



Power, Politics, *and* Preservation of Heritage Languages

WRITTEN BY
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Coalition of Asian American Leaders (CAAL)

CAAL envisions a state where all Minnesotans, regardless of background, are actively engaged and can achieve prosperity. Toward this vision, CAAL's mission is to harness the collective power of Asian Minnesotans to improve the lives of community by connecting, learning, and acting together.

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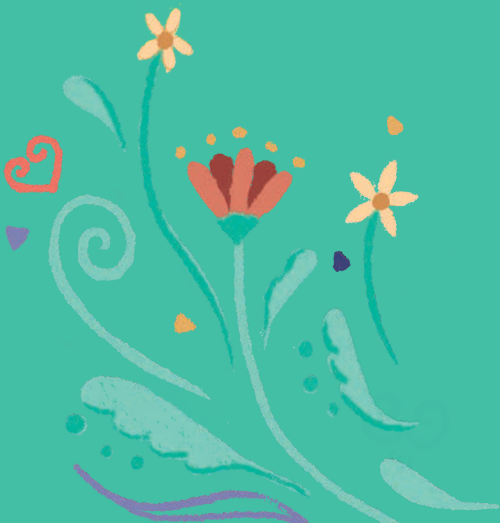
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Acknowledgements

This paper arose out of a partnership between the Coalition of Asian American Leaders (CAAL) and Education Evolving following a summit hosted by CAAL in June of 2019. The summit was attended by more than 100 racially and ethnically diverse educators from Minnesota, Wisconsin, and California who came together to discuss how they approach teaching and reclaiming language literacy. A powerful panel of six multilingual students shared their journeys. We wish to thank these student panelists: Kaleigh, Cecilia, Annie, Kia, Diamond, and Gay Ka Mwee. Their stories inspire and guide this project.*

The June 2019 summit underscored the need for our public to invest more in the many diverse students whose communities speak a heritage language in Minnesota. This paper highlights the Hmong community who comprise the largest Asian Minnesotan community and are among the top five primary languages spoken in Minnesota among multilingual English learners¹.



* Kaleigh, Student, Lake Middle School; Cecilia, Student, Park Center High School; Annie, Student, Patrick Henry High School; Kia, Student, University of Minnesota; Diamond, Leader, Student Engagement and Advancement Board (SEAB) and the Minnesota Youth Council; Gay Ka Mwee, Student, Metropolitan State University

We acknowledge and recognize the resilience and strength of the Native Nations, whose land we occupy. We recognize and honor the Indigenous community's leadership in the language reclamation movement. We acknowledge the ancestors and the survivors of United States government sanctioned attempts to eliminate Indigenous culture and language through oppressive and amoral government policies and deliberate acts of genocide.

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Introduction

In the United States, English is the de facto dominant language. Not the official language of the country, but the one overwhelmingly used by our government, schools, businesses, and in most public forums. When a student first enrolls in school, at any grade level K-12, our approach has typically focused on teaching them to speak, read, listen, and write proficiently in English. A strong command of English is unquestionably essential for students to excel in school, the workplace, and our society. But for many students, the dominance of English instruction has come at the expense of losing their first language.

For most of our modern history of schooling in the United States, students have been forced to leave their heritage or home languages at the door when they enter the school building. Historically, educators believed this was the best or even only way for students to learn English.

Fortunately today, a vast body of research has clearly demonstrated that there are numerous benefits to multilingualism, including evidence of how it can support students' learning of English as well as aid development of their cognitive and social-emotional skills and economic well being.^{2,3}

In school settings, a **heritage language** is usually defined as a student's home language or the language of their wider community other than English.⁴ A 2018 report from the Minnesota Department of Education estimated that 142,000⁵ students across the state speak a primary language other than English, and identified the top five primary home languages as Spanish, Somali, Hmong, Karen, and Vietnamese.⁶

Some of our students can speak, read, and write in their heritage language. Others are able only to speak or understand it, while still others cannot understand the language, but are part of a family or community in which the language is spoken and valued. It is important to acknowledge that when we refer to heritage language, the term can apply to any of these connections between a non-dominant language and a community, person, or family, regardless of a student's current linguistic fluency.⁷

As our understanding of the importance of heritage languages increases, so too must our efforts to bring heritage languages into schools in ways that honor and value their importance.

As one of our student panelists perfectly stated:

“FROM MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE, I HAVE LEARNED THAT IT IS ALWAYS THE ADULTS THAT ARE MAKING THE DECISIONS ABOUT OUR EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM AND WHAT WE LIVE IN...IT IS ABOUT US, OUR EXPERIENCES, OUR PERSONALITIES AND HOW WE EXPERIENCE THE EDUCATION SYSTEM. BY HAVING YOUTH AT THE TABLE, YOU ARE NOT ONLY ACCOUNTED FOR BY WHAT YOU ARE DOING, BUT MAKING SURE YOUTH HAVE A SAY IN WHAT THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM LOOKS LIKE.

—Diamond

In honoring his words, the stories and experiences of students are woven throughout this paper—because they are the ones experiencing the education system we have today, and are best equipped to guide us in designing an education system that honors them, our current reality, and the world they will inherit.



We begin this paper by illustrating why heritage languages matter to students' overall cognitive development, identity formation, sense of self, and academic achievement—as well as the opportunities heritage language instruction presents to families and community. Next, we highlight Minnesota's diverse population and the important relationship between data disaggregation and student achievement. Then, we look at what is happening with heritage languages across the state and nation. Finally, we move to understanding the challenges heritage language programs face, including policies, curriculum, resources, support, and sustainability.

