

**The Impact of Hmong in the Era of School Choice:
The Hmong in Minneapolis-St. Paul and the Charter School Movement**

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Abbreviations

ACORN	Association of Community Organization for Reform
ACTS	Asians Together Community Service
CPA	Community of Peace Academy
ELL	English Language Learners
ESL	English as a Second Language
HPO	Hmong Parent Organization
HOPE	Hmong Open Partnership in Education
LEP	Limited English Proficiency
PTO	Parent Teacher Organization

Abstract

In 1975, after the US withdrew its troops from Vietnam, the Hmong in Laos who had supported the US fight against the Communist party of Laos, found themselves, yet again, in a struggle to find a new homeland. After the Vietnam War, a significant number of Hmong found refuge in St. Paul, Minnesota, a frigid climate that contrasted the hot and humid weather of Laos. In their new place of residence, the Hmong encountered the US education system and were quick to utilize the opportunity for a free education, something that they did not have access to in Laos. However, in the 1970s and 1980s, the public schools were not adequately equipped to assist the new refugee hopefuls. At the same time, charter schools, a “revolutionary” movement of choice in public education, became the new rhetoric that people thought would revitalize the US’s failing education system. The charter schools that opened in the 1990s and early 2000s attracted the Hmong community of St. Paul. The Hmong enjoyed the parent-teacher-student relationship that choice theory advocated, therefore, the Hmong community engaged in collective action to strengthen the education of their children and ensure they equipped the future generation with Hmong values along with the ability to succeed in their new host country.

Introduction

Four years ago, on July 19, 2012, my second niece Lily was born—an American girl of Hmong and German descent. Her ancestors have moved from their homeland and built communities from scratch. Her German ancestors had left Germany in the 1880s to participate in a flourishing democracy. Shortly after arriving in the US, they realized that their cultural identity was at risk. They built communities to combat this and ensure their children would hold on to their Germanic culture. Much like her German descendants, her grandmother, a teenage Hmong woman during the late 1970s and early 1980s, lived in Laos for the younger portion of her life. She endured the Vietnam War that terrorized her home country of Laos. When the Vietnam War ended in 1975, like many other Hmong, her family gave up their lives in Laos, risked everything, and crossed the Mekong River into Thailand. Her family faced hunger, rough elements, a treacherous communist controlled government, and many other perils that endangered the well being of their livelihood. Her family had to swim across the river and overcome rapids and waterfalls to ensure safety from the communist party of Laos and made a Thailand refugee camp their temporary home. After the US Government had extended the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act in 1976 to involve Laotians, she was then able to migrate to California.¹ After a short time in California, she made the Midwest her new home. Her mother was born in Eau Claire, Wisconsin and is a second generation Hmong. Lily is a part of the third generation.

Lily's grandmother and mother settled in the US during an educational "revolution." The Hmong started to arrive in St. Paul in the 1980s, a time when the National Government had a gloomy outlook for the US education system. In 1983 the National Commission on Excellence in Education presented the report *A Nation At Risk*. This document, prepared by the Reagan

¹ The author is unsure about the exact dates of his niece's grandmother's migration dates, but the overall patterns and places are accurate.

administration, was introduced because of the US government's fear of mediocrity in the schools. They worried the US would continue to decline as a world super power in technology, manufacturing, and other relevant markets—Japan's economic boom threatened the US position as the leading country. The findings in the report were dismal and painted an unfortunate present and future if society did not rebuild the education system:²

We report to the American people that while we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur--others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments.³

The report led to ambitious efforts to find solutions for the so-called “broken” education system. Educators and professionals from all fields were inspired to create a system of equality and college readiness. In a system of equality, all children would have access to a quality education, and in turn, those educated students would ensure the US would remain a dominant core country for generations to come. However, the government was aware that public support and commitment would propel them in the right direction: “People are steadfast in their belief that education is the major foundation for the future strength of this country. They even considered education more important than developing the best industrial system or the strongest military force, perhaps because they understood education as the cornerstone of both.”⁴ This quote from the National Commission on Excellence in Education conveys a positive message of the US peoples' belief that a well-educated youth was essential to a robust and prosperous nation.

² Peter W. Cookson, Jr and Kristina Berger, *Expect Miracles: Charter Schools and the Politics of Hope and Despair* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2002), 30.

³ US Department of Education, *A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Washington, DC, 1983).

⁴ Ibid.

Specifically, the report suggests effective leadership is critical to rework the education system. Some of the tools included were to keep effective teachers despite the diminishing rewards, hold schools to higher standards that would then increase student retention rate, and convince business, individuals, and parents that investments in schools betters the whole community.

Albert Shanker, elected to serve as president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) since 1974, and a New York City leader since 1968, was one educator who responded to *A Nation At Risk*.⁵ At a National Press Club speech in 1988, Shanker stated, “we said that we were willing to talk, we were willing to consider the various recommendations in the reports, and we were willing to negotiate; we were open to discussing changes in our schools.”⁶ Shanker did not deny that the current education system had its flaws, rather he was interested in discussing ways in which educational professionals could restructure the traditional schools. The biggest problem facing public education, according to Shanker, was that schools were one size fit all, and they neglected the differentiated learners. He believed that he had a solution: schools of choice, later to be called charter schools.

Charter schools are public institutions created by a collection of teachers, parents, and community members that come together and brainstorm how to build schools that work for a particular area of expertise or a target population. They are autonomous, with no government control. However, they are required to meet state standards and other outcome goals. With this idea, Shanker believed that charter school proponents should draft a proposal with a layout of how their schools would look, and in turn, redefine the US idea of schooling. He thought that

⁵ Cookson, Jr and Berger, *Expect Miracles*, 32.

⁶ Albert Shanker, “National Press Club Speech” (speech, Washington DC, March 31, 1988), Walter P. Reuther Library-Wayne State University, <https://reuther.wayne.edu/files/64.43.pdf>

schools across America were too similar and the new schools he advocated for would be different.⁷

Finally, Shanker believed parents and teachers should work together for the better of their children's education: "This would be a school of choice; that is, no teacher would be forced to be in this subunit, and neither would any parent be compelled to send a child to this school. It would be a way for parents and teachers to cooperate with each other, to build a new structure."⁸

Shanker anticipated the segregation dispute that some education scholars believe to be a concern in charter schools. From a distance, some perceived charter schools as a new form of segregation, where one group of people were separated from another group for various reasons. However, the schools before *Brown v Board of Education* (1954) practiced forced segregation—they did not have a choice in what school they would attend. Charter schools were and are public. Therefore no parent was or is obliged to send their child to a school they believe to be segregating students.

In 1991, three years after his speech, while Shanker was serving as the President of the AFT, Minnesota became the first state to adopt legislation that approved eight charter schools and was a proponent of the educational revolution. City Academy, located on the east side of St. Paul, opened in 1992 and was the first charter school in the US. City Academy was surrounded with high-poverty, underperforming students, and high drop-out rates. However, to this day it still exists and continues to meet Minnesota state standards. At this moment, the charter school movement was born. From 1992 to 2000, the US saw a gradual increase in charter schools. In 1992, there were a handful of charter schools. In 2000, over 2,000 had been created and 34 states

⁷ Cookson, Jr and Berger, *Expect Miracles*, 25, 32-35.

