

Preserving the language

The St. Paul school district, which has two Hmong dual immersion schools, sees value in not just telling cultural stories, but telling them in the native language.

Phalen Lake Assistant Principal Sue Vang said that when she went to see her uncle in Laos a decade ago, he told her, "We're hoping when our language is gone, you people in America will be able to conserve the Hmong language for us," and noted that people were moving into cities where children learned to speak Lao, not Hmong.

"Ten or 20 years from now, I don't know how much of that original language will be left, so if it's not captured in print I think it really will be lost," said Xiong, the Hmong author.

She and Thao, a community culture specialist, have come up with nearly 300 titles for the school district over the years, soliciting ideas from the Hmong community about proverbs, folktales, poetry and other stories for children. They're working with illustrators to release a dozen new titles this year and sharing them with a group of teachers for revisions. Xiong said they're also trying to do digital versions that children can read on iPads.

They've thought about representation in other ways, too. One book about an orphan girl who finds silver and gold is based on a Hmong folktale with a male protagonist. They changed the gender because they wanted students to see more girls as characters.

"Students see themselves in these books," said Vang.

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