



**ASIAN AMERICAN  
AND PACIFIC ISLANDER  
STUDENT  
ACHIEVEMENT  
IN MINNESOTA**

**A MINNCAN REPORT**

# ASIAN AMERICAN AND PACIFIC ISLANDER STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN MINNESOTA

This report was published  
in February 2016 by Minncan:  
The Minnesota Campaign for  
Achievement Now

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please contact Minncan:  
[info@minncan.org](mailto:info@minncan.org)

**Minncan: The Minnesota  
Campaign for Achievement Now**  
2800 University Avenue Southeast,  
Suite 202, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55414  
[www.minncan.org](http://www.minncan.org)

*Design & Layout*  
[house9design.ca](http://house9design.ca)

This report is the first in a new series produced by MinnCAN and sponsored by The McKnight Foundation, focusing on Minnesota’s fastest growing student population: Dual Language Learners (DLLs).<sup>1</sup> By exploring success stories from communities with high percentages of DLLs, we hope to foster a much more robust conversation around how our state can support success for this important student group. This series will:

1. Recognize the increasing diversity of our state by celebrating the assets of three student groups with high proportions of DLLs: Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI), East Africans and Latinos.
2. Demonstrate that while much work remains to lead all DLL students to strong outcomes, there are local schools successfully changing the odds for these learners.
3. Share lessons from these schools with other practitioners around the state and offer promising policy ideas for our state leaders.

#### **Why “Dual Language Learners”?**

Many use the phrases “English Learners” (ELs) or “English Language Learners” (ELLs) to describe students whose native language is not English<sup>2</sup> and who therefore might need additional services to become proficient in English. We use the phrase “Dual Language Learners” to highlight that all English learners—whether they need EL services or not—are better off when they learn English *alongside* their native language(s), and when schools honor and support their growth in *both*. Rather than focusing on lack of English proficiency as a deficit, the ability to speak multiple languages should be seen as an asset. We also use this term to acknowledge that DLL students in English-only programs don’t cease to develop in their native languages outside of school, especially during the early childhood and early elementary years.

While we will generally use the phrase “DLL” throughout this series, we will periodically use “EL” and “ELL” when sharing state data specifically on EL student performance and describing the English language services provided in schools.

Regardless of how we define these terms on paper, we recognize that we must improve our state’s current system for identifying and supporting language learners. We must ensure that we are fully serving all students without over-

referring culturally and linguistically diverse children to EL services. Moreover, when students *are* placed into EL programs, it’s critical that they and their families fully understand their rights and the services available to them.

#### **Why “Asian American and Pacific Islanders”?**

Minnesota is home to an incredibly diverse Asian American and Pacific Islander population, with people of Hmong, Indian, Chinese and Vietnamese backgrounds making up about two-thirds of the population, and a mix of more than 20 other ethnicities, from Korean to Burmese, making up the remaining one-third.<sup>3</sup> While there are DLL students from all of these backgrounds, since the 1970s, Minnesota’s Southeast Asian population has grown dramatically<sup>4</sup> and the education ecosystem has responded with a number of targeted programs.

This report, the first in our series on DLLs, focuses heavily on these programs. At the same time, state-level data continue to group all AAPI students together, which limits our ability to understand outcomes for students of different ethnicities. For this reason, and because many of the school strategies we explore reach beyond Southeast Asian learners, we refer throughout the report to AAPI students broadly.

In addition to The McKnight Foundation, we would like to thank the following sponsors for providing generous support to this particular report:



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# Foreword

**BY MEE MOUA**

PRESIDENT AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,  
ASIAN AMERICANS ADVANCING JUSTICE  
FORMER MINNESOTA STATE SENATOR\*

Every day, I work to make Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders see their power and use it to advocate for a fair and more just society, not just for themselves, but for all. And every day, I wonder, “How different would my work be if our schools—where so many individuals find their path in life and so many immigrants have their first, most formative and substantial experiences with American society—beat me to the punch?”

Imagine a world where all AAPI children feel affirmed from the moment they step into school. Imagine if schools were a place where AAPI students could feel proud of who they are, and where their families were meaningfully engaged in their learning. Imagine if all of this led to increased academic success.

We need to ensure that each and every student attends a school that affirms who they are and then helps them become better, smarter, more curious and more ambitious versions of themselves.

We have a long way to go to achieve this dream, which makes me all the more excited about the stories featured in this report. In the pages that follow, you’ll read about teachers and school leaders who are slowly but surely beginning to create these schools for their AAPI students.

Let these stories make you wonder, as I do every day, about how different—how much better—our society would be if all schools empowered AAPI learners and families.

Then, let this report compel you to ask the new question I now ask myself every day, “How can I help advocate to create and support more of these schools?”



\*Mee Moua was the first Hmong American woman elected to a state legislature.



1



4



2



5



3

- 1 Weaver Elementary School
- 2 From left to right, Noble Deputy Superintendent of Academics Dr. Mai Yia Chang and Superintendent Neal Thao
- 3 Phalen Lake Principal Catherine Rich
- 4 Weaver Elementary Principal Pangjua Xiong
- 5 Phalen Lake Assistant Principal Bee Lee

# Introduction

“Our kids need to believe in themselves.”

—PANGJUA XIONG, PRINCIPAL OF WEAVER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

While the nearby hallways buzzed with children and activity, Weaver Elementary School Principal Pangjua Xiong sat with us in her quiet, cozy office to share her educational philosophy. Her school serves the St. Paul suburb of Maplewood, which, like so many other communities in Minnesota, has seen its Asian American and Pacific Islander student population grow significantly in recent years. And while Xiong is constantly exploring new ways to support her school’s culturally and linguistically diverse AAPI learners, there is one constant that grounds it all: ensuring that AAPI students believe in their own potential.<sup>5</sup>

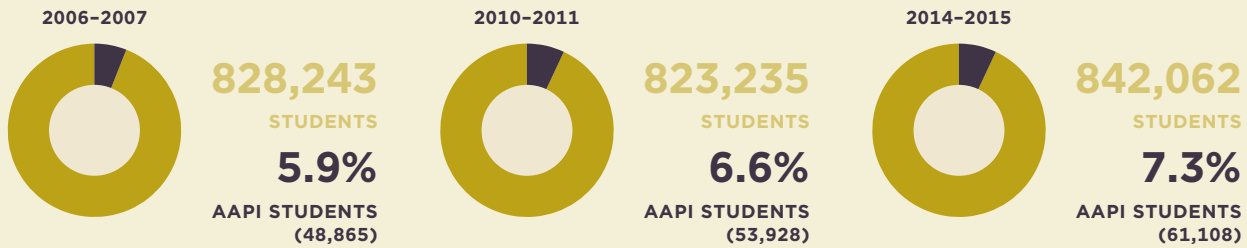
With this report, we aim to show how Minnesota educators, including Xiong, are helping AAPI students and families build from this baseline. We aim to help parents, teachers, advocates and other stakeholders across our state believe in AAPI learners, and to share promising practices and policy ideas to build on current successes and ramp up academic achievement for all AAPI students.