⁸ Shanker, "National Press Club Speech."

had passed charter school legislation.⁹ In the first half of the 1990s, the St. Paul Board of Education saw the first Hmong women, Choua Lee, to be elected. After her election, the Hmong parents, teachers, youth, and community activists created programs, expressed their educational views and developed charter schools.

Historiography

The first section of the paper discusses how the election of Choua Lee gave Hmong in St. Paul more representation in the schools. The second section is about two charter schools and their ability to create a curriculum that Hmong parents desired. The third segment explains Hmong collective action that occurred from 1995 to 1998. The last section discusses HOPE Community Academy, the first Hmong devoted charter school that opened in 2000. This paper does not address the other St. Paul Hmong charter schools that emerged in the mid-2000s because a historical comparison between them would require another research project. There are three other Hmong charter schools located in Minneapolis-St. Paul: Hmong College Prep Academy (2004); New Millenium Academy (2005); and Community School of Excellence (2007).

Scholars have devoted a significant amount of time to studying Hmong Americans, but few of them have written about the intersection between charter schools and the Hmong. In her book *The People of Minnesota: Hmong in Minnesota*, Chia Youee Vang, a historian at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, briefly describes the history of Hmong educational attainment in Minnesota. In this section, she only devotes one paragraph to Hmong and their attraction to charter schools. Vang believes Hmong in Minneapolis-St. Paul turned to charter

⁹ Cookson, Jr and Berger, *Expect Miracles*, 39-41.

schools because of their dissatisfaction with the traditional public schools and their improving economic status.¹⁰

Jeremy Hein, a sociologist at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, used the theory of collective action in a case study of Hmong Americans in Minneapolis-St. Paul. In the data Hein collected, he determined that civic engagement—civic engagement occurs when individuals seek to make a difference in their communities through political and non-political means—was greater than Hmong social and political participation, with education ranking as the most important civic responsibility. As Vang did, Hein wrote a handful of sentences on the Hmong charter schools founded in the 2000s and the recent successes they have had.¹¹

In his doctoral dissertation, Kirk T. Lee wrote a case study on the perceptions of Hmong parents in a Hmong charter school in California. Lee discusses the obstacles that Hmong parents face in traditional public education. Through interviews with parents, administrators, teachers and students, Lee discovered nine themes within the charter school that other school districts could implement to support Hmong parents in public schools. His dissertation is the most recent study of Hmong and charter schools.¹²

All these scholars pointed this research paper in its current direction, but there has not yet been a professional to write a historical analysis on the relationship between Hmong of St. Paul and charter schools. This paper seeks to answer the following research questions: How were the Hmong able to develop a greater presence in the St. Paul school district? Why were the Hmong

¹⁰ Chia Youyee Vang, *The People of Minnesota: Hmong in Minnesota* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society, 2008).

¹¹ Jeremy Hein, “The Urban Ethnic Community and Collective Action: Politics, Protest, and Civic Engagement by Hmong Americans in Minneapolis-St. Paul,” *City & Community* 13, no. 2 (June 2014) 119-139.

¹² Kirk T. Lee, “Perceptions of Hmong Parents in A Hmong American Charter School: A Qualitative Descriptive Case Study on Hmong Parent Involvement” (Ed.D diss. Portland State University, 2016).

in the Minneapolis-St. Paul region drawn to the charter school movement that swept the nation in the early 1990s? What actions during the 1990s led them to pursue alternative schooling options and create a charter school of their own? By writing about the relationship between Hmong and charter schools of Minneapolis-St. Paul, another vital piece has been added to the understanding of Hmong American history. It also deepens the history of how public schools have instructed minorities, specifically the Hmong.

A Watershed Moment Leads to the Emergence of Hmong Voices

A remarkable feat occurred in St. Paul on November 5, 1991. Choua Lee was the first Hmong to be elected to any form of public office in the United States, and it happened in a city with one of the largest Hmong populations. Lee, being a successful business owner at the young age of 23, sought to represent the Asian community by winning a seat on the St. Paul school board. She received 24,589 votes, topping all who were in the running. The Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party endorsed Lee, and with their support, she was able to capture the attention of the broader St. Paul community. She was critical of the way English programs were segregating Asian-American students; the schools perceived English Learners to be less intelligent by placing them in separate English programs. She thought the public schools needed to break down the language barriers between the Hmong parents and school board—Many Hmong were unaware of the alternative schooling options because of the language barrier.¹³ Lee already had most of the Hmong vote, which comprised about 20 percent of the population in 1991, but it was

¹³ James Walsh, “Hmong Woman Wins Respect – and Seat on School Board,” *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis), November 7, 1991.

the platform she ran on that gave her the white, African American, American Indian, and the other racial/ethnic groups to support her campaign.¹⁴

Lee's election was truly a watershed moment. She knew the current community leaders were underrepresenting the racial minorities in a quickly diversifying city. Lee said, "they [Hmong] are a part of the process now. However, they need to know they have a voice, that they have power too."¹⁵ With Lee on the St. Paul school board, her supporters finally felt they had a leader who would push for their needs and wants.

Lee inspired and motivated Hmong parents to take the initiative in their children's education. Although the first Hmong Parent Organizations (HPO) emerged in 1990, Lee's election energized the HPO as they expanded rapidly. In December of 1991, roughly two months after the school board election, public schools experienced a drastic increase in Hmong parent attendance at monthly meetings. They began to inquire about the education of their children, asking simple questions such as, "Where is my kid's class?" or, "What can I do to help my child?" Merely voicing their concerns is an accomplishment in its self, because in Laos, if their children attended a school, the Hmong parents were distant and knew little about the everyday happenings. Therefore, school liaisons, such as Lao Lee, attempted to encourage the Hmong parents to stop taking a back seat and to advocate for the future of their children.¹⁶

During the school meetings, Hmong parents asked questions to an interpreter, and in turn, the interpreter would translate them to the principal. Having an interpreter was progress, but it

¹⁴ James Walsh, "Lee Says Election is a 'Milestone' for Hmong People," *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis), November 6, 1991.

¹⁵ Walsh, "Lee Says Election is a 'Milestone' for Hmong People."

¹⁶ James Walsh, "Programs helping Asian parents learn the ABC's of school involvement," *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis), December 20, 1991.

did not eliminate the language barrier. Foster, a principal at Hayden Heights in North St. Paul with a population of about 40 percent Hmong, stated, “Everything is done in Hmong, so I just sit there, and an interpreter whispers in my ear.” Despite the complications of communication, the Hmong at the meetings demonstrated attentiveness for their children's’ education and were able to ask questions, which the school staff respected and appreciated.¹⁷

The mutual respect that developed between Hmong parents and the school encouraged the Hmong to take a more active role in the schools. Choua Lee, who made appearances at many parent-teacher meetings, understood that Hmong parents wanted to acquire a greater presence in the schools. Lee said the parents asked questions like, “Can we visit a classroom? Can we come and observe, just to get a feel for what our kids go through on a daily basis?”¹⁸ These requests were a sign of a developing paradigm shift in the St. Paul public schools. The Hmong’s ever increasing desire to learn the ways of the US education system began to pick up speed as the years progressed.

