

Munar Learning Center

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303-225King William St.
Hamilton On .L8R 1B1

MUNAR LEARNING CENTER AGM REPORT

Munar Learning Centre (MLC) is a grassroots organization established in 2018 to address issues faced by Somali refugee and Newcomers families in Hamilton.

MLC's focus is education because we believe that the number one indicator of academic success is the engagement of students and parents with schools and with the education system.

We also focuses on supports that help with to access the different systems such as legal, mental health and settlement and integrations.

We do inform, support, and create bridges between Somali refugees and Newcomers parents and the education system.

Vision: To establish pathways to success for our communities

Mission: To inspire lifelong learning and to strengthen our community's economic and social success.

Purpose: To inform, support and create bridges between the Somali refugees, the newcomers in Hamilton and the education system and service providers and Institutions.

For more than five years, Munar Learning Center has played a central role in reducing barriers for the Somali and newcomers communities in Hamilton.

Our staff and volunteers are deeply embedded in these Communities and continue to provide support for them. Our primary focus is to reduce or eliminate barriers in accessing services needed by these communities.

The Hamilton Community Foundation, the Hamilton Wentworth District School Board and LIUNA support continue to support our Programs.

We also received a Community Service Recovery Grant from the National Community Foundations to support the Munar Parent Engagement in Canadian Education project.

LIUNA, through their donations, has been a great supporter. They have supported both our Organizational Capacity Building activities and the Recreational and Wellness program for our students.

In addition, we delivered Mental Health and trauma-related sessions in partnership with COMPASS Community Health Center.

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Munar Learning Center PROGRAMS

1. THE TUTORING PROGRAM

The tutoring program "STEP BY STEP to a brighter future" is one of the highlights of Munar Learning Center's programs. The program is enhanced by a robust parent engagement, and it was featured in The Hamilton Community Foundation 2024 AGM report: Below are excerpts from the article.

STEP BY STEP – The tutoring program helps newcomer families find a path to a brighter future.

The room is remarkably quiet, considering its four walls contain the energy of 45 Grade 1 to 10 students.

On paper, they are refugees from Somalia, Sudan, Chad and Syria from low-income families in the lower city. In reality, they are young people who spend Monday to Thursday after school at Stepping Stones — a program run by Munar Learning Centre — practicing social skills, proudly showing their work to trusted adults, quietly listening to instructors, and working one-on-one with tutors.

Their reward — in addition to improved report cards and new friends — is Friday's program, when they get to trade academics for soccer and other games.

It is not just the children who learn at Stepping Stones. Next door are their moms, who drink coffee and chat. Before Stepping Stones, these women were strangers. Now they are friends.

<https://www.hamiltoncommunityfoundation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/HCF>

The **Step-By-Step** program provides a space within which both parents and students can feel at home and share ideas. Children get help with schoolwork, and parents learn about other programs and find support. Program volunteers offer help with letters, forms, and in-the-moment questions; a YWCA settlement worker provides newcomer resources; and program staff accompanies parents to teacher meetings. "These parents need someone to hold their hand," says Madina Wasuge, Munar's chair. "This is a place where they feel their children are okay and they're okay."

The parents have had this to say about the impact of the **Step-By-Step** program:

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- “Before my children were getting lower grades,” says one. “Now they’re getting Bs instead of Cs and As instead of Bs.”
- “I never have to tell my children to hurry up and get ready,”
- “Everyone has their backpack and shoes on and is saying, ‘Let’s go!’”

In addition, programming for middle school students has been supported by HCF’s ABACUS initiative since 2022. Step By Step uses a whole-child approach focusing on family, community and school. Hamilton Community Foundation has recognized that the approach used by Munar Learning Center is critical to increasing the likelihood that young people who face multiple barriers will graduate high school and access post-secondary education.

Munar believes that the program is a success because it is in the community and students and their parents have continuity. Students come almost every day for three or four years, and everyone is able to see the improvement. Teachers are asking parents, ‘What are you doing with this kid? Where are you getting help from?’”

The Step-By-Step program supports 45 students per week each year and is an investment in the future because if these students finish high school and go to higher education, we all Benefit.



2. THE LIFE SKILLS PROGRAM

Students’ Life Skills Building is another program to support newcomer and refugee students.