Why Heritage Language Matters

By welcoming and teaching heritage languages in schools, we show students that we value them and their unique assets. Educators and policymakers need to shift how they view heritage language instruction in schools and understand that multilingualism through sustaining home languages is a powerful asset, not a deficit that holds back the development of English or the ‘Americanness’ of multilingual children of color.

It is no longer common for students to be subjected to physical or verbal punishment for speaking their heritage language in schools. However, students do get a clear message early on that their acceptance both in society and by their teachers is dependent on renouncing their home language and culture. This deficit or problem approach to heritage languages is persistent and harmful to our students.⁸ This harm impacts students’ ability to succeed academically, their sense of self, as well as their relationship to society.

We are seeing the tide shift in education from uniformity to student-centered education that recognizes who students are and what their interests are.⁹ As such, schools must recognize the assets and talents that their multilingual students bring.¹⁰ Current research demonstrates that multilingualism has a beneficial effect on cognitive development, executive function, identity development, family relationships, and academic achievement as well as self esteem and cross-cultural understanding.¹¹ This section will review these benefits.

Because these programs are of such consequential value to our students who are traditionally underserved, it is important to keep in mind that heritage language courses must take place as part of the regular programming of our schools. When they are relegated to after school or provided as extracurricular, we are sending a clear message to students about what is “necessary” and “unnecessary”, what is “valuable” and “not valuable”. Their academic success and sense of identity cannot be an extracurricular activity. Multilingual students must not be “an extra.” They must be a part of the school day.

“ I DENIED [MY HERITAGE LANGUAGE] GROWING UP BECAUSE IT WASN’T NORMALIZED, IT WASN’T PART OF MY EDUCATION GROWING UP IN A WHITE SCHOOL.

—Diamond

I JUST WISH EVERYONE WANTED TO LEARN MY HISTORY... I THINK, ‘ARE WE NOT INTERESTING ENOUGH OR YOU GUYS JUST DON’T WANT TO LEARN ABOUT US?’

—Cecilia



IMPROVES LINGUISTIC DEVELOPMENT & EXECUTIVE FUNCTION

As our world becomes increasingly global and jobs change so rapidly, we are beginning to understand the value of flexible thinking, executive function, problem solving, cultural competency, and multilingualism.¹² These are precisely the assets and 21st century workforce skills that heritage language programs are designed to build upon and that are most valued by employers in our changing workforce.

To be clear, the intentions of heritage language reclamation are not simply to make English easier for students to learn, yet studies show that access to heritage language instruction has done just that. The myth that students will learn the school language better if they abandon their heritage language has been definitively debunked. Rather, countless studies over the last 50 years find students' abilities to learn and excel in the English language they use at school are strengthened by continuing to improve and establish their heritage language.¹³

Students who enter school with a strong mastery of their heritage language develop stronger literacy abilities in the school language.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, the opposite is also true. When students are encouraged to reject their heritage language, their language foundation stagnates, leading to greater challenges in both their heritage language and the dominant language.¹⁵

Because multilingual students navigate the world in multiple languages, they develop a greater awareness of language meaning and structure which allows them a more analytical understanding of language. Scientists refer to this ability as metalinguistic awareness.¹⁶ A student who speaks more than one language has a wider variety of labels and connotations surrounding each word.¹⁷ For example, a bilingual student who speaks English and Spanish learns the labels "cielo" and "sky". Both words label the air above us, yet the English is often used to explain limitlessness and the Spanish term often applies that endless feeling to describe affection and love. It is important to note that metalinguistic awareness is also built on a bicultural existence that allows students to associate several concepts with these labels.¹⁸

Research also shows that by processing information through more than one language, multilingual students develop more flexible thinking.¹⁹ Flexible thinking is one of the main skills involved in executive function.²⁰ It allows children to shift and approach things differently, which is an essential element of problem solving. A 2010 study looked at the effect of bilingualism on cognitive skills in young children.²¹ The study compared the performance of 162 three and four year-olds within one of three language groups (monolingual English speakers, monolingual French speakers, and bilingual speakers of English and one other language). The study found that the bilingual students outperformed both monolingual groups in executive control, word mapping, and executive function. Research states that bilingual students' advantage was based on perceptual skills and greater attention control and ability to ignore irrelevant information.²²

“SINCE I STARTED TAKING
HMONG, IT HAS GIVEN
ME MORE CONFIDENCE IN
MYSELF, TO CHALLENGE
MYSELF MORE AT SCHOOL.

—Cecilia

BUILDS POSITIVE IDENTITY & BELONGING

It is believed that when a person cannot speak his or her own language, this individual has also lost his or her own cultural identity.

—Terry Yang²³

Adolescence is unquestionably a challenging time for youth as they grapple with their sense of self and place in this world.²⁴ For youth of color and Indigenous youth, social identity plays a greater role in defining individual identity, which is both more complex and also built on how they perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others.²⁵

Scholars describe “identity” as relating to a person’s understanding of their relationship to the world as well as their possibilities for the future. This understanding stems from a connection to others and their perceived role in society.²⁶

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I DENIED MY HMONG IDENTITY FOR A LONG TIME. I WAS EMBARRASSED AND ASHAMED TO BE HMONG. IT TOOK A TOLL ON MY MENTAL HEALTH... IT WAS MORE PAINFUL FOR ME TO UNLEARN AND DECOLONIZE EVERYTHING THAT I HAD LEARNED.