As the Minneapolis-St. Paul Hmong population increased, the state aid for refugee programs dwindled. In 1992, The Bush administration sought to decrease the amount refugees received by half; even though Southeast Asians were continuing to settle in Minnesota. During the 1989-90 school year, the assistance programs for refugees provided the St. Paul school district with 220,000 dollars. This money was used to hire English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers and interpreters. However, in 1992, the Federal Government granted St. Paul public schools nothing in refugee assistance, and they had not been receiving federal or state aid for

¹⁷ Walsh, “Programs helping Asian parents learn the ABC’s of school involvement.”

¹⁸ Ibid.

medical and educational matters for the past two years. The underfunding left a gaping hole in the resources for Hmong refugees, resources they needed to access an equal education.¹⁹

With Choua Lee now on their side, Hmong educational concerns became more relevant in the wave pool of democracy. Lee ventured to Washington D.C. to lobby on behalf of the Hmong in Minneapolis-St. Paul. She realized that a reduction in federal assistance would have been a significant setback for the refugee population. Lee said, “at Capitol Hill, they know we exist, but they don’t know what’s going on. They think the refugees are draining the resources.”²⁰ Lee was the voice for the voiceless. She explained to the Federal Government that the Hmong were not wasting the resources. Rather, if Congress distributed the necessary aid to the schools that needed it the most, then those schools would have transformed a young refugee population into creative, progressive and educated individuals, something every society desires.²¹

At the beginning of the 1993 school year, the invisible began to emerge with strong voices. Hmong parents began to display greater acts of advocacy by demanding change instead of asking for it. The parents thought the schools were shortchanging their kids because communication between the schools and the parents was nonexistent. In one case, the school failed to notify a Hmong parent when their daughter was skipping classes. The mother did not discover the misdemeanor until the school suspended her child. Vang, the mother of the child, said, “Nobody bothered to call me. No one said a thing.” Schools were failing to relay simple

¹⁹ Tom Hamburger and Wendy S. Tai, “State Urges Congress to Restore \$200 Million in Aid to Refugees,” *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis), May 21, 1992.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

messages, a necessity that must be maintained to sustain healthy relationships between the schools and the parents.²²

Another issue parents brought forward with the school board was a lack of Hmong teachers and administrators (in 1993, 22 percent of the students in the St. Paul schools were Asian-Americans, and less than two percent of the staff was Asian-American). Lee Pao Xiong, parent and community leader, stated, “We need to hire more teachers, and these teachers could serve as role models. We want somebody who can create institutional changes instead of sitting there as observers.” Another parent expressed his frustration when he said, “we want you [School Board Officials] to address these problems in 1993-94. The problem is growing.” The Hmong involved with the board of education were not willing to be silent when it came to their children's education. They were supporting the schools with their taxes just as any other American, and they realized their contributions were not being used to benefit their youth. They desired schools that respected their input and implemented the necessary changes in the school's curriculum and finance plans. Therefore in 1994 and 1995, two charter schools attempted to provide the Hmong with institutions suited for their needs.²³

Community of Peace and LEAP Academy: Two Model Schools

During the early 1990s, the Hmong collective action—collective action is a way for individuals to group together and enhance their economic, social, and political status—was slowly gaining speed. Their efforts were significant, and nothing would take that away from

²² James Walsh, “Hmong Parents Tell School Board their Kids Being Shortchanged,” *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis), August 4, 1993.

²³ Ibid.

them. Groups of non-Hmong were assisting the Hmong in their efforts for a better-educated youth. Jeff Dufrense, who received his doctorate in education from the University of St. Thomas, has a track record of teaching English Language Learners (ELL) in Thailand refugee camps. He, along with Sandra Hall—Hall earned a master from Hamline University and conducted research on Hmong kinship—founded LEAP English Academy (now LEAP High School) in 1994.²⁴ Their mission was to educate the newest Minneapolis-St. Paul arrivals (immigrants and refugees who had limited English proficiency).²⁵ Community of Peace Academy (CPA), another charter school in St. Paul, opened its doors in 1995 with the mission of serving a diverse community and educating the mind, body, and will of all students. Karen Rusthover, the founder, had the goal to teach children who had faced obstacles and barriers in obtaining a quality education.²⁶ Both of these schools strove to give the Hmong, and the larger Limited English Proficiency (LEP) and minority students in the Twin Cities an education that was personalized while maintaining academic excellence in all subject matters.

Why were the Hmong Drawn to LEAP English Academy?

Initially, in the 1980s and into the 1990s, most public schools believed Hmong refugee students displayed poor academic achievement. This assumption left them unfit to attend post-secondary institutions, and their most significant obstacle was a language deficiency. Because of these viewpoints, public schools were quick to place Hmong in ESL classrooms. The few

²⁴ Jeff Dufrense and Sandra E. Hall, "LEAP English Academy -- an Alternative High School for Newcomers to the United States," (Paper presented on behalf of LEAP English Academy, 2004-05), 1-13, accessed November 3, 2016, <http://www.spps.org/domain/4645>

²⁵ LEAP High School, accessed October 31, 2016, <http://leap.spps.org/>

²⁶ "About CPA," Community of Peace Academy, accessed October 31, 2016, <http://www.communityofpeaceacademy.com/aboutcpa/history/>

bilingual teachers had extremely low expectations for the Hmong and held them to low standards (there were more LEP students than the current bilingual teachers could handle). The bilingual professionals and general education teachers perceived the Hmong students to be working hard because they were quiet by the nature of their culture—this was false, as they were still performing below average.²⁷

According to Christopher T. Vang, an education professor at California State University, a problem LEP students faced in the public schools was many of them were not adequately enhancing their communication skills. The communication skills he referred to included reading, writing, and speaking. Because of this, the LEP Hmong either dropped out or graduated unprepared to move on to post-secondary education or sustain jobs that required basic communication skills. According to Vang's research, public schools in the 1990s needed more LEP trained individuals.²⁸ During this time, some states attempted to diminish the value of bilingual instruction through legislation. In 1993, the Seattle Washington House of Representatives proposed a bill that would have decreased funding for LEP programs and focused on mainstreaming LEP students, the exact opposite of what Dufrense envisioned for LEAP English Academy. Through this bill, which was struck down, a newspaper report from the *International Examiner* stated, "Sommers' 'intent' clause shows no commitment to meeting the unique needs of LEP students. Instead, it implies that the state spends too much money coddling these kids."²⁹

²⁷ Christopher T. Vang, "Hmong-American K-12 Students and the Academic Skills needed for a College Education: A Review of the Existing Literature and Suggestions for Future Research," *Hmong Studies Journal* 5, no. 1 (2004-05): 3, accessed November 3, 2016, <http://hmongstudies.com/ChrisVangHSJ5.pdf>

²⁸ Vang, "Hmong-American K-12 Students and the Academic Skills needed for a College Education," 18-19.

