New School, Foreign Land;

Immigrant Children Brave First Day

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Body

On their ***first day*** of ***school*** in America, Selamawit Sereke, 6, and her sister, Helen, 8, yesterday entered a dizzying and unfamiliar world of classroom computers, math workbooks -- and simple words whose meanings they did not know.

In Selamawit's ***first***-grade class in Arlington, the teacher asked the students to sing the alphabet song. Selamawit didn't understand; she speaks Tigrinya, the language of her native Eritrea in Africa.

In Helen's classroom at Barcroft Elementary, the third-grader walked to the front of the class after she heard the teacher say her name. As Helen stood waiting for direction, the teacher tried to communicate that she had not been called.

For the Sereke sisters, yesterday was a tough introduction into a ***school*** system where none of the teachers understand their language, and the prospects of getting one who does are slim.

English is a ***foreign*** language for thousands of students who started ***school*** yesterday in the Washington area. Students speak as many as 100 different languages, according to ***school*** records, with most fluent in Spanish. In many cases, few, if any, ***school*** staff speak the languages of the smaller student populations.

During the last decade, ***school*** officials said, the number of non-English-speaking students has steadily increased.

"The situation is very tough," said Emma Violand, director of the English for Speakers of Other Languages program in Arlington, where students speak more than 40 languages. "It's a sad reality."

The initial process of learning, said Barcroft principal Ellen Kahan, "is terribly frustrating" for ***immigrant*** ***children***. "They don't have any idea about being part of a class, raising your hand, responding to a teacher. It takes a while for them to master all of that stuff."

In Arlington, for example, some staff members speak Vietnamese, Khmer, Laotian, Spanish and Chinese, according to ***school*** spokesman David Rorick. When translations, testing or interviews are needed in other languages, such as Urdu, Farsi or Hindi, he said, the ***school*** system often arranges to use a language consultant.

A relative who has lived in Arlington for several years translated for the Serekes during the few weeks before ***school*** started as the girls got their immunizations and visited the Intake Center, which acts as the ***school*** system's Ellis Island.

Before yesterday, Selamawit's and Helen's only exposure to ***school*** was in a makeshift classroom in a Sudanese refugee camp where they lived four years before moving to their one-bedroom South Arlington apartment in June. Their only classes were in Tigrinya, so they would not lose their native language, and in Arabic, the language of Sudan.

Gebrehiwot Sereke, 33, and his wife, Ketem, 27, fled Eritrea to Sudan with the two girls during the area's 30-year war for independence from Ethiopia, which ended recently. Three more ***children*** were born in the refugee camp, which the family reached after a 12-***day***, 300-mile trip from Eritrea.

A brother helped the family, which receives aid from Catholic Charities, come to the United States.

Ethiopian community leaders estimate there are 20,000 to 30,000 Ethiopians in the Washington area, most of them in Silver Spring, the Adams-Morgan neighborhood in the District and along south Columbia Pike in Arlington.

Immigration and Naturalization Service officials said a few hundred Ethiopians and Eritreans immigrated to the Washington area in 1989, the last year for which figures are available. However, both ***school*** and immigration officials said yesterday that those figures have risen during the last two years because of recent political upheavals in Eritrea and Ethiopia, and a ***new*** surge of refugees is expected.

Like other students who don't speak English, Helen and Selamawit will spend half of the ***school*** ***day*** in a class called English for Speakers of Other Languages, or ESOL, until they have mastered the language sufficiently to join their English-speaking classmates in all their subjects.

Kelly Miller, director of the ESOL program at Barcroft, said the girls have an advantage because they are trying to learn English at a relatively young age. Still, she said, it likely will be two to four years before they are fluent in English.

Because of the growth in the number of Ethiopians and Eritreans and the desperate condition of many of the refugees, Violand said, an attempt is being made to hire an Amharic or Tigrinya speaker for the Arlington ***schools***.

"The Ethiopians are moving to the front burner" on the ***school*** system's list of priorities, she said. "They need a hand if they miss the bus or if they have forms to fill, and right now they're not getting it."

Yesterday, as he watched his daughters start their American ***school*** experience, Gebrehiwot Sereke worried about the language barrier.

For about half an hour, he scanned the faces of ***children*** entering the building. He recognized a few as Ethiopians, and asked a teacher if Helen could be put in a class with a student who speaks Tigrinya. There were no other Eritrean students at her grade level. By chance, however, a Tigrinya-speaking student is in the class with Selamawit.

"We'll get her through," Kahan told the father through an interpreter after Helen went to her class. "We do this all the time."

Graphic

PHOTO, SELAMAWIT SEREKE, 6, LEFT, ON HER ***FIRST DAY*** AT BARCROFT ELEMENTARY IN ARLINGTON. CAROL GUZY

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