

*“School is the ticket out  
of poverty,  
Education is  
the brick to  
building a life.”*



***Dropout Prevention:  
Stories and Ideas from Hmong and Lao High  
School Students in North Minneapolis***

**March 2008**

A Report from the Council on Asian-Pacific Minnesotans

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## *Executive Summary*

Asian Pacific Islander students as a group are staying in school and finishing school at about the same rate as the statewide rate of 3%. Even in Minneapolis and St. Paul, the two cities with the largest enrollment of API students, the rates are the same as in St. Paul (10%) or slightly better as in Minneapolis (7% vs. 12%). Thus, at first glance administrators, educators, and policymakers might be tempted to look at API students and think that they are doing well. This perception is wrong and it jeopardizes API students, their families, and community. When these rates are compared to the statewide rate, twice as many API students in St. Paul and three times as many API students in Minneapolis dropout. The impact of these statistics are damaging and they are not acceptable.

This report grew out of the Council on Asian-Pacific Minnesotan's participation as a stakeholder in the steering committee for the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) *Dropout Prevention, Retention and Graduation Initiative* and the *Hennepin County Asian Pacific Islander Initiative*. It is based on responses from 45 Southeast Asian High School student participants in three focus groups to a series of open ended questions about causes of dropping out and dropout prevention. The students attributed the causes of dropping out to circumstances found both in the home and in the school. They stressed that schools paid inadequate attention to the needs of non English speaking newcomers who lacked previous formal education in refugee camps or their countries of origins. Newcomers spoke of their needs as teen mothers and shared the frustrations they faced due to language barriers, inappropriate placement into mainstream classes without adequate academic preparation, and the lack of emotional support from their families and schools.

With all the struggles and barriers they faced, there were sources for help and support for students such as the *Check and Connect* program and Asian clubs. In Asian clubs, students support each other to set long range goals including college. They inform, educate, and hold each other accountable to obtaining these goals. The positive dynamics in the Asian clubs are a key factor helping the Hmong and Lao students stay in school.

This report concludes with student recommendations and recommendations from the Council that are focused on developing and implementing policies. A renewed focus and attention to the needs of Asian and Pacific Islander students will help them stay in schools and succeed.

### **The students' recommendations on dropout prevention are as follows:**

- Develop resource materials that describe the negative impact of Dropping Out
- Acknowledge and address the special needs of non English speaking newcomers
- Provide emotional as well as academic support early and often to at risk students
- Educate parents on how they can get involved and support their students
- Use and expand the roles of Asian clubs to help prevent dropouts

The Council believes that the best approach to dropout prevention is to include students and their parents to create and implement prevention measures.





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## Putting a Face on Dropout Prevention: 5 Stories\*

### **Sia Cha: A Hmong teenage mother, struggling with a sick child and unsupportive husband**

*Sia Cha is a young single mother who was culturally married at the age of 16. She is a participant in the Check and Connect Program. She said,*

*I got married young. My husband was not very supportive. I am not with him now. My husband did not want me to complete my schooling. Like many Hmong men, he thinks that if your wife is smarter than you that's bad. It's the male thing. He thought that if I was educated I would leave him. So he would always find something for me to do at home and he would not let me learn to drive. When I said I want to go to school, he said, 'No, I want you to do this for me. You can go the next day.' The next day it was the same thing. He wanted me to go to work part time. If I am educated, it's a problem. My husband is 2-3 years older than me. He came to the US 12 years ago. His family follows the old traditions.*

*During her marriage she bore one child, a son who was born prematurely. She says her baby often gets sick. When the baby is sick she can't leave the baby in child care and go to school.*

*Sia is currently going through a legal divorce from a legal marriage after her husband tried to choke her. She is also going through a custody battle. This has made it difficult for her to focus on school. Sia now lives with her older sister, who is married and a college student. Sia says she feels isolated because she does not have enough extended family support since her parents moved to California. She cannot join them because of the custody battle. Legally she cannot take her baby across state lines away from the father. She works part time to support herself but 'part time work takes up a lot of time.' Sometimes she works early afternoon until late midnight. At the end of the week she might have Sunday off and that is not enough to catch up on school work and spend time with her family.*