Loss of heritage language is shown to harm students’ sense of identity and belonging. Not surprisingly, the “desire for acceptance and belonging can often create confusion and alienation, especially for bilingual adolescents.”²⁷ For many students, the desire to succeed leads to assimilation and the rejection of their own culture, family, and selves. The Hmong, like many immigrant groups, have been under intense pressure to assimilate, even at the cost of the Hmong language and culture.²⁸

But for students who have the opportunity to have their identity valued and recognized through heritage language courses, the results are quite different. Students with greater heritage language competency have a stronger sense of who they are.²⁹ K.Y. Xiong shares the story of one student whose experience stood out: “...a girl who grew up in Minnesota and had the opportunity to take Hmong heritage language and culture classes... She was able to balance both cultures; a bicultural Hmong American youth.”³⁰

—Kia

Heritage language programs recognize and support students in exploring and nourishing their sense of identity. For students who spend most of their school day in an environment that celebrates English and Western values, having a designated time within the school program to formally delve into their family’s language and culture has a powerful effect on students’ sense of self and value in society. In fact, studies have also demonstrated that bilingual students are less likely to drop out of school than their English only speaking immigrant peers.³¹

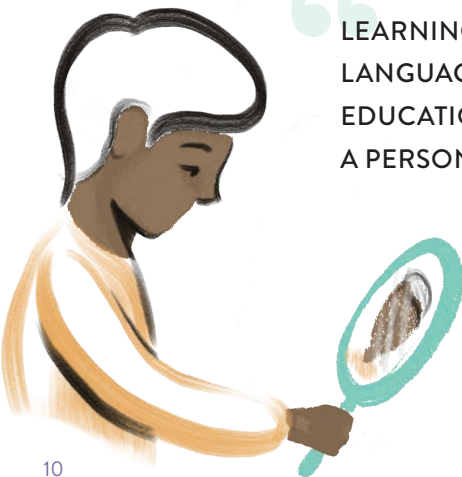
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LEARNING YOUR HERITAGE LANGUAGE SHOWS THAT YOUR EDUCATION SUPPORTS YOU AS A PERSON.

—Diamond

IF WE DON’T TALK ABOUT OUR HISTORY, OUR TRAUMATIZING PAST WITH WAR AND BEING A REFUGEE, IT KEEPS THOSE SCARS FROM HEALING.

—Diamond



STRENGTHENS FAMILIES & COMMUNITY

Heritage language programs empower families and community in school and strengthen their relationships to students. Substantial evidence shows the importance of family involvement in children’s education.³² Yet for many non-English speaking families, involvement in formal schooling requires them to re-live painful trauma from their own schooling when they were made to abandon their culture.

While often inadvertent, fracturing a child’s connection to their heritage or home language harms their relationships with their parents and community.³³ Teachers are impressed by how quickly students pick up conversational English, but we are only recently understanding how quickly these same children can lose their abilities to communicate in their heritage language.³⁴ There are many factors affecting heritage language retention such as out of school community and friendships, but on average, students lose the ability to communicate in their heritage language within 2-3 years of entering school.³⁵ As clearly stated by language acquisition professor Dr. Jim Cummins, “By the time children become adolescents, the linguistic gap between parents and children has become an emotional chasm.”³⁶

Yet studies have shown that when families and communities share stories or discuss issues with youth, it not only further develops their heritage language, vocabulary, and concepts skills, but also prepares students to better learn their school language and succeed in school overall.³⁷

“IF OUR LANGUAGE DIES OUT, WHO IS GOING TO REMEMBER US IF WE DON’T REMEMBER OURSELVES?”
—Annie

AS I GOT INTO HIGH SCHOOL AND STOPPED TAKING THOSE HMONG CLASSES... YOU LOSE IT. YOU SPEAK LESS OF IT AND IT’S HARDER TO CONNECT WITH YOUR PARENTS OR YOUR GRANDMA AND GRANDPA.
—Annie

“IT IS VERY IMPORTANT TO LEARN YOUR HERITAGE LANGUAGE AND CULTURE BECAUSE IT REALLY HELPS YOU TO CONNECT TO AND COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR GRANDPARENTS WHO CANNOT SPEAK ENGLISH. ALSO IT HELPS KEEP THE LANGUAGE, CULTURE AND HISTORY ALIVE.”
—Gay Ka Mwee

Schools need to clearly send home the message that multilingualism through sustaining heritage or home languages is valuable and that schools will work in partnership with families to develop and strengthen their home language.

We close this section by returning more fundamentally to the question of why heritage language matters. Ultimately, the devaluing of native language acquisition or multilingualism in our educational institutions means that students of color often internalize racism and, as a result, don’t see their own language as worth being fluent in.⁴⁰ At the same time, when white monolingual students learn a second language they are celebrated for being bilingual. These fundamental beliefs and policies are harmful to all Americans and perpetuate the deficit mindset that prevents multilingual students from reaching their full potential—and weakens America’s standing in the global community.

Dr. Nathan Pope uncovered many personal stories of identity crisis that Hmong parents reported due to their own educational experience or that of their children. The lack of Hmong language instruction and overall school environments pressured them to reject their Hmong culture.³⁸

Dr. Xong Xiong states that the majority of the Hmong elders rely exclusively on their oral culture and tradition. Traditionally-raised Hmong children are still taught through the oral traditions, learning to read and write Hmong only later in life.³⁹