²⁹ Editorial, *International Examiner*, February 15, 1994. <http://search.proquest.com/ethnicnewswatch/docview/367655971/BB6BFD024C2743A0PQ/3?accountid=14790>

Spending more money on LEP programs, teachers, and in LEAP's case, a school, was not a form of "coddling" LEP students. If anything, the incoming immigrant school was more successful at accommodating for the LEP student needs. Because of the different stance Dufresne took, many LEP Hmong students who either had difficulty in traditional public schools or were refugees with little to no educational experience entering the 10th, 11th, or 12th-grade thought LEAP provided them with the best possible future. The LEP Hmong students were more likely to be defined as at-risk with other factors which contributed to their academic success or failure; these included, finances, being an ethnic minority, their culture, a language barrier, and SES.³⁰

Dufresne and Hall knew the labels attached to LEP students and understood that ESL students who had recently arrived in the US took anywhere from two to eight years to reach national averages. Knowing this, Dufresne and Hall designed and founded one of the first charter schools in Minnesota, LEAP English Academy, which opened its doors in 1994. In the first years, the school was over half Hmong. Hmong students attended LEAP because it was flexible and it provided vocational training while easing the transition from the secondary level to the workforce or college. The staff was predominantly bilingual. They instructed in English, but many of the instructors could speak Hmong and were culturally aware. A high cultural awareness with students fostered a cohesive bond between instructor and pupil. Students who can communicate with their instructors at ease have the tendency to forget how advantaged they are. One could not imagine how difficult it would be to learn geometry or history, let alone any subject with the language being a permanent barrier. The lower or beginning ESL classes relied

³⁰ Vang, "Hmong-American K-12 Students and the Academic Skills needed for a College Education," 13-14.

on a more prevalent native tongue instruction, while teachers used English on a more frequent basis in upper-level classes to meet the Minnesota State Standards.³¹

LEAP gave older Hmong students the individual care and attention they needed to become successful in their host country. The staff was able to relate to the Hmong through common language and culture. LEAP was not tolerant of Hmong culture; rather they were allies. It respected the Hmong for their struggles and triumphs. However, since LEAP was structured only to educate 16 to 26-year-old students, the Hmong parents with children in K-9 grades were still waiting in open water, fishing for a lifeline.

One Woman's Dream Comes True: Community of Peace Academy

In the 1990s, the US was continuing the quest of becoming a multiculturalistic society. The Hmong played a vital role, and continue to, in constructing the US, especially in education.³² An incredible woman had realized the benefits of diversity in the school setting, and the Hmong had appreciated this.

Karen Rusthover, a St. Paul native, founded Community School of Peace in 1995. Rusthover grew up on the west side of St. Paul and attended a diverse high school with a large population of Mexican immigrants. Her experience in her secondary schooling sparked a passion for education and the will to teach in diverse settings, so much that she pursued a teaching degree in higher education. After graduation, she taught at three different public schools and criticized

³¹ Jeff Dufresne, "Mainstreaming LEP Students: The Case of the Hmong," *MinneTESOL* 11, no. 1 (1993): 1-19, accessed November 2, 2016, <http://leap.spps.org/Domain/4645> and Jeff Dufresne and Sandra E. Hall, "LEAP English Academy -- an Alternative High School for Newcomers to the United States," (Paper presented on behalf of LEAP English Academy, 2004-05), 1-13, accessed November 3, 2016, <http://www.spps.org/domain/4645>

³² Vincent K. Her & Mary Louise Buley-Meissner, "Hmong American Studies: New Voices," in *Hmong and America: From Refugees to Citizens*, ed. Vincent K. Her & Mary Louise Buley-Meissner (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 2012), 23.

every one of them. When asked why she was critical of traditional public schools Rusthover responded by saying, “I am an idealist, I felt like public schools should be equal. It should not depend on if your parents are rich or poor or what part of town you lived in. You should get an equally excellent education, and it was not like that.”³³ With a mindset of determination and will, the author would deem Rusthover a diversity champion. She recognized the inequality that existed in the US, and she was determined to make a difference.

Following her position at underfinanced schools and during a massive layoff of teachers, Rusthover found herself unemployed. Given her unexpected job loss, she was quick to accept a homeschool liaison position at two Catholic schools working with children of color and their parents. Rusthover was surprised at how good of an education these students of color were receiving in Catholic schools compared to public schools. Her time at these Catholic schools had a significant influence on her decision to create Community of Peace Academy.³⁴ “A Catholic school minus religion,” a headline in the *Saint Paul Pioneer Press* was titled to describe CPA. In that same article, Rusthover states, “this is a Catholic school without the religion. Why not say it? The model works.”³⁵

Rusthover gained valuable pedagogical methods during her 16 years as a non-catholic in two Catholic schools and as a student in 1993 at the University of St. Thomas, a private university in St. Paul. Rusthover genuinely believed that Catholic schools offered minority students a better education; she was convinced Catholic schools were superior in educating

³³ Karen Rusthover, interviewed by author, October 6, 2016.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Mary Jane Smetanka, “A Catholic school minus religion; Peace Academy, built on respect and nonviolence, hopes to resurrect the best of parochial schools. Unlike others, its first year has been relatively problem-free,” *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis), April 26, 1996.

minorities because of the parties involved. They carried the same vision and guiding principles and cared about the whole community. With this, came ontological pedagogy—the practice of teaching to the mind, body, and will. This ideology was the guiding force in CPA’s outline and produced, what Rusthover states, the five movements aligned with Christain praxis that applied to good teaching habits. Movement one was “naming/expressing the present praxis; 2) critical reflection on present action; 3) making the Christain story accessible; 4) dialectical hermeneutic of appropriate Christian story/vision to participants’ stories/visions; and 5) decision/response for lived Christian faith.”³⁶ These alignments transferred into the founding principles that attracted minority parents to CPA.

So what convinced the Hmong community to send their children to CPA, a first-year charter school with no track record, yet found themselves populated with a two-thirds Hmong majority? Two reasons: CPA’s environment was inviting for Hmong families, and by enrolling their children in a committed school it limited the possibility of Hmong boys joining gangs.

For a Hmong student to be successful, according to Vang, schools certainly need to understand “that family, language, culture, and environment all play roles in how Hmong students perform in school.”³⁷ Some components were found in the public schools, but not all of them. Therefore, CPA was up to bat. When reviewing their founding principles, the author found that CPA had all four aspects to ensure that a Hmong student was successful. Regarding family, Rusthover realized that parents played a primary role in their children's education and CPA wanted to empower the parent-student-school relationship.³⁸ For any school to be a part of a

³⁶ Karen Rusthover, *A profound New Vision for Our Public Schools: Success in Education Through Peace, Healing, and Hope* (Minneapolis, MN: Syren Book Company, 2007), 52-55.

³⁷ Vang, “Hmong-American K-12 Students and the Academic Skills needed for a College Education,” 20-21.

³⁸ Rusthover, *A Profound New Vision for Our Public Schools*, 85.

community, the parents need to trust the teachers and feel welcomed. The mutual trust leads to collaboration and successful students.

