

Advancing **ALTELLA** SNAPSHOT

Advancing ALTELLA Snapshot: Get to Know Umi Hassan

Supporting Families of Multilingual
Learners with Disabilities

Advancing ALTELLA Snapshot No. 7

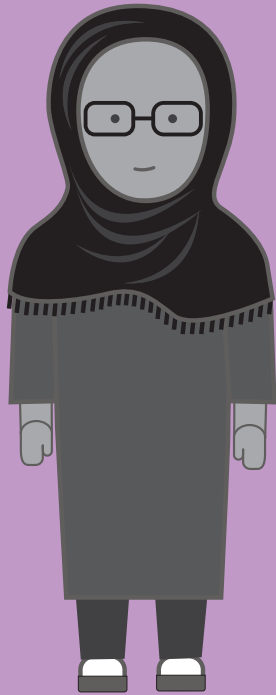
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Delis Cuéllar with Umi Hassan
advancingaltella.org

About Advancing ALTELLA Snapshots

The Advancing ALTELLA Snapshot is feature series. Advancing ALTELLA Snapshots are short, informative articles that highlight experts, educators, and topics of interest.





Umi Hassan: **THE FACTS**

TITLE:

Multilingual Parent
Advocate and Special
Education Assistant

AFFILIATION:

Transition Plus,
Minneapolis Public
Schools

AREA OF INTEREST:

Advocating for immigrant
parents of multilingual
learners and their children

Get to know Advancing ALTELLA Expert Umi Hassan

Umi Hassan is a mother of five children and is a parent advocate and a support educational special education assistant at Minneapolis Public Schools in Minnesota. Hassan first took the role of advocate in 2003, when working on behalf of immigrant parents of multilingual children in a Head Start program.

“I remember two students, one from Iraq and the other one from Nigeria. They showed behaviors unfamiliar to the teacher. I remember vividly that my mentor teacher referred those two students for special education screening. The only reason she sent them to be screened was because these students looked down when she was talking to them,” Hassan said.

Hassan talked to the teacher and explained that this was due to their culture, not disability. “After two weeks, these two students’ assessment results came back, and the expert agreed with me,” she said. “It is not an easy thing to advocate. It is an honor for me to do what I can to help my fellow parents.”

Hassan advocates for education that is tailored for students and that keeps their background knowledge in mind.

“School staff should know their [students’] backgrounds and teach students based on their prior knowledge. Basically, schools should know their audience, especially students with severe cognitive disabilities,” Hassan said.

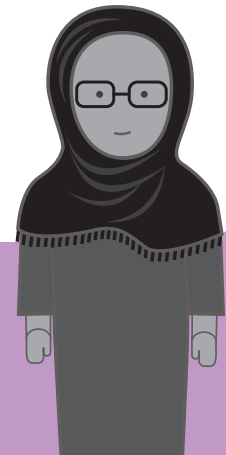
She recalled an English class, in which students were hearing a story about someone who got lost in the forest. The teacher wasn’t using any visuals to help with understanding. “The first question [the students] asked was, ‘What is a forest?’ There are no forests where they come from. It was a new concept for them and no pictures to get an idea of what it was.”

Hassan recognizes language is a key obstacle for parents of multilingual children with significant cognitive disabilities.

“The most challenging problem faced by parents of multilingual children with significant cognitive disabilities is the language barrier,” said Hassan. “Parents in my community speak Somali at home and communicate with their children in Somali. When their child starts school with a disability it doubles the anxiety for parents and their children as well.”

Umi Hassan's recommendations for working with multilingual learners with significant cognitive disabilities

- Help students with pictures and translating classroom material, to make it easier for the student to learn.
- Include as many learning styles as possible. Check the students' understanding while introducing new concepts and demonstrate a lot of patience and understanding.
- Open and honest communication between schools and parents is the key to a successful society. I believe we can raise positive and productive children if parents and teachers work together.



Learn more: Umi Hassan's suggested resources

- The [Somali community's experiences with autism: An exploratory study](#). This study explores how the Somali community experiences and perceives the condition of autism.
- The [Minneapolis Somali Autism Spectrum Disorder Prevalence Project](#). The project studies the prevalence of autism spectrum disorder in Somali children in Minneapolis.

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