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## [Special Issue on Hmong Newcomers to Saint Paul Public Schools] Are We There Yet? Examining the Principals Role in the Integration of Hmong Refugee Children into Elementary Schools

Kyla Wahlstrom  
University of Minnesota, wahl001@umn.edu

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## *Special Issue on Hmong Newcomers to Saint Paul Public Schools*

### **“Are We There Yet?”**

## **Examining the Principal’s Role in the Integration of Hmong Refugee Children into Elementary Schools**

**Kyla L. Wahlstrom**

*University of Minnesota*

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the efforts of four elementary principals to create a welcoming and integrated culture for newly arrived Wat Tham Krabok refugee Hmong children. It reveals the accommodations and challenges made by the schools. It demonstrates that the effectiveness of a specialized program for newcomer refugee children necessitates careful planning and the involvement of staff members and school leaders.

*“I think there’s been an amazing breath of fresh air in my building. It makes us appreciate what we have. You just can’t help but be amazed by them ... how they handle things, and I love the little things they do ... and it’s been a great fun for teachers. They’ve just jumped in. ... It’s a whole community in that sense. ... It’s been good.”*

(A principal’s comment on the integration of 115 refugee children into her school of 525 students.)

### **Introduction**

The role of school leaders in student achievement is well-researched, with the evidence of the influence of student and family backgrounds on student success as a major variable (Henderson, 1987; Riehl, 2000; Sanders & Epstein, 1998; Walberg, 1984). Conditions such as low family income, recent immigration, isolation, and erratic parenting skills have been found to explain more than half of the difference in student achievement across schools (Coleman et al., 1966), and are highly related to dropping out of school, violence, and low levels of adult employment and income (Henderson & Berla, 1994). When a major urban area was determined to become the relocation site for more than a thousand Hmong, who had lived for over 20 years in a Thai



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refugee camp, there came an urgent need to understand the issues of immigrant isolation and a drive to create support networks of all kinds. Research has clearly shown that positive core beliefs and articulated community values create successful educational environments, particularly for low-SES children (Deal & Peterson, 1990; Scheurich, 1998; Weiss & Cambone, 2000). Thus began the journey of this metropolitan area to re-shape the “immigrant experience” into a powerfully positive event in the life of their city and their city’s schools.

School administrators and community leaders, including the mayor, began planning a year in advance for the arrival of the Hmong refugees. They knew that the only way that the integration would be successful would be to have multiple systems in place. The planning group was comprised of persons from social service agencies, local churches, local philanthropic foundations, the school district, and political groups. Together they formed task-forces or subcommittees to address each of the various service needs which the immigrants would have. The members met often and jointly to share their thinking and to coordinate their planning. An extremely detailed matrix of services, responsible persons, and timeline was developed.

As one might suspect, the school district had a significant role in arranging for the overall accommodations for the families. In order to provide for the educational needs of the arriving children, elementary schools were given the opportunity to apply to have a Transitional Language Center (TLC) located in their building, as a school-within-a-school, and were essentially self-contained classes. There were only Hmong children from the refugee camp in the TLC classes and the classes were age-based. Either the teacher or the teaching assistant in each TLC class was a native Hmong speaker and all initial instruction in the fall was conducted in Hmong.

Elementary principals met with their school staff to discuss and then vote on whether or not to apply to have a TLC. Five buildings were selected by the school district to become TLC sites, and each of them developed their own plan to enable this. By December 2004, all five of the elementary schools had enrolled Hmong students into their settings.

In Spring of 2005, the school district sought an evaluation from outside of the district to look at several outcomes related to leadership in bringing about changes in the schools. This report on the actions of principals is one part of the complete evaluation project being profiled in this group of articles in this special issue. With regard to school leadership, of particular interest in the evaluation process were the efforts that the selected elementary principals made to create a welcoming and integrated culture in their schools. Interest in examining the school culture in the TLCs was high because schools can be insular places where rapid attempts to change the status quo are frequently met with resistance. Integrating hundreds of new immigrant students all at once is, by definition, a rapid change for a school. Finally, because the school district had taken many preliminary steps to advance the planning for the arrival of the Hmong, the district leaders were curious to find out if the transition work had been ultimately successful.