Because the truth is that right now, our state is not doing enough to lead all AAPI students—a population that is growing<sup>6</sup> and increasingly diverse, linguistically, culturally and socioeconomically—to strong outcomes.

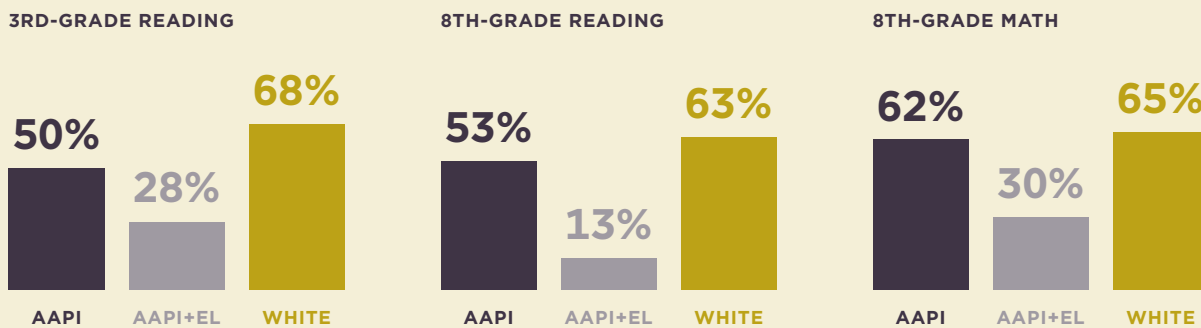
Wondering why this data is not broken down by ethnic community? Learn why on page 19.

**While Minnesota’s AAPI student population is steadily increasing,<sup>7</sup> our schools are struggling to lead all AAPI students—especially DLLs—to strong academic outcomes.<sup>8</sup> What’s more, AAPI students in Minnesota are not faring as well as their AAPI peers in other states.<sup>9</sup>**

*K–12 enrollment in Minnesota*



*2015 Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments, proficiency rates*



*Minnesota vs other states*

**27** OUT OF **29**

On the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Minnesota ranked **27th out of 29** states on fourth-grade reading proficiency for AAPI students.

**3rd** LARGEST GAP

On the 2015 NAEP, Minnesota had the **third largest proficiency gap** on fourth-grade reading between white and AAPI students.

**46** OUT OF **50**

For 2013-2014 high school graduation rates, Minnesota ranked **46th out of 50** states for AAPI students.



Although we cannot yet say that any Minnesota community has completely changed these odds, there are pockets of tremendous promise: schools that are using data, accountability and transparency to strategically drive AAPI student growth; schools where staff are developing creative methods for effectively building relationships with community members, with a close eye towards making AAPI students and families feel welcome and heard; schools where educators are re-vamping instruction to honor AAPI learners’ native language, culture and history; and schools that are pairing high standards with high supports to ensure success for all.

In this report, we showcase three such schools in the Twin Cities metro area—where the majority of AAPIs in Minnesota live<sup>10</sup>—to help demonstrate how educators are meeting the needs of these learners. We organize the promising practices we found in these schools and policy recommendations to scale up their success by theme in the pages that follow.

Of course, this report cannot possibly capture all of the great work happening in Minnesota classrooms to support AAPI learners and their families, nor can it uncover the challenges and achievements of *every* AAPI student or group, who come from such a wide range of ethnic, linguistic, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. It also cannot do justice to all of the success stories and lingering concerns that teachers, parents and community leaders shared with us, on issues ranging from mental health to school discipline.

We hope, however, that it can serve as a *starting point* for a discussion—a discussion about what is possible, what is working and what needs to change to help even more AAPI students get a strong start in Minnesota’s K–12 system.

We hope that the stories and promising practices shared here will spark not only conversations, but real innovations across the state. Moreover, we hope that the policy recommendations will be a call to action for state leaders. We invite you, the reader, to be a part of the conversation, innovation and action, tapping into the limitless and unique potential of Minnesota’s AAPI students.

# What schools do we feature and why?

We looked to both data and our partners on the ground for insights on where AAPI students—and especially DLLs—are thriving, and where families feel their kids are receiving rigorous and relevant education opportunities. While we couldn't visit every school that was recommended to us, nor could we capture every success story we uncovered during our visits, this report is our best attempt to synthesize themes, share stories and pollinate ideas from the following three schools. Each of these schools were deemed Celebration Eligible\* in 2015 and are achieving results for AAPI students and DLLs that are significantly higher than state and district averages.\*\*

\*Celebration Eligible schools are the 25 percent of schools directly below the cutoff of Reward schools, which are the top 15 percent of Title I schools based on the MMR. Celebration Eligible schools may apply to the Minnesota Department of Education to be Celebration schools. "Priority, Focus and Reward Schools." Minnesota Department of Education, accessed Jan. 25, 2016, <http://education.state.mn.us/mde/justparent/esea/priorityfocus/rewardsch/index.html>.

\*\* All student demographic data was pulled from MDE's "State Report Card 2014-15" unless school leaders were able to provide us with updated figures for the 2015-16 school year.

# Noble Academy

**Location:** Brooklyn Park

**School leaders:** Superintendent Neal Thao

Deputy Superintendent of Academics Dr. Mai Yia Chang

Principal Kevin Munsterteiger

In response to growing demand from the Hmong community for a school that met their academic and cultural needs, Neal Thao founded Noble Academy in 2007. The public charter school—which started out in a basement in Brooklyn Park, and gradually grew into its new building with the capacity for 1,200 students—offers Hmong Language and Culture to all learners. “There was a demand from the community,” Superintendent Thao says. “Parents wanted this school.” Thao and Noble’s Deputy Superintendent of Academics, Dr. Mai Yia Chang, believe it is their focus on Hmong culture and literacy, coupled with a commitment to high academic standards and continuous improvement, that makes their school attractive to families. “As good as we are, we can always get better,” Thao says.

\*(page 11) Students with family incomes below 130 percent of the Federal Poverty Level are entitled to free school lunch, and students with family incomes below 185 percent of the Federal Poverty Level are entitled to a reduced-price lunch. “National School Lunch Program,” United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, p. 2, accessed Jan. 25, 2016, <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/NSLPFactSheet.pdf>.