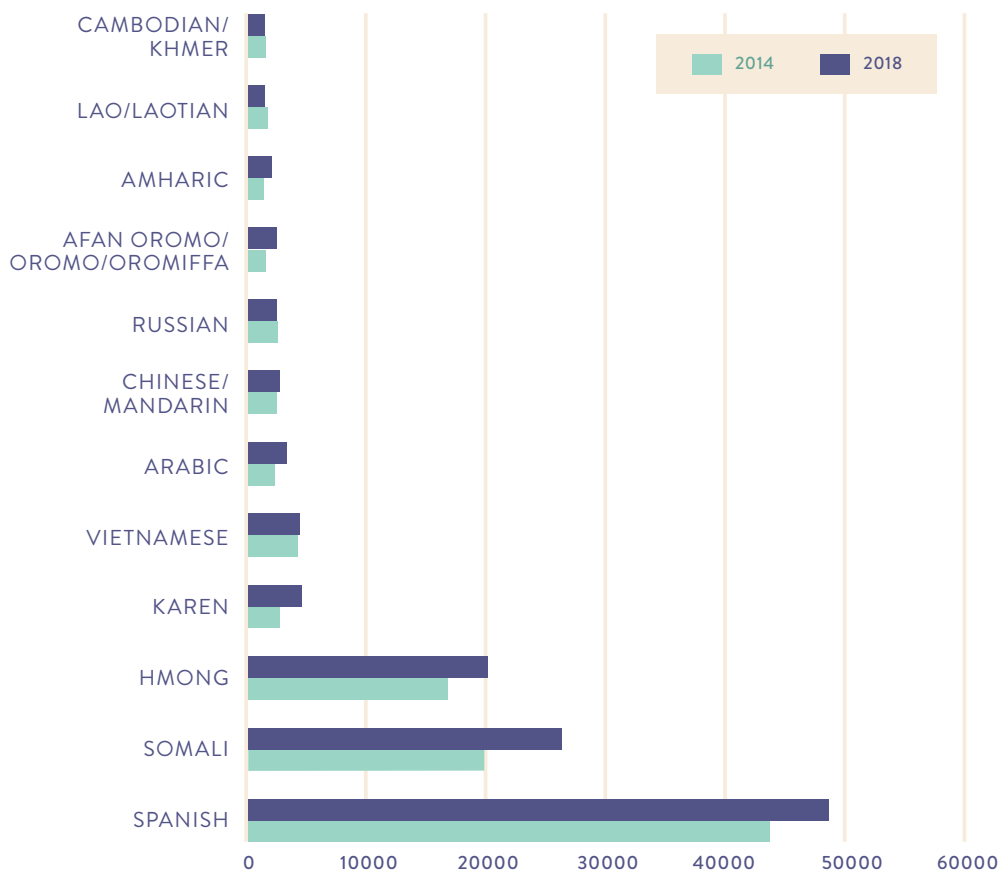
Disaggregating Data Highlights the Asian Academic Achievement Gap

Minnesota is known for churning out high-performing students. In comparison to other states, Minnesota has higher test scores, graduation rates, and overall college readiness indicators.⁴¹ Yet, Minnesota has the highest academic disparity gaps between nonwhite and white students, and between multilingual students of color and English-dominant students (particularly white students). Furthermore, disparities exist among different ethnicities within racial groups.

MINNESOTA'S DIVERSE ASIAN AMERICAN AND DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNER COMMUNITIES

Gaps among ethnicities are particularly important to be mindful of because Minnesota is home to more than 40 Asian cultural or ethnic communities. These communities are complex, diverse, and with unique sets of assets and challenges. About 50% of Minnesota's Asian population are Southeast Asian Americans who are refugees or descendants of refugees from Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam. Hmong represent 31% of Minnesota's Asian population.

CHART 1.
Most primary home languages have seen increase in student counts⁴⁶



Asian American students, for example, must deal with the misconception that Asian American communities are “all the same” and with the “model minority” myth, which encourages the belief that all Asian American communities are doing well. In fact, while the data show that the Asian student population is doing well overall relative to white (non-Latino) students,⁴² disaggregating the data reveals this isn’t the case for all Asian ethnicities.

For instance, in 2018, Minnesota’s average ACT score for all students was a 21.3 (out of 36 possible),⁴³ higher than the national average score of 20.8.⁴⁴ The average ACT score for Asian students was 20.5 but for Hmong students at Minneapolis and St. Paul public schools the average scores were 17 and 18 respectively.⁴⁵ Unfortunately, neither the U.S. nor Minnesota Department of Education collect data beyond the aggregate label of “Asian”, therefore data for specific ethnic communities is not available across the state.

Incomplete data leads to misunderstandings about who Asian Americans and other ethnic groups are, what unique needs exist, and what community assets may be uplifted to solve community challenges. Data disaggregation should be conducted to give accurate information about diverse groups as we work toward racial equity in Minnesota.

Minnesota’s Dual Language Learners (DLL) comprise 21% of children from birth to age 8.⁴⁷ Since 2000, this has grown 77% compared to 24% nationally. Asian (28%) students make up the second largest population of DLLs after Hispanic (31.5% in the state). Despite this growing community very little research has been done on this population and the benefits of heritage language.

TABLE 1.

Total dual language learners nationwide and in Minnesota ⁴⁸

	U.S.	MINNESOTA
TOTAL DLL POPULATION	4,929,989	78,858
SPANISH	76.5% (3,770,816)	40.4% (29,854)
HMONG	0.8% (39,860)	17.5% (12,948)
SOMALI	0.7% (37,371)	17.1% (12,616)
KAREN LANGUAGES	0.3% (12,607)	3.9% (2,913)
VIETNAMESE	1.8% (89,705)	2.5% (1,854)

English language proficiency varies greatly among Asian ethnic groups. This is important given its impact on communities’ academic achievement, independent living abilities, and psychological well-being.⁴⁹ In aggregate, the foreign-born Asian American population has higher levels of English proficiency, educational attainment, and employment. 34% of foreign-born residents hold a BA or higher. Taiwanese, Pakistani, and Asian Indians have the largest proportions of people with a graduate or professional degree and paired with high English proficiency levels.⁵⁰ This is largely a result of U.S. work visa programs focused on recruiting highly skilled and highly educated groups already English proficient. In Pakistan, nearly half the population leaves school with a command of English.⁵¹ In India, English is listed as the second official language.⁵²

For Southeast Asians the story is very different. More than half of Hmong, Vietnamese, and Cambodian populations have a high school diploma or less. 39% of Hmong respondents reported that they speak English “less than very well”, limiting opportunities for employment and economic success, 91% of Hmong households speak a language other than English at home,⁵³ and less than half of Hmong adults have an education beyond high school. Adult English language learners whose education has been interrupted may hold a wealth of experiences and oral skills in their native language, but may have limited literacy in their native language. A limited native language literacy could affect their English language development.⁵⁴

State and Federal Policies that Support Heritage Language

We are fortunate in Minnesota to have policies that support heritage language programs. Various provisions have required the disaggregation of data, specific measurement of multilingual English learner's academic progress, and support for heritage language programs. We now have data that shows great need, and are building a foundation to better support and strengthen heritage language programs across the state.

