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teach social studies. For now, Bacon says this would give PPS the most “bang for its buck.”

Bacon says three barriers stand in the way of not only implementing a Somali dual language program, but also of implementing the native literacy program his department is proposing. He says the 480 Somali students in Portland’s school district are scattered, so significant busing would be required to get them all to the three school clusters being considered for the program: the Wilson, Roosevelt and Madison high schools and the elementary and middle schools that feed into them.

Secondly, there are no available course materials.

“It’s not like we can go to publishers and say, ‘Give me your math materials in Somali,’ it just doesn’t exist. We’re going to have to do a lot of identifying and developing that,” he says.

And finally, there is a lack of qualified teachers who speak Somali languages. Since posting a want ad for a Somali-language-speaking teacher in early December, the

district has not received one qualified applicant, he says.

While there are many languages among immigrant students that are not represented in this special language program, Somali is the most commonly spoken. PPS has dual-language immersion classes in Spanish, Vietnamese, Russian, Japanese and Mandarin – languages that have a higher demand among English-speaking students that fill half the seats in a dual language classroom.

Amal Amir is a college graduate fluent in Somali language and interested in teaching kids in the proposed program. As a Somali refugee who moved to the U.S. when she was 12, Amir’s experienced first-hand what it’s like to go to a school where none of the teachers looked like her or talked like her. But while she is

fluent in Somali she lacks teaching credentials. Because Oregon doesn’t have a program to certify Somali teachers specifically, Somalis with a bachelor’s degree, like Amir has, might be eligible to teach the languages. Bacon is looking into ways to get her on track to getting a license. He says there’s no shortage of educated Somalis who can teach in Portland.

“We just need to figure out how to get them through our system so that we can get them the proper licensing and into our classrooms,” he says.

While the proposed program is not the optimal approach, Amir says she believes it can help kids who are English speakers communicate better with their relatives and strengthen the academic achievement of those who are not. “It will make a difference in every Somali household,” she says.

Bacon hopes that the native literacy program he has proposed will set the course for developing both materials and teachers for a more comprehensive program later on. He wants to start this fall by providing classes at several schools that will develop Somali students’ skills in their native languages, and therefore raise their chances of doing well in other areas.

“This is not a cure-all by any means. This is about starting to put a stake in the

ground, recognizing their assets and working on what we know by research, is the most impacting thing for these kids: developing their first language,” Bacon says.

“We’re not going to see the results we would see if we did dual language immersion program,” he says. “Because of the three barriers, and at this point, with our feasibility study that we did, we know we can’t do immersion yet. Can we get there someday? Maybe – I don’t know.”

PPS Superintendent Carole Smith will make a decision on the budget, and ultimately the fate of the proposed Somali language program, in March or April. The board will then vote on it in May.

In the meantime, nonprofits like African Youth and Community Organization (AYCO) and Immigrant Refugee and Community Organization (IRCO) provide programs that help African youth with their studies outside of school. AYCO director and co-founder Jamal Dar says AYCO has developed after-school sports programs, and kids who wish to participate have to help younger community members with their studies.

Abdirahman Dahir moved to Portland in 2006 from a refugee camp in Kenya and was placed into a sixth-grade classroom. He had no previous formal education. Dahir, like many other Somali youth, sought the help of a community organization. He says that without the Upward Bound program at IRCO he probably would have gone the way of many of his friends and never graduated. In 2012 he earned his high school diploma, and now he helps his seven younger siblings with their homework.

“It’s difficult when you see kids raising their hands and the teacher answering their questions, and you’re sitting there in the back and you don’t even know how to ask anything,” Dahir says.

The Somali native literacy program that was proposed would be the first program of its kind in PPS, but G.M. Garcia, former PPS Dual Language Immersion Program director, says the program being offered the Somali community “sounds like a consolation prize.”

She says resources should go to fix problems with the dual language immersion and ESL programs that are already in place before the district introduces a whole new program.

While overseeing the dual language program in 2013, Garcia says she saw slots in dual language programs given to native English speakers because immigrant students – who really needed the program – often couldn’t get the transportation to the schools where it was being offered. In some cases, parents didn’t even know the program existed. Because each school gets 50 percent more funding for each of its ESL students, there is a financial incentive for principals to keep students on their schools’ rosters: If they lose the student, they lose the extra funds.

Garcia says for the proposed Somali native literacy program to work, it will need to be implemented properly and have the support of schools within the district.

“If we don’t have resources comparable to the English-only education, parents deserve to know,” Garcia says. “I am also very concerned about the gap between what was presented to the board and what the Somali

leaders appear to understand and expect.”

In addition, Garcia says PPS should look into how native language can be strategically used in mainstream and ESL settings and conduct a sustainability analysis that would identify program goals based on parents’ demand, student need and desired outcomes.

Garcia says the traditional ESL program also needs work. Many ESL teachers were librarians or physical education or art teachers before losing their jobs during massive layoffs in the 1990s, Garcia says. They were able to come back on as ESL teachers, but teaching English isn’t their specialty. “In Oregon, as a state, we don’t do a good job of hiring, training and developing ESL teachers,” she says. Having better-trained teachers in ESL classrooms could also go a long way in helping new immigrant students to assimilate, she says.

AYCO and other immigrant community groups have been pushing for language programs within PPS that will support their efforts as community organizations to address issues with assimilating African youth. AYCO director

Dar says he has come to mistrust the school district after four years of what he says amount to empty promises.

“It’s always ‘yes, yes’ and then nothing happens,” he says. He’s sent in several proposals for different programs upon request, but then been denied each time, he says. “We’ve had 60, 70, 90 people in front of the board, and we get no result,” he says.

Despite the barriers standing in the way, there is a clear need for Somali youth to have a connection with their native languages built into the school system. As they are thrust into a new culture and language, someone in the system who places a value on the assets they already have can make a big difference, says Bacon.

Mohamud never graduated from high school, but she was able to enroll in a Portland Community College program that allows immigrants ages 16 to 20, who don’t speak English as their first language and who don’t have a high school diploma or GED, to further their education. Jeff Laff manages this program, called Yes to College, and he says Mohamud is one of the program’s “greatest success stories.” He says, “She’s persevered much longer than most students in her situation.” Mohamud continued to learn English for several more years at PCC, then took classes to help her get a GED so she could begin to take classes for credit. She is on track to earn an associates degree in 2016.

Laff says immigrant students who move to the U.S. when they are high-school age are not given enough direct English instruction in the high school setting.

Now married and a mother of three, Mohamud says she hopes her children will be able to learn both English and her native Somali language in public school someday.

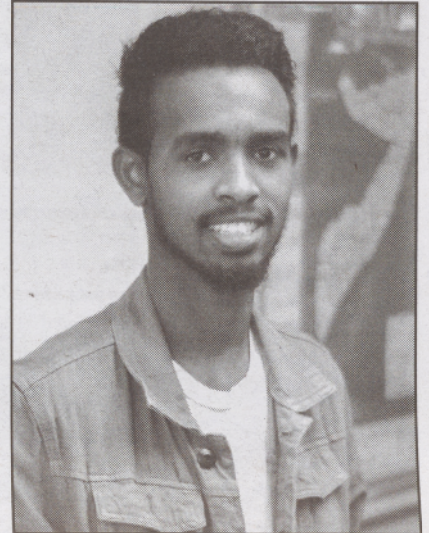


PHOTO BY DIEGO DIAZ
Abdirahman Dahir moved to Portland in 2006 from a refugee camp in Kenya and was placed into a sixth-grade classroom. He had no previous formal education. Dahir, like many other Somali youth, sought the help of a community organization.