

‘One thing at a time’

Last fall, Abdisalam Adam put the district’s strategy to the test. Superintendent Joe Gothard announced in May that the district would open its East African Elementary Magnet School that fall—just three months later. Gothard tapped Abdisalam, a longtime district educator and assistant principal, to lead the effort.

Throughout the summer, Abdisalam spread the word throughout the community, holding several enrollment events. In an open house days before school started, the school was crowded with parents, students, and teachers eager to get to know each other. Abdisalam told staff that the school had blown past its enrollment goal, with 253 students.



Abdisalam Adam addresses the growing crowd at an August 31 open house for East African Elementary Magnet School. The community made the school possible, he told them. Credit: Aaron Nesheim | Sahan Journal
But on October 1, when schools conduct their annual count, enrollment had fallen to 188.

Many of those challenges can be chalked up to logistics, Abdisalam said. Some parents had reported difficulties with transportation: Their bus stops were too far away. Other families wanted all their children to be together in one school, and the pre-K through fifth-grade school only serves elementary kids. The school’s 7:30 a.m. start time was another factor, he said: It’s challenging for parents to navigate vastly different start times when sending kids to multiple schools.

Next year, East African Elementary Magnet School will add a sixth grade. Abdisalam said he plans to discuss the start time issues with the district. The school is already in discussions about moving to a new building that can better accommodate a K-8 school. And since October, enrollment has ticked back up; in January, the school listed 203 students.

Generally, Abdisalam said, parents feel optimistic and welcome at the school. They're attracted by the school's academics, language and cultural offerings, and diverse staff: a mix of East African, white, African American, Latino and Asian teachers. In the hallways at dismissal time, kids often sing a popular Somali song they have learned, "[Soomaaliyeey toosoo](#)," which Abdisalam translated as "Arise, all Somalis." He described kids "coming down the stairwell just singing this song all together." Teachers have learned the song, too. Parents have been moved to see their children coming home singing Somali songs, Abdisalam said. One parent reacted with disbelief, Abdisalam said. "I didn't know they would speak Somali," he recalled the parent saying. Next year Abdisalam hopes that the school's language lessons will go a little deeper in Somali and Arabic; right now, the school focuses primarily on East African culture.

May Lee Xiong has offered her support to Abdisalam, and he has visited Txuj Ci. Xiong's advice to Abdisalam: "One thing at a time," she said. "He doesn't have to build everything up at once. It's going to take 20 years."

That process involves a lot of one-on-one discussions with families, Xiong said. "Like I tell him all the time," she said, "it was one conversation at a time."
Cynthia Tu contributed reporting and data analysis.

iexaminer.org