

LAURA The 325 students at Tarek ibn Ziyad Academy are bussed here from around the Twin Cities, but many of them
MCCALLUM: first came from places much farther away.

ASAD ZAMAN: We have students here from Somalia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania Egypt, Saudi Arabia, of course America. I think--

LAURA Asad Zaman, a native of Bangladesh, is principal of Tarek ibn Ziyad Academy, or as it's known by its acronym,
MCCALLUM: TIZA. Zaman says more than 80% of the school's students are English language learners, so all of the school's teachers are trained to teach English as a second language, or ESL.

ASAD ZAMAN: Most ESL happens in the classroom.

LAURA Zaman says the school also has two ESL labs for students who continue to struggle to learn English. The school's
MCCALLUM: heavy emphasis on teaching English language learners to read paid off in last year's standardized test scores. 91% of the school's students were proficient in reading, one of the highest scores in the state. That achievement is prominently displayed outside the school office. But Zaman notes the school's math test scores weren't quite as good, 57% of TIZA's students were proficient in math, which is about equal to the state average.

ASAD ZAMAN: Because we focused on reading, and then this year we are having a focus on math.

LAURA And I wondered if that's one of the challenges when you have a lot of English language learners, math can be
MCCALLUM: pretty tricky for them if they don't understand the language around the math.

ASAD ZAMAN: Well, yes, and our teachers feel that the students have a natural aptitude for math, but, unfortunately, without English they can't do anything, because the questions are in English.

LAURA The school's students speak more than 15 languages at home, and this is one of the few schools in the state that
MCCALLUM: teaches them Arabic.

SPEAKER: [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

USRAM: I know this one.

SPEAKER: Usram?

USRAM: Address [INAUDIBLE]

SPEAKER: Address, very good.

LAURA The seventh graders in this class are studying Arabic words they might use at the post office, such as mail,
MCCALLUM: stamp, and envelope. The students wear the school's uniform, blue pants and white or blue shirts, and all of the girls in the room wear Islamic headscarves. Down the hall in one of the kindergarten classes, children are reciting the days of the week in Arabic.

SPEAKERS: [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

LAURA MCCALLUM: Tarek ibn Ziyad Academy is named for an explorer who led the Muslim conquest of Spain. And Zaman says the school recognizes the traditional values of the mostly Muslim countries its students have come from. One of those values is respect for parents and teachers. Zaman says families who enroll their children in TIZA want the school to reinforce that value.

ASAD ZAMAN: For example, one of the students, I think one month ago, got suspended from school because he called the teacher ugly. Now in the grand scheme of things, one might argue this is not really a suspension offence. But from our perspective, this is a big deal, you cannot disrespect a teacher.

LAURA MCCALLUM: Zaman says the school makes it clear to students that they must follow the rules or they will be disciplined. That could be a phone call to the student's parents, or students may be sent to the so-called reflection room in the school's library. Zaman stops by that room, where three boys are reflecting because they were pushing on the playground.

ASAD ZAMAN: We keep a very tight leash on it, because if they start pushing and we do nothing, then there is a fight, and no we're not going to do that, no pushing means no pushing.

LAURA MCCALLUM: TIZA has a waiting list of more than 1,000 students. Zaman believes that's because of the school's focus on both academics and discipline. He also thinks the school is a welcoming place where Muslim children won't be harassed for their religion.

ASAD ZAMAN: Here the girls are not getting teased because of their headscarf, the boys are not being called little terrorists.

LAURA MCCALLUM: As a public charter school, Tarek ibn Ziyad Academy doesn't teach religion, but it does provide a time and place for Muslim students to pray if they choose to, and that's important to many of the parents who send their children here. The Arabic instruction is also a priority for many families. The chairman of TIZA's board, Hasham Hussain, is originally from Egypt and has two children enrolled in the school.

HASHAM HUSSAIN: It's important for me for my own kids to be bilingual. I want them to be able to live in America and speak English without an accent, but I also want them to also be able to speak Arabic without an accent.

LAURA MCCALLUM: Hussain says he helped found TIZA, because he saw a need for a school designed for immigrant children. He says the first couple of years were a little Rocky, but says the school is now achieving exactly what he and the other founders had hoped. I'm Laura McCallum, Minnesota Public Radio News.