Below: Noble Academy

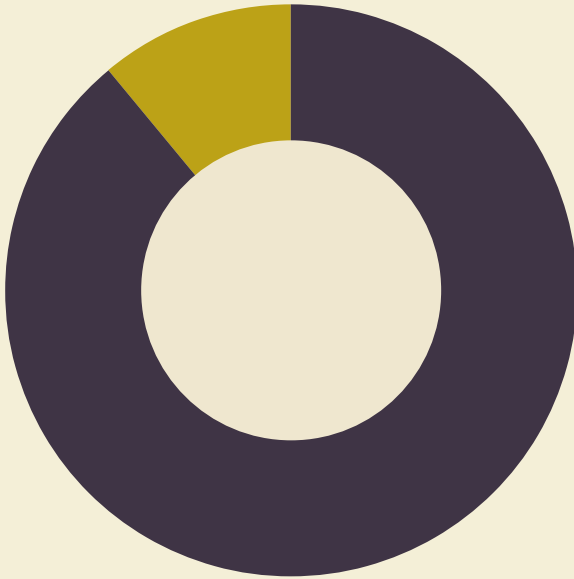


# Quick facts<sup>11</sup>

Public charter school serving

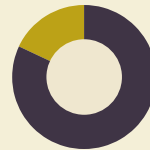
# 620

STUDENTS  
GRADES K-8



## 89%

AAPI



## 82%

EL

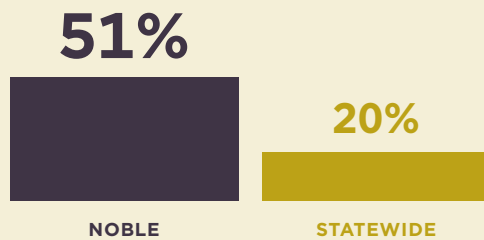


## 75%\*

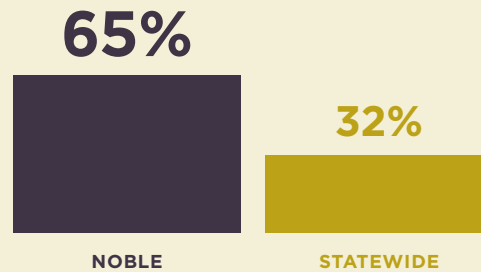
FRL

**Performance highlights:**<sup>12</sup> Percentage of students classified as both AAPI and EL who were proficient on the 2015 MCAs

Reading



Math



# Phalen Lake Hmong Studies Magnet School

**Location:** *St. Paul*

**School leaders:** *Principal Catherine Rich  
Assistant Principal Bee Lee*

Previously a traditional St. Paul district neighborhood school, Phalen Lake became a regional east-side Hmong Studies magnet school in 2008, when the district predicted—correctly—that the neighborhood would soon see a large influx of AAPI, mostly Hmong, students. Phalen Lake now offers Hmong Studies courses to all students, and also hosts a language academy\* for new-to-country students and a two-way Hmong immersion program. Serving students with such varying needs and interests can be a challenge, but Phalen Lake staff believe that high expectations for students, and a collaborative, reflective practice among educators help them be successful.

\*Language Academies are designed for newcomer students in grades 1-6 with language proficiencies ranging from no English to having some high frequency words and chunks to being able to communicate some basic needs. "Language Academy," St. Paul Public Schools, The Office of Multilingual Learning, accessed Jan. 25, 2016, [http://ml.spps.org/language\\_academy](http://ml.spps.org/language_academy).

Below: Phalen Lake Hmong Studies Magnet School

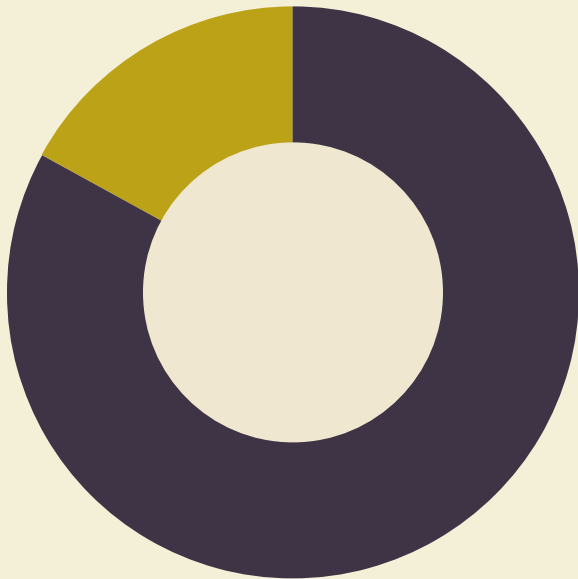


# Quick facts<sup>13</sup>

St. Paul Public Schools magnet program serving

# 750

STUDENTS  
GRADES PREK-5



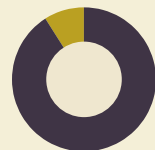
## 83%

AAPI



## 86%

EL



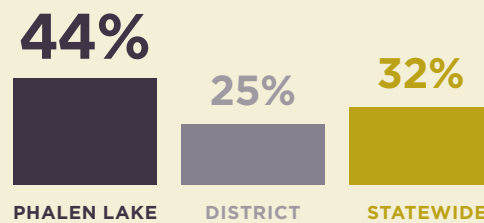
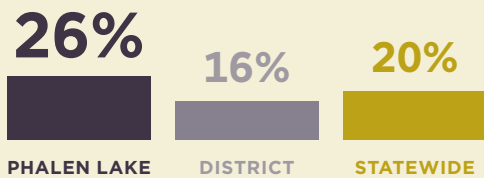
## 91%

FRL

**Performance highlights:**<sup>14</sup> Percentage of students classified as both AAPI and EL who were proficient on the 2015 MCAs

Reading

Math



# Weaver Elementary School

**Location:** *Maplewood*

**School leaders:** *Principal Pangjua Xiong*

Nestled in the St. Paul suburb of Maplewood, Weaver Elementary School has seen its student body become much more diverse in the past decade, as have many other suburban Minnesota district schools. Much of the change at Weaver can be attributed to the school's growing AAPI population, which, according to Principal Pangjua Xiong, is composed mostly of Hmong and Vietnamese students. To better serve the school's AAPI students and families, as well as their Somali and Spanish-speaking peers, Xiong has doubled down on parent engagement, data-driven decisions and strategies, high standards and a growth mindset for all students, regardless of their home language or background.

Below: Weaver Elementary School



# Quick facts<sup>15</sup>

North St. Paul-Maplewood-Oakdale public district school serving

# 530

STUDENTS  
GRADES K-5



## 38%

AAPI



## 35%

EL



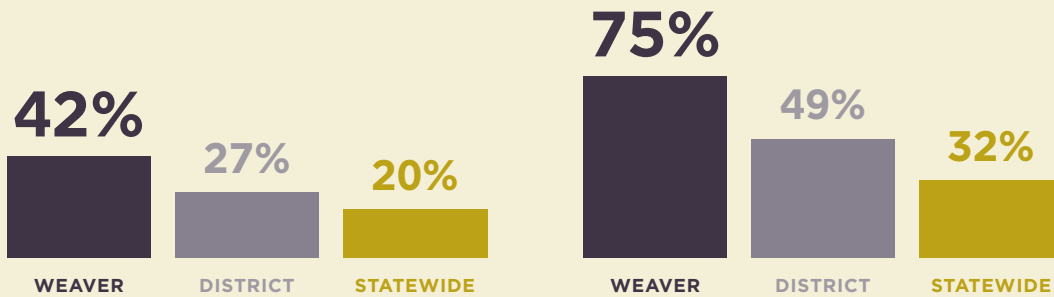
## 58%

FRL

**Performance highlights:**<sup>16</sup> Percentage of students classified as both AAPI and EL who were proficient on the 2015 MCAs

Reading

Math





# Data + accountability

The schools we visited are strategically and effectively using data to track student growth and proficiency, tailor instruction, target interventions and hold themselves accountable to parents and the larger community—all while focusing on the underlying goal: effective teaching that drives learning. Accountability systems rooted in objective student data are particularly important for historically underserved students who could more easily slip through the cracks before schools tracked, released and applied student performance data. Although there's more we can do to better monitor and further disaggregate student performance, schools are already leveraging the data they do have in service of student learning.