This paper explores the actions and perceptions of the principals during the first year that the TLCs were formed. The research questions guiding the data collection were as follows:

1. What actions did the principals take with regard to integrating the refugee students into the school routines?
2. How did the integration affect the academic programs and outcomes for the school?
3. What were the unanticipated challenges that occurred?
4. What differences were present, if any, between the leadership actions and student outcomes in Transitional Language Center schools versus the Language Academy

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schools, where immigrant students are mixed into all regular classrooms and language needs are addressed only through ELL pull-out service?

## **Methods and Analysis**

The fact that the district administration purposefully chose to work with the leaders in the TLC schools already set a positive bias for what was done in those schools. Interviews with three of the five TLC principals were conducted. The other two TLC principals had significantly fewer Hmong refugee students ultimately enrolled, and these students came later in the school year than did the larger group of students who arrived at the three schools in the earliest part of the school year. In order to provide perspective for how the TLC program differed from the Language Academy, a fourth interview of a principal at a school designated as a Language Academy school was also conducted. Language Academy schools are different from a TLC school and other elementary schools in the district in that they have a greater amount of ELL services than do the regular schools in the district. However, in Language Academy schools, the English Language Learner students are fully integrated into all classrooms.

To gather data to answer the above questions, a structured interview protocol was developed. The interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed. The interviews with the principals lasted about an hour for each session. The questioning route followed a prepared set of questions based on what is known about effective leadership actions in dealing with school change. (See Appendix for interview protocol.) The questions followed a path which traced the first days of school with the new Hmong refugees to where the principals had to look forward to programming for those children in the coming year. All interviews took place near the end of the school year, in late May or early June of 2005. The qualitative data were analyzed with NVIVO, yielding themes that effectively answered the above questions.

## **Findings**

The emerging themes of leadership are most vividly portrayed in the voices of the principals. The findings reveal how the TLC schools adapted their schools' cultures to embrace the influx of nearly 350 elementary-aged Hmong refugee children into their three schools. We found several themes which emerged in all of the TLC sites about the actions that the principals took to integrate the children into the schools and the positive experiences that resulted. These themes were:

- Staff involvement plays an essential role in successful integration
- Modification of academic programming will be necessary and desired
- Several challenges will be school-wide and will need a school-wide solution
- The principal will likely have several leadership challenges never before encountered
- Differential academic outcomes need to be discovered and accepted
- Sensitivity to differing cultural norms are needed for effective parent involvement
- Careful planning ahead for next year is essential for both students and staff

### **Involvement of Staff in Decisions Affecting Them is Crucial**

In each of the schools, staff members voted to see if they were willing to become a TLC site. This was important for “buy in” since having the Hmong refugee children in the school would challenge their status quo and change some of their regular routines. Additionally, the newly arrived refugees were likely to draw heavily on the school’s social resources. In effect, the teachers had to be willing to share school-based resources more than before. This included instructional support staff, the school social worker, the library aide, and the lunchroom assistants. One school held two open houses, one just before school began and the second at the end of September (within a month). This enabled the children and parents to begin to understand that the school was a gathering place for families as well, and not just a place where children go in the daytime to learn. One principal summed up how the teachers reacted and decided to make a bid to become a TLC site:

We had to give up a lot of space in our building ‘cause we needed room for five new classes in our building ... We gave up our staff room and then we gave up some other things that were pretty important to us, so we’re kind of using every kind of nook and cranny in our building .... And so, a lot of really good things that you can point to were here, where the willingness was kind of amazing.

Staff involvement in decisions affecting them was and is an on-going process. Even though the staff in all of the buildings was asked for input and to vote on becoming a TLC site, the principals in the three buildings had to continue to give the teachers wide latitude in planning for integrating the students throughout the year. One principal explained how her teachers took action for next year when the TLC would be dissolved into a Language Academy in their school:

The planning committee for making the transition to becoming a Language Academy school next year clearly outlined the protocol for placement of students in classes next year. ... We went through and clearly identified for teachers how to set up their classrooms to make sure that we had a good balance. Within those meetings, I stepped back and said “these are your decisions. I’m going to throw in my two cents in terms of what my opinion is, but they’re your decisions. You tell me what it should be and what it should look like.”

