

Envision plan proves a turning point

Turner identified the district's Envision SPPS plan, rolled out in fall 2021, as a turning point in the district's strategy for investment in language and cultural programs. That plan aimed to close and consolidate some schools to provide all students with a well-rounded education.

Parent feedback had already shaped many parts of the district's proposal, Turner said. The plan included some significant changes to the Hmong program. Jackson Elementary School, where the Hmong immersion program had become smaller over time, would close and merge its Hmong program with Phalen Lake. The plan also laid out the opening of a new [Hmong language and culture middle school](#), which became the Txuj Ci Upper Campus.

But parents pushed back against other changes that they thought would be disruptive to immigrant families. Three of the schools slated to close served many immigrant families: [Wellstone Elementary School](#), home to a dual-language Spanish immersion program; [LEAP High School](#), which serves immigrant students new to the country; and [Highwood Hills Elementary School](#), a small school with many Somali families.



Fadumo D. Kahin, right, dressed her family in Highwood Hills Elementary's school color—orange—to protest the school's possible closure at an October 28, 2021, St. Paul school board meeting. Credit: Jaida Grey Eagle | Sahan Journal
After protest from parents, teachers, students, and alumni, the St. Paul school board ultimately [opted to keep these three schools open](#).

At this point, a new phase of work began, Turner said. Some community workgroups, already meeting before the introduction of Envision SPPS, had needed more time to create

recommendations. And the debate about closing Highwood Hills sparked new conversations about supporting East African language and culture in schools.

A workgroup of primarily Somali community members began meeting twice a month to talk about not only supporting Highwood Hills, but also investing in a districtwide program for East African language and culture, Turner said. Those efforts manifested this fall when the district opened its East African Elementary Magnet School.

“That work literally started the month after the Envision vote,” she said.

As the East African Elementary Magnet School prepared to open, the district took steps to boost enrollment at Highwood Hills so the schools would not be competing with each other. The school adopted a polytechnic focus to expose children to technical career fields. With the new focus, Highwood Hills’ enrollment rose nearly 20 percent this fall compared to last year.

For the past several years, enrollment has remained relatively steady at Wellstone, the district’s fifth-largest elementary school. And enrollment at Adams Spanish Immersion School has grown by more than a quarter in the last two years. The school had a long waiting list, which allowed it to add another kindergarten class this year, a district spokesperson said.

And at LEAP High School, which had just 121 students two years ago, enrollment has jumped to 174.

The district attributes this growth to the return of yellow school buses for high school students, a relocation to a new East Side location closer to many LEAP families, and strengthened relationships with cultural organizations that recommend LEAP to families, a spokesperson said.

Matt Olson, a music teacher at LEAP who helped lead the pushback against the school’s proposed closure, said he was not surprised by the school’s enrollment growth.

“I think all of the teachers at LEAP were always confident that we could increase numbers, increase enrollment, and support larger classes at LEAP just as we had in the past,” he said.

Next steps for cultural and language programming include rolling out Somali language classes in some high schools next fall and a second year of Karen language, Turner said. At the request of several school board members, the district will also convene an African American parent workgroup to explore cultural programming for that community. School Board Member Chauntyll Allen [told Sahan Journal last fall](#) that she hoped the district could create a year-round [Freedom School](#) with a focus on African American students.