## *Promising practices*

**1** *Educators are embracing and utilizing data.* Teachers and school leaders see data as a tool to help them better understand which instructional strategies are working and which aren't, which students are progressing and which students need additional assistance. Data is also guiding professional development priorities. At Phalen Lake, for example, weekly grade-level team meetings are an important tool for driving student growth. In these meetings, teachers and support staff come together to review student assessment results, identify progress and challenges and develop concrete strategies for moving students forward.



Above: Weaver Elementary School

**2** *Educators are differentiating their instruction—and then differentiating it again.* The schools we visited have large percentages of AAPI students at all points on the language spectrum—from new-to-country DLLs to native English speakers, and everything in between. Because students with different backgrounds and abilities bring unique needs to the classroom, teachers at Noble Academy use data to constantly reassess where their students are, regroup them accordingly and then provide differentiated instruction to help every child hit their learning targets. This kind of differentiation is particularly important to DLL students and teachers. In one classroom, a teacher might have students who are strong readers in their home language (and thus have considerable critical thinking skills and content knowledge) and students who have limited literacy in all languages. These students are the same age, have the same EL classification, and yet, they have very different needs. Only by looking at objective data and tailoring instruction for individual students accordingly can teachers help all students excel. “Our teachers are trained to be master differentiators,” says Dr. Chang.

**3** *Schools are being transparent about data with families.* To foster strong relationships, communicate academic expectations and create buy-in, schools are increasingly sharing data goals and progress with students' families. "We're never afraid of sharing our [test] scores with anyone," says Noble Academy Superintendent Thao. At Noble, where monthly calls between parents and teachers are routine, teachers provide updates on students' academic progress, as measured by assessments. To avoid having data feel scary or daunting when the calls might include bad news, teachers always share a classroom success story about a child with the family. And at Phalen Lake, teachers share updates on student progress towards standards via monthly classroom newsletters that they send home with students. Additionally, the school is very transparent about their MCA goals, ensuring all families understand them at the beginning of the year.

### ***Policy Recommendation***

**1** *Disaggregate student data by ethnic community.* Currently, at the state level, all AAPI students in Minnesota are grouped together and tracked under the category "Asian." This means that we are measuring, for example, third-generation Chinese-American students and new-to-country Laotian learners all under one catchall umbrella. By further disaggregating student performance data, such as MCA results, kindergarten readiness and high school graduation rates, by ethnic community, the state could paint a much better picture of how students and schools are doing, while also shedding light on what's working for different student groups. Moreover, a more nuanced picture of student outcomes will allow us to better target funding and ramp up support for the student groups that need it most.

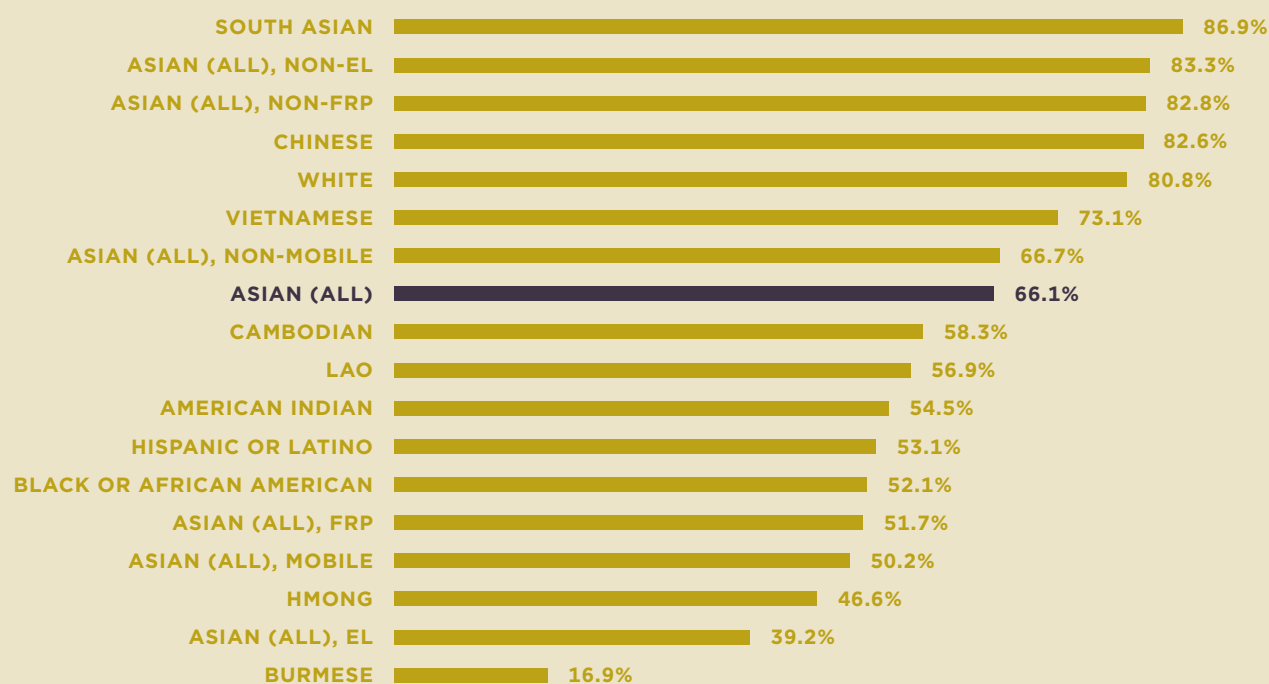
Better data disaggregation would also allow us to better evaluate student outcomes across schools and districts. While on the ground schools might have a good sense of which types of AAPI students they're serving, current data provides no benchmark for broader analysis. For example, are districts with strong AAPI student outcomes serving students of the same ethnicities as other districts? Without disaggregated data, we have no way to know.

# “There’s a lot of diversity *within* the diversity.”

—BO THAO-URABE, COUNCIL OF ASIAN AMERICAN LEADERS

Collecting more granular data on AAPI student performance is so critical to community members that in 2012, the Council on Asian Pacific Minnesotans worked with the Minnesota Department of Education to try to disaggregate AAPI student achievement data as best they could, using students’ self-reported primary language at home<sup>17</sup> as an indicator of their ethnic group. Although this method was admittedly imperfect (for example, ethnicity could not be deduced for an AAPI student who reports speaking primarily English at home), it still yielded eye-opening results that unearthed wide academic achievement gaps *within* the AAPI student population. Consider this graph of proficiency rates on the 2011 reading MCAs, which the Council on Asian Pacific Minnesotans did their best to disaggregate.<sup>18</sup>

## Percentage of students proficient in MCA II reading, 2011



Having an accurate and consistent system for tracking and reporting this data every year, on a variety of measures, across schools and districts would be an incredibly powerful tool for evaluating what is and is not moving the needle for AAPI students.

