

# Top 10 Things You Need to Know About Newcomer Low German Mennonite Students

## 1. Separateness

- Mennonites have kept the Low German language, religion and culture intact for hundreds of years. In respect for that separateness, consider accommodating students in a variety of settings: online, off-campus, on-campus classes and evening support to reach as many students as possible.

## 2. Diversity

- There are various (and sometimes conflicting) Mennonite faith traditions (Old Colony, Reinlander, New Reinlander, Sommerfelder, Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference, ...). Learn about your students' groups.
- Show an interest in their faith traditions by including Mennonite history and traditions while teaching Canadian content:
  - Be sensitive to dynamics of LGMs from Durango vs. Chihuahua, or Old Colony vs. Sommerfelder;
  - Think about how to assign group work and which topics to avoid (see #5)

To learn more, check out these resources:

[Mennonite Central Committee's website: "Opening Doors":](http://openingdoors.co/education-in-a-colony-context/) <http://openingdoors.co/education-in-a-colony-context/>  
[Anne Wall's "Low German 101":](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hZa69aWxdP0) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hZa69aWxdP0>

Abe Wall's "Cultural Overview of the Low German Speaking Mennonites for Educators":  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6gTR2Cc7wvE>

Abe Wall's "Working with Low German Mennonite Students: A Resource Guide for Educators" (printed material)

## 3. Environment

- Most conservative colony schools are one room schoolhouses where all siblings are together all day. When new families come to Ontario, they may find it difficult to be separated into different classrooms or buildings.
  - Consider allowing older siblings to be with younger ones for parts of the day/during lunch to help ease adjustment.
- Seating plans have a whole different meaning in colony school:
  - Boys are seated on the right, girls on the left.
  - The front of the classroom is reserved for the oldest students; youngest sit in the back.
  - The aisle seats are for the strongest academic students; wall seats for the weakest students.
- Be aware that genders may be uncomfortable seated next to each other.
- Explain your suggested seating plan so the students understand your intentions and ask if it's ok.

## 4. Talking Topics

- Work, family, tradition, and culture are highly valued. Let them talk about those things.
- Food is always an easy way to connect. Engage families through events where food is shared and invite them to bring in their food.
- Language:
  - Try to employ Low German phrases to show interest in and respect for their language.
  - Empower them with their own language by having them translate, and show your willingness to learn from them.

## 5. Touchy Topics

- Some topics are deemed appropriate to be discussed at home, at church, or not at all. Before delving into these topics, get to know your students very well to gauge if it appropriate to discuss. Be flexible in allowing alternative assignments that meet the same overall course expectations when students express discomfort on

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topics like: Death, Sexuality, Pregnancy, Evolution/Dinosaurs, Hallowe'en (witches, monsters, ghosts,...), Divorce, Movies, tv, social media,...

## 6. Purpose

- Colony schools focus on the practical skills of reading, cursive writing and basic arithmetic. Texts are limited to a primer, the catechism and the Bible. Introducing Ontario curriculum to newcomers can be extremely overwhelming. Narrowing the focus of learning to a reading, writing and math eases the transition because they are starting on common ground and purpose. Once students get comfortable with those topics, introducing history, geography and science become easier. Too much, too fast can thwart engagement and trigger resistance or withdrawal.
- Stating your learning goals usually grounds your purpose and will prompt deeper engagement. If the learning goal of the course seems irrelevant to their lives, stressing that this lesson is a step toward graduation, which would lead to a better job, can drive more engagement.

## 7. Goal Setting

- Teaching lessons on setting personal goals is tricky because setting goals is considered prideful. It implies we have control over our futures. The philosophy of many LGM's is that our futures rest in God's hands and whatever He deals us is what we accept. Existence is a day-to-day experience in trusting God's provision. Their trips to Mexico, for example, are usually very sudden, and if there is advance warning it's either the day of, or the day before.
- To encourage goal setting, ask students to consider someone they admire/respect because that person had accomplished something that they would also like to accomplish. Getting students to look at the examples of others, and thinking about the steps that person took, achieves the same outcome without putting the emphasis on self.

## 8. Opinions

- Low German culture values the community over the individual. It is usually inappropriate to ask young people for opinions because decisions are made by the adults in the community. You may get blank stares or silence if you ask classroom of LGM students an opinion question.
- Sharing opinions openly might send the message that they were prideful. Additionally, if their response is regarded as wrong, they could be mocked by others in the class later.
- Don't mistake silence, or lack of response, as insolence or rudeness, or being less intelligent. The silence could indicate that your question is not fully understood, or that it's not appropriate for the student to respond to such a question, or even that the nature of the question is culturally offensive.

## 9. Fact vs. Fiction

- Fact wins every time. Fiction is considered a lie and spending time on it is unproductive and pointless.
- You may have to explain that though the text may not be "true", the concept behind the story is a way to share or illustrate "truth".

## 10. Inference

- The nature of schooling in colonies is rote and recitation. Finding answers to directly stated questions is readily grasped but reading between the lines is a challenge because it is not part of their experience.
- To foster this skill, students will need ample opportunities to observe and practise. Trying to find a message that is not clearly stated is risky and you might be met with silence when you're trying to get our students to do it.

*The key to success is very simple: be warm and welcoming, ask the right questions, listen to learn and you'll build relationships.*