Having teachers as active decision-makers about their work life is key to beginning and sustaining school-wide initiatives. Evans (1996) and Fullan (2001) clearly point to the essential role of teacher involvement in school change. Allowing teachers to participate in decision-making is known to build teacher loyalty and compliance with decisions that will affect them (Kotter, 1996). From a human relations perspective, having teachers involved in school-wide decisions is a means to support teachers’ professional self-efficacy (Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1999) and is a model for democracy and self-governance (Soder, 2001). The principals for the TLC programs carefully considered all of these reasons as they moved through the change process within their buildings.

## **Modification of the Academic Programs**

In all three TLC schools, Hmong students in TLC classes were integrated with grade-level peers for lunch, recess, field trips, among other things. Otherwise, the integration was rather sporadic and varied among the three buildings. All three principals left it to the grade level teams of teachers to take action that would integrate the instruction. In one school, for example, the first, second, and fifth grade classes mix and share instructional time across them. But the third and fourth grade levels have remained segregated for all instructional time.

The curriculum being used in some of the TLC classrooms was specifically selected by the district's ELL department. In those classes, they supplied all TLC classrooms with the reading curriculum for *all* grade levels. This was forward-thinking on the part of the district ELL department and was an important action to take, since many children in the upper elementary grades needed to have instructional materials geared to lower levels of reading. Then, as the students made progress, they could move up in the curricular sequence within the same series without changing classrooms. The upper grade teachers taught the curriculum at many levels, which enabled the students not to be sent down to the lower grades for their reading lessons. Furthermore, integration into classes taught by specialists, such as music and art, occurred as well. This is important, as noted by one principal, because "they have learned, I think, just a ton about the rhythm of the [English] language via the music."

The principals had some flexibility in the choices they made for how they could spend their building money for support staff. The principals who had the TLCs, and which were to become Language Academy buildings the following year, most often used the funds to hire bilingual Education Assistants. This included several Hmong, one or two Spanish speakers, and maybe another language if there were enough students to warrant the hire (e.g., Russian, Somali). Having a high level of fiscal autonomy at the school was important to address immediate needs, and again allowed the principal to "customize" services for the particular school setting. Again, research in schools has shown that where the principal has sufficient independence to allocate limited resources such as money and instructional materials to "fit" the local needs of a building, there is a greater likelihood for real change to occur and for the changes to become embedded (Schlechty, 1997).

## **Unanticipated Challenges to the School**

School leaders are often caught in delicate, political balancing acts, with the need to address one-size-fits-all regulations with the actual conditions in one's local building. For example, one principal at one of the TLC schools noted that trying to balance out the classes ethnically is difficult

because, with having 48% Hmong currently in our building, not all of those kids are ELL, since some of them are now third-generation Hmong. So, spreading the Hmong kids around is not as easy as proportionally placing them among the classes. Some classes will have a disproportionate share of Hmong, but still may be balanced with regard to the ELL needs in the class.

Another principal noted that with the recent influx with the Hmong refugee students, her building is now 66% Asian and 24% African American. According to the principal, they do not

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have a sufficient amount of Caucasian students for them to count as an identified sub-group, because children's test scores are aggregated for purposes of the No Child Left Behind Act (2002).

Due to the fact that many of the Hmong children came into a formal school setting for the first time in their lives, they had behaviors that were consistent with their background, but were somewhat incompatible with the structures of organized schooling in the United States. One principal described how her prior assumptions had been incorrect about the cultural adjustment of the different ages of the children:

Well what surprised me is that I thought the older students, like fourth, fifth and sixth graders, would have difficulty transitioning and show a lot of discomfort and adjustment problems. And I thought that the younger children, [K-2] would adjust really easily ... it was exactly the opposite. The older children, I think, understood why they were here. The younger children were so used to just running and playing and jumping. [For example], we had two little boys, brothers, who, at ten o'clock in the morning went out to play and they ran home. ... The little ones were just so used to so much freedom and a total lack of structure.

In the fall, during recess, the Hmong newcomers played mostly in segregated groups. They had their own types of games, and their own social structure to decide who was to be the leader. There was clear evidence that they were very accustomed to playing independently, while being imaginative with the schools' play equipment.

Transportation issues were common among all principals interviewed for this study. The broad range of issues, both practical and cultural, is captured well in the following passage:

Transportation was the issue that caused us to pull our hair out. ... We found that the parents had a distrust of government—so they had their “official” address and then they had the address where they were really living. They were often not the same address. With not having correct addresses, the busing difficulties multiplied. These little children were getting dropped off at corners, not at their houses ... maybe a corner three blocks from home. The parents had no idea where that corner was ... the child had no idea where to go ... It was just [awful].