Thankfully, states and school districts across the country, including Hawaii, Washington state and San Diego Public Schools<sup>19</sup>, are already implementing such systems to disaggregate student data by ethnic group. In the San Diego Unified School District, for example, schools collect more detailed demographic information from students in the district enrollment form. Since disaggregating this information by ethnic group, the district has been able to target resources to address the student groups who struggle most, particularly in developing English language fluency.<sup>20</sup>

With Minnesota's student population growing more diverse each year, it is time to follow suit and make sure our policies and systems track in-depth data that will help every student in Minnesota excel.

Below: Noble Academy



**2** *Track “Total English Learners.”* In order to more accurately understand how DLL students perform, and how our schools can better support them, it is critical that we continue to monitor these students *after* they have met basic English proficiency and exited EL services. Currently, students assessed as having limited English proficiency are labeled as ELs and receive language support services. But once they are able to access instructional content in English, participate in mainstream academic classes in English and demonstrate their academic knowledge on Minnesota’s math and literacy tests, they are generally exited from EL services and no longer tracked or counted as ELs.<sup>21</sup>

As Conor Williams, founding director of New America’s Dual Language Learner National Work Group writes, “Not only does this contribute to an unfair and inaccurate narrative about language learners—that, as a group, they are supposedly a drag on schools’ academic performance—but it makes accountability systems problematic.”<sup>22</sup> By systematically removing students from the EL subgroup as they become proficient in English, and not tracking how they then fare in mainstream classes, it becomes impossible to determine which schools and practices are proving successful for these students over the long haul.<sup>23</sup>

To ensure the long-term academic success of DLLs, we must more closely monitor their success after they have exited the revolving door of EL classification. Oregon has been collecting data on “Ever English Learners” since 2006–07,<sup>24</sup> while California and Iowa have recently taken steps to better define and track so-called “Total English Learners.” By following suit and disaggregating student achievement data for this new grouping of former ELs, it would become possible for us to see how different Minnesota school- and district-level approaches to educating ELs are working long-term, helping us to uncover and replicate best practices.

# Family engagement

“The system works best if parents are engaged.”

—BO THAO-URABE, COUNCIL OF ASIAN AMERICAN LEADERS

As we talked to schools and community members focused on driving AAPI student success, we found that deep family engagement is a critical tool for both assessing student needs and tailoring relevant and responsive supports, whether school-wide or one-on-one. For schools that are successful, family engagement is all about collaboration and relationships that benefit both the school and families. Teachers are listening to parents to increase their impact in the classroom, and parents are becoming more empowered to support their students outside of school walls. This follows with research showing that when families are engaged in their children’s schools, students generally have better academic outcomes.<sup>25</sup>

While parent engagement is critical for all students, community and school leaders highlighted the added importance for immigrant, refugee and other families who might struggle to navigate the American education system. Intentional engagement strategies can help families navigate both language and cultural barriers, learning not only key expectations and how to engage as a parent advocate, but also the two-way supports that may be available to them in the process.

## *Promising practices*

**1** *Teachers are literally meeting families where they are.* More and more, schools are conducting home visits as a means to foster strong teacher-family relationships and to help teachers get a better sense of what students’ home life is like so that they can provide appropriate supports. At Noble Academy, for example, at the beginning of each year, classroom teachers make personal home visits to meet with every student’s family. One teacher shared with us that home visits helped her understand that for students with large families at home, quiet space to complete lengthy reading assignments was truly at a premium. She’s therefore differentiated the types of assignments she sends home to ensure that all students meet key expectations—and that she’s setting them up to do so successfully.



**2** *Schools are creating a feedback loop with families.* By soliciting ongoing feedback from families, school staff can foster trusting relationships and, what’s more, gain valuable input on how the school is doing and where it can improve. At Noble, the staff conducts a parent survey three times each year, even offering up the school’s computer lab and providing translators to remove barriers families might have in participating and sharing their feedback. (Students and teachers also take a survey three times each year!) Meanwhile, at Phalen Lake, the family room provides a less formal way for families to drop in, ask questions and share concerns. “Families can feel heard,” says Rich of the open and candid communication she strives to achieve at her school.

**3** *Through creativity and strategic partnerships, schools are offering more resources to students and families.* As a traditional district school, Weaver shares many resources and staff with neighbor-

#### SCHOOL SNAPSHOT

### A community space at Phalen Lake

Family engagement is so critical to Phalen Lake that the school has set aside an entire room for it. Staffed by two family liaisons and home to the school’s bilingual educational assistants, the “family room” is constantly open to parents, siblings and even grandparents. While the room is a resource center on the surface, with everything from school information to technology access, it has grown into much more. When a student’s grandmother was recently locked out of her house, the family room was her go-to, where she went for help and a safe space to wait. “Think of that grandma in a different setting,” Assistant Principal Bee Lee said. “At Phalen, we wrap around her and find out what she needs.”<sup>26</sup>

Neftali Ramirez, a Spanish-speaking family liaison who has worked at Phalen Lake for 12 years, says that the family room, coupled with his efforts and those of his colleagues (who speak Karen, Burmese and Hmong), makes families feel welcome at the school. Phalen Lake Principal Catherine Rich confirms this, saying that, “Families come in with community needs, questions and concerns.” Her team rises to the occasion, offering information on everything from energy assistance to employment opportunities. “We try to be prepared for anything,” says Ramirez.<sup>27</sup> “Families contact us when they have questions about middle school and high school,” he explains, pointing out that families continue to see Phalen Lake as a resource to them, long after their children leave its halls.



ing schools in the community, so Principal Xiong has gotten creative about getting more resources for families into the school. For example, she invited the district’s lone Hmong bilingual liaison to office out of Weaver. Although the liaison spreads her time across the district, having a home base at Weaver means that she can be more readily available to translate events and conferences (the latter of which a full 95 percent of Weaver parents attend), and generally be a liaison for AAPI families at the school. Additionally, Xiong has built partnerships with the larger community of Maplewood, perhaps most notably by initiating a backpack stuffing program with local churches to address increasing poverty and hunger among students and families.

Below: Phalen Lake Hmong Studies Magnet School



# Celebrating students’ native language + culture

Mounting evidence shows that strong home language literacy skills contribute to DLLs’ academic success. Studies show, for example, that students instructed in their native language as well as in English perform better, on average, on measures of English reading proficiency than EL students instructed only in English.<sup>28</sup> Not only does preserving their native language help DLLs master English, but their bilingualism also offers a myriad of cognitive, social and economic benefits. For example, bilingual young adults perform better in the job market<sup>29</sup> and are more likely to demonstrate problem-solving skills<sup>30</sup> and even creativity.<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps it is no surprise then that many AAPI families in Minnesota want their schools to provide opportunities for children to study their native language, history and culture. In July 2015, for example, the Council on Asian Pacific Minnesotans reported that, in a survey of parents and primary caretakers of Southeast Asian preschool-age children, 85 percent said it is “very important” that children speak and understand their cultural community or communities’ language(s).<sup>32</sup>

Schools around the state are responding, both to parent demand and to the research, by offering programming that is in some cases steeped in AAPI culture, and in other cases focused on dual language learning. While exact approaches and strategies vary, educators are paying more attention to honoring and celebrating the home language and culture of AAPI students—and, already, they’re seeing promising results.

