

Quick tips on working with Somali students



At Sullivan, we are lucky to have a diverse student population, including many Somali students. Nearly all, if not all, are Muslim (as are many of our native Oromo-, Arabic- and English-speakers), and many have limited formal schooling. Recognizing that cultural differences can arise, this sheet provides background on Somali history and culture and highlights potential hot spots you might encounter.

Though these tips apply to some Somali students, differences abound. Seek understanding: When a student is upset or uncooperative, first try to understand why (utilize our great bilingual staff), anticipate possible alternatives students might need, and proceed accordingly.

One sheet cannot nearly encapsulate a centuries-old religion and millennia-old culture. This is meant to be a quick resource guide. Please utilize the source list to learn more.

Cultural Differences and Potential Hotspots

- **Names:** In Somali culture, a person's paternal lineage is traced through names. A student's first name is parent-chosen, followed by the father's name, then the grandfather's name (on her/his father's side), and so on. Many students, therefore, have different "last names"—more appropriately, "third names"—than their parents because these are their grandfathers' names. For the same reason, most married Somali women keep their maiden names.
- **Prayer:** Most Muslims pray five specific times during the day. Students might need accommodations to wash their hands, feet, ears, and heads (which is required) and pray, especially for the second and third prayers at noon and afternoon. On Fridays, Muslims usually pray together. Young Muslims might not observe this custom until they're older.
- **Ramadan and Eid:** In the Islamic calendar, Ramadan is a month of fasting and prayer for Muslims. It culminates with Eid al Fitr (or simply Eid), a celebration that can last three days. During Ramadan, Muslims do not eat or drink from sun up to sundown; students might need alternatives for lunchtime placement and for dehydrating sports and activities. The Eid al Adha celebration occurs about two months later, when Muslims observe the hajj pilgrimage. Pupils might be absent for one or two days for the Eid holidays, if school is in session. The Islamic calendar is a lunar calendar, so when these holidays fall changes from year to year.
- **Pork:** Muslims do not eat pork or pork byproducts, which is forbidden according to Islamic law. Many additional foods contain non-kosher gelatin, which is often made from pig.
- **Attire:** Many Muslim girls wear hijab, or headscarves, and long coverings that cover their legs, according to Islamic law. Boys might wear knitted kufi caps or qamiz, a traditional Islamic robe. Some young girls do not wear hijabs, beginning to wear them at puberty.
- **Sex separation:** Strict adherents of Islam believe in rigid separation of the sexes, especially regarding physical contact. This can complicate sports, recess, and simply shaking hands with students or parents of a different sex (which should be avoided unless initiated by the other person). Dating and sex outside of marriage is prohibited. This may affect sex ed. The innocent nature of dances and Valentine's Day festivities should also be carefully explained.
- **Music:** Some students' families might object to the use of music, as it is sometimes viewed as a means of bringing men and women together. Teachers might need to communicate with families about the nature and context of the music being used.
- **Art:** In the Qur'an, false idols are forbidden by Allah, akin to one of the Ten Commandments for Christians. As a result, some students might refuse to draw people (especially themselves) or animals. Depictions of the creation and the prophet Mohamed are forbidden.

- **Dogs:** According to Islamic teachings, owning a dog as a pet is forbidden. Students might lack prior knowledge on stories about dogs. Muslims can own a sheepdog, hunting dog, or guard dog. Also, in Islam, animal cruelty is forbidden.
- **Gestures:** Avoid using the “Come here” gesture of motioning toward yourself with one index finger, which may show disrespect. Rather, with an open palm, wave toward yourself.

Somali History and Emigration to Minnesota: Short history of Somalia

- Ancient Somalia: Artifacts found in the horn of northeast Africa—what is now Somalia—date back 5,000 years. The population was largely nomadic herders and traders. A distinct oral language developed, and oral storytelling and poetry became vital pieces of Somali culture.
- Late BCE-Early AD: Somalia was closely connected with Ancient Egypt, a trading partner and culturally similar country, as well as Mycea, Babylon, and Phoenicia.
- Early 600s: The area began to be shaped by Islam. (Almost all Somalis are Sunni Muslims.) For centuries, massive empires blossomed in the region, fueled by trade with neighbors.
- 1800s-early 1900s: Italian, British, and French colonizers divide Somalia, inspiring anti-imperialist resistance but also influencing culture (like food, schooling, language, and attire).
- 1960s: Somalia gained independence; leaders pushed to unite the once-fractured country. Military general Siyad Barre, aligned with the Cold War Soviet Union, came to power.
- Early 1970s: A written Somali language using a Latin alphabet was adopted, upping literacy rates. Somali became the primary language of instruction in school. Barre pushed militarization and economic nationalization. Murder, rape, and imprisonment of rival clan members, such as intellectuals and religious scholars, built inter-clan animosity.
- Mid-1970s: Barre cut ties with the Soviet Union. Poverty, caused by corruption, economic ineptitude, and military spending, was widespread. Educated Somalis, especially members of other clans, fled the country; this brain drain exacerbated problems.
- 1980s: Militias—fueled by poverty, widespread armament, and inter-clan rivalries—pushed to oust Barre, who grew more repressive. Thousands of Somalis starve or die from violence.
- 1991-1992: Barre was forced from power. Inter-clan conflicts plunged the country into full-scale civil war. Food was used as a political weapon; 300,000 people died from starvation alone. Following the Battle of Mogadishu— with 19 American troops and more than 1,000 Somalis killed—the UN left Somalia. Warlords rose to power; violence continued.
- Present day: Somalia is a patchwork of areas controlled by the U.S.-supported government (including Mogadishu), by Islamist groups like Al Shabaab, by militias supported by Ethiopia, by leaders in semi-autonomous Puntland, and by leaders in nearly independent Somaliland.

Somali Diaspora (in Minnesota and Beyond)

- During this strife, millions of refugees flooded into neighboring Kenya and Ethiopia. The U.S. admitted many Somali refugees. Minnesota—with many Catholic and Lutheran charities to assist in refugee resettlement—was seen as an enviable location for early refugees.
- Initially, inter-clan tension continued among refugees, until a group of 17 Somali-American clan and ethnic group leaders met and agreed to reconciliation.
- As more refugees settled in Minnesota and developed ties to the community, they sponsored relatives and promoted Minnesota to friends, encouraging continued emigration.
- Today, large Somali communities live in many African countries (the highest number in Kenya), as well as in UAE, England, all Nordic countries, Canada, and the U.S. Minneapolis has one of the largest populations of Somali expatriates.