

PREMIUM

32°

# High school Arabic program sends debate team to Qatar

Email Facebook 12 Twitter 3  0



1 of 8

ANTONIO PEREZ, CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Students test Arabic language skills

By Noreen S. Ahmed-Ullah, Tribune reporter

8:44 pm, March 19, 2014

In a classroom on Chicago's South Side, four students made final preparations this week to compete in a debate halfway around the world in a language they have studied for only a handful of years.

The students from Lindblom Math and Science Academy in West Englewood will leave Thursday for Doha, Qatar, where they will do their best to make compelling arguments in

Arabic to teams made up almost entirely of native speakers.

"It's going to be a challenge," said senior LaCharro Hawkins, 18, who lives in West Englewood. "We're not there to win. It's about the experience and becoming proficient in writing and speaking the language, and learning about the culture."

Lindblom's Arabic language program, which began partly as an effort to foster understanding after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, is the largest of its kind in the country. The school will be the only one representing the U.S. in Qatar. None of the team's members has left the continent before.

The debates on issues, including government surveillance, will require a whole new vocabulary for the students, who have been developing their arguments and translating them from English to Arabic since receiving the competition's eight topics three weeks ago.

For debaters, anticipating the opposing team's counterarguments is key. The four Lindblom students will have the added burden of trying to understand their opponents' arguments as they are made. Then they'll have to be ready to snap back with rebuttals.

The students have been getting help from their teachers in translating their opening arguments, fine-tuning pronunciation of newly acquired vocabulary and practicing to listen for transition words that will signal where the opposing team is headed — words such as "wa lakin," which means "but," "lidhalik," which means "therefore," and "ma'dhalik," which means "nevertheless."

"It's such a difficult language," said Karina Reyes, 17, a junior whose parents moved to Chicago from Mexico. "It's not A-B-C-D-E-F-G. You have to learn a whole new set of letters. You need to read from right to left. There's gargling sounds, so you need to hear how a letter is pronounced in order to get the pronunciation right. You really need to pay attention in class to see how it all works."

Lindblom is one of the oldest schools in the district and stretches across nearly an entire block in the middle of the West Englewood neighborhood. It is one of the district's elite selective-enrollment schools and accepts students based on test scores, grades and results of an entrance exam. Eleven percent of the kids who attend the school come from the surrounding Englewood community, and 93 percent come from the South Side.

After being shut down for two years for restoration, Lindblom reopened in 2005. Principal Alan Mather wanted to offer a foreign language that would offer new opportunities for his students and set them apart from kids taking more traditional languages, like French and Spanish.

As an assistant principal in 2001, Mather said he watched high school students grapple with their opinions as they watched the Sept. 11 attacks on TV, "having trouble sorting through the complexity of the noise" as people from the Arab world were being vilified. He thought offering Arabic would help students bridge a cultural divide.

"It made me think about the need to create understanding, and that would only happen on the ground," he said. "Thus, this was a perfect blending of two pieces, opportunity and the constant battle to stamp out ignorance."

The problem was that there was no curriculum for teaching Arabic as a foreign language to high schoolers and no certification for Arabic teachers. Mather reached out to the author of a new Arabic language textbook, put out searches for certified teachers who also happened to know Arabic and enlisted the help of Nesreen Akhtarkhavari, now the director of Arabic studies at DePaul University.

Mather and Akhtarkhavari put together a proposal for CPS. They worked with the Illinois State Board of Education to set up a process by which certified teachers could get endorsements for teaching Arabic.

In the years since, Mather has continuously advocated for his Arabic program, enlisting outside support including from the Qatar Foundation International for more opportunities for his students and teachers.

The district received a federal grant of nearly \$900,000 in 2008 to add languages deemed important, like Arabic, to the curriculum of schools around the city. Today, 12 CPS schools — seven elementary and five high schools — offer Arabic courses.

This school year, with a grant from the Qatar Foundation International, Mather helped start the Center for Arabic Language and Culture, a nonprofit organization based at Lindblom that promotes the Arabic language and Arab culture.

"The K-12 Arabic program is nascent, still early in its development," said Tyler Blackwell, the center's newly appointed director and a former foreign affairs officer with the U.S. State Department. "It hasn't been developed to the extent as more established world languages, such as French, Spanish and German. There isn't even an AP Arabic exam yet, but we are working with the College Board to create one."

Nearly one-third of Lindblom's 1,140 students are taking Arabic this year. The four students headed to Doha on Thursday were picked out of an Arabic debate class started at the school this year in anticipation of the Qatar Debate, which is funded by the Qatari government.

The four debate team members said they initially weren't interested in studying Arabic, an

extremely tough language to learn with a different script. But all found themselves in the program when the school's Mandarin class filled up and Arabic was the only other language course available.

Sophomore Brenda Macias, 15, who has been taking the language since coming to Lindblom as a seventh-grader, said she often thought of quitting as she listened to audiotapes in Arabic.

"I would literally cry because I couldn't understand what they were saying," said Macias, whose parents grew up in Mexico.

But eventually, the students said, they came to love the Arabic culture, which helped them appreciate the language. All four debaters said they will continue with Arabic in college and hope the language will open doors for them both here and abroad.

In Qatar they will join students from Jordan, Egypt and Lebanon, as well as non-Arab countries like Malaysia and Singapore. Their Arabic teacher said that until the topic list arrived a few weeks ago, the students had been prepping by debating fun topics like sports, travel and food. Now the issues are more serious.

"The nice thing about the debates is they are being forced to study new words about government and national security and education," said Fadi Abughoush, who teaches Arabic at the school.

But he knows the uphill battle before his students. "We are the only team whose first language is English. Even the students from Malaysia and Singapore ... they've been studying Arabic since first grade," he said.

Sophomore Erin Nwachukwu, 15, whose only other foreign language ability consists of a few words of Igbo from her father's native Nigeria, says she enjoys the way Arabic stimulates her brain, and the challenge of figuring out what it all means.

The Chicago Lawn resident says she knows the group will be at a bit of a disadvantage in Qatar, but that doesn't dampen her enthusiasm.

"I've never been on a plane before," she said. "I'm just excited. We may not win the debate, but if we can at least present a good argument, then we've won."

[nahmed@tribune.com](mailto:nahmed@tribune.com)

## Related Content

---

Preparation for Qatar

---

[Next Article](#)

---

[Account](#)

[Sign in](#)

[Register](#)

[Customer Services](#)

[Advertising Services](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Customer Services](#)

[Advertising Services](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Terms of Service](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[About Our Ads](#)

[Visit our desktop site](#)

[Terms of Service](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[About Our Ads](#)

[Visit our desktop site](#)[A Tribune newspaper website](#)

[A Tribune newspaper website](#)