Hmong language and culture were a cornerstone of CPA: “Racial, ethnic and cultural diversity within our school community, expanded our worldview and enriched our education.”³⁹ Along with the addition of native Hmong speakers, Rusthover lined her office walls with Hmong tapestries and embroidery. Embroidering was an artform practiced by Hmong women, and tapestries became popular in refugee camps in the 1980s. The women sold these to make money.⁴⁰ Rusthover highlighted the importance of Hmong culture by helping the women sell their artwork and allowed the community to celebrate the Hmong New Year at CPA. CPA realized the importance of the Hmong culture and displayed appreciation by decorating a school that resembled the homes of the students. CPA’s sensitivity to Hmong culture was why Mike Ricci, Rusthovers co-founder, believed the Hmong were attracted to CPA.⁴¹

It is easy to merge culture and language into the same category, but it is important to deal with each one on a separate plane. In the beginning, to represent the expanding Hmong population, CPA made a point to hire on as many native Hmong speakers. CPA also had a full-time teacher strictly devoted to handling the language barriers and difficulties. For every student who registered, and continues to register at CPA, they received a questionnaire that identifies if the child had a first language other than English (EL). The questionnaire demonstrates a deep respect and mutual understanding of the child's needs—if the student was EL, that did not

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ “Welcome,” HmongEmbroidery.org, accessed November 14, 2016, <http://www.hmongembroidery.org/index.html>

⁴¹ Smetanka, “A Catholic school minus religion.”

automatically place them in an ELL class. Rather, it helped the staff better meet the child's needs.⁴²

Moreover, CPA's environment was designed to be non-violent, respectful, with high regards for the physical and spiritual environment surrounding CPA.⁴³ CPA had all the pieces for a school that gave the Hmong community hope, and the environment portion was a bonus for Hmong parents who were concerned about Hmong gangs in St. Paul.

St. Paul was a hotbed for Hmong gangs in the 1980s and 1990s, surprising many. However, historically, boys of immigrants and refugees have banded together and displayed acts of violence in response to a cultural and identity crises. Therefore, the Hmong youth formed gangs, just as many European immigrants had done, due to their inability to adjust to the mainstream culture, pressure from parents, and discrimination.⁴⁴ Chris Her, a former gang member states, "I think a lot of parents' expectations for their kids being in America, because of having a chance that they didn't have, kind of pushed their kids off a little bit."⁴⁵ As a result, the Hmong gang members felt a disconnect with their parent's traditions, leaving them in limbo. According to Paul Hillmer, "Parents who discovered their children had joined gangs sent them to relatives in another state, instead of surrounding the child with positive influences."⁴⁶ The Hmong parents often felt helpless because they were unable to punish their kids the way they

⁴² "CPA Family Handbook K-12," Community of Peace Academy, accessed November 4, 2016, <http://www.communityofpeaceacademy.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/CPA-Family-Handbook-Pre-K-12.pdf>

⁴³ Rusthover, *A Profound New Vision for Our Public Schools*, 85-86.

⁴⁴ Kevin C. Lor, "Factors Leading Hmong Youth to Join Gang" (master's thesis, University of Wisconsin Stout, 2003), 6, 9.

⁴⁵ Paul Hillmer, *A People's History of the Hmong* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society, 2010), 258-259.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

used to in Laos. If a child disobeyed, they used corporal punishment. However, this form of punishment was, and still is, frowned upon in the United States. Therefore, Hmong parents needed a place that would put their minds at ease of having their offspring join gangs.

How did Rusthover convince the Hmong community that CPA was a school that would diminish the likelihood of their kids to join gangs? According to Rusthover, the church she and her husband attended—her husband was a Presbyterian pastor—sponsored 175 units of low and moderate income housing that was predominantly occupied by Hmong. Her husband's office manager was also a Hmong man who had strong ties with the Hmong community, particularly with the youth. His office manager was concerned about the kids at Liberty Plaza, the low-income housing which the church sponsored, as they were involved with gang activity. When he heard about the school, he was quick to promote its proposal on Hmong radio. After Rusthov's appearance on the radio, she commented, “and that is when my phone started ringing.”⁴⁷

“The name of the school was carefully chosen,” Rusthover stated.⁴⁸ She had seen firsthand as principal of a Catholic school what violence had done to her students. With gang activity on the rise, she and her staff were devoted to building a peaceful community: “Violence was closing in on all of us. In response to this, peace became the focus of our new public school. We would call it Community of Peace Academy. We would intentionally teach and practice conflict prevention and ethical behavior. The staff would model nonviolence which was practiced by all members of our school community.” The result was a community of students, friends, family, teachers, and administrators who were all behind a school with the mission of

⁴⁷ Rusthover, interviewed by author, October 6, 2016.

⁴⁸ Rusthover, *A Profound New Vision for Our Public Schools*, 57.

“creating a peaceful environment in which each person is treated with unconditional positive regard and acceptance.”⁴⁹

In this section, the author has discussed how two charter schools, founded by non-Hmong individuals, were able to provide the Hmong community in St. Paul with the components that traditional public schools could not fill. These schools gave the Hmong perseverance, hope, ambition, and most importantly, the tools to start programs specifically dedicated to Hmong language and culture.

Hmong Collective Action in the Later Years of the 1990s

Collective action is a way for community members to organize themselves and congregate around an issue or idea they believe to be pressing in their city. The Hmong community of St. Paul has engaged in collective action numerous times. The Hmong have celebrated the Hmong New Year in the old Minnesota Metrodome for a few decades; they have created the first Hmong newspaper called the *Hmong Times*; and Mee Moua was elected to represent Minnesota as a Senator, the first Hmong to be elected to serve in the US Senate.⁵⁰ Hein defines the Hmong as “an ethnic community using space, institutional structure, and in-group interaction to engage in collective action.”⁵¹ Hein is suggesting that when Hmong create ethnic communities, they are more likely to participate in efforts which seek to benefit their community.⁵²

⁴⁹ Rusthover, *A Profound New Vision for Our Public Schools*, 57.

⁵⁰ Hein, “The Urban Ethnic Community and Collective Action,” 119-20.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 124-125.

Chia Youyee Vang uses the ethnic enclave theory to explain the progression of a generational gap. Vang argues that when immigrants arrive in their host country, they attempt to find others from their countries of origin that would serve as a community of peers. Support groups soon form to help each other with social, economic, educational, cultural, and traditional needs. As the first generation and the one-and-a-half generation achieve upward mobility, the first generation begins to worry about their offspring's retention of traditional values (the one-and-a-half generation are Hmong who were born in Laos or Thailand, spent a good portion of their childhood in southeast Asia, and then moved to the US in their adolescences, pre-teens, or early teenage years). In the case of the first-generation Hmong, the Americanization of their children and their understanding of traditions and cultural practices were pressing issues.⁵³ Asians Together Community Service (ACTS), more specifically ACTS of St. Paul, was attempting to give the Hmong the cultural needs the charter and public schools could not do.