To respond to these problems, the principals first met with the Hmong parents to explain the school's worries about safety. They then had to work long hours with the district's transportation department to have the children dropped off at their houses or as close as possible. The TLC principals across the three schools held similar beliefs about the precious value that parents bring to the education equation. The principals' actions to reach out and support the parents' views and needs ultimately create bridges of trust between the parents and the school. With parents believing in the integrity and benevolent nature of the school, trust is being developed that will serve the best interests of the children's education for years to come (see, e.g., Tschannen-Moran, 2004).

## **Challenges to the Leadership of the Principal**

Not all of the principals interviewed were in favor of the concept of having a school-within-a-school, where the refugee children would be separated from the other students regularly enrolled. One of the principals who used to be a special education teacher firmly believed in the mainstream model of integrating all learners. During the interview, she explained that she totally reversed her opinion. She saw the extreme social and emotional difficulties that the primary grade children had in making the adjustment to a new culture and greater structure. She described lots of crying in class and panic with the buses because the children at that young age were unable to express their feelings or their fears. She noted her change of heart in supporting the self-contained TLC “because it allowed them a sheltered, emotionally safe place while they learned a new, totally new, social experience.”

Many of the newly arrived refugee children were accustomed to “being in charge,” which was especially problematic if their siblings were also in the school. On the playground, some were very aggressive in telling their younger siblings what to do, and even pushed them around. Thus, the need to separate the siblings, even at recess time, has been a challenge for scheduling.

The three principals each spoke about the effect of suicides that occurred in Hmong families, often just before they left the refugee camp. They shared how those memories and unresolved grief are now showing up in the students’ comments in class. The principals have had to work with the teachers about how to handle these issues in the classroom when they arise, pointing out that they sought out advice from social service agencies and family counselors.

The following passage from a principal reflects both a challenge to the educators, as well as a moment of deep reflection. It points to how truly traumatic the prior experiences in a repressed society can be felt and remembered by anyone who has come to this country:

I think an interesting thing that happened just recently—we all knew that these kids had experienced some terrible things before they came [to the U.S.]. One of my third grade teachers brought me a set of photographs. They had asked kids to bring in pictures of their family because they were going to do a whole project about the family. And she handed me this set of photos and she says, “Look through them and tell me if there’s anything in here that you think is a little ‘off’”. So I’m looking through the pictures. And the first pictures are the girl in traditional clothing, like for Hmong New Year, and then with her family and that. And then there’s a picture of soldiers kind of taking a picture and kind of laughing at whatever they were taking a picture of. And then the final picture is a man, in what was later explained to me as a Hmong coffin, who had been brutally murdered and sewn back together, basically. It was her father. And what the soldiers were mocking was the funeral....

The amazing thing was that the other Hmong kids all knew about her father and what had happened. The soldiers had taken her father, and then the family found her father like that. And, I think we all, in our minds, knew that some of these kids had experienced stuff like that. But to have it put in front of you like that was just (pause) ‘oh my god.’ And so I think, in terms of looking at the kids now, when you see it put right in front of you, it’s like, “wow.” And the other thing that’s happening is, of course, the comfort level of the kids [has increased]. That stuff is starting to come out more, and my guess is even within the next year, we’re going to see [and hear] a whole lot more.

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The principal described how she will seek to provide social service support to the family, and that she had the bilingual teaching assistant help the student talk through the whole experience with the class. The principal then noted that the real difficulty in leadership is processing with her teachers the blend of U.S. mainstream culture with what the children know from their Hmong culture:

Our culture would say, "It's really not appropriate to bring [the picture of the deceased father] to school." Yet, her mother sent that picture to school with her because she wanted us to know what had happened. You don't want the child to feel ashamed because our reaction would be like, "Gasp— what are you doing with this in school? You don't want to show this to other kids!" So that's why we have to deal with more outside agencies, because it's really about providing overall support for that family. Yes, we do what we can to provide support in school, but we also need to look at the bigger picture.

