

Road map for school readiness in the Hmong Community.

A FIVE-YEAR PLAN



Ready 4 K

OUR VISION

Every Hmong child in Minnesota will enter kindergarten encouraged, supported and fully prepared for learning success.



An initiative of Ready4K Hmong Project led by
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and

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Scott Parker, Minnesota Child Care Resource and Referral Network; Jackie Felt, Linda Weber
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Nai Christopher Lo, Hmong Culture Center; Bauz Lyfoung Nengchu, State of Minnesota Office of
Ombudsperson for Families; Tamar Ghidalia, Hmong American Partnership;

and

Hmong educators, daycare providers, community leaders and parents.

The Hmong community faces unique challenges



Minnesota is home to approximately one quarter of the nation's Hmong population and St. Paul is home to the largest Hmong population in Minnesota. Nevertheless the majority of Hmong are concentrated in poor neighborhoods and face grave socioeconomic and educational challenges.

In St. Paul, 86 percent of Hmong students qualify for free or reduced meals, compared to other Asian (76 percent) and Caucasian American students (66 percent). Studies show that Hmong pre-kindergarten children scored significantly lower on most of the standardized tests compared to Caucasians, and other ethnic minority students. A similar gap exists at the high school level. Further, only 45 percent of Hmong adults have a high school diploma compared to 93 percent of Caucasian adults in the Twin Cities.

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The Hmong community is deeply concerned and wants to reverse this trend. In October 2009, the 4th Annual Hmong Early Childhood Summit was attended by over 50 educators, daycare providers, parents, professionals and community leaders of the Hmong community that came together to discuss priorities and solutions critical to Hmong children's school readiness. This group identified priority issues and suggested steps to reverse the downward educational trend.



PRIORITY ISSUE 1:

Supporting Parents to Involve Them in Their Children's Lives

Situation: *Although education is highly valued in Hmong families, we are deeply concerned about parents' involvement in their young children's lives. Multiple priorities compete for their attention each day. While trying to be good Hmong citizens by serving the community at funerals, weddings and spiritual ceremonies, they are also trying to meet their daily demands at work to provide for their families. Children become secondary to kin responsibilities, social and cultural events and jobs. The result is that too few parents put children first, especially young children, birth to five years old.*

Steps to a Solution

AT THE FAMILY LEVEL

1. *Improve knowledge and awareness of early childhood development and standards.* To some extent early childhood development and standards are new and even foreign to Hmong parents, especially those belonging to the first generation. Many parents believe that children naturally learn what they need to know as they grow. As a result, parents take for granted how they communicate and what is appropriate. For example, some parents unintentionally use terms like "stupid" (niag ruam), "fatty" (niag rog) or "slut" (niag phem) to relate to or discipline children. Others use television to babysit young children without realizing the impact of shows like "Power Rangers" and "Family Guy." We learned that many parents are unaware that standards exist (e.g., the Minnesota Early Childhood Indicators of Progress) to facilitate development and school readiness.

SOLUTIONS:

- Empower parents to become involved in the discussion of standards and curricula for young children.
- Encourage parents to create support and network groups to share ideas and push for change.

2. *Change parents' attitudes and behaviors toward young children, especially birth to five years old.* Some Hmong parents believe that their children—birth to five years old—are too young to learn. They believe the children should be loved, cared for and protected, but learning the alphabet, shapes, numbers, and self-care should come later when they are "ready." The interaction of this belief and hurried lives push parents away from the child's circle.

SOLUTIONS:

- Educate Hmong parents about parent-child interaction and brain development in the early years.
- Retain active parents as ambassadors or coaches to support parents who put children first.
- Encourage parents to take advantage of child development education and evidence-based parenting practices.



3. *Strengthen the family, friend and neighbor (FFN) parenting repertoire, especially grandparents.* FFN plays a significant role in the early care and education of Hmong children. Over 70 percent of the Hmong pre-kindergarten children receive FFN care. Yet, without resources to support their work, grandparents face tremendous mental health issues (e.g., isolation and loneliness). Their ability to involve young children in a variety of activities to get them ready for school is limited.

SOLUTIONS:

- Campaign to change parents' attitudes toward pre-kindergarten children so grandparents do not bear all the parenting responsibility.
- Develop culturally and linguistically educational activities for grandparents and young children.
- Develop opportunities for grandparents and their peers.

AT THE COMMUNITY LEVEL

1. *Change community norms about young children.* The current norm about working with young children is "babysitting" versus "educating." Babysitting implies a superficial interaction without intended outcomes, compared to the intentional teaching and learning opportunities inherent in educating children.

SOLUTION:

Involve various community leaders (clan leaders, spiritual leaders and professionals) so they have an active role in the planning, engagement and implementation stages of changing this community norm.

2. *Make standards and other resources accessible to parents.* Cultural and structural barriers are holding Hmong parents back from helping their children to be ready to learn and to be successful.

SOLUTIONS:

- Involve parents in community parenting programs.
- Ensure parents know standards exist.
- Make programs accessible in the language parents understand.

3. *Connect parents to existing parenting programs.* The number of Hmong parents participating in Early Childhood Family Education classes and other parenting programs is increasing. But participants stated that "there are wonderful programs in the community to help improve parent-child relationships but Hmong parents are not aware of them."