ACTS of St. Paul and was founded by Gael Larson in 1992—Larsen worked closely with the founders of HOPE Community Academy, the first Hmong charter school. Larsen and ACTS of St. Paul focused on serving and meeting the needs of the Hmong. They were there to listen to the parents, and collaborate with them to create programs that would mend parent-child relationships; they taught children about Hmong culture, history, and language, and prepared students for the upcoming school years. ACTS attempted to fill gaps in Hmong students' education that went unfulfilled during their time in the public schools.⁵⁴

⁵³ Chia Youyee Vang, *Hmong America: Reconstructing Community in Diaspora* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 57, 96.

⁵⁴ "About Us," ACTS of St. Paul, accessed October 31, 2016, http://acts.nonprofitoffice.com/index.asp?Type=B_BASIC&SEC={E45B2F86-ACB5-4803-8F90-FC29A473F27A}

The Hmong started to funnel into Minnesota in the 1980s. As the years flew by, many Hmong parents began to realize that their children were acculturating to the American way of life while leaving their Hmong heritage behind. Culture loss worried many parents because the Hmong refugees endured significant challenges to give their children a haven in the United States. Larsen understood the Hmong parents' dilemma and offered them a creative and involved opportunity. In 1996, ACTS of St. Paul performed a musical called "Hmong Life With Tears," which they held at Roseville Lutheran Church. The musical served a couple of purposes: To bridge the generational gap between the Hmong generations; to teach Hmong children about their culture and life at home; to build and sustain long-lasting relationships between two generations of Hmong that have different motivations; and to create a drama that resembles the Hmong life in a context they could all relate to.⁵⁵

"Hmong Life With Tears" was written by Hmong leaders of ACTS of St. Paul who incorporated their experience of having refugee parents raise them. Their parents did not understand their want to become Americanized. It touched on sensitive traditional Hmong American conflicts such as girls marrying at a young age. Maysee, the lead character who battled with her parents, says "I don't care about marriage! I want freedom. Can't you understand that I just want to be with my friends? What is so wrong with that?"⁵⁶ Karris Vang, the individual who played Maysee, stated, "the character's experience mirrors that of many Hmong girls who have adopted American ways that conflict with their parents' upbringing, values, and

⁵⁵ Pat Burson, "Hmong Play Tackles Generational Conflict; 200 Young People Join Arts Program Aimed at Helping Old, Young Get Along," *Saint Paul Pioneer Press*, August 16, 1996.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

traditions.”⁵⁷ However, “as the play unfolds, Maysee begins to understand more about her parents and comes to appreciate that she is both Hmong and American.”⁵⁸

The play was a fantastic tool created to bridge generational conflicts and teach the Hmong youth about their culture and history. As Larsen expressed, “The play is all about helping the little ones understand what is happening at home.”⁵⁹ There was no handbook on how to raise children in a foreign country with a traditional ideology. Many parents were struggling to connect with their children and convey the importance of their background. When the kids went off to school, it created a divide between home and institute. Additionally, since children spent a majority of their time in an academic setting, little time was devoted to developing a shared understanding within families. The desire for cross-generational agreement between the parents and children set a precedent for HOPE community academy.

ACTS of St. Paul put on other plays that wrestled with issues such as education and gender roles. The collective action displayed by Hmong leaders occurred because they thought the younger generation was embracing more American than Hmong ideals, and they wanted to guarantee the youth would hold on to their Hmong identity, or as some Hmong professionals say, “Hmongness.”⁶⁰ The musicals were useful, but the Hmong community of St. Paul knew they had other concerns the public schools were not addressing.

Another form of collective action presided in the St. Paul Hmong community in 1995; the Minnesota chapter of the Association of Community Organizations for Reform (ACORN),

⁵⁷ Burson, “Hmong Play Tackles Generational Conflict.”

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Vang, *Hmong America*, 96.

tossed around the idea of a dual-language school which would focus on the Spanish and Hmong language.⁶¹ The school was one of the first instances where the St. Paul community was interested in starting a charter school devoted to teaching the Hmong language. A dual language school was quite sensible since St. Paul was becoming racially and ethnically diverse. By 1995 and into the beginning of the 2000s, St. Paul's core-city foreign-born population more than tripled from 11,388 in 1970 to 41,138 in 2000. Most of the foreign born were Hmong. The percentage of whites decreased from 88.6 percent in 1980 to 64 percent in 2000.⁶² Therefore, given the diverse makeup of core-city St. Paul, many of the members of HPO spoke for the Hmong community, stressing that English would be the primary language in their new school. However, the members still believed that students should have a choice of either learning Hmong or Spanish. Choua Lee said, "I hope the school will pioneer in this area. It's exciting, but you have to do it with caution. That will guarantee success."⁶³

From 1991 and on, Hmong parents, educators, and community experts worked diligently to provide programs for the Hmong children. However, since HOPE, the first Hmong devoted school, would not open until 2000, what did the community have to offer Hmong students? How was the Hmong culture being passed down to the next generation? How would students do better in the upcoming school years? In the summer of 1998, a program for St. Paul children twelve and younger added the necessary components to serve the needs of the 200 Hmong youngsters

⁶¹ Pat Burson, "Proposed Charter School's Goal Is to Help Pupils Appreciate Diversity," *Saint Paul Pioneer Press*, July 12, 1995.

⁶² "SOCDS Census Data: Output for St. Paul city, MN," US Department of Housing and Urban Development, accessed November 1, 2016, http://socds.huduser.gov/Census/race.odb?msacitylist=5120.0*2700058000*1.0&metro=msa&frames=%24frames%24

⁶³ Burson, "Proposed Charter School's Goal Is to Help Pupils Appreciate Diversity."

attending. In 1998, the summer school at Roseville Lutheran Church hired on multiple Hmong professional who possessed the essential tools to bridge the academic gap many Hmong were facing in the public schools. Hmong culture was also important, but the program stressed academic achievement⁶⁴

The summer school program believed the reason Hmong students were falling behind their peers was that of a language barrier. Hmong students were being placed in special education because they could not communicate well in English, and when their lessons were modified to fit additional needs, little to no progress was made. Therefore, to try and lessen the impact of the language barrier, the summer school program instructed lessons in English as much as possible. If the students were unable to learn the material in English, then the teachers would reteach in Hmong. The multilingual approach gave the students a second chance to learn the material.⁶⁵ The teachers at the summer school program realized Hmong students were not less intelligent than their peers, rather they could not understand in the dominant language. A child should never be punished for lack of language comprehension if they can demonstrate an understanding of the content in their tongue.

St. Paul in the 1990s saw a great display of collective action: the idea of a partially Hmong Charter school was in the works. ACTS of St. Paul was closing generational gaps and attempting to restore the Hmong culture. Two Hmong leaders were elected to the St. Paul school board, and a summer school program was created to improve English proficiency in Hmong children. However, despite Hmong parent's advocacy, they still felt marginalized or forgotten in

⁶⁴ Linda Owen, "A School of Their Own; Requests from Hmong Leaders and Parents Have Resulted in a Special Summer Program to Help Hmong Youngsters Do Better in School for the Coming Year," *Saint Paul Pioneer Press*, July 22, 1998.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

parent meetings because of the language barrier. Some public schools managed to hire on liaisons and interpreters. Yang said it was a small start, but still not what the Hmong community envisioned. Some schools offered to update parents by writing in Hmong, but this attempt helped little because many of the parents were not literate in their language⁶⁶—the Hmong did not have a written language until 1950. On behalf of the Hmong parent-school relationship, the St. Paul Pioneer Press said, “school officials simply must do more... Finding a way to improve communication between Hmong parents and schools is one pressing concern.”⁶⁷

A School of Their Own

In this section, the author will be pulling from a series of newspaper articles that followed HOPE’s first year. These sources offer valuable insight into why HOPE was created, along with telling a peoples’ history of the school. Within the newspapers, the author has come to the conclusion that the creators of HOPE constructed their school upon four building blocks. These include parent involvement, preservation of Hmong culture, increasing student academic performance and English proficiency, and bringing on a Hmong staff to serve as role models.

