

# Caring Across Communities

## Success Story

Portland Public Schools



## From Fear and Grief to a New Life: Sara Finds her Way

If Sara knew how to ask for help, her grief, fear and anger might not have brought her so close to the edge of crisis. But by the time the staff of Portland Public Schools' Caring Across Communities partner agencies met her, Sara's life was in complete turmoil.

Born in Sudan, Sara, her younger brother, mother and father escaped war and deprivation by immigrating to Egypt. Soon after, Sara's father died and Sara's mother remarried a man who was able to resettle the family in Portland, Maine. Just 10 years old when she arrived in the U.S., Sara had already experienced more trauma than many people do in a lifetime. Her feelings of grief at the loss of her beloved father, her fear of assimilating into a totally new culture, her confusion over learning a new language and new customs, and her difficulty finding her way in her reconstructed family combined to overwhelm her.

Sara began fifth grade in a class for English Language Learners (ELLs) designed to help her prepare for middle school. Her first months of shyness and fear led the way to frustration and resentment. She lashed out against her teachers and classmates. At home she fared no better. She didn't get along with her new step-father and she felt she had no room to grieve for the father she missed so much. Her stress caused spontaneous nosebleeds and vomiting.

In middle school her misery accelerated. She defied her teachers, threatened her peers and, when she just couldn't take it anymore, simply left campus without permission. By the time she was referred to an on-campus counselor, Sara was very nearly lost.

A counselor from the project's partner agency and a bilingual parent outreach specialist at the Multilingual Center were paired with Sara through the Portland Public Schools Caring Across Communities program. Over the next two years, the counselor and facilitator met with Sara weekly. They visited her home and learned more about her background and family life. A social worker referred Sara to the Center for Grieving Children, where she attended weekly sessions with other children suffering from grief and loss. At the Center, Sara participated in activities focused on releasing her feelings of grief and loss through the arts, group process, peer support, and physical outlets.

At school Sara was struggling academically. Her counselor enrolled her in the Read 180 Program to strengthen her vocabulary, reading comprehension, and writing skills. She also participated in a guided study hall; the Safe and Smart Program for afternoon homework

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help and enrichment; and, in the summer, a multilingual academic program to retain and enhance the skills learned during the school year. Throughout the year, Sara received the support of a bilingual educational technician in her mainstream classes.

In the eighth grade, Sara was selected for the *Make It Happen Program!* which matched her with an academic coach to work on specific areas of academic need. By the end of the academic year, as her English skills reached proficiency and her confidence blossomed, Sara began to make friends and good grades. At home, her new coping strategies helped her once again enjoy her family.

Now in the 9th grade, Sara is a happy, poised, confident young woman who initiates conversations and enjoys both school and social life. She has even figured out a way to maintain her cultural traditions by starting a club with a group of Sudanese girls who combine Sudanese traditional dance with American rock and roll dance steps.

With social, emotional, and academic supports in place through the Portland Public Schools' Caring Across Communities partner agencies, Sara came to terms with her grief and loss and overcame the barriers she faced. She successfully learned English, succeeded at school, and made friends.

"Sara seems to have figured it all out," her guidance counselor says. "She has become a conscientious student who is able to reflect and make informed decisions." Her counselor is confident Sara will continue to improve. "She asks for help when she needs it."

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is supporting Caring Across Communities and its partners, such as Portland Public Schools, to address this need by increasing and improving mental health services for all America's children. Learn more about how programs like Caring Across Communities create innovative solutions for children like Sara at: <http://www.healthinschools.org>.

For more information about Portland Public Schools, contact Grace Venenzuela at: [valeng@portlandschools.org](mailto:valeng@portlandschools.org)

For more information about the Caring Across Communities national program and related resources visit: <http://healthinschools.org/Immigrant-and-Refugee-Children/Caring-Across-Communities.aspx>

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