

Faced with staff vacancies, one Minneapolis elementary turned to parents for help

Mara Klecker, Star Tribune

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For the first time in several years, Hmong International Academy in Minneapolis has a full special education staff — something that Principal Gao Xiong hardly thought possible last summer.

The public North Side elementary began the school year with just two-thirds of its support staff hired. In a year when dozens of other schools across the state were also scrambling to recruit for [hundreds of open positions](#), Hmong International Academy was short seven paraprofessionals, including several needed for the special education classrooms, which are often tough positions to fill.

"It's always stressful to have lots of vacancies," Assistant Principal Kate McNulty said. "But the opportunity it lent us was to really look within our own community."

The school is now down to a single part-time support staff opening. That turnaround, principals say, is thanks to a group of half a dozen parents and caregivers who stepped into the open support staff roles as a way to meet the needs of the school, their own families and the larger North Side neighborhood.

"They have really acted as that bridge from our school to the community," Xiong said, adding that since they started hiring parents, they've received more applicants as word has spread. "It's this win-win solution."

The parents-turned-school staff, most of whom are Black, have also helped to correct what Xiong has dubbed an "identity crisis" for the school and built a staff that better reflects the student body. Though it's named Hmong International Academy and home to the Minneapolis Public Schools' [Hmong language classes](#), only about a third of the school's 250 students identify as Asian. About 27% identify as Black or African American. In celebration of Black History Month, the parents working in the school helped plan and organize a series of events and school visits from prominent Black leaders in the community, including School Board Member Sharon El-Amin and Sen. Bobby Joe Champion, DFL-Minneapolis.

During her visit, El-Amin complimented the school's solution of hiring parents: "There's no way we can do this work alone anymore. We can't just have a school in a community; we have to have community in our schools. I love seeing that here."

Applicants to educational support professional jobs in Minneapolis Public Schools must have at least two years of college credits or pass a paraprofessional assessment to qualify for the position.

Kiara Pratt, an assistant educator working in the front office, has three sons attending the school but is a self-described "mama bear" to all the students. After working as a nurse, she took the school job because she wants students to see strong role models from their own neighborhood — something she believes can help reduce conflict and violence on the North Side.

"My favorite part is seeing these kids go from thinking that no one cares and then seeing their behavior change when we just keep pushing to let them know we're there for them," Pratt said.

KionDre Pippin is also hoping to use his position as a special education paraprofessional to motivate students, including his own son in kindergarten as well as another young boy on his caseload. That child lost his father last year and Pippin has stepped in to support him both in and outside of school.

"If we come all together as one – all the other parents who work here and live here working together – we can help get every kid of every race to be successful," Pippin said.

Mauressa Crumble-Gresham started working at the school two months ago and has a son in second grade. She loves working with children, something she didn't get the chance to do when she was working as a cook or in her previous job as a personal care assistant. Now she plans to spend her spring break researching ways to earn her teaching license. Her son, Ze'Mario Welch, is more than supportive.

"It feels good to have her here," he said on a recent morning as he came to stand by his mom during a school dance. "I guess she could have another job as long as it was still with me."

McNulty said staff has noticed that the children of the new hires have had fewer behavior issues this year. Many of them hug or wave at their mom or dad in the hallways.

"You can tell they are happy to have their parents here," she said. "Sometimes they come up to me and ask 'Did you know my mom works here?' I'm always like, 'I know! Isn't that great?'"

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