

Fremont charter hopes to start nation's first Arabic immersion program

By Sharon Noguchi
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It's 8:30 a.m. at FAME charter school in Fremont, and teacher Nahil Ireiqat is explaining to her Arabic I students like-sounding words, just one of many ways the language can ambush learners. Maktab (teacher's desk), she reminds them, is not the same as maktaba (library).

Even as the high school students learn the flourishes of Arabic script and unaccustomed sounds of the spoken language, they face the sobering prospect that after this year, they've still got about 2,100 hours of class left to master what the U.S. State Department considers an "exceptionally difficult" language for native English speakers. Its written language is a challenge even for native Arabic speakers.



Fame Charter School Arabic immersion teacher Nahil Ireiqat, instructs student... (Maria J. Avila)

How much better, Ireiqat said, to immerse students in the language from a young age — which is exactly what FAME hopes to do starting next year. The 4-year-old school that

focuses on serving immigrants from the Middle East and South Asia has outlined a plan to start the first K-12 dual-immersion Arabic program in the nation.

If approved by the Alameda County Board of Education, FAME would begin with one class of kindergartners and add a grade each year; immersion programs typically mix children who speak one language with children who speak another, so classmates supplement the dual-language instruction. The school would continue to educate other children in English.

In a post-9/11 world, there's a strong demand for Arabic speakers, the school's founder Maram Alaiwat said. FAME attracted about 200 applications for its spring lottery this year, she said, even from non-Arabic speaking families.

"People are coming to this school saying 'we want our kids to be global citizens,' and they love the exposure to foreign language in kindergarten," she said.

FAME, which stands for Families of Alameda County for Multicultural and Multilingual Education, draws 760 students from as far as Oakland and San Jose to two campuses in Fremont and one in San Leandro. It also oversees 700 home-schooled children. As a public school charter, FAME receives state money but is freed from most provisions of the education code, not bound by union

contracts and is run by its own board rather than a local school board.

While charter schools often encounter opposition from school districts wary of losing control and funding, FAME avoided local controversy partly because it petitioned Alameda County's school board for its charter, not a local district. A public hearing on its renewal will be held Nov. 10.

The school is strictly secular. And its success has attracted a unique partner: the FBI has taken the school under its wing with a "junior agent" program.

Special Agent Joseph Schadler said that FAME's Arabic classes and Middle Eastern student body played no role in choosing the school. It's just that Alaiwat, a graduate of the FBI's citizen academy, had expressed interest.

At least half its students come from non-English-speaking homes; of those, the majority speak either Arabic or Urdu, yet others come from Spanish or English-speaking homes. But many of the native Arabic speakers, particularly refugees, lack formal schooling in their language.



Fame Charter School Arabic immersion students listen to teacher Nahil Ireiqat (not pictured), instruct during class in Fremont October 31, 2009. The class is made up of different age groups. (Maria J. Avila/ Mercury News)



Fame Charter School Arabic immersion teacher Nahil Ireiqat, left, instructs students, including Shikeba Mehmood, 16, of Fremont during her Arabic immersion class at the school in Fremont October 31, 2009. The class is made up of different age groups. (Maria J. Avila/ Mercury News)

By respecting their languages, the school encourages multilingualism, Alaiwat said. Just listen to the soccer teams discussing strategy, sometimes in Arabic, maybe in Pashto or English, depending on the players.

In response to parent demand, the school began teaching Arabic three times weekly. But its most intense focus is on teaching English.

While the school still struggles to reach state test-score goals, especially in math, it excels in one area. Of its English learners, more than one-quarter gained fluency, at a rate

more than double the county's and state's rates. "Their growth is amazing," Alaiwat said. FAME gives English learners extra instruction and emphasizes



Fame Charter School Arabic immersion teacher Nahil Ireiqat, right, instructs student Roasa Mehmood, 16, of Fremont during her Arabic immersion class at the school in Fremont October 31, 2009. The class is made up of different age groups. (Maria J. Avila/ Mercury News)

teaching idioms. And Alaiwat credits aides and teachers, who among them speak 11 languages, with making a connection with kids.

Families flock to FAME for its small student-teacher ratio — 20:1 in elementary and high school, 25:1 in middle school — and especially for its feeling of physical and cultural safety, Alaiwat said. For example, girls can cover their heads without fear of ridicule and won't be forced to wear bathing suits in coed swim classes. The school is 60 percent female.

"There are no gangs here," said Hanan Mohmand, 16, a junior who moved to Fremont last year from Peshawar, Pakistan, barely speaking English.

Jessica Moncaleano, whose family also speaks Spanish at home, experienced a huge adjustment when she started as a freshman two years ago. FAME has uniforms and a closed campus, and no spirit week. "I didn't like it at first," the junior admitted.

But she likes learning Arabic, which is sometimes useful in the melting pot of Fremont and like an introduction to Middle Eastern culture, Jessica said. And while her friends think it's a weird language to study, she said, "I like to be different."

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A UNIQUE SCHOOL

Families of Alameda County for Multicultural and Multilingual Education (FAME)

Grades: Public K-12, charter school through Alameda County Board of Education

Students: 760 students from as far as Oakland and San Jose; 700 home-schooled children from 11 counties.

Campuses: Two in Fremont; one in San Leandro

Languages: Although the school teaches Arabic and has plans to become the first Arabic-immersion school in the country, students speak 15 languages