### **Meng and Pachu: Hmong newcomers, struggling with language barriers**

*Meng, age 18, has lived in the US for only two years. He told his story in Hmong. He feels that it is difficult for him to be placed in classrooms where students are advanced with English language and school subject matter. He feels that it would be helpful to be in a classroom where he is learning at a similar pace with other students and thus can be given more attention. Sometimes Meng feels that his teachers do not understand his needs; he feels discouraged to attend certain classes where this is the case. Meng knows*

*that he is falling behind each year and this frustrates him. He is aware of the after school programs available to help him. However, the school is located in an area where he feels it is unsafe to walk home late in the evening.*

*Pachu is a 17 year old Hmong mother who arrived two years ago. She has three children. She said she shares the same concerns as Meng. Pachu also feels that her responsibilities at home with the children make it difficult for her to keep up with school work.*

**Pao: A second generation Hmong American student determined to succeed**

*My dad discourages me. But I am determined to stay in school. I see education as the brick to building a new life. I will be the first to graduate from high school in my family. My two brothers dropped out. I saw their mistakes.*

*Pao is a student who faces challenges at home. He has two older brothers who did not finish school. But he does not want to stay in poverty. He knows that school is the ticket out of poverty. He is driven by a determination to succeed. His fierce determination was shared among the teenagers we spoke to in the focus group with members of the school Asian Club. Pao and many of his peers, both male and female, were determined to succeed despite set backs such as family discouragement. It was readily apparent that the Asian Club exerts a strong positive influence on students. We sensed that students feel supported by their peers in their efforts to overcome negative parental discouragement. Peers can have a positive influence on one another.*

**Shelly Xiong: Second generation with a history of dropping out, but now determined to succeed**

*Shelly is a second generation, Hmong female and is a participant in the Check and Connect Program. Unlike Meng and Pachu, she is fluent in English. Shelly traces her struggles to an abusive home situation. She ran away from home as a younger teenager, and dropped out of school. But now she is back in high school and determined to succeed. She has stayed at the Bridge, a shelter for runaway youth. She felt resentment at a teacher who reported her abusive situation at home to Family Children's Services which resulted in her being removed from the home and placed at the Bridge. However, in time, she came to understand that the teacher was only looking out for her and is now thankful for that teacher's tough love and what was done to help her resume school. The staff at the Bridge offered her counseling programs where she could deal with her emotional and psychological stress. The counseling and support she received from case-workers helped her turn her life around. She is very articulate, street wise, feisty, and determined to better her life. She sees education as her path to independence.*

\*The names used in this report are pseudonyms.

## Part I: Introduction

The research for this report grew out of the Council on Asian-Pacific Minnesotans' participation as a stakeholder in the steering committee for the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) Dropout Prevention, Retention and Graduation Initiative. The Council shares the goals of the initiative to raise awareness at the state level about dropout prevention, to influence policy and inform the decision making process. Other partners in the initiative include seven school districts, ranging from urban and suburban districts with very diversified school populations (St. Paul, Brooklyn Center and Richfield) to rural districts, predominately white (Duluth, Hibbing, Park Rapids) and one predominantly Native American (Red Lake). The Council facilitated three focus groups with Hmong and Lao high school students as part of data gathering for the MDE Dropout Initiative's 'listening project.' The following report is based on the ideas and experiences of Asian Pacific Islander students and reflects our efforts to incorporate their voices into policies that will address their issues and make a real difference in their lives.

### Why focus on dropout prevention: Minnesota Department of Education

The Minnesota Department has adopted the following case statements as to why the department has chosen to put energy and resources into dropout prevention:

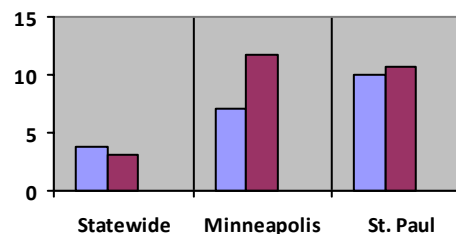
- Millions of students leave school before high school graduation
- Members of some demographic groups are at much higher risk of dropping out of school
- When young people dropout of school they – and American society at large – face multiple negative consequences
- In Minnesota the statewide graduation rate for 2004-2005 was 86.63 percent. This statistic approaches 90% but it masks the disparities between various populations of students. Percentages of students who graduate from school in four years are much lower for American Indian, Black and Hispanic students, as well as students of poverty, students with disabilities (especially students with emotional/behavioral disorders) and those who are English language learners

