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Team-Teaching Helps Close Language Gap

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The St. Paul, Minn., school district has gained notice for its success in educating a large population of students of Hmong heritage who are learning English

Dateline: St. Paul, Minn.

In the St. Paul public schools, "pullout" **teaching** is frowned upon. Instead, "collaboration" is the favored method when it comes to **teaching** English-**language** learners.

The approach--a mandate from the central office--seems to be working. For three of the past four years, the district has made adequate yearly progress for its English-**language** learners under the federal No Child Left Behind Act. And it has done so with a population that is primarily Hmong, a Laotian ethnic group that was first resettled in the Twin Cities in the late 1970s after the Vietnam War. As recently as two years ago, the district received more Hmong students from a camp in Thailand.

Michael D. Casserly, the executive director of the Washington-based Council of the Great City Schools, says the St. Paul district is "amongst the best" of 65 urban school systems in nearly closing the achievement **gap** between English-**language** learners and native speakers, based on his organization's analysis of state data.

Over the past seven years, the district here in the Minnesota capital has revamped its programs for elementary students so that inclusion has replaced assigning English-**language** learners to a full-day English-as-a-second-**language** track or having an ESL teacher regularly pull them out of class. Now, mainstream and ESL teachers co-teach in the same classroom, which is not a commonly used method.

Many of the Hmong families living in St. Paul received refugee status because some had fought on the side of the United States in the Vietnam War, and were persecuted in Communist Laos after the war. Traditionally, the Hmong were farmers and had little experience with formal schooling. Another 2,000 Hmong students have enrolled in St. Paul schools since the 2004-05

school year, when they arrived from a refugee camp on the grounds of a Buddhist temple in Thailand named Wat Tham Krabok. (See Education Week, April 14, 2004.)

Now, one in four of the district's 41,000 students are of Hmong heritage. Many U.S.-born Hmong don't speak much English when they start kindergarten, so Hmong English-**language** learners include both American-born and newly arrived students. Of the district's 17,000 English-**language** learners, 9,800 are Hmong and 4,000 are Latino.

At the elementary level, the district concentrates its recently arrived English-**language** learners in 14 schools that have extra ESL teachers or bilingual staff. They are mixed with native English-speakers in all classrooms.

At Como Park Elementary School, longtime ESL teacher Margaret Farrell **team**-teaches with 1st grade teacher Steven Petrini in the morning and with a 2nd grade teacher in the afternoon. Each teacher in the **team** is responsible for all of the students.

One November morning, while Mr. Petrini goes over rituals such as naming days of the week, Ms. Farrell takes three 1st graders who are Hmong and speak English only in one- or two-word sentences into a separate classroom for a half-hour and reads to them. She calls the activity a "pre-reading" lesson, and has thought through how the exercise is tied to the curriculum that all children receive.

Ms. Farrell acquaints the two girls and a boy with the book *When I Was Five* by Arthur Howard. She highlights words such as "astronaut" and "birthday," and tries to connect the book to their own experiences by having them talk about their birthdays.

Later, Ms. Farrell takes the helm of the class to teach a "writer's workshop" using the same book. She occasionally calls on the three Hmong children from the pre-reading session, asking questions similar to those they answered earlier and encouraging them to take part in the whole-class experience.

Ms. Farrell then asks all of the children to work individually on "me stories," 1st grade lingo for memoirs, about when they were 5 or 6 years old. She and Mr. Petrini circulate to **help** them.

St. Paul's collaborative model, developed locally, is constantly updated. It's mapped out in teacher handbooks, curriculum guides, a CD, and handouts with neat graphics. The district has even produced purple buttons that say, "Got Collaboration?"

One goal of the English-**language**-learner program is for teachers to provide instruction tailored to children with different needs, without the children even knowing it. Some teachers have resisted, says Valeria Silva, a native of Chile and the director of such programs. While the approach was started with teachers who volunteered, she says, eventually all elementary school teachers were required to use that model. "Some people left the district," she said. "They wanted to do pullout."

The district mandates that each day, every elementary school teach an hourlong writer's workshop, an hourlong reader's workshop, and a 30-minute workshop for vocabulary and spelling. Each workshop involves a mini-lesson and then a time for pupils to work in small groups or individually while teachers **help** them. That setup allows teachers to provide the differentiated instruction that students need, according to Ms. Silva.

A common curriculum for mathematics is required in elementary schools and the district is phasing in a workshop approach to that subject. Eight ESL teachers work out of the district's central office to monitor the progress of English-**language** learners and coach teachers at the elementary and secondary levels.

At the secondary level, however, the district uses a more common approach to **teaching** English-language learners, separating them out, at least at the lowest levels of proficiency, into a separate ESL track.

The big push in middle and high schools, through training and coaching teachers and writing centralized curriculum, has been to **help** educators go beyond **teaching** students conversational skills to **teaching** "academic English." The curriculum is aligned both with state academic-content standards and standards for developing proficiency in English.