### Academic Outcomes

One of the principals expressed surprise that so many of the older elementary-aged children from the Wat who were in grades four, five, and six were bilingual in both Hmong and Thai. This is due to the fact that schooling in the Wat was done primarily in Thai. Thus, concepts taught in Hmong and English may have already been taught in Thai, although neither the child nor the teacher may know this at the time of instruction. Nevertheless, all three principals spoke of the incredible rate of learning that has occurred in the TLC classrooms over the course of a year. One principal noticed the most growth in the changes in students' writing. At the beginning of the school year, nearly all children wrote the same thing, since they used the teacher's model or a student's suggestion as the one and only way to complete that writing assignment. Now, at the end of the year, she said, "they've gone from [collective thought] to the individual activity ... There really has been tremendous growth."

Another principal noted, "The children have taken off, with a huge learning curve, since January, 'cause everything has just ... you know ... settled in." The third principal went on to say:

The thing that I kind of go back to is just the listening to the difference between the amount of Hmong that was spoken at the beginning of the year versus the amount of Hmong that needs to be spoken in the classroom now. I mean, they can virtually function with very little Hmong. When we deal with teaching the concepts, that's when they switch to the Hmong. But the basic instruction and morning meeting are done entirely in English now.

The non-partisan policy "think tank," *Children Now* (Naughton, 2005), challenges and supports schools to "promote culturally and linguistically appropriate strategies" for classroom instruction by providing bilingual teachers and educational assistants. Clearly, the TLC program addressed this issue well, and the rate of learning was probably enhanced as a result.

As students were gaining academic knowledge, there was an increasing need for a wider range of curriculum materials in each grade level. One principal solved this problem by having teachers "put out the call" for additional curriculum materials during a regular staff meeting. That practice allowed for three things to occur: (a) extra materials were located quickly, without

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having to wait for an order to be sent to a publisher or the district office, (b) if the materials already existed in the building it was less expensive than purchasing them, and (c) it served to unite the teachers in the building in the belief that *all* of the students in that building were their responsibility. Thus, the TLC principals demonstrated effective leadership for improved instruction when they made explicit that the use of differentiated learning materials was an expectation in their buildings. Pressley (2001) and Foorman et al. (2006) found that effective teachers match students' learning tasks and materials to students' ability levels, with the findings pointing to a faster pace of learning and higher test scores.

One idea to create support and a stronger building climate occurred in two of the three TLC sites. They set up a "buddy system," to pair an older, non-refugee student with a younger child from the Wat. They used the students' time together for paired reading. This was highly successful, as the older children enjoyed the supportive role, and the younger children eagerly looked forward to having contact with their buddy or to see their buddy in the hallway.

### **Cultural Sensitivity and Parent Involvement**

Parent advocacy and parent outreach were challenges to both the district and school administrators. Interviews with the school district administrators as the evaluation project began had revealed that there was much internal discussion about whether or not the school-within-a-school concept—the TLC—was the best approach to use. Once the district's decision was made to offer a choice of either the TLC or the LA option to Hmong parents, the district administrators had to defend critics' assertions of the "segregation" of refugee students in the TLCs. Because the Hmong parents were unaccustomed to having choices related to the education of their children, this created further worry within the district administrative ranks about how to place children fairly and without bias. Because the parents were inexperienced in dealing with concepts of advocacy and choice for their youngsters, having to choose a school program soon after arrival in a new country was overwhelming and a unique experience.

All of the principals had many stories and examples of specially-designed parent outreach as they sought to include the Hmong parents from the start in their child's education. Experienced principals know that communication is critical for parents to feel connected to and supportive of their child's school. The principals also knew that in the Hmong culture, the family is where their own traditions and values are transmitted, but it is in the school that cross-cultural connections and understandings take place (Watson, 2001). Thus, the principals knew that Hmong parents valued the school as the place that would provide a "world view" for their children. As one principal explained the situation for the TLC as a district educational option:

From the initial negative reception [the TLC] received, to the positive view in the Hmong community of the TLC program now, that doesn't happen without parents trusting the school, [and] that's not going to happen without communication. Within the Hmong community, there was stuff in the press that we were segregating [their kids]. ... And so we had the reporter from *The Hmong Times* [a local newspaper in the Hmong community] visit here. And the follow-up article was just glowing about what a wonderful program it was. [After that,] the program was then fully enrolled.

