

SUCCESS STORY

Building a Bridge to Understanding and Success

Portland Public Schools | Maine

By the time three young Somali boys were called into their principal's office for a disciplinary hearing—they were frightened, their teachers were frustrated and classmates annoyed.

All three boys were new to their middle school in Portland, Maine. Their families had immigrated from Somalia on Refugee Visas to help them escape the war, displacement and poverty that threatened their very existence. Faced with resettling in a community so different, adjusting to a new culture and unfamiliar expectations, navigating a new language and feeling isolated, the boys clung to their faith in God that, someday, everything would be okay.



But that's where the trouble began. Without permission the boys were leaving class in the middle of the day. Their inability to express themselves in English made it impossible for them to explain their purpose or why they insisted on splashing water around the boys' bathroom during each of these absences.

The teachers were appalled that the boys would simply leave their classes and classmates were angry that the bathroom floor was wet each afternoon. The principal was being asked to suspend the boys, but before he made his decision he called the Portland Public Schools' Multilingual and Multicultural Center, a *Caring Across Communities* partner program funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

The Center sent a Somali Parent/Community Specialist to talk to the boys and learn more about their behavior. The principal made it clear he wanted the mid-day absences and the bathroom escapades to stop.

In his conversations with the boys, the specialist learned that the boys were leaving class to say mid-day prayers, a tradition in the Muslim faith. To prepare for praying, they would perform ablutions, a ritual washing of their feet to show their humility before God. The sinks in the boys' bathroom seemed the most logical place for the ablutions.

After explaining the religious purpose of the boy's behavior, the Somali Parent/Community Specialist called in the local Imam (the equivalent of a Muslim priest) whose son was one of the students. Eager to help, the Imam worked with the administrators to find a solution. The Imam explained to the boys that the requirement to pray at mid-day left leeway as to when the prayers were said. He assured them that lunchtime was a perfectly acceptable time to pray and that on long summer days, prayers could be held until after school.



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As for the foot washing, a morning bath or shower before school and wearing clean socks would be sufficient so that the boys need only symbolically wash their feet at mid-day by rubbing the outside of their clothing with wet hands. The Imam also reminded the boys that their religion required responsibility for one’s actions and they needed to clean up any water splashed around the restroom during ablutions. The specialist explained “from the boys’ perspective it was important to hear from a holy man about the time to pray and the preparations that are required. The Imam was quite happy to be consulted and the school personnel learned more about Islam. All round, this was a good solution.”

Satisfied with the explanation, the principal canceled the disciplinary action. Meanwhile, the Parent/Community Specialist continued to work with the teachers and the entire school staff as a cultural liaison. In a matter of days, everyone had a better understanding of the boys and their religion. “My unique position with the Multilingual Center allows me to bridge the gap between school and my culture and helps all parties to be heard and feel respected.”

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is supporting *Caring Across Communities* and its partners, such as Portland Public Schools, to address needs 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 all children and adolescents at www.healthinschools.org.

To learn how *Caring Across Communities* is helping immigrant and refugee students succeed, please visit www.rwjf.org/newsroom/product.jsp?id=60828.

For more information about Portland Public Schools, contact Grace Venezuela at valeng@portlandschools.org.

About the Center for Health and Health Care in Schools

The Center for Health and Health Care in Schools (CHHCS) is a nonpartisan resource center at The George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services. CHHCS links educators and health professionals to the information essential to building effective school health programs; testing new school-connected strategies to achieve better health outcomes for children; and promoting awareness of successful new directions in school health programming.

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