

A 20-year process

May Lee Xiong started working at Txuj Ci, then called Phalen Lake Elementary School, in 2004. That year, as a refugee camp in Thailand closed, St. Paul Public Schools [prepared to welcome a new wave of Hmong refugees to the district](#). The district selected several schools to serve as [Transitional Language Centers](#) for the new refugees. One of those schools was Phalen Lake.

Xiong was then a fifth- and sixth-grade teacher for the new arrivals. “Every week, it was new families coming in,” she recalled.



Serena Lee and Fahlada Yah strike silly poses as they eat breakfast before class on Thursday, January 18, 2024. Credit: Aaron Nesheim | Sahan Journal

St. Paul Public Schools data show that before the new refugees arrived, a little less than half the students at the school were Asian; the rest were a mix of white, Black, and Hispanic. By 2008, state data show that more than 70 percent of students were Asian. That year, Phalen Lake began a Hmong studies magnet program with a focus on teaching students about culture and heritage. In 2011, the school added a dual-language immersion program so that students could develop fluency in both Hmong and English. It was the district’s second Hmong dual-language immersion program, after Jackson Elementary School began one in 2006; that school has since closed and merged its Hmong programs with Txuj Ci.

In its first year, the Phalen Lake program focused just on kindergarten; it has added a grade each year since. Middle- and high-school pathways developed since then allow students to continue their language learning throughout their school career. The kindergarteners who first enrolled in Phalen Lake’s Hmong dual-language immersion program are now high school seniors, and will graduate this spring.

Two of Xiong’s nieces participated in the early days of the language-immersion program; of 26 cousins, they are the only two who speak Hmong, Xiong said.

“They’re translating for their older siblings to Grandma,” Xiong said. “My mom’s always like, ‘I wish you guys would have started this earlier, so I can talk to more of them.’”