ALL KIDS COUNT ACT

In 2016, CAAL led a coalition of more than 30 organizations to pass the All Kids Count Act, historic legislation that requires the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) to disaggregate student data along lines of race and ethnicity, English language ability, foster care status, military family status, gender, low-income status, and disability. Minnesota parents now have the option to provide their child's ethnicity by completing the Racial and Ethnic Demographic Designation Form,⁵⁵ which includes seven of the most populous Asian and Pacific Islander groups; three of the most populous Native groups; seven of the most populous Hispanic and Latino groups; and five of the most populous Black and African Heritage groups. The act also requires districts and the state to provide cross-tabulated data on the most populous intersecting groups. Through disaggregation of data, educators and policymakers can make more informed decisions and equitably allocate resources to ensure every student has access to a quality education.

EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT (ESSA)

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), passed in 2015, is the most recent reauthorization of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, designed in part to better serve historically disadvantaged students by providing targeted education funding to states. ESSA now requires states to include progress toward English language proficiency as an indicator in their school accountability systems.⁵⁶

LEARNING FOR ENGLISH ACADEMIC PROFICIENCY AND SUCCESS ACT (LEAPS)

In 2014, the Minnesota State Legislature passed the Learning for English Academic Proficiency and Success Act (LEAPS) which has been described as a comprehensive bill embedded in 42 statutes.⁵⁷ The LEAPS Act supports the academic success of the state's growing English Learner population by emphasizing bilingualism and multilingualism as an asset and treating language as a right and resource, rather than a problem.⁵⁸

The LEAPS Act establishes bilingual and multilingual seals and world language proficiency certificates upon graduation. MDE has developed native language assessments for districts to award certificates to any student who has demonstrated proficiency in languages other than English, including American Sign Language (ASL) and Indigenous languages. The Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system will award college credit to enrolling students with certificates, within three academic years of high school graduation.⁵⁹

The LEAPS Act also adds the acquisition of academic native language literacy to required reporting on performance measures in all Minnesota schools. MDE monitors which languages are spoken across the state. Schools should use this information to develop rigorous literacy instruction through native languages so that all students have access to meaningful academic content.

Heritage Language Programs That Are Leading This Work

Fortunately, there are many examples of strong heritage language programs nationally and in Minnesota that we can look to for lessons and inspiration. Each program is at a different place along their journey, but has distinguished itself as a special program—designed by and with the community—to serve the needs of students who feel otherwise unseen in traditional programs.

Minnesota also has a very strong tradition of immersion education for English speakers. The objective now should be to harness that expertise, and the research findings that demonstrate the benefit of multilingualism, to grow heritage language education in ways that fully support heritage language learners and close the achievement gap.

For this section, we have invited educators from each of the programs to share with us the history of their programs, what they look like, and how they measure success.

BDOTE LEARNING CENTER

MINNEAPOLIS, MN, GRADES K - 8

Founded in 2014, Bdote Learning Center focuses on Dakota and Ojibwe languages. Their pedagogical model combines language immersion, place-based education, and restorative justice—elements Bdote believes are at the heart of Dakota and Ojibwe life in Minnesota.

Immersion* classrooms involve language-proficient teachers engaging in social interactions and academic instruction in the language, compelling students to move toward language acquisition at their own pace. Place-based education is rooted in the history, environment, and culture of a school's broader community—taking students out of the school building and connecting them with that community. Restorative justice is a principle of behavior management that seeks not to punish but to repair harm.

Bdote aims to engage not only with students, but with their families and other community members. It was created out of a need for language restoration and as a way to engage Native students that felt lost in schools that did not reflect their identities. The founding Board of Directors envisioned a school that honors and incorporates the Dakota and Ojibwe cultures and languages.

EL COLEGIO HIGH SCHOOL

MINNEAPOLIS, MN, GRADES 9 - 12

Since its inception in 2000, El Colegio High School has held heritage language classes as a key pillar of their academic vision. They assert students' ancestry and culture as an asset, despite what messaging they may have received in the past—offering a holistic, student-centered education that poises graduates for entry into a global workforce.

El Colegio's language program leans heavily toward Spanish, with most of the student body identifying Spanish as their heritage language. Core and elective Spanish courses provide students opportunities to engage with higher level academic content in their heritage language while building and maintaining fluency.

* Immersion programs are defined as programs that offer instruction through the immersion language for at least 50 percent of the school day during the pre-school and elementary years and offer a minimum of two content areas taught through the immersion language in middle and secondary continuation programs.

While El Colegio’s program leans heavily toward Spanish, many students identify as Native American or as a member of a Central or South American indigenous group. The school assists students in learning these indigenous languages (such as Nahautl, Sauk, Dakota, Ojibwe, Mopan, Tzotzil, K’iche, and Mam) to explore their identity and reinvigorate the language while growing a more profound connection to their own ancestry.