Source: 2006 American Youth Policy Forum

### Dropout prevention programming and initiatives are needed to help Asian Pacific Islander students stay in and finish high school

	<u>Dropout Rates</u>		
	MN	Minneapolis	St. Paul
API	3.8	7	10
All	3.2	11.7	10.6

Asian Pacific Islander students as a group are staying in school and finishing school at about the same rate as the statewide number. Even in





Minneapolis and St. Paul, the two cities with the largest enrollment of API students, the rates are even as in St. Paul or slightly better as in Minneapolis. Thus, at first glance educators and policymakers might be tempted to look at API students and say that they are doing well as evidenced by the statement above by the Department of Education. This perception is wrong and it hurts API students, their families, and community.

The impact of these statistics are real and they are not acceptable. For example, the St. Paul School District has the highest enrollment of Hmong students in the nation and they are roughly 90% of the API students. (SPPS estimate). In 2005, the district's API dropout rate was 10% vs. 10.6% for the district-wide dropout rate. Even if the API number is good for St. Paul when compared to the statewide rate of 3.2% - the dropout rate for API students is three times higher and is unacceptable. When compared to the rate for white students in the district (7%), the API rate is lacking and needs improvement.

The dropout rate means real children. In St. Paul, on average API students make up about 30% of the 41,000 students enrolled in the district. With a 10% dropout rate, 1,230 API students out of 12,300 students are slated to not graduate from high school. If API students were on par with the statewide rate, more than 820 students would not be headed for or be at great risk to dropping out. Most of these students would be Hmong students, thus, as an ethnic group, the Hmong students would be more impacted by the high dropout rate of the district.

In Minneapolis for the 2004 school year, API students made up 13% of the total enrollment. The API dropout rate was 7% vs. 12% for the district. This percentage equates to about 400 API students dropping out over time if no prevention initiatives are in place to help them stay in school and graduate. The API dropout rate for Minneapolis is twice that of the statewide dropout rate.

Asian Pacific Islander students are doing well in school. They are graduating, but some of them are dropping out. The challenge is to look beyond the numbers and understand why the numbers exist; to find out who these students are; and to find ways in which to help them succeed in school. Additionally, data from other sources need to be looked at and compared with each other to obtain a fuller picture.

The Asian Pacific Islander community is diverse and complex. Their time in and journey to the United States vary. Some students in schools today may be 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> generation Asian Americans speaking only English in the home. Some students may be first generation having just recently arrived in the United States as refugees from ravaged countries like the Karen from Burma, Tibetans from China, and Hmong from Laos. These children would most likely not have had any formal education and or speak English in the home.

The educational needs and challenges of these varying students are huge, but not insurmountable. The school districts have made great efforts to help educate these students, but more can be done.

## Part II: Home and School

The students in the focus groups identified a range of different factors causing a student to dropout. These fell into two broad categories – factors outside the school such as home, family, parents and cultural environment; and factors within the school experience itself. In each of these areas there are multiple reasons that could impact dropouts.



### A) Factors outside the school: home, family, and cultural environment

- Discouragement in the family- parents don't know how to support achievement
- Negative home conditions – abuse and neglect
- Problems Among females experience in early cultural marriages
  - Jealous and controlling husbands
  - Husbands who do not allow their wives to stay in school
- Teen parents – the need and care of children takes precedence over schooling
- Financial pressure - some kids have to work part time to help support the family
- Cultural expectations and gender roles
- Hanging out with the wrong crowd of friends – drugs, drinking and theft

### Conflicts in the Home that Negatively Impacts Drop-out

Students spoke about three types of home conflicts that if unresolved have a high impact on whether they dropout of school: 1) conflicts between a student and siblings; 2) conflicts between a student and his or her parents; and 3) conflicts between teen wives and unsupportive or jealous husbands.

‘At home, I had a lot of family problems that were not solvable. I had many fights with my mother and brother.’ (Shelly, now living away from home)

‘My mother and I are like brick walls going at each other. It's either she breaks or I break and usually I do because I am younger and the daughter.’