## ***Promising practices***

**1** *Educators are encouraging home language literacy and fluency.* “Read with your child in your native language. Keep that language strong.” This is the message Weaver Elementary School Principal Pangjua Xiong encourages staff to pass on to parents. Not only does research consistently show that keeping their native language strong can have positive benefits on a child’s academic career, but it also empowers families who might not read or speak English to know that they can still play a big role in helping their children learn.

Additionally, at Phalen Lake, teachers and administrators are seeing amazing results from their growing two-way immersion program. Hmong students are building confidence and doing better with their English oral skills. Having a stronger grasp of their native language, teacher Defrance Schmidt says, helps immersion students gain a stronger grasp of English as well.

**2** *Schools want students to feel confident in what they can do.* To boost confidence, schools want students to feel good about what they can do, regardless of their English proficiency. To that end, for example, Noble Academy is very careful to send DLL children home with assignments that they can complete, even if their families can’t help them. “We send home homework that we know students *can* do by themselves,” explains Noble sixth-grade teacher Hannah Powell.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, at Phalen Lake, Assistant Principal Lee reports that teachers encourage students to work together in pairs using academic language, so that kids know that they can later practice those same skills at home by themselves, without the presence of a teacher or another adult.

**3** *Educators are striving to have students see their culture and traditions reflected in the school building.* By being more intentional about everything from curriculum to classroom decorations, schools are working to make students—as young as pre-K learners—see their backgrounds reflected and celebrated in school. At Phalen Lake, for example, elders in the local Hmong community came together to build a traditional Hmong house in the school library. “We wanted students to see, honor and understand the contributions of their elders,” Principal Rich says of the Hmong house and a video series fifth-graders made to document the construction project.

## SCHOOL SNAPSHOT

### Focusing on the “how” at Phalen Lake

Although Phalen Lake focuses on Hmong Studies, an underlying goal of the school is to have students from *all* backgrounds contribute to and become an active member in an increasingly multicultural society. And so, while families and students might choose the school for the Hmong focus, they also benefit from the school’s many—and intentional—multicultural offerings. In fact, this focus on multiculturalism has a long history: even before Phalen Lake became a Hmong Studies magnet, the school offered classes in both Hmong and Latino Language and Culture.

Phalen Lake affirms students’ languages, identities and culture in a variety of ways. For example, the school has documents translated into Hmong, Karen and Spanish; has bilingual family liaisons and educational assistants on staff; and offers the school’s flagship “folktale of the month” in Hmong, Spanish and Karen to all students, including those in the pre-K program. In short, the school works to celebrate *every* child’s culture. “The underlying belief is that if you learn another culture, you have a deeper understanding of your own,” says Principal Rich.

While the school works to serve students from all backgrounds, the Hmong focus is at its core. Since 2011, the school has been home to a dual language immersion program, which begins in kindergarten, where students receive instruction 90 percent in Hmong and 10 percent in English. Gradually, the students are exposed to more English, and by third grade, they receive instruction half in each language. Founded in response to requests from the local Hmong community, which was becoming concerned that their language and culture were being lost, the immersion program is steadily growing each year to accommodate demand.

But, as Assistant Principal Lee says, “Two-way immersion is just one piece of the puzzle that enhances a different kind of learning.” Most important is *how* Phalen Lake delivers its programs. Central to the school’s approach are high academic ex-

pectations for all students—regardless of their background and language proficiency—and collaboration among educators, through both co-teaching in the classroom and shared decision-making throughout the building, particularly around annual goals.

In order to hold high expectations for all children, including those in the school’s language academy for new-to-country students, the staff is intentional about engaging all students in active learning and supporting a sense of pride for those at all levels. “Newcomer students are part of the classroom,” explains Stephanie Defrance Schmidt, a fifth-grade ELL teacher at Phalen Lake.<sup>34</sup> By keeping all children together in the same classroom, where they are supported by a co-teaching team that brings both content and language expertise, Phalen Lake’s hope is that students won’t focus on their differences as deficits, and that they will all feel valued right off the bat. Whether students are participating in whole group or small group learning, there is always an emphasis on student empowerment through peer-to-peer talk—focusing specifically on developing and using academic language. “My neighbor is my intellectual colleague.” This, according to Principal Rich, is how they want all children to think. This not only increases engagement, but encourages ownership over learning.

Co-teaching and collaboration are key to accelerating and differentiating learning, and building a strong staff culture. Among educators, there is a sense that they are always growing and learning together, and most importantly, working together to meet the diverse needs of their students.

In the school’s folktale room, Minnesota Reading Corps members painted a mural of a Lao village and the Concordia University summer camp donated a Hmong house, as well. “We use this a lot as a teaching tool to talk about what life was like in Laos,” says Phalen Lake Dual Language Curriculum Coordinator May Lee Xiong. “It helps give value to what the students bring to us.” The folktale of the month is also an important way to help all students feel valued. By sharing stories bilingually, in a combination of English, Hmong, Karen and Spanish, teachers seek to honor not only multiple languages, but also the oral tradition of other cultures.

**Policy Recommendation**

**1** *Increase teacher diversity + bilingualism.* Research shows that students of color benefit academically when placed with teachers of the same race.<sup>35</sup> And yet in Minnesota, while our schools are now 30 percent students of color, only four percent of teachers are people of color. Perhaps even more shocking, for every AAPI teacher in Minnesota, there are 70 AAPI students.<sup>36</sup> Minnesota’s student population is only expected to grow more diverse, and if family interest at Weaver, Phalen Lake and Noble is any indication, demand for AAPI language and culture classes will only grow stronger. Already, Weaver Principal Xiong says that she would love to offer Hmong language classes—and parents are certainly asking her to—but a shortage of Hmong-speaking teachers is a significant barrier.

IN MINNESOTA, FOR EACH WHITE TEACHER, THERE ARE

11

WHITE STUDENTS



IN MINNESOTA, FOR EACH AAPI TEACHER, THERE ARE

70

AAPI STUDENTS



To meet the needs of Minnesota’s current and future students, state policymakers must get serious and creative about increasing teacher diversity and bilingualism, focusing on widening and strengthening the teacher talent pipeline. A good place to start would be to invest state resources in the expansion of teacher preparation programs that are effectively cultivating teachers of color.

At the same time, the state should remove barriers keeping teachers of color out of the classroom. District hiring officials cite both testing and licensure requirements as barriers to recruitment and hiring.<sup>37</sup> Teacher candidates from other states, the majority of which have a higher percentage of teachers of color than Minnesota,<sup>38</sup> face particular licensure hurdles and streamlining procedures must be a priority. Finally, the state should clarify and improve the licensure process for community experts—many of whom might have cultural and linguistic experience relevant to AAPI students.

