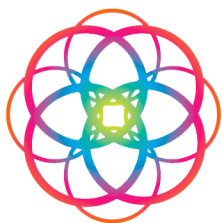




SOMALI STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN MINNESOTA

A Report on the Largest East
African Community in Minnesota

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Minnesota
Education Equity
Partnership

AUGSBURG
UNIVERSITY®



Executive Summary

The central focus of this report is the children and youth of Somali descent who live and go to school in Minnesota. It is important to understand the background of why their families are here, recognize they are born here or elsewhere, and later examine the school experiences they have. In this report, we present experiences in educating Somali students: public and charter schools, English language development, the lack of Somali teachers, and family engagement. Unfortunately, Somali student achievement in Minnesota, like other English Learners (EL), has been consistently lower than white, native English-speaking peers' academic achievement.¹

We therefore present recommendations to strengthen Somali student achievement: curriculum and instruction through literacy and native language development, diversifying the teacher workforce, and teachers and families working together. We drew extensively from research, interviews with different people from the diaspora community, and observations.

This report shows how Minnesota educators and systems work with Somali students and families to build a strong educational foundation, and shares promising practices and policy ideas to build on current successes and increase academic achievement for all students. This report should equip teachers, schools, and policymakers with what they ought to consider when creating and implementing equitable policies and practices. This report serves as an advocacy tool for the Somali community, Minnesota educators, policymakers, and you, the reader, to strengthen academic achievement for one of the fastest growing EL communities in Minnesota.

In many areas around Minnesota, the Somali population has risen significantly. Somali parents dream of better opportunities for themselves and, more importantly, their children when arriving to the US. Somali students have the same goals as their classmates: to make a difference in their community and have fun. The Somali community wants to be seen as another contributing group, trying to live the American dream. All of this hope in education results in a reality of wasted time in programs and classes that do not address their unique needs.² Somali students often feel unprepared for academic demands, or they do not often feel ready for college or a career. They also often feel invisible, or hyper-visible at school. Somali families often feel unheard or disregarded in engagement opportunities with the school or district. Students and families do not often see themselves reflected in the school building or curriculum.

The following recommendations come from research, interviews, and observations in the community. Strengthening Somali student achievement requires a variety of modifications in curriculum and instruction, family engagement, and the teacher workforce.

Recommendations to Strengthen Somali Student Achievement:

- (1) **Culturally Responsive and Relevant:** The curriculum, practices, and school environment must reflect the student body and experience for students to feel powerful in owning their education, especially for SLIFE
- (2) **Multiple Literacies Approach:** Integrate literacy and native language development at any age to establish a linguistic foundation for English learning and strengthen identity.
- (3) **Teachers and Parents Together:** Families are interested and willing to engage in their children's education and teachers can develop a strong team with families.
- (4) **Diversify Teacher Workforce:** Students are more engaged when they see a teacher who looks like them and understands their experience, so barriers must be addressed that prevent more Somalis from pursuing the career.

The growing reality, especially for public schools, is a student population whose needs are not met. Schools and districts need to recognize the way western education privileges certain kinds of learning and knowing over others.³ Furthermore, culturally relevant pedagogy is central to the success of people of color.⁴ Because of increasing diversity overall, schools ought to recognize the different needs of their students and families.

Considering the research that bilingualism has positive effects on test scores and executive function,⁵ and recognizing the refugee background of many students, native language development is crucial to integrating students into Minnesota schools and teaching literacy. It is important to have language retention and acquisition so that students feel connected to both the home and new community.⁶ The MN LEAPS Act also calls for native language development.

Minnesota's teaching workforce is over 96% white while its student population is over 30% children of color and growing.⁷ Considering this, a homogeneous teaching corps is a consistent barrier to providing equitable education.⁸ Another barrier is the unconscious bias teachers may have: stereotypes, positive or negative, influence decisions and behaviors without the individual consciously acting on the stereotype or being aware that they are doing so.⁹ Such behaviors create self-fulfilling prophecies, which in turn validate teachers' images and experiences. If the unconscious bias is not negative, the opposite mentality toward students of color is that they need to be saved.¹⁰

There is a common misconception that parents with limited formal schooling have little to offer in their children's education.¹¹ Schools can show families how to embrace involvement by reaching out and helping families feel welcome and comfortable. Plus, schools and teachers can recognize that, for Somali families, education is an endeavor in which many adults participate.¹² Similar to student engagement, parent engagement must also be culturally relevant and responsive.

It will take cooperation from Somali community, students, parents, educators, researchers, and policymakers to make multilingual and culturally relevant programs an option for students. Despite the time, effort, and financial commitments this will require, the potential gains are significant and students need to be part of the overall education community in the effort to have equity in Minnesota schools.

Endnotes

¹ Johnson, A. (2017). Minnesota Multilingual Equity Network: English learner-Every Student Succeeds Act Initiative. St. Paul, MN: Coalition of Asian American Leaders & Minnesota Education Equity Partnership. Retrieved from <https://mneep.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/ESSA-PolicyPaper-Final-Web.pdf>

² Bigelow, M. H. (2010). *Mogadishu on the Mississippi: Language, racialized identity, and education in a new land* (Vol. 60). John Wiley & Sons.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ladson-Billings, G. (Summer 1995). But That's Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. *Theory in Practice*, Vol 34 (3). Retrieved from http://equity.spps.org/uploads/but_that_s_just_ladson-billings.pdf.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ MN Department of Education. (2017). 2017 Report of Teacher Supply and Demand in Minnesota Public Schools. Retrieved from <http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/about/rule/leg/rpt/rep17/>

⁸ MN Education Equity Partnership. (2016). 2016 State of Students of Color and American Indian Students Report. Retrieved from <https://mneep.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/SOSOCAL-Report-2016.pdf>

⁹ Gershenson, S. & Dee, T. S. (2017). The Insidiousness of Unconscious Bias in Schools. The Brookings Institution. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2017/03/20/the-insidiousness-of-unconscious-bias-in-schools/>

¹⁰ MN Education Equity Partnership. (2016). 2016 State of Students of Color and American Indian Students Report. Retrieved from <https://mneep.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/SOSOCAL-Report-2016.pdf>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

AUGSBURG
UNIVERSITY®



Minnesota
Education Equity
Partnership

For more information, visit:

<http://www.augsburg.edu/education/east>
<http://www.mneep.org/bbg/big-bold-goal-4>