The Life Skills Development Project at Munar Learning Centre was funded through the Edith Turner Funds. The project was implemented to achieve a variety of positive life-skills workshops such as improved self-awareness, confidence, critical thinking, problem-solving, goal setting/action planning, time management, etc.

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The primary objective of this project was to incorporate these life skills into students' lives so that they are prepared both academically and for future employment opportunities.

The project's outcomes were comparable to the predefined outcomes, and key areas for improvement were identified.

We had 50 participants in the Life Skills Development, aged between 12 and 17 years old, living in the inner City of Hamilton (mostly newcomers or refugees). Moreover, the students in the project face a variety of academic challenges/barriers.

For these students, skills like effective communication, problem-solving, time management, and emotional regulation can make a positive difference in their daily lives and school performance. These skills were learned through games, activities, and reflection and designed to help them build resilience, foster positive relationships, and manage stress. These skills are crucial for overcoming educational barriers and improving academic outcomes. By developing these abilities, participants become better equipped to face challenges, set and achieve personal goals, and lay a stronger foundation for both their educational success and mental health. Two educational navigators facilitated the activities and deliverables designed for this program.

The activities facilitated in the project were evaluated by using a variety of tools such as: collecting quantitative and qualitative data, observation, self-assessment/reflection activities, and progress tracking. Observations were used to qualitatively assess the project outcomes. Self-reflection activities encouraged students to be introspective about their experiences and behaviors, helping them identify strengths and areas for improvement in their life skills. Progress tracking involved monitoring and documenting students' development over time, providing measurable insights into their growth and effectiveness in applying life skills.

Life Skills Development Project curriculum include:

A brief meditation exercise was performed for the first 5-10 minutes of each Life Skills development course session.

- Collaboration and Inclusion
- Ethical resolution scenario (problem-solving)
- Career Exploration (Munar Learning Centre)

Part 1: Personal Portfolio Activity

- Reflection exercise where participants write their interests and talents, personal strengths,
- Establish goals for the future to help build a foundation for their careers

Part 2: Career research

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Research a list of 2-3 dream careers participants would wish to have and present how it relates to their portfolio

- SMART goal setting - students created their own SMART goal for their upcoming school year.

Part 3: Mental Health Skills:

Introduction to mental health and meditation

- Icebreakers/Team-building games
- "What Time is it, Mr. Wolf"
- Animal Red Light
- Emotions, Feelings, and how to deal with them
- Decisions based on emotions
- How to evaluate the choices we make
- Last Session: "Inside Out Movie"
- Relates to our emotions and feelings and how they change and develop as we age
- What are my Emotions? - relate each Inside Out emotion to your own
- A brief meditation exercise was performed for the first 5-10 minutes of each Life

Skills development course session.

- Introduction to Life Skills, Introduction to mental health and meditation
- Icebreakers/Team Building games

Time management & Organizational skill building – Participants learned how to manage school work and other responsibilities in their lives.



Findings:

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The meditation exercise facilitated at the start of each session had great positive feedback, and this was an exercise method known as "Rainbow Guided Meditation", which was used to promote relaxation and decrease anxiety. The inclusion of media sources such as videos, audio, and movies was successful in engaging the participants with course content, and it helped initiate important and valuable class dialogue about the media content. Specifically, the movie *Inside Out* shown in our final week (i.e., Emotions, Feelings, and how to deal with them), provided significant benefits in helping them understand emotions and feelings, which are crucial for their life development. *Inside Out* teaches children that all emotions have value and play a role in their overall mental health. The general themes and feedback concluded that the movie as well as the post-movie dialogue were able to help them embrace and express their feelings rather than suppressing them, fostering emotional intelligence and resilience. The findings also found that the self-reflection activities through the course were an effective method of assessing their interests, strengths, and areas for growth. Specifically in the context of developing life skills for future career opportunities, focusing on future career opportunities and life skills is highly beneficial for school students, serving as a crucial component of their personal and academic development.

These two activities: 1-feeling circles and 2 journaling; were challenging due to lack the written language proficiency of the participants, and it created a challenge for them to express their thoughts and emotions clearly in writing. A future consideration would be to integrate journaling into the regular Munar Learning Centre education program, to ensure a smooth transition and familiarity to journaling.

3. PARENT ENGAGEMENT PILOT PROGRAM

The Engagement in the Education System of Parents from Refugee and Immigrant Communities.