SOLUTIONS:

- Encourage Hmong parents to attend classes and acquire new knowledge.
- Encourage Hmong parents to share their knowledge with other parents.
- Train and support a group of "salesperson-like paraprofessionals" to market existing programs to parents in the Hmong community (e.g., brief home visits to all eligible families, education fairs, educational clinics during the Hmong New Year and Fourth of July Soccer Tournament).
- Hire more Hmong home visitors to deliver the needed knowledge to parents at a place or time when parents are free of worry and able to learn.

4. *Educate and empower parents to be politically savvy.* In the St. Paul Public Schools, Hmong children represent the largest proportion of the student population at the pre-kindergarten level.

SOLUTION:

Educate and empower Hmong parents to exercise their political power. This will go a long way toward improving children's education. One participant stated, "We need to raise Hmong consciousness from being passive recipients of help to being active citizens participating in the creation and co-creation of solutions. Another participant said, "Push Hmong interests! Don't wait for non-Hmong to do it for us."

PRIORITY ISSUE 2:

Supporting Hmong Parents to Provide High Quality Home Environments for Young Children

Situation: Research shows that there is a positive relationship between the quality of the home environment and children's development, including school readiness. The lack of a quality home environment compounds the disadvantages of being new to the country and poor. Members of the community stated that Hmong children often do not have appropriate space, routines or technology at home. They are more likely to be "babysat" by television under the care of their grandparents, older siblings or other relatives. In many of these homes, children are less likely to access to age-appropriate materials. The adults or surrogate parents have no resources to compensate for what is missing.

Steps to a Solution

AT THE FAMILY LEVEL

1. Work with parents to define standards of quality home environments for Hmong families. Hmong are not monolithic; they are diverse in generation, acculturation, education, religion and class. What is considered quality to one may not be quality to another.

SOLUTION:

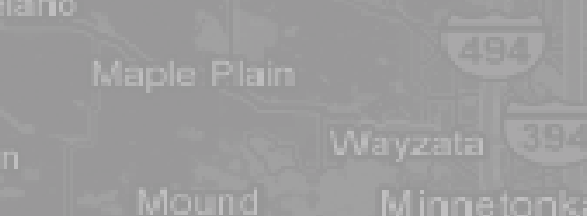
Work within the Hmong community to define what the standards of quality home environments look like, what the community says about these standards, and how to go about implementing the standards.

2. Help parents understand the connection between a quality home environment and children's learning and development.

SOLUTIONS:

- Develop a media campaign targeting parents of newborns.
- Create and develop incentives for parents to access and participate in existing parent education programs.
- Expand home-visiting services to train more Hmong parents as coaches to deliver the education.





AT THE COMMUNITY LEVEL

1. Work with families and other institutions to translate the standards into action plans.

SOLUTION

- Produce videos that distinguish among various types of home environments to explain how they impact children’s learning.
 - Distribute the materials widely to Hmong families.
2. Develop “parents as coaches” programs to train kin-based parents. The coaches will work with parents to improve the home environment and enhance children’s learning opportunities. It is acknowledged that penetrating Hmong families with trained professionals has been a challenge. Hmong families are more likely to trust and be receptive to their kin (kvw tij). Kin helping kin also protects families from the potential of shame from feeling inadequate.

SOLUTIONS:

- Parents selected and trained to serve as coaches can strengthen home environments.
 - Coaches can work collaboratively with parents to assess and structure time and space for education to occur and to create innovative incentives for children at home.
 - Coaches can create language-appropriate educational videos that teach parents to assess their own home environments.
 - Videos should be distributed without cost to the Hmong community.
3. Involve the Hmong 18 Council and church leaders in drafting recommended standards for improving the home environment to support children’s development. A similar recommendation on bride price has been developed and successfully implemented in the Hmong community.

SOLUTION:

Engage the Hmong 18 Council to help change parents’ attitudes and behaviors about the value of education for young children.



PRIORITY ISSUE 3:

Supporting the Development and Application of Testing and Measurements

Situation: Testing and measurements are an emerging concern in the Hmong community. Participants stated that most of the standardized tests given at the pre-kindergarten level have not been tested with Hmong students, nor were they translated into Hmong. Administration is also a troubling issue. The tests were administered in English only, without using staff proficient in Hmong. Given what is known about the current state of testing and measurements, Hmong community members are asking questions like: "Why should our children meet the target performance at this early age when English is their second language?" and "How can our children relate to a test designed for mainstream American children?" and "Are our children really falling behind or is it something else?"

Steps to a Solution:

AT THE FAMILY LEVEL

1. Educate parents about the importance of testing and measurements. Most tests and measurements at the pre-kindergarten level (for example, Ages and Stages Questionnaire®, or ASQ) are designed to assess children developmentally and cognitively to inform parents and educators about the children's strengths and weaknesses; however, most parents are unaware of this.

SOLUTION:

Educate parents about the purpose of the tests to strengthen parenting practices.

2. Empower parents to be more active, vocal and critical about the type of tests educational institutions adopt. It will take time and education for parents to understand the purpose of the testing.

SOLUTION:

Work with parents to advocate for a fair and equitable process of test administration.

AT THE COMMUNITY LEVEL

1. Work with educational institutions to ensure Hmong staff are part of the testing and measurement team.

SOLUTIONS:

- Hold educational institutions accountable to ensure all testing and measurements are equitable and fair, especially to Hmong students.
- Leverage more resources to:
 - Translate tests and measurements that educational institutions have adopted to ensure all students have a fair chance of performing.
 - Test existing tests and measurements at the institutional level to ensure the tests are reliable and valid for Hmong children.
 - Develop new tests and measurements if current tests and measurements are biased, skewed or lack validity.

BRIEF SUMMARY

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