**2** *Increase cultural competency support for educators—in both teacher preparation and job-embedded professional development.* As Minnesota’s student population grows increasingly diverse, it becomes more critical that both new teachers and seasoned educators receive training and ongoing professional development to better support their diverse learners. To help teachers make their instruction more relevant to and supportive of students, and to honor the cultural backgrounds students and their families bring, teacher preparation programs must prioritize intercultural awareness and communication, awareness of one’s own culture and culturally relevant teaching and curriculum.

**3** *Expand funding for targeted, high-quality, parent-directed early learning opportunities.* With research consistently finding that home language proficiency is an important precursor to DLLs’ success in learning English, it’s critical that families be able to send their young children to high-quality early learning opportunities steeped in their native language.<sup>39</sup> The Council on Asian Pacific Minnesotans’ report cited earlier found that many Southeast Asian parents—62 percent of those surveyed—consider it “extremely important” that they be able to send their children to early learning programs with providers who can speak the language from the child’s cultural community. That same survey found that, currently, 66 percent of Southeast Asian children are cared for by parents, grandparents or other relatives—perhaps in part because relatives can help children preserve their language and culture. Only 11 percent of surveyed parents report that they enroll their children in Head Start, a child care center, nursery or preschool.<sup>40</sup>

To support AAPI DLLs' success in learning English, and to help their families preserve their native language and culture, the Legislature should continue to expand access to high-quality, linguistically and culturally diverse early learning programs, and work to build a pipeline of multilingual, diverse early educators to staff them. In addition, Parent Aware, the state's early childhood quality rating and improvement system, should continue to prioritize culturally relevant and diverse early learning programs and take into account appropriate learning environments and supports for language learners. Finally, the Legislature should empower communities and districts to *align* PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade opportunities and build out coherent systems for early childhood educators to share resources and coordinate curriculum across the pre-K to third grade continuum.

**4** *Rethink charter school accountability systems.* With AAPI families increasingly asking for schools that honor and teach their native language and culture, Minnesota's charter school community has grown to offer several schools to meet this need. As the AAPI population in Minnesota grows, it is likely that parent demand will continue to fuel AAPI-specific charter school options. It is important to provide these choices to families, but equally important that all school options be strong, culturally *and* academically.

To ensure that all charter schools not only deliver on the unique cultural programming they set out to provide, but also set and help children meet high academic standards, Minnesota must take a multi-pronged approach. The state should work to preserve culturally relevant schools, empower charter authorizers to manage their schools more effectively and, finally, hold accountable schools that are not meeting the needs of their students. By encouraging improvement among charter schools, Minnesota can take an important step towards ensuring that every child has access to a culturally relevant *and* academically rigorous school.



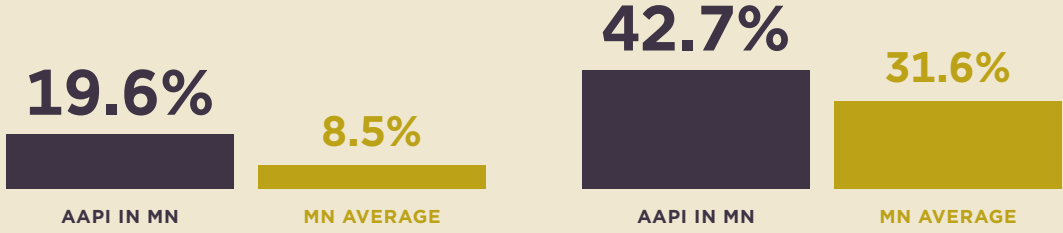
# High expectations + high supports

The data on educational outcomes for AAPI Minnesotans tell us two divergent stories. On the one hand, they are significantly more likely to hold a college degree than Minnesotans of other races and ethnicities. On the other, the number of AAPI Minnesotans without a high school diploma is nearly double the state average.<sup>41</sup> Too often, expectations for students also fall along this divide, with the “model minority myth” pigeonholing some as high achievers, while the unique linguistic, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds of others can lead to lowered expectations—a self-fulfilling prophecy which can actually harm students’ academic achievement.<sup>42</sup>

### *Educational Attainment (Population 25+)*

*Less than High School*

*At Least a Bachelor’s Degree*





At the schools we visited we found just the opposite, with deep cultures of high academic expectations for *all* students, regardless of their ethnic, cultural, linguistic or socioeconomic backgrounds. “We’re going to take students where they are and we’re going to grow them,” says Phalen Lake Assistant Principal Lee. “We move them forward, no questions asked.”

These high expectations for AAPI students are important, but to actually help children *reach* them, teachers and school leaders must hold themselves as educators to similarly high standards to move their students forward. By building a healthy school culture, with high expectations for students and high supports for teachers as the foundation, they’re seeing strong results across the board.

### ***Promising practices***

**1** *Schools are closing the belief gap among teachers.* In our conversations with leaders and teachers at the featured schools, the “belief gap”—whereby many have lowered expectations for students of color relative to their white peers—came up again and again. To truly hold high expectations for children, it is critical that teachers believe their students can actually reach them. This is why the schools we visited are confronting and closing the belief gap, training teachers to see the academic potential of each and every child and embracing their unique backgrounds as assets.

“Our classroom teachers have a really good mindset for growth,” Principal Xiong says of her team at Weaver. “That’s important, to know that your children can learn.” “We’re closing the belief gap and the achievement gap,” echoes Dr. Chang of Noble Academy. At Phalen Lake, with its language academy, dual language immersion program and many other services for AAPI and DLL students, staff members firmly believe that all students can achieve at the same high levels. “We take new families coming through the door, and right away, we hold them to high standards,” says Assistant Principal Lee.

**2** *Schools are closing the belief gap among students, too.* At the featured schools, strategies to strengthen school culture and provide more support to teachers all feed into the same underlying goal: ensuring all students thrive academically. That’s why educators must also communicate their standards around academics and school culture to students and get *their* buy-in in to the expectations that have been set. To that end, at Noble Academy, teachers know that growth is important, but hold academic proficiency as their bottom line goal. “Of course we

want to celebrate growth, but the goal is getting our students to grade level,” Dr. Chang says.

At Weaver Elementary School, Principal Pangjua Xiong wants students to not only hold themselves to high academic standards, but to also see themselves as *leaders*. To that end, she’s applying to adopt “The Leader in Me” curriculum. The curriculum promotes seven habits—stressing creativity, leadership and responsibility—and empowers teachers to weave leadership opportunities for students into the school day.<sup>45</sup> “Our kids need to know that they can be leaders, to know that they have potential,” Xiong says.

## SCHOOL SNAPSHOT

### School culture + staff empowerment at Noble

Noble Academy staff pride themselves on providing the culture and language programming parents seek alongside high expectations—both for students and their teachers. “The academic rigor really extends to the teaching staff,” says Noble Academy Principal Kevin Munsterteiger.<sup>40</sup> Classroom teacher Hannah Powell agrees: “We really hold a high standard for our students, and for ourselves as teachers.” School leaders accomplish this by fostering a collaborative, healthy culture for staff and empowering teachers to see themselves, according to Dr. Chang, as “magic makers.”