The teachers in the schools were equally instrumental in making the Hmong parents feel welcomed in the school setting. One principal explained that her Hmong-speaking teachers put a

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parent night together. The teachers created different “stations” that the parents could visit within the gymnasium. For example, one station showed parents how to help a child with homework. Another explained how to help their child with reading and what the reading instruction was like in the classroom. Interestingly, one of the stations was about *school policies for teachers* so that the parent could better understand the job of an American teacher and the role school in the community. At a different school, the principal explained the outreach efforts her staff had made to parents:

At the Hmong PTO meetings we did presentations on “how to help your children with math, how to help your children with reading, what are the tests that their kids were going to be taking.” And we did a presentation on how we do discipline in school, and explained responsive classroom and restitution. We did that within the Hmong PTO because then you have discussion. ... This is all done in the Hmong language.

Moreover, at all three of the TLC sites in this study, the schools have Hmong parents’ groups which are separate from the other parent organizational groups for the schools. Not only would the language have been an issue if everything was slowed down due to translation, but further, there were cultural differences that needed to be accounted for during the translation process. The principals indicated that small numbers of Hmong parents were actually participating regularly in the parent groups and on Family Literacy Nights they generally have over 100 people attended. Taxi cabs were often used to bring parents in for conferences or meetings, but the parents’ use of taxis was slow to occur. This was because the parents were afraid to get into the cab, with the fear that they would be taken away. After Hmong-speaking teachers and teaching assistants assured parents that “This is safe,” the use of taxicabs became an accepted and frequent practice. Each school had allocated over \$2,000 to cover the costs of the taxis for parent transportation to school functions. Also, having a bilingual clerk in the school office was an essential feature of the ease of transition for many of the families. Kids can come to the office with their problems and parents can be contacted in their native language. Principals who instituted a bilingual clerk found their work to integrate the refugee children significantly easier.

Another example of the cultural adjustments that needed to occur between the Hmong parents and the school dealt with the concept of time. When the fall parent-teacher conferences were announced, each family was offered a specific time slot in which they could meet individually with the classroom teacher. However, Hmong parents just showed up at the school the first night of conferences, because they did not fully comprehend that individual meetings were arranged on a schedule of time slots. As one principal explained, [the parents assumed] “it’s the first day of conferences, so we should go.”

Parent involvement in education, at least in U.S. schools, includes their participation in making academic decisions for their children (Sanders & Epstein, 1998). This is something that the Hmong parents from a refugee camp had not experienced before. A principal shared this story:

The body language that I’m seeing from this group [in the TLC] is different than the body language that I’ve seen from our other Hmong parents [in previous years]. [The TLC parents are] more assertive, more able to say, “This is what I need for my child and this is what I need”...I think they’re getting a lot better counseling and that’s good. They realize that they have rights.

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The proactive principals also sought out connections with community partners to reach families in a variety of ways. For example, several principals connected with local social service agencies. The schools opened on Saturday mornings for parent programming in ELL services for adults, and mental health counseling. They also provided other general referral services for medical and other community resources, such as food shelves and free clothing. Research conducted by Au (2006) notes that effective teachers have very strong home-school connections, and such connections are particularly important for students who are English language learners (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001).

The adjustment of the parents has a huge impact on how the children will react and how they will perform in schools. This is especially true if a child is worried about his or her parent. For example, one principal told of a single mother who arrived with six children. School social workers have been concerned about her, and other parents who exhibit signs of depression. Evidently, depression has been a major issue for the newly arrived Hmong immigrants, who are struggling with financial issues, parenting concerns, and loneliness or homesickness.

### **Planning ahead –Transitioning for Next Year**

As the principals began to look toward the next school year, they all were concerned with how the programs and services would be adjusted, since all of the TLC students were being integrated into mainstream classrooms in the coming fall. In other words, all of the TLC schools were becoming Language Academy schools. To accomplish that transition, principals purposely placed all TLC students into classes for the next year where they would know either the classroom teacher or the educational assistant. This was sometimes met with disagreement from their staff, since this meant that existing grade-level teams were being split up. However, making that decision in collaboration with the school staff enabled the principals to share the value that the needs of the children came first before the needs of the adults in the school. Sergiovanni (2000) would characterize the decision to put the needs of the students first as a decision that centered on the importance of community—community of relationships, of place, and of mind and heart. When the sense of community is used as the filter or the guide for decision-making, the decisions embody shared commitments with people who share similar intentions. Clearly, the TLC principals and their school staff shared a collective sense of purpose. Their work with the children and parents from the Wat refugee camp exemplified lived values and shared norms—both of which are key characteristics of effective schools (McDonald, 1996).

