that are not found in English, Spanish, French and other European-based languages.

"It's really hard adjusting yourself reading right to left," said Najeeba Abdullah, a third-year student at North Atlanta. "When you're learning Arabic, you almost have to completely forget English."

The opportunity for young children makes the Amana Academy proposal groundbreaking, Webb said.

"I could make a great case that Arabic is every bit as useful as Spanish, French, Latin, but in a different way," she said. "It's really important for us to begin to have a strong cadre of students coming through schools with this language."

Most Americans who are learning Arabic were exposed

to it in college, too late to gain proficiency for professional purposes, said Antonia Folarin Schleicher, president of the National Council of Less Commonly Taught Languages, and a professor of African languages at the University of Wisconsin.

"If you want the level of proficiency the government wants for translators, it's not going to happen in four years of college," she said.

If the proposal is approved, the organizers plan to model their Arabic program on Georgia's elementary school foreign language program. The students would take 30-minute daily lessons in Arabic.

The name, Amana Academy, was chosen in part because Amana is one of the few Arabic words that is easy to pronounce. And its loose meaning in English, "a trust that must be guarded," covers the philosophy of the school founders toward public education, said Ehab Jaleel, a Coca-Cola marketing director who is helping organize the school.

Charter schools are public schools that receive public money but operate independently of school systems. The structure allows them to offer unique programs. Amana proponents want students to learn by participating in group projects rather than relying on classroom lessons. They advocate the separation of boys and girls, and community



RICH ADDICKS / Staff

Ahmed Elghotni teaches Arabic at North Atlanta High School on Friday. He says pronunciation would come easier to students if they learned the language at an earlier age.

volunteering. A facility has not been chosen, but Amana proponents hope to locate in Sandy Springs.

Arabic initially wasn't a central theme in the design of the charter, Jaleel said. But as the proposal evolved, parents became excited at the idea of students learning a language that is spoken by 300 million people, yet unfamiliar to most Americans, Jaleel said.

"It gives you a different perspective on learning in general," Jaleel said. "There's a halo effect on other subjects."

A native of Jordan, Jaleel speaks little Arabic himself. His two oldest daughters are tutored in the language. Learning any second language improves a child's ability to understand other subjects, and the charter advocates hope Fulton school officials find that research compelling.

The school board is expected to vote on the charter application next month.

At North Atlanta High, part

of the Atlanta public school system, the Arabic program has a long history of attracting students and public attention.

The program began 15 years ago, and now has about 80 students. Few of the students come from families where the language is spoken at home, said teacher Ahmed Elghotni.

His classes are small, and challenging. On a recent morning, students reviewed basic vocabulary, pronunciation and sentence structure. Most stumbled frequently on pronunciation, which Elghotni said is the most difficult aspect of Arabic.

Some of his students have continued with the language in college on federal scholarships. But it's still a short time frame, he said.

"We spend too much time trying to get students to start practicing these sounds," he said. "If they are younger, they are not already programmed. They can accept it much easier."

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