English-**language** learners in the first two of five levels of English proficiency attend mostly classes taught by ESL teachers. After that, they are put in regular classes, except for receiving one ESL class a day for about two years.

Pao Yang, who came from the camp in Thailand, attends classes in the track for beginning English-**language** learners at Humboldt Senior High School. After two years in the United States, he takes classes at level 2.

While his classmates represent many countries--Ethiopia, Mexico, Myanmar, Somalia, Togo--the 15-year-old interacts mostly with fellow Hmong from the camp. Mr. Yang understands a lot of English, but speaks only a few words at a time and draws often from a limited pool of expressions, such as "a little" and "not right now."

He attended school for five years in Thailand before he dropped out to **help** his family to carry water and cook meals. The oldest of eight children, he spends a lot of time outside of school caring for his younger siblings.

All day long, Mr. Yang is intent on learning the difficult academic words that are thrown at him. "Territories, territories," he repeats aloud during a lesson on Canada's geography. "Quotient," he says quietly six times to himself, after learning the word in Algebra 1 class.

Some experts think the district needs to do more for English-**language** learners at the secondary level.

Bee Lee, the program manager for Hmong enrichment programs and a liaison with Hmong parents for the district's department of English-**language** learners, contends that most mainstream secondary teachers aren't using strategies to **help** second-**language** learners. That affects students in levels 3 to 5 of English proficiency, who mostly attend regular classes, he says.

Ms. Silva acknowledges that her department's focus has been on training teachers in the ESL track at the secondary level. At some point, she says, colleges and universities must step up to the plate and turn out mainstream teachers prepared to engage second-**language** learners.

Zha Blong Xiong, an associate professor in education and human development at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, believes that while ESL classes are necessary for newcomers, they can stifle the motivation to learn for U.S.-born children from Hmong families, who are particularly sensitive to being singled out at school.

"A lot of my students who come to the university--every one of them talked about the damage to the psyche, despite some good experiences in ESL," he said, adding that he was referring to American-born Hmong.

In St. Paul schools, he says, a lot of second-generation Hmong get stuck in ESL through middle school and even high school.

At the request of Education Week, district officials ran an analysis to see if Mr. Xiong's perception was right. They found that 2,484 of the 3,029 students who enrolled in St. Paul schools as English-**language** learners in kindergarten and who are now in grades 7-11 still haven't met the district's criteria for being fluent in English. Nearly 2,000 of them are Hmong.

Also, 9,800 of the district's 11,800 students of Hmong heritage are classified as English-**language** learners.

But that's not the same as being stuck in ESL classes. The data show that 22 percent of those 3,029 who enrolled in kindergarten as ELLs and are in grades 7-11 are still receiving **help** designed for English-**language** learners, with a much smaller percentage in the upper than lower grades. If students carry the ELL designation for a long time, St. Paul educators are likely to provide other services for them, such as special education or extra **help** with reading, says Heidi Bernal, the assistant director of the district's department for English-**language** learners.

The St. Paul district reclassifies children as fluent in English when they score proficient in reading and writing on the state's English-**language** proficiency test and also either score at the 60th percentile on the Stanford Achievement Test or pass the state's high school exit exam.

"It is a high bar because we want to make sure we are supporting kids until they can be successful in the mainstream classes," Ms. Bernal said.

She acknowledged that the high standard for fluency may mean that St. Paul has more students

with higher skills counted in the subgroup of English-**language** learners than other cities, and thus may have an easier time showing that the **gap** between the students and native speakers is being closed.

Hmong who work for the district believe there's still a lot of room for improvement in serving students from their community.

Mo Chang, who has a master's degree in **teaching** and learning, is the charter school liaison and special-projects coordinator for the district and a member of a "cabinet" that meets regularly with Superintendent Meria Carstarphen. As a Hmong refugee who enrolled in St. Paul schools in the late 1970s when she was 12 and was assigned to ESL classes, she recalls how it felt to receive such treatment.

"I remember being pulled out of class all the time--I think it was three times a week," she said. "It made me feel like I'm dumb and don't know anything. Kids think maybe something is wrong with you if you need extra services."

Along with Ms. Silva, Ms. Chang was part of a delegation that visited the camp at Wat Tham Krabok to prepare for the students' resettlement in the fall of 2004. The two district officials were also on the committee that helped set up **language** centers at schools, in which children received intensive English instruction and learned about school culture. The centers were closed after one school year, and those children are now in regular programs for English-**language** learners.

Ms. Chang is pushing for the district to open a magnet school with a focus on Hmong culture and **language**. Some schools already teach a period of Hmong language, but unless the district does more, it will continue to lose students to charter schools that have a Hmong focus, she says. Already, St. Paul has two such charter schools, and one more is scheduled to open.

