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# Addressing Challenges Together

Conversations between Immigrant Families & Educators

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How do we address the educational challenges facing immigrant students?

Final Report  
Fall 2018



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## **Public Deliberation & Dialogue**

The Public Deliberation and Dialogue (PDD) program equips Gustavus students to research and design communication strategies to address pressing issues and make reasoned, community-based decisions. The workshops summarized in this report were developed and supported by the PDD program and the Department of Communication Studies at Gustavus Adolphus College. Funding was provided by the Minnesota Humanities Center.

[www.gustavus.edu/communication/deliberation](http://www.gustavus.edu/communication/deliberation)

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## Introduction

Many Somali immigrants in Saint Peter struggle to navigate public schools' policy-making processes and school staff are often unsure of how to involve immigrant families. This project sought to enhance communication and community engagement in order to address challenges facing Somali immigrant students.

Beginning in summer 2018, Gustavus students in the Public Deliberation & Dialogue program interviewed school staff and immigrant families to document numerous perspectives. The interview findings informed the development of two full-day workshops convened in October and November 2018 during which representatives from the school district (including teachers, counselors, and administrators) and Somali immigrant families (including parents and local college students) identified and explored challenges that immigrant students face. They then developed strategies to improve student learning.

This report summarizes the ideas and outcomes that emerged from the extended conversations held at the Saint Peter Community Center.



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## Workshop I

During the first workshop on October 29, participants worked in small groups to discuss and identify educational challenges for immigrant students. After formulating a list of challenges, they then came to agreement on the most urgent.

### Primary Goals

- ❖ Understand challenges
- ❖ Learn from different perspectives
- ❖ Brainstorm strategies

## Prioritized Challenges/Needs

### LANGUAGE BARRIER

The language barrier between Somali families and the school staff was one of the most repeated challenges expressed. While interpretation services are made available for parent-teacher conferences and occasional in-person meetings, day-to-day oral and written communication presents a challenge for families and teachers. Email correspondence, phone messages, calendars, the school website and online resources are not currently translated into Somali. In addition, Somali students have varying degrees of English comprehension, which presents pedagogical challenges for teachers.

### COMMUNITY COMMUNICATION

Related to the language barrier, participants expressed concern about the lack of sustained dialogue between the Saint Peter school community and Somali families regarding academics, activities, and policies. Parents feel disconnected as they are often not aware of co-curricular opportunities available to their children.

### STUDENT ISOLATION

Somali students have reported feeling isolated at school. Further, some students' credits from previous schools do not transfer correctly, leaving them behind on graduation requirements.

### EDUCATOR DEVELOPMENT

Participants expressed a desire for teachers to learn more about their Somali immigrant students, their families, and their culture. Teachers also need more support for addressing the varying academic abilities of students in their classes.

### CULTURAL MISUNDERSTANDING

The United States' education system is different from the immigrant students' previous educational experiences, which can make the transition into Saint Peter schools particularly difficult. Examples include variations in the school calendar based on religious holidays; attending class and school events on time; and homework expectations.

## Complete List of Identified Challenges

The first ten reflect those challenges identified as most urgent. The other challenges are listed in random order.

1. Language barrier between parents and teachers	1. Caqabadaha luuqadda u dhexeeya waalidiinta iyo macallimiinta
2. Communication barrier between parents and schools	2. Xaalad xiriirka u dhexeeya waalidiinta iyo dugsiyada
3. Language learning for students	3. Waxbarashada luuqada ardayda
4. Teachers/staff need support and training	4. Macallimiinta / shaqaalaha waxay ubaahan yihiin taageero iyo tababar
5. Not enough space & time for community dialogue	5. Meel yar iyo waqti ku filan wadahadalka bulshada
6. Transient students	6. Ardayda ku-meel-gaarka ah
7. Cultural misunderstandings	7. Fahamka is-faham-dhaqameed
8. Students have varying needs and abilities	8. Ardayda waxay qabaan baahiyo iyo awoodo kala duwan
9. Students feel isolated	9. Ardaydu waxay dareemaan inay go'doon yihiin
10. Homework expectations	10. Fursadaha shaqada ee guriga
11. Students learning English and course content simultaneously	11. Ardayda baranaya Ingiriiska iyo maadooyinka koorsada isku mar.
12. Attending parent-teacher conferences	12. Ka-qaybgalka shirarka waalidka-macallimiinta
13. Teachers underprepared to teach different ability levels	13. Macallimiinta ma u baahnaayeen inay baraan karti kala duwan Els
14. Lack of student support groups	14. Caawinta ardayda taageerada ardayga
15. Unclear who is responsible for welcoming new families	15. Maqnaanshaha cidda ka masuulka ah soo dhaweynta qoysaska cusub
16. Unfamiliar school culture for students	16. Dhaqanka iskuulada ee aan u qalmin ee ardayda
17. Limited family involvement in student learning	17. Kaqaybgalka qoyska ee waxbarashada ardayda
18. Homework expectations	18. Ka filashooyinka shaqada guriga
19. Parents unfamiliar with school technology (e.g. how to check students' grades)	19. Waalidka aan aqoonin tiknoolajiyada dugsiya (sida sida loo hubiyo ardayda 'grades')
20. New families unfamiliar with school calendar	20. Qoysaska cusub ee aan aqoonta jadwalka iskuulka
21. Students not accurately reporting academic concerns to parents	21. Ardayda aan si sax ah u sheegin welwelka tacliimeed ee waalidka
22. Limited interaction between new families and existing families	22. Isdhexgalka xaddidan ee u dhexeeya qoysaska cusub iyo qoysaska hadda jira
23. Student-parent communication about extracurricular activities	23. Isgaadhsiinta ardayda-waalidka ee ku saabsan waxqabadyada ka baxsan
24. Parents attendance at extracurricular activities	24. Waalidiinta ka qeeybgalka hawlaha ka baxsan
25. Stereotypes	25. Qufulan