Hmong Open Partnership in Education (HOPE) Community Academy was founded by a group of Hmong and non-Hmong with a passion for youth in St. Paul. While there were already three charter schools established that either incorporated Hmong culture, provided Hmong language or improved English abilities, but HOPE and its founders took the next step: a school for the Hmong community, created by the Hmong.

⁶⁶ Owen, “A School of Their Own.”

⁶⁷ Burson, “Hmong Parents Form Groups to Change Schools.”

The HOPE founders came across an old, abandoned brewery, a perfect spot on the West side of St. Paul. The University of St. Thomas sponsored HOPE and LearnNow, a for-profit company residing in New York, funded the school. Since charter schools are public, they receive their funding in two ways: the first comes from a non-profit or for-profit company. These companies pay for much of the expenses. The second originates from the student population, just like any other public school. HOPE found a building, had a sponsor, and had a funder, but now it had to lay the foundation for a school that held so much promise.⁶⁸

Family: Parent Involvement

In Laos, the small percentage of Hmong children who were able to attend the small school villages respected their teachers. Hmong parents trusted the educators to mold their kid's minds into well-educated individuals, and they rarely communicated with the teachers.⁶⁹ When the Hmong refugees first encountered the American education system, they ran into an array of differences that discouraged them from participating. Because of this, they were unable to adequately provide their children with the essential support needed for all students to succeed. The lack of support led to increased student dropout rates, decreased college admissions, and overall unsatisfactory academic achievement levels. On top of the support issues, culturally, Hmong parents had been taught in Laos that participating in classrooms, questioning teachers and offering advice was unthinkable and went against traditional norms.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Kristina Torres, "Building New Hope; After Years of Struggling in The American Education System, Hmong Children Now Have a School Specifically Tailored to Meet Their Needs," *Saint Paul Pioneer Press*, September 17, 2000.

⁶⁹ Neng Yang, Lee Thao, Kaying Yang and Soua K. Yang, *Introduction to Hmong History and Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: Minneapolis Board of Education, 1994), 16.

⁷⁰ Lee, "Perceptions of Hmong Parents in A Hmong American Charter School," 3.

In a recent qualitative study, Kirk T. Lee examined Hmong parent involvement in American schools. Within his research, he found multiple barriers that kept Hmong parents from being actively involved with their children's schools. Lee concluded that self-efficacy was the most significant obstacle and described key reasons why this was true. Some reasons were that Hmong parents had no formal education, just survival skills, only five percent of them could read and write, and their patriarchal society held girls and boys to different standards. In Laos, parents were passive, and in the US, cultural and language barriers were present.⁷¹ HOPE was aware of these problems and made parent involvement a must.

Gael Larsen, a St. Paul community member well known and appreciated among the Hmong for the Hmong summer school program she ran since 1992, and Neal Thao, the second Hmong to be elected the St. Paul school board, began planning for HOPE in 1998. The institute opened in 2000 and from the start realized the concerns of the Hmong parents were vital to the school's success. In a newspaper article written in 2000, Kristina Torres, a columnist on school choice discusses HOPE's need for parent involvement: "Their satisfaction, too, means as much to the school as the academics, the money, and the management."⁷² To show how serious the school considered parent concerns, it did something few other public schools offered. In its first Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) meeting, with just being open under two months, it engaged in a bilingual dialog speaking Hmong and English.⁷³

Fifty parents filled a room in HOPE, something unheard of in other St. Paul public schools. The collection of concerned relatives, ready to communicate their needs, was

⁷¹ Lee, "Perceptions of Hmong Parents in A Hmong American Charter School," 10-20.

⁷² Torres, "Building New Hope."

⁷³ Ibid.

remarkable and displayed many small victories for the Hmong community. First, the parents were willing to face traditions and question their children's teacher, something they would not have done in Laos. Secondly, the language barrier was nonexistent leaving them free to communicate their ideas in a constructive dialogue. Thirdly, parents were no longer passive- they advocated for themselves and their kids. Lastly, they expressed the want for teachers to teach more Hmong language and culture, a surprising argumentative stance. One school and a bilingual PTO meeting led to more parent involvement, something that was missing for many years.⁷⁴

Community: Preservation and Practice of Hmong Culture

Given the multicultural makeup of America, it was only a matter of time before a scholar recognized the importance of culturally sensitive pedagogy. In 1995, Gloria Ladson-Billings, an educational theorist, developed the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. This theory is “a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes.”⁷⁵ In other words, by using this philosophy, teachers can bridge the gap between school and home by incorporating culture references or costumes. The parents of HOPE expressed a desire for a more culturally sensitive approach and for teachers to be more responsive to Hmong culture.

Therefore, in the first PTO session, the Hmong parents were upset because teachers were not instructing in Hmong or teaching enough Hmong culture. Koo Vang, a local businessman who believes that a culturally based school was needed, stated, “Hmong morals, cultural beliefs

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Gloria Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful teaching for African-American students* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1994), 17-18.

are the key point. However, still having the mainstream curriculum is important.”⁷⁶ Knowing this, HOPE incorporated many subtle culture details in the school. The floor tiles in the hallway were symbolic as they resembled the high rocky mountains of Laos, a place the Hmong elders called home for a good portion of their lives. Also, the students sat on colorful lev rugs—levs are floor mats used with Hmong families. That act as a place of gathering for the whole family.⁷⁷ Lastly, the school had “specialists in areas that included someone who teaches about Hmong language and culture.”⁷⁸ Hmong parents had requested more Hmong culture, and that is what they received. One Hmong parent “felt sure that his child would benefit from knowing what it is to be Hmong, to be able to speak Hmong, to learn Hmong culture.”⁷⁹

Professional: More Hmong Staff

Some research has been conducted on the effects of students having a teacher of the same race/ethnicity as them. In a study carried out by various university professors, they concluded that the representation of a students race had shown a significant impact on achievement levels. Given this, it would only seem necessary for a teaching staff to represent the student body as closely as possible. Anna Egalite, Brian Kisida, and Marcus Winters, all professors from various universities, agreed “that minority teachers are uniquely positioned to improve the performance

⁷⁶ Torres, “Building New Hope.”

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Kristina Torres “Holding on to Hope St. Paul’s New Charter School Serving Hmong Youngsters is Facing an Enrollment Shortfall that Threatens its Budget and its Academic Goals. Yet the Hope Community Academy Presses on,” *Saint Paul Pioneer Press*, November 19, 2000.