Student retention rates have increased since the beginning of the program, as have graduation rates. In 2016, 100% of the graduating class was accepted into one or more post-secondary institutions. Faculty from local colleges and universities have shared that El Colegio graduates in their courses exhibit more socio-emotional maturity, participation in class discussions, and engagement in the coursework in general compared to many of their classmates. While as a small school El Colegio does not have the resources to conduct a comprehensive program evaluation, feedback from colleagues, the community, and students are strong indicators of this program’s success.

JACKSON PREPARATORY MAGNET SCHOOL

ST PAUL, MN, GRADES PRE-K - 4

Established in 2006, Jackson Preparatory Magnet School’s Hmong Dual Language Program was the first of its kind. The program provides one classroom at each grade level with a mission to develop students to become bilingual, biliterate, and bicultural through a two-way immersion, 90/10 model—wherein 90% of instruction is in Hmong and 10% is in English. At each grade level the percentage of English increases.

Each classroom is taught by a licensed Hmong bilingual teacher. Instruction in all core subject areas (reading, writing, and math) is taught only in Hmong in Pre-K through first grade. Additionally, a portion of the day is dedicated to English language development. The dual language program begins Hmong literacy instruction for students in Pre-K to first grade and adds formal English instruction in second grade. In third and fourth grade, students continue to receive instruction in both languages in all core subjects. Specialist classes such as science, music, and physical education are taught in English.

PARK CENTER IB HIGH SCHOOL

BROOKLYN PARK, MN, GRADES 9 - 12

In close partnership with students and the community, long time educators Pang Yang and Sydney Chang created the Heritage Hmong language course—a student-centered world language course at Park Center Senior High School that incorporates social justice, reading, writing, visual art, poetry, photography, and history. Ms. Yang received the Minnesota Council on the Teaching of Languages and Cultures 2019 Teacher of the Year Award.

The course was borne out of a student initiative,* with a half-dozen Hmong students organizing meetings with parents, students, school board members, and school department heads from Osseo Area Schools to share the need for more programs to support the district’s Hmong student population. They expressed the need for students to discover who they are and develop their identity, language, and culture.

The course is open to speakers of all levels and is a space where students can innovate, problem solve, and above all develop a sense of self efficacy, student ownership, and agency. Students—mostly native speakers who have been designated English learners their whole time in school—receive bilingual seals and college credit through the course. The course is also a space for community members to share their time and expertise around Hmong culture.

* For more background, see: <https://www.educationevolving.org/blog/2019/10/hmong-for-native-speakers>

PHALEN LAKE HMONG STUDIES MAGNET

ST. PAUL, MN, GRADES PRE-K - 6

In 2004, Phalen Lake was designated a Transitional Language Center, receiving 100-150 “new to the country” Hmong refugee students from Thailand and substantially increasing the school’s Hmong population. Hmong families demanded more Hmong culture and history in the curriculum. By 2008, Phalen Lake became a regional magnet with a focus on Hmong Studies, where all students have a well-rounded understanding of Hmong community, history, and contributions to Minnesota and the United States.

But Hmong language courses remained available only as elective courses. Parents asked for more Hmong language learning at the same time that many EL students were showing stagnant academic growth in English. In 2011, the Hmong Dual Language (HDL) program began with one kindergarten class using the two-way immersion model—a research-grounded best practice for bilingual students to maintain their heritage language and acquire English while achieving higher levels of academic success.

Efforts to better align the HDL program include building a strong articulation of Hmong language programs through middle and high school so students can maintain and deepen their language proficiency, and working across schools, districts, and states to share effective practices in teaching the Hmong language in an immersion setting.

VANG PAO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

FRESNO, CA, GRADES K - 6

Elders and leaders from the Hmong community approached Fresno County school districts in 2015 expressing a deep desire for revitalization and nurturing of the Hmong language and culture for their children. Fresno Unified School District launched its first elementary Hmong Dual Language Immersion (DLI) program at Vang Pao Elementary in 2018.

Success indicators for their DLI program are that students achieve grade level success in Hmong and English, develop language proficiencies in two languages, and deepen cross-cultural competencies. Vang Pao’s goal is to expand to middle school and collaborate with the local university to develop a PK-university Hmong DLI pathway. Fresno Unified continues to expand its DLI sites for both Spanish and Hmong.

Local assessment results reveal Hmong students in both the elementary and secondary program outperform their counterparts not enrolled in the Hmong language program. Fresno Unified has formed a task force with diverse stakeholders, including parents and community members, to create its first Dual Language Immersion Master Plan to ensure half of graduating seniors become proficient in two or more languages and earn the State Seal of Bilingualism by 2030.



Challenges Facing Heritage Languages

In the previous section, we saw the power that community and student leadership have to transform children's educational experiences. In all of the above examples, families and communities played a foundational role in heritage language reclamation.

Educators also took bold steps toward heritage language reclamation and forged new pathways to provide culturally appropriate and authentic teaching practices. While some teachers feel supported by their school communities, many teachers are confronted with systemic challenges. These challenges include things like low support from colleagues and administrators, limited professional development opportunities for teachers, and an overall lack of systematic support for heritage languages.

In this section, we highlight what practitioners from the June 2019 heritage language summit hosted by CAAL, and stakeholders who helped advise this paper, shared as their most common challenges.

LACK OF MATERIALS

There are a number of factors involved in successful heritage language classroom instruction. It requires teachers to be highly trained in the content, hold strong connections to the community, and have the ability to connect multilingual learners with their heritage community. Heritage language teachers must also consider intercultural factors and personalize learning with learner-centered⁶⁰ and differentiated instruction.^{61 62 63}

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I THINK HMONG PEOPLE OR ASIAN AMERICAN PEOPLE SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN TEXTBOOKS. I FEEL WE ARE NOT INCLUDED ENOUGH IN THERE, EVEN THOUGH WE ARE IN AMERICA.

