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## Communities In Schools of Columbus Offers Support for Somali Students



Last year, a five-year-old Somali boy in Columbus, Ohio, was put on a school bus by his father who did not know how to enroll his son, or even the school to which his son would be delivered that morning. He just knew he wanted his son to be in school! This scenario, while disturbing, exemplifies the cultural barriers that can exist alongside deeply-rooted desires to create a better life through education.

The young boy was not recognized by the school staff, who promptly phoned the police to report a lost child. Fortunately, Hodan Khalif, school resource coordinator for Communities In Schools (CIS) of Columbus, was available to sort out the confusion and lend a helping hand. Khalif's compassionate and culturally-sensitive intervention was critical in reaching out to all of the key players— the community, the parents and the school.

Columbus is home to the second largest population of Somali immigrants in the United States – more than 30,000 people. Since the mid-1990s, Somalis have established businesses, worship centers, homes and local organizations and, in turn, have helped shape the Columbus-area communities in which they live. Columbus' public schools have welcomed large numbers of Somali children into their classrooms. In fact, several of the area schools served by CIS have the highest population of Somali students in attendance – typically more than 25 percent.

Despite the rich cultural opportunities afforded to local Somali residents, they have faced a number Communities In Schools of

Columbus Offers Support for Somali Students of challenges. Lacking a familiarity with both the language and culture of the Columbus school system, many Somali students have fallen through the cracks. CIS of Columbus realized it was crucial to develop a clearer understanding of the myriad obstacles facing those students. In 2004, the CIS affiliate secured corporate funding in order to hire Khalif as the school resource coordinator, with her overarching objective being to help Somali families navigate the local education system.

Hodan Khalif brings a rich background of experiences and skills to her job. After spending her childhood in Somalia, she moved to the United States to escape the escalating violence and tension in her homeland. Prior to her employment with Communities In Schools, she spent five years working in the Columbus public school system and at Columbus State Community College teaching English as a second language. Through her work, Khalif has become knowledgeable about the educational challenges facing the Somali community, and recognizes the need to bridge the gap between the Somali population and Columbus' schools.

Kitty King, director of project initiatives for CIS of Columbus, notes, "Hodan's passion to help Somali children succeed in school was the main attraction for her to come to CIS and for CIS to hire her." With a working knowledge of English, Somali and Arabic, Khalif serves as a vital liaison between Somali families and Columbus' schools – assisting, translating and advocating for families at school meetings, home visits and community gatherings. "In Somalia, parents do not feel it is necessary to be involved with their children's education. Here in America, it is essential that parents are involved. They need to meet their kids' teachers and stay connected throughout the course of the school year," Khalif notes.

One significant way Khalif has helped Somali students and their parents stay abreast of important developments taking place in schools is through a monthly CIS column in Columbus' Somali newspaper – The Somali Link. Translated into Somali by Khalif, the column includes pertinent updates on school personnel, student testing, immunization requirements and parent organizations in the Columbus school district, along with Khalif's contact information. This truly links Somali parents with the critical information they need to help their children do well in school. Somali students and their families are indeed fortunate to have Hodan Khalif and CIS of Columbus on their side.