26. Different experiences based on gender	26. Khibrado kala duwan oo ku salaysan jinsiga
27. High school credit system/graduation requirements	27. Nidaamka deymaha dugsiya sare / shuruudaha qalin-jabinta
28. Introductions & starting conversations	28. Soo bandhigid iyo wada-hadal wadahal
29. Punctuality	29. Dakhliga
30. Basic skills are not always developed in elementary school	30. Khibradaha aasaasiga ah looma horumarin dugsiya hoose
31. Housing for new families	31. Guryeynta qoysaska cusub
32. Jobs placement for educated parents	32. Meeleynta shaqooyinka waalidiinta waxbartay
33. Need one-on-one attention	33 Waxay ubaahantahay fiiro gaar ah
34. Low Somali literacy	34. Akhriska Soomaalida ee yaryar
35. Student attendance	35. Ka qaybgalka ardayga
36. Public school ends at age 21	36. Dugsiyada dadweynaha ee ugu ds da'da 21 jir
37. Grade placement based on age not skill level	37. Meesha fasal oo ku salaysan da'da xirfadda heerka
38. Building student confidence	38. U dhisida kalsoonida ardayga
39. Connecting people that communicate differently	39. Isku xiridda dadka isdhaafsanaaya
40. Students sit with their own communities in class	40. Ardeydu waxay la fadhiistaan bulshadooda iyaga oo jooga fasalka
41. Few English Language educators	41. Barayaasha Af Ingiriisiga oo kooban
42. Student uncertainty about selecting classes	42. Hubin la'aanta ardayda ee xulashada fasalada
43. Mistrust	43 Qodobka
44. Schools are reactive, not proactive	44. Dugsiyadu waa kuwo firfircoon, maaha kuwo firfircoon
45. Student wellbeing	45. Fadlan najaxa ardayga
46. Students feeling isolated	46. Ardayda dareenka ah
47. Students not knowing who they should talk to for help	47. Ardayda aan garanaynin cidda ay tahay in ay la hadlaan caawimaad
48. Teachers want to be culturally sensitive	48. Macallimiintu waxay doonayaan inay noqdaan kuwo dhaqan ahaan xasaasi ah
49. Parents not familiar with all opportunities available for students	49. Waalidiinta aan aqoon u lahayn dhammaan fursadaha loo heli karo ardayda
50. Cultural differences in school disciplinary strategies	50. Farqiga dhaqameed ee istiraatiijiyadaha edabta dugsiya



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## Workshop II

### Primary Goals

- ❖ Learn from different perspectives
- ❖ Develop vision for addressing challenges
- ❖ Create a plan for moving forward

On November 19, participants met in facilitated discussion groups to develop six primary strategies for improving the educational experience for immigrant students. They created actionable plans to address the community problems prioritized in workshop one.

## Prioritized Strategies

### COMMUNITY LIAISON

This discussion group focused on defining a Community Liaison position within the Saint Peter School District. The group envisioned the role of a Community Liaison as a leader of a team of other staff and volunteers, who could ensure that each school in the district had support.

