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## Aid for Somali students divides parents

By CAROLINE ALPHONSO

*Detractors fear TDSB plan to offer special support for students from the community will stigmatize children*

Suban Abdullahi has taken on an unusual charge: She is fighting the Toronto District School Board so her children do not receive any special treatment.

On Wednesday, school trustees will be reviewing – and possibly approving – a task force report that calls for more supports for Somali students, postsecondary scholarships, a Somali heritage month and Somali-focused curriculum. The recommendations have sparked deep divisions in the community. Supporters say that, because of a higher-than-average dropout rate, interventions are urgently needed. Detractors such as Ms. Abdullahi say it will only stigmatize her two school-age children (three others are in university) and others of Somali descent.

"The task force is marginalizing our children," said Ms. Abdullahi, who formed a grassroots parents' movement and gathered hundreds of online signatures. "If they really want to help, why not help all the students who are failing?"

Her argument raises interesting questions: How does a school board decide where to dedicate its limited resources? And will those extra supports leave students feeling stigmatized?

The TDSB came under fire when it wanted to collect race-based data on its student population and when it opened Ontario's first public Africentric school. When data showed Portuguese students were dropping out at higher rates, a task force created a few years back was also criticized. The task force on Somali students, made up of parents, students and educators, was formed last year after some parents requested more supports for their kids at school.

About 5,000 Somali-speaking students attend TDSB schools, the majority of whom were born in Canada. A 2006 study showed that 25 per cent of Somali-speaking students at the TDSB dropped out, compared with 14 per cent over all. Also, fewer students of Somali descent apply to university or college. But the high dropout rate is not limited to Somali students. Portuguese- and Spanish-speaking students also do not fare well in school.

Donna Quan, the director of education, said the debate about where to direct supports is natural. But in the end, she said, helping students cross the finish line is what matters most.

"This is about inclusion. This is about levelling the playing field and giving an opportunity to those who may not have a chance to succeed," she said. "I think that the stigma will draw some short-term concern, but I think that once that generation receives the support and is able to move further through that support, that stigma will gradually dissipate."

Michael Inzlicht, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Toronto's Scarborough campus, said

creating a specialized task force and then providing accommodations for one ethnic population will bring attention to it. But, he added, "you have to weigh that with what are the effects of not addressing and recognizing the problem. Will the problem get any better by just pretending everything is great and the Somali population is not doing any worse than the other populations? Should we stick our heads in the sand and pretend everything is fine, or should we actually do something about it?"

A colour-blind approach may be nice in theory, but does not recognize that some communities face difficulties and issues of race that affect academic performance, Prof. Inzlicht said.

Ms. Abdullahi argues the vast majority of Somali students – about 75 per cent – are graduating, and perhaps TDSB resources should be put toward those who are failing, generally. Her children in Grade 9 and 10 are in French immersion and doing well in school, she said. Targeting resources at them is unnecessary, Ms. Abdullahi contends.

"It's not doing anything but harming them. It is isolating them. It's showing the other children that the Somali descent children are not capable," she said.

Not so, said Haweiya Egeh, who co-chaired the task force. Ms. Egeh is a graduate of the TDSB, and her father is a teacher at the school board. She acknowledges many Somali students fare well in school. Watching the division over extra support, Ms. Egeh concludes: "No community agrees 100 per cent over anything."

Ms. Egeh believes the fact that most Somali students graduate high school does not mean there is not a problem. "Even though there are success stories, we have to recognize that within the community there are people who need supports," she said. "I don't buy the whole labelling stigmatization thing."

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