

## How to...

### **Bridge the cultural difference between Somali students and their schools**

This guidance has been developed as part of 'Our Languages', a DCSF funded initiative to promote the teaching of community languages in mainstream and supplementary or complementary schools.

It is intended to help schools develop good practice in teaching and learning and to provide practical ideas for extending current provision. The guidance also offers suggestions for partnership working between mainstream and supplementary schools. You will also find links to support organisations, websites and government departments.

'Our Languages' is led by a consortium of four organisations:

CILT – the National Centre for Languages  
The National Resource Centre for Supplementary Education at ContinYou  
The School Development and Support Agency (SDSA)  
The Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT)

### **This guide will be of interest to you if**

- You are a teacher in a mainstream school with Somali students
- You are a teacher in a school with any ethnic minorities, as although this is written about Somali students, its principles are appropriate for any other ethnic group

### **Context**

Lambeth Academy is a new academy in Clapham, providing much-needed extra secondary school places for the borough of Lambeth. It is currently (Mar.2008) in its fourth year of existence, and has about 750 students (years 7-10 and a small year 12). There are about 20 Somali students in the school, and the number who join us every year is remaining constant, or even rising slightly.

Our lead supplementary school is the Aayatiin Foundation, a Somali community organisation based near Brixton Hill. We have also linked up with LamSom (Lambeth Somali Community Association), based at Stockwell, who have been providing help and support for the Somali community in Lambeth since the early 1990s, and in particular have been working with school age children.

It is to LamSom that we are indebted for their valuable help and experience in the production of the "top tips", and we gratefully acknowledge their own dual language booklet as the source.

### **Why we wanted to address this issue**

Since our lead supplementary school is a Somali one and there is a large Somali community in Lambeth, it seemed the obvious place to start. Also, as the newly-appointed EAL coordinator for my school, I was painfully aware of how little I really knew about the culture and customs of many of the pupils for whom I now had responsibility, and in particular, those from outside Europe. In addition, the borough of Lambeth has recently begun an initiative aiming to raise the achievement of Somali students, so this seemed to fit in very well with what we were trying to do.

### **What we did**

I met regularly with leaders of both Aayatiin and LamSom, along with a Somali member of Lambeth EMAT, who had facilitated the original link. We came late to the project, so only had a short time to plan the joint events for other mainstream and supplementary schools in the area, and that had to be our first priority.

However, I was able to visit both Aayatiin and LamSom, to see at first hand the work they were doing with the young people of the borough, and more recently the leader of the Aayatiin Foundation has met with the Somali students in our school in order to establish what kind of help and support they feel is most necessary in their school and their community.

### **Evidence of success**

A new Somali pupil (with no English) joined Lambeth Academy during the project. Thanks to the contacts with the two Somali schools, I was able to facilitate support for her. I have also become much more aware of the cultural issues surrounding Somali students, and it has made me realise the need to make the effort to find out about the cultures of the other EAL students as well, as sometimes this can have a significant effect on the way they react within school.

### **The lessons we learned**

There are a lot of individual supplementary schools in Lambeth, some struggling to make ends meet. There are also many organisations offering help and support. Getting these all working together would benefit everyone. We intend to try to reach out to more schools and link up with the parents more closely as well. One possibility would be offering English lessons for parents in the Academy, to strengthen the home-school links and enable parents to communicate with school more effectively. Another possible project is a mentoring scheme, using university students from the same ethnic background.

### **How did working in partnership make this more effective?**

Having personal links into the communities where the students come from helps to create a closer relationship within school. The students from Lambeth Academy whom I saw at the supplementary schools at first found it a bit strange that their “two worlds” should suddenly meet in that way, but back in the Academy they were more relaxed about it and actually rather pleased that someone from outside their community was actually interested in it.

### **Tips for bridging the cultural difference between Somali students and their schools**

- Remember that many Somali children may have experienced severe trauma before arriving in England, and this may affect for some time their ability to perform well in school
- Traditionally, many families keep boys and girls separated until marriage, so it may be preferable not to insist on a “boy-girl” seating plan
- Use your right hand when handing things to Somali students. It is culturally disrespectful for a Somali to hand things over using the left hand
- Many Somali people do not touch someone of the opposite sex unless they are married. Therefore, allow Somali students and parents to extend their hand first to shake hands. If they do not shake hands, a small bow of the head shows respect
- Make sure that you know if parents do not speak English, so that you can arrange in advance for an interpreter to be present for important meetings

### **Pitfalls to avoid**

- Failing to differentiate fully for newly-arrived students in particular – remember that they will need a lot more support in most lessons by way of visuals, demonstrations etc than most other students, even those with a low level of literacy

**Glossary of terms**

EMAT – ethnic minority achievement team

**Links**

DSCF Ethnic Minority Achievement site: <http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ethnicminorities/>

Ethnic Minority Attainment portal: <http://www.emaonline.org.uk/>

LamSom – Lambeth Somali Community Association: [www.lamsom.org.uk/](http://www.lamsom.org.uk/)

Aayatiin Foundation: [www.aayatiin.org](http://www.aayatiin.org)