### **A Different Perspective: The Language Academy Interview**

The Language Academy principal perceived no differences among the children from the Wat refugee camp who had been enrolled in her school versus other immigrant children: “They’re just about the same” she said. Language services available for the Hmong students were fewer as well. The newly arrived children received ELL service an hour a day outside of the classroom with a bilingual aide. During that time, the students were provided some very basic survival skill instructions in the native language for the initial six weeks of school. Once they had that background knowledge to just survive, then they had regular ELL pull-out service. For the rest of the day they were integrated without a bi-lingual speaker in the room.

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The amazing fact that emerged during the interview with this Language Academy principal was that 86% of the students in this particular school were ELL. As a result, the principal noted, “We’re in a unique position... We can no longer do [specialized services to immigrant children] here because the numbers of non-English speakers are so high.” She went on to explain that they had 22 different languages in the school. The predominant group was Latino, the second largest group was immigrant African students, and the smallest group was Asian. To handle all of those languages, the ELL teachers in the building would meet with the grade level teachers once a week for assistance in planning lessons. Following the planning, they often taught the whole class together.

Parent involvement in the Language Academy school was different as well. According to the principal “They [the parents of kids from the Wat] are not involved this year as much as we would like for them to be because they are still learning about how to manage [in a new location].” Transportation to get the parents to the school was difficult, since they lived several miles from the school and there was not any direct public bus service to the school. Like the TLC schools, transportation was a major obstacle for parent involvement. However, unlike the TLCs, the Language Academy did not provide specialized taxi service for the Hmong parents, since all of the ethnic groups represented in the school had the same need. The principal reported that parents did come in for special events such as family night.

When asked about parent interest in their child’s education, the principal responded, “They are just overwhelmed ... they were just overwhelmed with everything and they’re trying to learn their new environment.” She went on to share that during the parent conferences, families would tell how very grateful they were for this opportunity for their children. In addition to their appreciation, parents wanted to know how they could help their children to succeed in school. They were particularly concerned about discipline, and wanted to be told right away if there were any problems that could be handled before they became unmanageable.

The teachers in the Language Academy were less inclined to attend the Hmong culture workshops because they had so many other cultures in their school. Still, the principal gave strong praise for the district ELL department for the quality of the materials for learning about the Hmong that were made available to teachers. At the time of the interview, the principal was in the process of hiring a counselor to help the whole staff adjust to the many different cultures in the school. She noted that effective discipline for a Russian or a Somali student is very different than that for a Hmong child: “For example, how they each respond to adults is so different.” In order to fund that counselor’s role, the principal needed to cut a portion of a different position, “You know that’s part of being principal—knowing how to use your resources well.”

Academic progress is reported to be happening slowly in this school. At the end of the year, the children from the Wat refugee camp were still working on naming the alphabet letters and letter-sound association. “They’re on their way...slowly” said the principal. Finally, she noted that most of the Hmong students from the Wat who attended her school this past year will not be returning in the fall. This is due to the cost of bus transportation. As a result, next year all but five of the refugee students will be attending different schools—schools which are closer to their own neighborhood.

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## Conclusion

One of the TLC principals was specifically asked how things might have been different if all of the children from the Wat had immediately enrolled at a Language Academy school. Her response was thoughtful and unequivocal:

I think that would have been tough. I think it was good that we did it the way we did. I think it was good that we pulled those supports in and we were able to provide for them. Next year's going to be a little [difficult at first], since leaving the TLC on some level is kind of like a cocoon. They're going to have to spread their wings a little bit more next year inside of a Language Academy, but that's a logical next step because the goal is to have them bilingual.

Principals in the TLC schools were clearly more actively engaged in issues related to successful integration of Hmong students in their schools. Due to the fact that the classes for Hmong students were self-contained, the principals in the TLC schools created expectations that the teachers and students in TLC classes would regularly be connected to or integrated with non-TLC classes in their building. Some TLC principals allowed the integration to naturally occur, while others more or less administratively required the integration and the teachers complied.

In the Language Academy schools, the principals had a much less visible role in directly effecting the integration of the Hmong students. Assumptions that integration would occur naturally were the norm. This was due, in part, to the fact that the Hmong students were spread throughout all grade levels among all classrooms. As a result, there was limited attention paid to how well the Hmong children were adjusting, since they were seen as part of the general population of ELL students in those buildings.