—Annie

And their work is cut out for them. Unlike some language programs, where instructional materials are readily available, for a number of heritage languages (including Hmong, Somali, Vietnamese, Oromo, and Karen), there is a lack of materials, curriculum, activities, and written texts available. This means that teachers often spend significant amounts of time, on and off the clock, to develop materials from scratch. One positive result is teachers often end up establishing connections with community experts and elders who can help fill in this gap via stories, expertise, and knowledge. In order to build culture- and language-specific curriculum, teachers need to form learning communities, so their work and efforts are not done in isolation. Shared successful practices can come from these partnerships and help to build stronger programs. But ultimately, the need to design, develop, and implement is exhausting for heritage language teachers.

For a number of reasons, Hmong teachers struggle with unique challenges regarding materials. First, much of Hmong history is up for debate.⁶⁴ Until the 1950s,⁶⁵ transmission of Hmong culture, language, and history primarily occurred through oral tradition.⁶⁶ Christian missionaries, European colonizers, and others outside Hmong culture attempted to create written records. The results were limited and insufficient, due mainly to their own biases, agendas, and writing systems. Second, for more than 15 years during the Vietnam war, families were frequently on the move to avoid getting injured or killed, resulting in constant disruptions to learning and limited educational opportunities for Hmong children. The war era allowed no time for the development of Hmong educational materials. Even before the war, only a small number of affluent Hmong families could afford to attend schools—and instruction was delivered in Lao, the state's official language.⁶⁷

Teachers expressed interest in shared, open databases of curricular resources, co-created and moderated by teachers. They said they want to share lesson plans, curriculums, and other classroom resources across districts, but are blocked by district intellectual property policies. This is particularly frustrating because many of the resources were generated as a result of community involvement and educators' established networks, and created beyond teachers' typical work days. Additionally, the notion that schools and districts can assert ownership of the knowledge, culture, languages, and experiences intricately woven into culturally responsive pedagogy is untenable. Such a notion underscores the Western value of individualism, and is fundamentally incongruent with the value of interdependence and collectivism present in the Asian and African cultures represented by many heritage language programs. Attempts to monetize knowledge and language never owned by schools and districts ultimately hurts students, contributing to the deep inequity experienced by communities who speak lesser known languages.

“OUR FIRST YEAR AS A HMONG STUDIES MAGNET [BEGAN] WITH PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT BY EXPERTS FROM THE COMMUNITY. [WE TALKED] ABOUT DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF HMONG CULTURE AND COMMUNITY FROM DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES... YOU COULD HEAR A PIN DROP. IT WAS EXTRAORDINARY.

—Catherine Rich, Principal,
Phalen Lake Hmong Studies Magnet⁶⁸

NO PATHWAYS TO FULL TEACHER LICENSURE

Successful heritage language instruction must include highly qualified teachers who reflect the student population. Children need to see educators who look and talk like them. They should be highly trained with native-like fluency, not only in their content but also in cultural competency.⁶⁹ Currently, there are no preparation programs in Minnesota that license teachers to teach less commonly taught languages, like Hmong, Somali, or Vietnamese. The lack of pathways to licensure deprives heritage language teachers of full professional licensure. Teachers who wish to teach heritage language courses have to apply to the Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board (PELSB) through a time-consuming and complicated portfolio process, or apply and re-apply for temporary licensure through special variances, programs, or waivers.⁷⁰

“ALL THE TEACHERS IN MY PRIMARY SCHOOL YEARS WERE BASICALLY WHITE. THERE WAS ALMOST NO REPRESENTATION OF PEOPLE OF COLOR... I REALIZED THAT PART OF THE REASON WHY I HATED THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM WAS BECAUSE I NEVER WENT TO SCHOOL WITH PEOPLE WHO LOOKED LIKE ME AT ALL OR SPOKE THE LANGUAGES THAT I SPOKE.

—Diamond

WE NEED MORE TEACHERS FROM DIFFERENT CULTURES...THE HIGH SCHOOL THAT I WENT TO, THERE WERE A LOT OF HMONG AND KAREN STUDENTS. HOWEVER, THE TEACHERS—MOST OF THEM ARE FROM THE DOMINANT GROUP. IT WAS HARDER FOR THE STUDENTS TO LEARN, BE INSPIRED, BE ENCOURAGED, AND TO MOVE FORWARD.

—Annie

The repeated need to seek variances leaves teachers and administrators with feelings of perpetual insecurity in the licensure assignment they hold. One Hmong language teacher stated that it also leaves other teachers feeling like Hmong teachers are not qualified to teach due to licensure issues. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, without access to teacher preparation programs or professional development opportunities specific to the heritage languages they teach, teachers don't have the opportunity to develop skills unique to heritage languages generally or to the specific languages they teach.

Schools, districts, unions, and teacher preparation institutions must show they value and respect heritage language teachers by prioritizing teacher recruitment that will increase the pool of diverse teachers.⁷¹ This includes improving pathways to full licensure, creating a welcoming space for heritage language teachers to the teaching profession, and unions holding districts accountable for supporting teacher licensures.

COURSES NOT RESPECTED OR PUBLICIZED

Several heritage language course offerings have disappeared in large part due to low enrollment. Without full enrollment, school and district administrators say it's difficult to justify the staff allocation to teach heritage language courses. This pressure is intensified in times of budget constraints when administrators are looking for areas to trim.

“

I FEEL LIKE ASIAN AMERICAN HISTORY SHOULD BE LIKE A CORE CLASS. BECAUSE IF U.S. HISTORY IS A CORE CLASS AND OTHER CLASSES ARE CORE CLASSES WHY CAN'T ASIAN AMERICAN HISTORY BE A CORE CLASS?