⁷⁹ Kristina Torres, “Bridge Between Culture; For the Hmong Students of HOPE Community Academy—and for the 10 Non- Asians who Attend—School is a Place to Master Basic Skills While Also Learning About the Traditions, Language and History of the Hmong People,” *Saint Paul Pioneer Press*, March 11, 2001.

of minority students directly or indirectly, by serving as role models, mentors, advocates, or cultural translators for those students.”⁸⁰ In theory, this sounds perfect. However, minority teachers were hard to come by in the 1990s and early 2000s, and for this reason, schools had a difficult time adequately representing the diverse student body. Despite that, HOPE made it a priority to have Hmong professionals in their school.

By 2000, the community had Choua Lee and Neal Thao, two Hmong who served on St. Paul public school board of education. However, this figure, like many public office workers, appeared distant. Lee, who resigned after one term on the board, decided that becoming a teacher was the career for her. She moved to the classroom to shape and influence the future of youth and would later become the assistant director at HOPE. She thought she could serve as a better role model.⁸¹ Along with Lee, was Maychu Vu, the Executive Director of HOPE. Vu, a Hmong woman, as the director of a charter school was something all of the students at HOPE could respect, and maybe one day aspire to be. Vu says, “This is a personal dream of mine, to see all this happen. I know we're doing something right for these kids.”⁸²

HOPE further increased the Hmong presence by hiring thirteen Hmong teachers. Over fifty percent of the staff was Hmong. Each teacher had their website which provided some background on themselves along with information about the content they teach. Torres wrote,

⁸⁰ Anna J. Egalite, Brian Kisida, and Marcus A. Winters, “Representation in the Classroom: The Effect of Own- Race/Ethnicity Teacher Assignment on Student Achievement” (Harvard Kennedy University, 2015) accessed November 2, 2016, https://www.hks.harvard.edu/pepg/PDF/Papers/Egalite-et-al-2015-FLTM_EER.pdf

⁸¹ Kristina Torres, “Walking a Fine Line; The Pioneering Hmong Women Who Help Run the New HOPE Academy Charter School Struggle Daily to Balance Their Individual Ambitions with the Clan-Based Traditions of Their Culture,” *Saint Paul Pioneer Press* January 7, 2001.

⁸² Kristina Torres, “‘This is Like Family’; It has Been a Year of Trials and Triumphs at HOPE Community Academy, A Hmong-Centered Charter School Where Teachers, Administrators and Pupils Have Created Special Bonds,” *Saint Paul Pioneer Press*, July 8, 2001.

“No other public school in St. Paul has a teaching staff that looks like this. No other school in the state, either. They aspire to be a model for the Hmong communities in California, WI, oversees—everywhere.”⁸³

Structure: Academic Achievement

Academic achievement was an important reason for starting HOPE, if not the most. People developed charter schools out of frustration with the direction traditional public schools. The choice theory was fresh, new, and exciting. It held promise. Charter schools survive on student achievement, therefore, some fail and others ascend into high accomplishing schools similar to CPA. Being a brand new school, HOPE was walking the line between failure and success.

HOPEs classroom teachers quickly realized that an added stressor was weighing down their shoulders. Out of the 360 students that attended HOPE in its first month, a majority of them were reading below the state standards and writing and instructing in English was difficult. The below average reading levels were not intimidating for many of the teachers at HOPE. In a newspaper article titled ‘*The Skys The Limit With These Kids*’ one teacher said that he decided to teach and remain at HOPE because of the kids. He enjoyed the excitement that the kids brought every day. With that energy, the teacher was able to improve every students’ reading ability. Tony Ducklow states, “many of these kids could hardly string a simple sentence together, and now they are writing detailed reports and narratives. We work hard and accomplished a lot in this first year. We are all very proud of this.” Ducklow and many other teachers at HOPE strove

⁸³ Kristina Torres, “Walking a Fine Line.”

for excellence and nothing less. Because of this, the Hmong parents were appreciative and supportive. The teachers were able to build positive relationships with the parents.⁸⁴

The parents understood that academics came first, another reason they chose to enroll their children at HOPE. One parent said, “It really is an academically based school. That was really stressed to me by Choua Lee (the assistant director): Their focus is really academic. I do know that the work here is at a higher level.” With parent support behind it, a real vision for the future, enthusiastic kids and a reliable staff, HOPE was able to uphold their academic promise: “Early results from student tests indicate phenomenal ten to twenty percent gains for second- and third-graders, gains that staff members have never seen before in their careers. The achievement, springing from an academic program that school director Maychy Vu considers the school's greatest strength, should put the school on the map and help with recruitment.”⁸⁵

HOPE community academy had a vision for excellence, but recent data from the Minnesota Department of Education shows that in 2014, 2015, and 2016 about 40 percent of students at HOPE did not meet the state standards of student achievement.⁸⁶ It is unclear at this time, due to the lack of information, to suggest why this trend is occurring. HOPE did not quite reach excellence, but the accomplishments in between put the Hmong in St. Paul on the map regarding education. As time unfolds, it will be more apparent if Hmong do better in self-segregated charter schools versus the traditional public schools.

⁸⁴ Kristina Torres, “The Sky's the Limit with These Kids'; Tony Ducklow Had His Work Cut Out for Him Last Fall, When Many of His Pupils at A Hmong-Centered Charter School Were Reading Below Their Grade Level. After Hard Work and A Healthy Dose of Fun, Most Kids Have Made Impressive Gains,” *Saint Paul Pioneer Press*, June 3, 2001.

⁸⁵ Torres, “‘This is Like Family’.”

⁸⁶ Minnesota Department of Education, “Minnesota Report Card: Academic Standards: are students meeting academic standards?” accessed December 19, 2016, http://rc.education.state.mn.us/#academicStandards/orgId--74070010000__test--allAccount__subject--M__grade--all__p--5

Conclusion

In St. Paul during the 1990s, the Hmong community perceived a disconnect between themselves and the traditional public schools. Therefore, with the election of Choua Lee to the St. Paul school board, Hmong parents were able to obtain a voice in educational matters; charter school pioneers were able to provide the Hmong with public schools that were more fitting for their needs; and community activists were able to display acts of collective action for the better of their youth. All of these events were contributing factors to the grand opening of HOPE Community Academy, the first Hmong charter school and a place of their own. HOPE was built on family, Hmong culture and language, and academic achievement. For the Hmong, the 1990s was a remarkable era where their people were able to chart an alternative route in education.

This research paper has told the story of the Hmong in St. Paul during the educational revolution of the 1980s and 1990s. They used charter schools as a vehicle to obtain an education for their younger generation. Hmong parents were attracted to the charter schools because they were academically challenging, culturally sensitive, had programs aimed at improving English abilities, safe, and had racially representative teachers. This paper has added a small but important facet of the Hmong American experience, along with telling a positive message of a charter school history. As time progresses, historians should seek to compare and contrast the other Hmong charter schools that have developed in the 2000s. How are they different? How are they the same? Do they serve the same community? Have they been effective? Do Hmong students perform better in self-segregated charter schools? For now, other scholars should use this piece of work as a cornerstone for future histories written on the Hmong and charter schools.

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