TLC schools had more emphasis placed on teacher professional development in learning about the Hmong cultural traditions than the Language Academy schools. Nevertheless, the principals interviewed in all four schools who accommodated the Hmong refugee students expressed the belief that their teachers were "well-equipped" to handle the issues and demands of a group of students who had had little or no prior formal school experiences.

This study revealed that the role and actions of school leaders ranged widely, and that the actions are often linked to their personal beliefs about how to integrate and educate English language learners. The large amount of time spent in planning to receive the Hmong refugees apparently reaped huge benefits. The assimilation of the Hmong into the fabric of a large urban area was accomplished with few major problems. Much of the success dealt with the significant role that education played in the newly-formed daily lives of the Hmong families. Furthermore, the leadership behavior and beliefs of the school principals in the TLC schools had major impact on the schools' positive attitudes toward embracing the challenge of educating large numbers of non-English speaking students. A TLC principal summarized the feelings of many:

These kids from the Wat, they're just so eager to learn, they're just so eager to take in things, they work so hard. [They see] this as their opportunity. And you can see it in their eyes; you can see it when the teacher finishes the directions and turns them to do independent work. ... It is really neat. It's been a wonderful experience, it really has.

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Schools set the tone of a community. Principals and district level leaders are key to how the teachers will react, which in turn reflects how the parents and children respond. The journey is circular, and it all begins with envisioning the circle and finding a place for the concerns and the wishes of each group on that path, with the plans and actions bringing all around to meet at the place where it all began. This is where the groups find a new starting point, and the growth process begins all over again. Such new growth will continue, next year, as the TLCs transition into Language Academy programs. And the importance of thoughtful, experienced, and committed leadership will continue to be revealed as the journey continues.

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### About the Author



Kyla L. Wahlstrom, Ph.D., is the Director of the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement (CAREI) in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota. She also is a Lecturer in the Department of Educational Policy and Administration. Her research focuses on educational leadership and professional development, the impact of policy initiatives on learning, and the role of standards in school reform. She is the author of one book, several book chapters, numerous journal articles, and over 50 technical reports used by educational leaders to shape policy decisions.

## Appendix

### Principal Interview Questions

“Today we’re going to focus on your newcomers from the WAT refugee camp in Thailand. We should be able to finish in about 40-60 minutes.”

#### *The Students*

1. How would you describe the new Hmong students from the WAT?
2. Have you had students like them before at your school?
3. What have you learned this year about the WAT students?
4. What has surprised you about the newcomers from the WAT?

#### *The Transition*

1. Have you been aware of any stress factors the children experienced in their transition?
2. What do you see are the factors that aid in the children’s adaptation?
3. What is the procedure for transitioning students out of the TLC/LA to mainstream classes?

#### *The Program*

1. What are the main goals of the program?
2. Do you have a curriculum for your program?  
IF YES Who designed it?  
Could you describe it to me?  
IF NO Do you know why not?
3. What are the key features of this program that distinguish it from other programs?
4. Which are the features of the program that are especially good for the newcomers from the WAT?
5. What are the challenges of the program in general?
6. How does it not meet the needs of the children from the WAT?
7. Do you feel students are in the TLC/LA for the right amount of time?
8. In what ways do WAT students interact with native English speaking children in the school?
9. TLC ONLY: How might this program be different if it were for a different refugee population (e.g., Sudanese)?
10. Have you had students arriving at different times throughout the year? What have been the implications of this from an administrative perspective?

#### *Parent Involvement*

1. How are parents informed about the program?
2. What are ways you involve parents in school activities?
3. Do you feel that teachers are successful in involving the parents of the newcomers in school activities?
4. Are teachers successful in involving parents in their child’s learning?

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- a. IF YES, How?
  - b. IF NO, What are the obstacles that you are aware of?
5. Have you interacted with parents?
- a. IF YES, How would you describe your overall interaction with parents?
  - b. IF NO, What are the obstacles?

*Training/Background Knowledge*

1. What training have you had about Hmong culture, history or families? What about your staff?
2. What training has the staff had at your school on meeting the needs of this type of student?

*Other*

Is there anything else you'd like to add to this interview about the WAT students or the TLC/LA program?

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