

## St. Paul school district halts enrollment slide. to immigrant communities.

The secret: listening

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13 - 17 minutes

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The second-graders in Mee Kong's classroom had not finished their breakfast yet, but they were ready to get to work.

Their assignment: to create a book about their mom's side of the family. One child sketched her siblings on virtual pages on her tablet. Another pulled up an old photo of her family celebrating Christmas.

"How many of your brothers and sisters go to school here?" the principal, May Lee Xiong, asked her.

"Four," the girl said, pointing to herself as a baby and three older children. Several others graduated from the elementary school, now called Txuj Ci Hmong Language and Culture Lower Campus; they now attend the middle-school program at the upper campus.

Xiong explained that the assignment served an important linguistic purpose for the Hmong dual-immersion class. In the Hmong language, relational words for the mother's side of the family are different from words for the father's side of the family. For example, grandmother is two different words depending on which parent's mother she is.

"They have to learn that," Xiong said. "We learned it naturally, because we grew up in that, but now, they don't really have that." When the school began its language-immersion program in 2011, she recalled, most students spoke Hmong at home. Now, almost none do—and parents seek out the school to provide language instruction, Xiong said.

Txuj Ci adopted its new name—which means "cultural knowledge" and was voted on by parents, students, and staff—at the beginning of this school year. But it started its Hmong programs 20 years ago. Txuj Ci is now the largest elementary school in St. Paul Public Schools, with nearly 700 K-5 students. Though many charter schools catering to the Hmong community provide instruction on Hmong culture, Xiong says her school's language immersion aspect is unique. And as word of the program has spread throughout the community, the school has grown.

This year, enrollment in Txuj Ci's kindergarten through fifth-grade classes is up by more than a third from two years ago. The prekindergarten classes had to move to a different location because the building was full. To supplement its elementary programming, in September 2022 the district opened a Hmong middle school, which is now the Txuj Ci

HMong Language and Culture Upper Campus. And St. Paul Public Schools has convened a workgroup to figure out long-term facilities solutions to Txuj Ci's enrollment growth.

In recent years, St. Paul Public Schools, like many urban school districts, has struggled with enrollment decline. One key reason: competition with charter schools. A [2022 Sahan Journal data analysis](#) found that of the 20,000 St. Paul kids who opted out of the district in the 2020-2021 school year, 60% had enrolled in charter schools—particularly those that cater to immigrant communities.

But this year, for the first time in six years, St. Paul Public Schools' enrollment decline was barely noticeable. Instead of enrollment declining by more than 1,000 students, as it had each of the past four years, the district lost just 48 kids between fall 2022 and 2023—a drop of 0.1%.

The district credits its enrollment stabilization, in part, with an investment in language and cultural programs like Txuj Ci. The four schools that have added the most students in the past two years are the Txuj Ci Lower Campus and the new Upper Campus; the new East African Elementary Magnet School; and Adams Spanish Immersion School.

Another major factor in stabilizing enrollment, according to the district, is investment in prekindergarten programs. Those programs help families “start early” in the district—and many of those families are interested in the language and culture programs, too, said Jackie Turner, the district's executive chief of administration and operations.

This academic year, St. Paul Public Schools opened East African Elementary Magnet School. More than 70 percent of students transferring into the school came from other districts, charter schools, or private schools. The district also [rolled out Karen language classes](#) in four high schools and online. Enrollment rose at Adams Spanish Immersion School, the district's second-largest elementary. And LEAP High School, which serves new immigrant students, has become a success story. In 2021, the administration proposed closing LEAP, citing falling enrollment, but ultimately the school board opted to keep it open. Now, after moving to a new location, enrollment is up there, too.

Txuj Ci's success has helped pave the way for the district's other language and cultural programs, Turner said. She attributes the programs' success to intentional choices to involve parents and community members in decision-making.

“When you jointly create, people feel invested in that work,” Turner said.