The first step to creating a culture of high expectations is creating buy-in among staff. That’s why, in order to foster a healthy, collaborative and positive culture, school leaders invite teachers and support staff to help *define* that culture. Each year, all teachers come together and write a “covenant” of the five pillars they promise to uphold throughout the year, such as a commitment to being transparent and

accountable, and not engaging in any toxic discourse about students. “We’re creating a culture that gets buy-in from everyone,” Dr. Chang says. The results of this process are that teachers see themselves as a team, working together to support students’ learning.

Noble reinforces these ideas with two weeks of professional development before school starts, and weekly professional learning communities by grade level throughout the school year. Individualized strategic staff plans are also integral to building staff culture and facilitating growth. “We coach them *intensely*,” says Dr. Chang, who spends much of her time conducting classroom observations and providing immediate feedback and coaching to teachers. Noble requires staff to bring a growth mindset, where both personal reflection and observations are used as tools for honing skills throughout the year. “We’re always growing,” explains Noble second-grade teacher Nou Moua.<sup>41</sup>

**3** *School leaders are prioritizing growth, learning + collaboration for teachers.* In order to close not only the belief gap but also achievement gaps for students, it's critical that teachers get robust support, honest feedback and opportunities to take on leadership roles within their schools. That's why each week at Phalen Lake, while students participate in Math, Science, Hmong Culture, Language and Performing Arts enrichment rotations, grade-level teams—including building administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, instructional specialists and more—meet in Professional Learning Communities. During these meetings, staff reflect on their curriculum, investigate student data and work together to develop plans to move each learner forward. “This is an active, reflective professional community,” Rich says. “Everybody is finding their piece of leadership,” confirms content coach Michelle Brown Ton of this professional community.<sup>46</sup>

At Noble Academy, educators also find opportunities to lead. Formerly a Noble classroom teacher, instructional specialist Shannon Siercks reports that “being able to grow” and having ample opportunities to move into administration and instructional coaching make it easy for educators to stay at the school for many years.<sup>47</sup>



## ***Policy Recommendation***

**1** *Expand opportunities for teacher leadership.* Although Minnesota’s overall teacher attrition rate of 10 percent<sup>48</sup> is consistent with, and even slightly better than, the national average,<sup>49</sup> we heard loud and clear on our school visits that opportunities to grow and lead were a huge driver of retention. This is consistent with research showing that high-performing teachers, in particular, are more likely to stay in teaching if there are opportunities for leadership and professional growth.<sup>50</sup> To retain great educators, Minnesota should create and fund more programs—and expand successful ones already in place, such as Q Comp—that encourage highly effective teachers to pursue career pathways as instructional coaches, school improvement leaders, curriculum specialists and more. State leaders should also ensure that highly effective educators have opportunities, and perhaps even incentives, to serve as mentors to new teachers, first as their cooperating teachers during clinical experiences and later, as on-the-job mentors.

**2** *Preserve and improve teacher evaluations.* Throughout our school visits, many teachers expressed that frequent observations, feedback and aligned professional development are critical to their continued growth. To ensure that every Minnesota teacher has access to meaningful feedback, relevant coaching and opportunities to address their areas for growth, our Legislature should preserve and improve the state’s teacher evaluation system with these goals in mind.

“Our teachers rise to the occasion...I want all teachers to believe, ‘I am a magic maker.’”

—DR. CHANG, NOBLE ACADEMY SUPERINTENDENT OF ACADEMICS

# Conclusion

As the schools in this report demonstrate, empowering AAPI students to believe in their potential is an important first step in advancing student success. To help learners then *reach* their potential, we find that it takes an intentional mix of strategies that support students, teachers and families alike. From shared accountability and thoughtful family engagement, to a focus on honoring students' diverse backgrounds, to high expectations backed up with high supports, innovative educators are working to change the odds for Minnesota's AAPI learners.

We hope this report has inspired you to believe in AAPI students in Minnesota, and to advocate for changes in the classroom and at the Capitol to help them and their schools take the next steps. And like us, we expect that this report has also made you ask new questions. What does student success look like across the full spectrum of the AAPI student population, from new-to-country to more established immigrant children? In our ever-changing state, how can we truly create a public education system that gives every student, regardless of their background, access to school leaders, educators and resources that meet their needs and affirm who they are? How can we prepare and empower more educators to make changes within their school walls? What do AAPI and DLL parents want for their children, and how do they think their schools are currently doing? What do students think?

When we set out to write this report, we knew that we could not possibly answer every question facing our state's diverse AAPI students. Our goal was to spark a meaningful discussion. With the lessons and ideas you have gleaned from this report, and the questions on which you are now reflecting, we invite you to keep this discussion moving forward, with the goal of setting all AAPI students in Minnesota up for success.





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- 1 Phalen Lake Hmong Studies Magnet School
- 2 Noble Academy
- 3 Noble Academy
- 4 Weaver Elementary School
- 5 Weaver Elementary School

# Acknowledgements

As with any project we undertake at MinnCAN, this report was made possible only because of our many tremendous partners. We'd like to thank all of them, including: The McKnight Foundation for providing funding and guidance to support all aspects of this project; Comcast, Ecolab and Travelers for their generous contributions to bring this report to life; the students, educators and school leaders at Noble Academy, Phalen Lake Hmong Studies Magnet School and Weaver Elementary School who so warmly welcomed us; the many local community members, advocates and educators who offered their thought partnership, including Bo Thao-Urabe, Rose Chu, Sia Her, Chue Vue, Pang Yang, Jesse Lee, Kari Smallkoski, Bao Vang and Melissa Jackson; the national leaders and advocates who pushed our thinking, including Conor Williams from New America, Souvan Lee and Rita Pin Ahrens from the Southeast Asian Resource Action Center and Carl Hum, Tom Kam and Mee Moua from Asian Americans Advancing Justice; and finally, Hlee Lee for taking such beautiful photos and Chue Zeng Yang for developing the logo and artistic direction for this report.

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- 47** Shannon Siercks, interview by Ariana Kiener and Andrea Roethke, Noble Academy, Brooklyn Park, Minnesota, Oct. 21, 2015.
- 48** "Teacher Supply and Demand," p. 32.
- 49** National data show an estimated attrition rate of 15.7 percent in 2012-13. "Teacher Attrition and Mobility: Results from the 2012-13 Teacher Follow-up Survey: First Look," U.S. Department of Education, p. 6, accessed Dec. 4, 2015, <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2014/2014077.pdf>.
- 50** "The Irreplaceables: Understanding the Real Retention Crisis in America's Urban Schools," TNTP (2012), accessed Dec. 4, 2015, <http://tntp.org/irreplaceables>.



## **About MinnCAN**

MinnCAN advocates for the success of every Minnesota student, from pre-K through college and career. We improve policy to help all students thrive and share promising practices and stories to demonstrate that all kids CAN succeed.

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