

### SUCCESS STORY

## Healing Invisible Wounds

Portland Public Schools | Maine

At night, when 11-year-old Khadijo lay in bed, wounds that the daylight hid became painfully apparent. Khadijo would cry as feelings of grief and loss swept over her. Memories of her home in Somalia were fraught with feelings of hunger, illness and violence. She was confused by her new home in the United States, unable to speak English, and baffled by the academic expectations placed on her. Khadijo felt stressed and alone, fighting feelings of vulnerability as she tried desperately not to let on to anyone how afraid she really was.

As a young child in Somalia, Khadijo's father received a refugee Visa to immigrate to the United States. After he left, her mother led Khadijo, her two older sisters and younger brother to Kampala, Uganda to escape violence in their homeland and wait for permission to join their father. Four years in Uganda took a terrible toll on the family, as they endured poverty, hunger and illness in the slums on the outskirts of the city.

In 2005 they received the Visas they so desperately needed and the family settled together in Portland, Maine. But the wounds of her early childhood haunted Khadijo and she struggled to fit in at her new school. Her family enrolled her in an intensive English as a Second Language (ESL) program but the demands of the class and her own fears overcame her. Her peers inadvertently triggered outbursts from Khadijo and she had trouble finding socially appropriate ways to address conflict. She was often confrontational, initiating fights with boys and girls alike. Overwhelmed by class, Khadijo became overly involved in her peers' problems and became known as "dramatic."

The school's social worker recognized Khadijo's troubled behaviors and referred her to the on-site, year-round counseling and support services offered by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's partner, Portland Public Schools' *Caring Across Communities* program. The Multilingual Center took the lead in offering the help of bilingual, bicultural workers who provided interpretation and translation services.

To help her deal with her sense of loss felt during the immigration process, Khadijo was referred to the Multicultural Program at the Center for Grieving Children. At the Center, Khadijo and 15 of her peers participated in weekly peer support activities. These were beneficial in releasing common feelings of grief and loss through the arts, peer support and physical outlets. While there, Khadijo acted out a play in which she and other Somali girls dramatized the ill-fated attempts of families trying to escape their war-torn homelands in boats which were intercepted by pirates. In their effort to resolve their fear and sense of loss, the girls transformed the pirates into helpers who were compassionate rather than dangerous to the families.



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Throughout middle school, Khadijo continued to receive counseling and support at the Center. As her academics and language skills improved, Khadijo moved from her ESL class into mainstream classes where she received help to overcome her fear of math and improve her reading and comprehension. Khadijo also received support for homework and summer school. To guide her each day and help work through the typical problems every student faces, Khadijo was matched with a volunteer mentor who met with her weekly.

Now in the 8th grade, Khadijo’s teachers and counselors describe her as “enthusiastic about learning.” She has developed a reputation as a leader among her peers and, even though she still sometimes feels frustrated and a little fearful, she has found socially acceptable ways to express her feelings and ideas. She shows pride in her work, has developed a great sense of humor and loves to write.

The *Caring Across Communities* project in Portland, Maine creates a critical support network by connecting school and community-based programs with an emphasis on support to immigrant and refugee children and their families. Through this project, educational seminars are provided to school mental health workers, teachers, and community mental health service providers on cultural competency, refugee and immigrant issues, as well as cultural healing traditions and practices. It is these transcultural experiences that create the awareness and knowledge base necessary to uncover and heal the invisible wounds within Khadijo, her family and hundreds of others like them.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is supporting *Caring Across Communities* and its partners, such as Portland Public Schools, to address this need by increasing and improving mental health services for all America’s children. Learn more about how programs like *Caring Across Communities* create innovative solutions for children like Khadijo at [www.healthinschools.org](http://www.healthinschools.org).

To learn how *Caring Across Communities* is helping immigrant and refugee students succeed, please visit [www.rwjf.org/newsroom/product.jsp?id=60828](http://www.rwjf.org/newsroom/product.jsp?id=60828).

For more information about Portland Public Schools, contact Grace Venenzuela at [valeng@portlandschools.org](mailto:valeng@portlandschools.org).

**About the Center for Health and Health Care in Schools**

The Center for Health and Health Care in Schools (CHHCS) is a nonpartisan resource center at The George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services. CHHCS links educators and health professionals to the information essential to building effective school health programs; testing new school-connected strategies to achieve better health outcomes for children; and promoting awareness of successful new directions in school health programming.

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