#### RESPONSIBILITIES INCLUDE:

- Coordinating a team
- Orienting immigrant families to district
- Helping educators engage families
- Bridging cultural differences
- Enhancing dialogue with community
- Advising school district

#### QUALIFICATIONS INCLUDE:

- Trusted by community and school staff
- Proactive
- Familiar with immigrant & school cultures
- Multi-lingual
- Ability to coordinate a team & delegate
- Background in education

The group emphasized that representatives from both the school district and the Somali community be involved in building a job description and serving on the hiring committee.

### Implementation

Long Term Goal: Have a Community Liaison hired by July so they can host August community meetings as well as orient and prepare families for the school year.

Short Term Goal: Identify bi-lingual community volunteers—familiar with the schools and the community—who could hold Office Hours in each school at a consistent time each week. Families and educators would know when and where to consult with someone knowledgeable about Somali language and culture.

**QUESTION:**  
How do we support multiple cultures/ languages?



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## NEWCOMER ACADEMY

This group discussed the possibility of creating a Newcomer Academy that would help integrate new immigrant students and families into the school district. At the point of enrollment, the district would assess a student's academic, language, and health to establish their need. The student would get an individual learning plan and be placed in a curriculum centered on English language learning and basic skills so they could eventually begin learning in mainstream classes. The Academy would also include a mentorship program staffed by future "graduates" of the Newcomer Academy who would assist new students through the transition process.

Along with the student academy, a separate Parent Newcomer Academy would offer a curriculum to provide new families the necessary information for their children to thrive in school and a place for them to ask questions. This academy would focus on effective communication, include a parent mentoring program, and share information about community resources.

### COLLABORATORS

- ❖ Academic Counselors
- ❖ EL Teachers
- ❖ Content Teachers
- ❖ Community Liaison
- ❖ College Student Volunteers

Suggestions for advancing this idea included: (a) ensure that Spanish-speaking newcomers are included; (b) embed an Academy within each school; (c) include community partners; (d) provide transportation for families; (e) have the students in the Academy travel with a teacher from class to class; (f) explore grant opportunities.

## Implementation

Long Term Goal: Pilot Newcomer Academy in Fall 2019.

Short Term Goal: Research, collaborate, and prepare pilot.

## JANUARY - MAY 2019

Conduct research of other successful programs (phone calls/site visits)

Form a committee (teachers, administrators, community members, financial managers)

Develop a curriculum; need a common planning time and vertical alignment

Build a mentoring program

Promote Academy within and outside school district

Create a pilot structure, perhaps beginning with 5-12th grade

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## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

This group identified three overlapping areas for professional development in the Saint Peter school district.

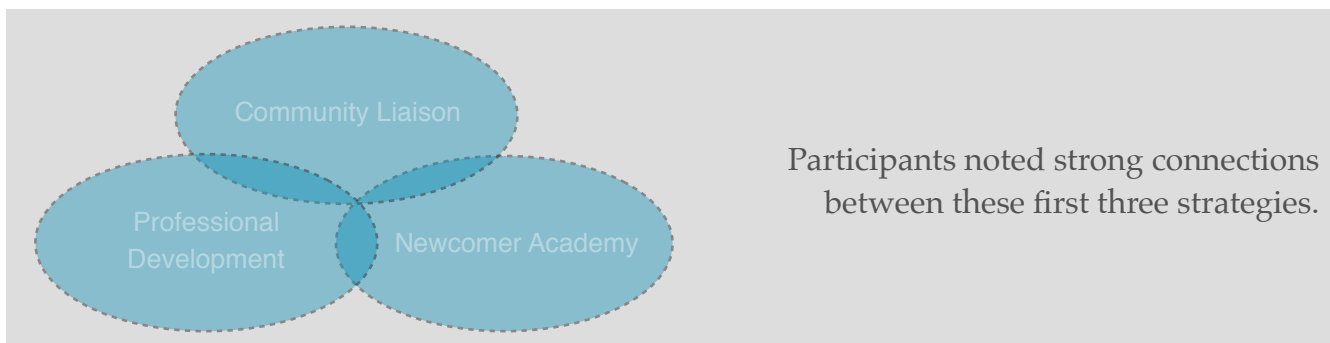
DIALOGUE	STRUCTURAL SUPPORT	WORKSHOP
Create ongoing opportunities for facilitated dialogue between faculty, staff, students, and community members to help build cross-cultural understanding.	Provide consistent training on differentiating instruction, with consideration for both learning and cultural differences.	Develop a cultural learning workshop that shares stories, explains cultural differences, and offers strategies for engaging in informal dialogue.

Additional suggestions included: (a) require self-study that encourages staff to reflect on their own perspectives; (b) consider using training videos for substitutes and para-professionals; (c) ensure that training leaders have credibility with teachers.

