

MPS embraces students' Somali heritage with new class offerings

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Minneapolis Public Schools may very well be the first school district in the nation to offer Somali language classes to high school students. At South High School, where MPS' Somali classes are offered, nearly 60 students are registered in two class periods, one that focuses on Somali language and another on culture. "Somali language is an important element of one's identity," said Dahir Hassan, Somali language and heritage teacher at South. "If you don't speak the language, it is hard to claim that identity."

Heritage language and culture classes devote a portion of the school day to providing instruction in students' home language and culture. The goals of the program are to maintain and expand students' language resources and to strengthen immigrant students' connection to their home culture and community. According to the Minnesota Historical Society, in 2010 there were an estimated 60,000 Somalis living in Minnesota, the largest Somali population of any state in the U.S. MPS has over 2,800 students who speak the language at home.

The class became a reality due to the hard work and leadership of Superintendent Johnson, Board Director Samatar, Somali-speaking families and MPS staff. "When I met with Somali parents last year at community engagement events, they made it clear that heritage language instruction was a priority for them," said Dr. Bernadeia Johnson, superintendent of schools. "The academic value is undeniable, so I was determined to see it happen."

"I wanted to be sure our students have the tools to retain their language and culture while also learning English," remarked Director Samatar. "It was a pleasant surprise that what we thought would be a pilot grew to two full classes of engaged students excited about learning."

According to Janice Kittok, world language content lead in the Multilingual Department, students who learn languages also learn valuable skills like patience, discipline and study habits that can transfer to other subjects. "Being bilingual is an invaluable asset for any path a student may choose in life," Kittok said.

"I learn something new every day," said Fartun, a 12th-grader in the class. Fartun has one Somali parent and one Yemeni parent. "I may speak Somali at home but I want to know how to read and write at an academic level," she said. "It is important to me because it is my language and my culture."

Students who learn heritage language and culture develop a broader world perspective, delving into cultural, historical and geographical knowledge of their home country and the world. "When I was my students' age in Africa, I didn't have any sense of value for my own culture," said Hassan. "After going abroad I realized that in order to learn about other cultures, I had to first understand my own. My hope for this class is that the students will learn the tools to not only be proud of where they came from, but to be successful global citizens."