Many Somali parents came to Canada as refugees from their war-torn country. Most are unskilled and have had limited access to education, if any. Because of their life experiences, the immigrant families that come to us are mostly from female-headed households, and as parents in Hamilton, they face many parenting challenges and often have difficulty raising their children within the system.

The involvement of parents in the education of their children is an important feature of any resilient community. This component is however even more important for parents from refugee backgrounds because it is not only crucial for the academic success of children, but it also enables civic participation and empowerment which ensures the development of strong, robust communities.

We supported Somali parents in Hamilton by giving them tools and resources to demystify the system and help them connect with and learn about the Education Munar Learning Center.
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system. We provided education and training to 60 parents and delivered further training to 10 Education Community Navigators. The role of the navigator is to support parents when they need to contact or are contacted by their child's school

The training sessions on the education system were structured as follows:

- Three workshop groups of parents, each made up of 20 parents.
- Each training group of 20 parents attended 5 training sessions.
- Each training session was 3 hours in duration.

Training sessions for Parents on the education system included –

- Structure and function of the Education System in Canada Ontario and Hamilton;
- Roles, Rights, and Responsibilities of the Parents; Reporting and Responding;
- Interactions between Schools and Parents; Policies and Procedures;
- Code of Conduct; and Communicating with Schools and Teachers.

Training sessions for Navigators training sessions will include –

- Advocacy and Communications skill development;
- Counseling and Problem-solving; Understanding the legal framework;
- Parental Rights and Responsibilities
- Navigation. Who to call when you need to; Community Resources.

This Pilot identified a significant community need for the work that we do and the training we deliver. The feedback from participants was overwhelming in its desire for us to continue this project, and as a result, we would like to scale up this project.

In the Pilot, we established the foundations of the project and developed training and project tools and resources such as - Training and Workshop materials, A Parent's Handbook, and A Navigator's Manual

PARTNERSHIP WITH COMPASS COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTER

The Munar Learning Centre welcomed the opportunity to partner with Compass to provide the much-needed educational service to the community of vulnerable and marginalized Somali parents with whom MLC works. We provided the Somali parents with workshops and information sessions addressing legal, parenting, and mental health issues. Parents obtained information that allowed them to begin to have a sense of empowerment. When parents feel empowered, they can support the emotional health of their families and effectively address concerns within the legal, social, and educational systems. They will be less fearful about language barriers and difficulties they may encounter while responding to issues within the education and social services system.

Workshop Details

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There were far more participants in attendance than was anticipated. It was anticipated that there would be about 20 to 25 participants in attendance; however, that number was almost doubled for some sessions.

- Trauma and Emotional Support for children provided parents with strategies for recognizing the impact that trauma could have. The theme of the workshops - "Healthy Mind, Healthy Body Happier You" - gave parents tools for understanding and responding to signs of emotional trauma and provide information about accessing mental health support. In the workshops, participants discussed issues relating to mental health and addiction. They discussed the impact of youth marginalization on mental health and ways in which barriers could be overcome and foster positive change in the outcomes for youth.
- Human Rights and Child Welfare Issues was an informative session that assisted parents in learning about their rights as parents and the rights of their children. The session covered obligations under the Child, Youth and Family Services Act (CYFSA) and the role of Children's Aid Societies. It addressed the CAS processes and what happens when the CAS is called and showed parents how they should respond to and work with the CAS.
- Parents and Educational Services for Children examined culture and how cultural frameworks impacts families and children. It explored the impact on immigrant families as they learn to adapt to and respond to living and working in a new cultural environment. It explored parenting within different cultures and provided parents with alternative strategies for disciplining their children. It showed how the structure of the education system in Ontario might be different from that in their home country. There was a great deal of discussion around the rights and responsibilities of parents within the education system and the importance of parent-teacher communication.

The participants expressed their appreciation, their satisfaction with the sessions delivered, and the information they received. Some expressed a desire for more sessions because they felt the one or two sessions on any topic did not go to the depth they wanted.

CONCLUSION

Munar Learning Centre must continue to offer workshops and training sessions to racialized parents and families who are vulnerable and at risk in the community.

We are seeking different opportunities and resources to continue to extend services to all refugees and newcomer parents in our communities helping them to navigate the education systems and support them to become more engaged and healthy citizens.

We thank all our volunteers, funders, and supporters as we continue our mission to strengthen our community's economic and social success.

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