### Implementation

Long Term Goal: Develop continual professional development strategies for all staff that are scheduled throughout the school year.

Short Term Goal: Begin with building district-wide cultural understanding through dialogue and storytelling.



## LANGUAGE LAB & CULTURAL EXCHANGE

A language lab and cultural exchange would be a place with food, games, and conversation where students could practice conversational English skills and where students could cultivate friendships. The language lab is envisioned as a once a week event, incorporated into “Saints Time” or after school. The environment should be focused on fun and socialization — a place people want to go. Volunteer college students could be involved. A once-per-month language lab could also be offered to adults.

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## AFTER SCHOOL SUPPORT PROGRAMS

Participants emphasized that new programs should serve community members of all ages. Conversation centered on strategies for getting more space and resources for the popular Hikmah program, which offers tutoring for students at the local mosque. Additional ideas included creating additional English classes for adults (with childcare provided) as well as starting a book club.

## STUDENT SUPPORT GROUPS

A student mentor program could help new students understand the school system, connect peers, and help develop social skills and English skills. Another mentor program could connect community members with students to support them in applying for jobs and navigating post-graduate life. Participants also discussed the possibility of establishing a support group, led by a certified counselor, for students with mental health needs.

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# Moving Forward

At the end of Workshop Two, the participants came together to meet in a large group to discuss next steps as well as the necessary resources needed to complete the goals the groups had created. The group suggested strategies for capturing and publicizing the energy and content from the two workshops and inviting more people into the conversation.

### Ongoing Dialogue

Participants emphasized the need to “continue the conversation.” They suggested establishing a regular meeting time for more people, representing many different perspectives, to further strategize about how to implement ideas to address the challenges immigrant students face.

### Short Videos/Social Media

Participants strategized about short, multi-lingual videos (20-30 seconds) that could be shared widely. These videos could summarize issues and ideas discussed in the workshops, share stories, and invite more people to join in the conversation about how to enhance educational experiences for students.

*Moving forward, participants expressed optimism that progress will be made with time to establish relationships, feedback from administrators, and the formation of a team to continue discussion of the challenges and strategies in this report.*

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# Research

Gustavus students researched what other school districts and communities are doing to address challenges similar to those identified by Saint Peter. This research summary may inform some of the strategies the school district and community choose to pursue.

## Liaisons

*Opportunities:* School districts that currently have a community liaison position reported that it is a valuable asset for increasing interactions between the school district and immigrant communities. Having one or more school liaisons can provide for effective and efficient communication between school faculty and student families about classroom curriculum and activities, school policy, and classroom norms. Liaisons can also enhance trust between family members and their communities. Further, liaisons allow EL faculty to work at a higher level because trust between language learners and teachers is built through cooperation with the liaison. Liaisons also can act as a cultural mediator between the schools and immigrant families.

*Obstacles:* Despite the value of liaisons, the cost of hiring and retaining effective community liaisons can pose a challenge. Also, some liaisons feel under-appreciated because there are teachers who do not see their value in the classroom or district. Some districts found difficulty writing a clear job description that fits within the school system structure.

## Professional Development

*Opportunities:* Ongoing training and development opportunities are one of the most effective ways to encourage application of best practices, according to the Center for Public Education. Various districts and communities stress the importance of professional development that builds cultural competencies. Other ways to enhance development programs include implementing a peer mentorship program and tailoring development activities directly to professionals' area of expertise. Additionally, having professional development hours qualify for continuing education units (CEU) would provide additional incentives for participation.

*Obstacles:* Common concerns for professional development include cost and finding credible "trainers."

## Community Spaces

Physical spaces where community members can meet and engage with each other are valuable assets to communities with diverse populations. For example, the Tree Street Youth center in Lewiston, Maine provides youth with an after school space to develop leadership skills and prepare for the workforce. Their most notable feature is their come-and-go policy which allows older kids to leave, pick up their siblings from school, and return. The Minnesota Council of Churches also provides a program wherein domestic and immigrant/refugee families engage in six week sessions twice a year to learn about resources for immigrant families and work on community building. Although a potentially costly venture, these programs have had major success in developing community partnerships and shared values.