—Annie

The lack of information presented about or validity granted to heritage language courses is another compounding factor. School administrators and other teachers in a school may be reluctant to actively promote heritage language courses. We heard educators express concern that their colleagues may fear losing students to heritage courses, which would result in less job security. Even though the mainstream classroom settings leave little to no opportunity for Hmong students to learn about their history,⁷² students may be counseled to consider other world language courses or other electives. Overall, the culture of some schools and the tone set by leadership doesn't truly recognize and lift up heritage language courses as critical offerings in the school—offerings that all students would benefit from.

The challenge is compounded for parents and their children as they struggle deciding whether to prioritize enrolling in schools that provide dual language programs or schools with English-only classes. People who have lost their first language understand why it is important to preserve their heritage language; at the same time their children feel societal pressure to assimilate.



ELECTIVE COURSES ARE VULNERABLE COURSES

The problem of low course enrollment described above is exacerbated by high school credits that are (or are not) made available through heritage language courses. Even though the content covered in heritage language courses often covers topics and standards from social studies, language arts, and even science, high school catalogs code these courses as “electives.” As described above, in times of financial stress, heritage language courses may be especially vulnerable to cuts as districts often look first to cut elective courses.

“ I WENT TO NOBLE ACADEMY FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL [AND] IT WAS REQUIRED FOR YOU TO TAKE A HMONG CULTURE AND HMONG LANGUAGE CLASS THERE. AS I TRANSITIONED TO HIGH SCHOOL WE ALL HAD ONE HMONG CLASS. IT WAS AN OPTION—IT WASN'T A CORE CLASS AND NOT EVERYONE WAS REQUIRED TO TAKE IT.

—Annie

WESTERN EDUCATION AT ODDS WITH ORAL LANGUAGE TRADITIONS

An overarching challenge related to all of the above is that many heritage languages, including Native American languages, are oral language traditions. This is fundamentally at odds with elements of Western education, which has historically imposed one-language classroom experiences.⁷³ Educational experiences that we take for granted, such as texts, written assessments, even linearly drafted course syllabi are structures and systems centered within the dominant language—which is attached to power, access, and opportunity favoring the dominant group.⁷⁴ Heritage language curriculum and instruction challenge Western assumptions of what constitutes a “course”.

In her thesis paper, Dr. Xong Xiong noted that “Western liberalism postulates that in order for something to be true and valid it has to be written down. Western liberalism believes that documentation in ink is essential for it to be “valid” knowledge and therefore it is empirically sound. Such a view illegitimizes Indigenous knowledge.”⁷⁵ Hmong American writers have urged Hmong people to start writing and telling their own stories from their perspective, thereby creating their own image of themselves. When they do not do this, others write their stories for them, and they are in danger of accepting the images others have painted of them.⁷⁶

“ AS ADVOCATES AND EXPERTS OF OUR OWN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE, WE HAVE TO PUSH BACK. KNOWLEDGE DOES NOT JUST LIE IN BOOKS AND PRINTED MATERIALS. IT LIES IN OUR ELDERS, IN OUR COMMUNITY, IN OUR COLLECTIVE WEALTH. WE NEED TO GO OUT TO OUR COMMUNITY AND BRING THIS KNOWLEDGE INTO OUR CLASSROOMS. AS TEACHERS, WE NEED TO UNLEARN SOME THINGS AND BRING OUR CULTURE INTO THE SCHOOL SYSTEM.

—May Lee Xiong,
CAAL Summit Panelist

Using Our Collective Power for Heritage Language Reclamation in Schools

Every child has a basic right to a meaningful education. As Minnesota continues to grow in its diversity and our world continues to be ever more connected, we must adapt to support the success of every student. We must move away from the position that diversity is a “problem to solve for” in education. Rather, education systems and policies must shift how they view heritage language instruction as a way to embrace students’ full range of racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds in our schools.

“IT REALLY HELPED ME TO CONNECT TO OTHERS IN MY COMMUNITY. ALSO IT WOULD HELP ME FOR MY FUTURE CAREER BECAUSE IT WILL GIVE ME AN ADVANTAGE AND BENEFITS.

—Kayleigh

The programs featured in this paper underscore the power that families and communities hold to initiate systems change. Quality education cannot make students feel they must reject their culture and heritage language in order to succeed, and schools can no longer play a part in separating the bonds between communities and families and students. Heritage language programs are an asset-based way to help strengthen these bonds—and offer more opportunity for family leadership and involvement in their child’s education.

Heritage language programs build upon the 21st century workforce skills most valued by employers in our changing workforce such as flexible thinking, executive function, problem solving, and cultural competency—giving multilingual speakers advantages in college and the workforce. Schools must see multilingualism as an asset, and not a threat to learning English or acculturation into American society.

At the heart of heritage language reclamation is the desire for decolonization and liberation. Colonized education that institutionalized racism and white supremacy in American education strips students of color of their cultural identity and self-worth. Destroying a child’s language disrupts their relationships with parents, grandparents, and their heritage community—and perpetuates appalling academic disparities for students of color.

Through heritage language reclamation, we have the collective power to shift the tide and reimagine student-centered, equitable education that prepares all students for their global futures.

We have created a series of **Calls to Action** to help you advocate for heritage language programs from your respective lens. They can be found at educationevolving.org/heritage-languages or caalmn.org/community/education.

The Calls to Action are for:

- Students
- Families & Community Leaders
- Teachers
- School & Districts
- Legislators
- Teacher Preparation Programs & Higher Education Institutions
- Minnesota Department of Education & PELSB





we carry our resilience
on our tongues,
our spoken language
continues to survive
through wars and genocides,
across jungles and rivers
even after it has been stripped away
by those claiming to help us on the other side

—Mai Neng Vang

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