When her own, American-born son was still assigned to ESL classes in St. Paul schools in junior high school, Ms. Chang says, she removed him from the classes, against the advice of teachers.

Mr. Lee, who is also a Hmong refugee who arrived in the United States at a young age, has helped establish the district's first Hmong bilingual program, offered at Jackson Preparatory Magnet School.

The Hmong have been in the United States in large numbers only for 30 years, he says, but he's dismayed that many children and youths, including his 4-year-old son, can't speak Hmong well. Mr. Lee plans to enroll his son in the bilingual program at Jackson next year.

A big part of Mr. Lee's job is to tell Hmong parents how to navigate the school system.

It's not easy, he says, in part because the district is slow to change to accommodate Hmong parents. Too many schools still send out written information, rather than call, even though many Hmong parents can't read and write, he says. And while school officials provide a Hmong

interpreter at meetings, they often use jargon that Hmong parents don't easily understand, even in translation.

Sometimes Mr. Lee feels as if he bears all of the district's Hmong students on his shoulders, he says during a stop to eat egg rolls at a Hmong marketplace here. He pulls his shoulders up toward his neck, and says, with anguish, "My shoulders are too narrow for it."

When conflicts come up between the district and Hmong parents, he says, the parents turn to him and say, "'Bee, you're the inside person, how come you can't **help** me?'"

All he can really do, he says, is explain to them how things work in the United States.

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See a multimedia gallery with photos and audio at www.edweek.org/hmong.

Closing the Gap on the High School Exit Exam

English-**language** learners in St. Paul are catching up to native English-speakers on key measures of academic achievement. The state is phasing out the Minnesota Basic Standards Test as its high school exit exam. It also requires students to pass a writing test.

8th graders' scores on the Minnesota Basic Standards Test, 2005-06

Reading

Percent passing on first try

	English- language learners	Native English-speakers
2001	41	63
2002	33	68
2003	41	65
2004	42	66
2005	64	66

Mathematics

Percent passing on first try

	English- language learners	Native English-speakers
2001	39	51

2002	33	56
2003	37	51
2004	30	50
2005	47	50

NOTE: Figures have been rounded.

SOURCE: St. Paul Public Schools

Members of St. Paul's Hmong community gather in RiverCentre last month to celebrate the Hmong New Year with such traditions as the ball-toss game. During the courtship ceremony, teenagers line up across from each other and toss a cloth ball back and forth. The city's Hmong population has grown steadily in the three decades since the end of the Vietnam War.

Thaying Xiong, a kindergartner, copies the Hmong translation for "turkey" onto an art project at St. Paul's Jackson Preparatory Magnet School, which has the district's first bilingual program in English and Hmong.

Pao Yang, a 10th grader, works on homework in a transitional science class for English-**language** learners at Humboldt Senior High School.

Steven Petrini, a 1st grade teacher at Como Park Elementary School, **helps** Mai Lee Yang space a word she is writing. He **team**-teaches the class with a teacher who specializes in English as a second **language**.

Margaret Farrell, who co-teaches with Mr. Petrini, **helps** three Hmong students pronounce words during a "pre-reading" session.

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By Mary Ann Zehr

## Prepared for College?

Dateline: St. Paul, Minn.

It takes support from teachers--and a little courage--for teenagers who don't speak much English to meet college recruiters who come to their school.

When an announcement came over the public-address system at Humboldt Senior High School here recently, an ESL teacher sent eight Hmong 10th graders to a college fair in the gymnasium. The students, who were resettled in the city two years ago from an unofficial refugee camp in Thailand, are enrolled in level 2 classes for English-**language** learners, out of a five-level progression.

They entered the gym, where representatives from 52 Minnesota colleges and universities had set

up booths. At first, they surveyed the situation.

Pao Yang, 15, looped his arm around the shoulders of a friend, and they cruised between the rows of booths.

They were soon joined by Sou Yang, Pao Yang's cousin, and they followed his lead to approach a booth for North Hennepin Community College. It was manned by Thai Xiong, a new-student specialist for the college, who spoke to the boys in Hmong and told them to pick up an application and fill out a card to get more information.

The 10th graders then went to their next class. Shortly afterward, the PA system announced that it was the 11th graders' turn to attend the fair. But the ESL teacher in that class didn't let the students go, saying the college fair was for students with a higher level of English proficiency.

Well-educated Hmong in St. Paul worry that the school district isn't doing enough to prepare most Hmong students for college.

Zha Blong Xiong, an associate professor in education and human development at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities who is Hmong, says that while white students from St. Paul schools score an average of 23.8 on the ACT test, Asian-American students, 90 percent of whom are Hmong, score an average of 17.7, out of a possible 36. Also, he notes, district statistics show that participation of Hmong in Advanced Placement classes is low compared with whites'.

For the class of 2005, however, the graduation rate for Asian-Americans in St. Paul schools was 85 percent, compared with 89 percent for white students.

--MARY ANN ZEH

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