## CONTACT LIST

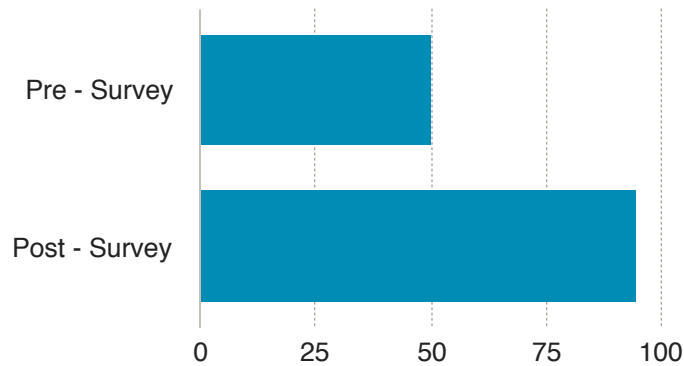
Nancy Altmann, Refugee Program & Community Engagement, MN Council of Churches	Kristina Robertson, EL Program Administrator, Roseville School District	Heather Mueller, Teaching and Learning Director, Mankato Area Public Schools
Julia Sleeper, Tree Street Youth, Lewiston, ME	Martina Wagner, EL and Migrant Education Programs, Owatonna Public Schools	Mellanie Helling, Student Support Coordinator, Mankato Area Public Schools
Amy Vizenor, Assistant Professor of Education, Gustavus Adolphus College	Judi Sprung, Coordinator of Supplemental Programs, Willmar Public Schools	

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## Conclusion

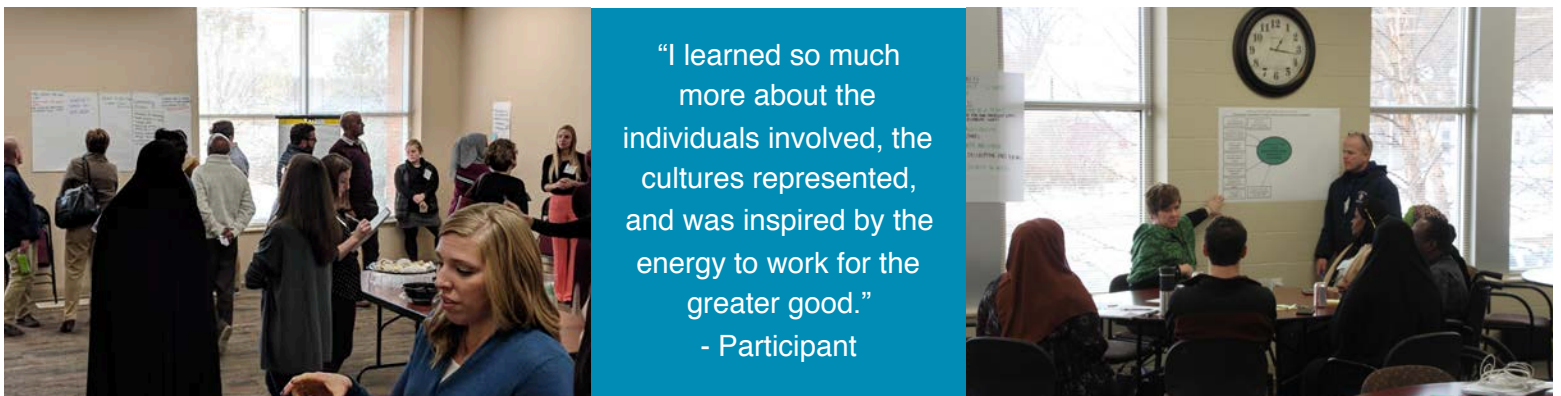
In participants' surveys, many described how the deliberations had shaped their perspective. At the conclusion of the second workshop, nearly 100% of participants agreed they have a better understanding of the educational challenges Somali students face compared to only 50% at the beginning of day one.

- I understand the educational challenges that Somali immigrant students face.



Specifically, participants cited changes in their understanding of: challenges the school district faces; how willing the school district is to offer help; Somali parents' involvement in their child's education; and the impact of communication for the relationship between the school district and community members.

These deliberations provided invaluable information and encouragement to both the Saint Peter school district and the Somali families of the community. Through thoughtful conversation about challenging issues, the participants of these two workshops developed plans for addressing identified challenges moving forward. With cooperation between the school district and Somali community members into the future, great success could be achieved in tackling these important issues.



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# Thank You

These important deliberations would not have been possible without the commitment of the participants and those working to support the conversations. Special thanks to:

- Minnesota Humanities Center
- Saint Peter School District
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- Saint Peter Community Center
- Gustavus Adolphus College
  - ❖ Erin Peterson, Project Assistant
  - ❖ Dining Services
  - ❖ Students enrolled in Communication Studies 320
  - ❖ Public Deliberation & Dialogue Summer Research Students

“There are many people willing to help. It can be a collaboration between school and community. We can do this and can make it happen.”

- Participant, Fall 2018



Minnesota  
Humanities  
Center