‘I was abused as a child and grew up around cousins that were involved with drugs. At 13, I got involved in jacking cars and then drinking and drugs.’

Family expectations about roles play a part in the process. Students said some parents motivate their kids but others give up. Some parents encourage their children to keep their grades up but some are very discouraging. One student said parent expectations can be too high. Some said support in the home is often lacking.



Members of the Chinese American Association Dance Theater and their dragon participate in the Minneapolis Mosaic with Mayor R.T. Rybeck

America's Chinese community is keen to retain its distinct cultural identity - and even second generation immigrants try to remain true to their Chinese roots.

-Asian American Federation  
Census Information Center

Likewise many other Asian American and Pacific Islander parents state that they value their children learning and retaining the language, culture, and traditions of their cultural/ethnic heritages.

The need to help their family struggling with finances can pressure some kids to dropout. They work so that the money they bring home can make a contribution to the family and to help the family stay out of poverty, have a home, a phone and possibly a computer.

### Cultural factors and parent education

The students in the focus groups suggested that more needs to be done to address the gap between home and schools through parent education. In the context of an increasing ethnically, and culturally diverse population, the schools cannot assume that all families understand the need to complete twelve years of schooling. In much of the third world formal education did not exist or was of limited duration and scope. Some of the newcomer Hmong families were not exposed to much formal education in Laos or in the refugee camps in Thailand. Some of the families are deeply entrenched in traditional ways of life and values. The above discussion about parents and early marriage suggest that cultural factors can affect whether a teenager completes high school.

A student shared that there are a lot of cultural expectations required of her because she is the oldest daughter in her family. It is common and expected that Hmong girls take care of the domestic chores around the house and child caring before homework can be done. Girls reported that often times they could not get to their homework until 9:00 or 10:00 pm. At which point, they are tired and can not focus much on their homework.

*“I don’t like doing chores because I don’t think it is my responsibility to be doing all that. I think it’s the parents.”* (Sia, Check and Connect Program)

At Patrick Henry High School (PHHS), the Hmong girls felt that early marriages may have caused some girls to dropout years ago but the group felt that this was changing. When asked what they themselves see as a desirable age to get married, they said a suitable marriageable age now is after college, 25 not 15.

*“My husband was not very supportive of my education. He thought that if I was educated I would leave him. So he would always find something for me to do at home and he would not let me learn how to drive. This fear is shared among Hmong men in the Hmong community.”* (Pachu, a young Hmong wife)

### **Unsafe neighborhoods**

Lastly, safety issues play a part. The neighborhood around North High is not seen as safe to walk through and this often prohibits them from after-school enrichment or learning opportunities.

*“I walk to and from school. It is not safe to walk home alone late in the evening and I do not have a car or school transportation. So I would rather go home than stay after school.”* (Hmong female)

## **B) Factors within the schools related to dropping out**

### **Reasons for Dropping Out**

Students in all three groups, newcomers, high risk youth, and college bound student leaders were critical of their schools. Students often said school or classes were boring meaning they were not relevant to their lives or they couldn’t figure how it applied to their lives.

*‘Learning should be more fun. More games, more activities to involve us.’* (Hmong male, PHHS)

*‘Make classes more fun. They are too boring. Make parts of the day, or a complete day’ less structured.’* (North High)

*‘School needs to offer more fun activities.’* (Hmong male, North High School)

*‘Schools are boring – schools could be more fun.’* (Hmong male, PHHS)

The common themes expressed across all three focus groups were:

- The placement of newcomers above their academic ability
- Teachers who are not enthusiastic, exciting or culturally competent or caring
- Schools linguistically limited in their communication
- Lack of opportunities to socialize or obtain peer support
- Boring classes
- Some science teachers are harsh on students

### **Increase student involvement:**

*Make schools more fun. Let the students teach some of the time. Turn it around so they get to ask the questions, write questions for the teachers to answer.* (PHHS)

The students expressed a strong sense of dissatisfaction with their education. Most agreed that schools should find ways to involve students in improving their education and the education of their peers who are struggling. Even the students who are doing well and are not at risk for dropping out expressed heart felt criticisms about their educational experience along with suggestions on how to improve it. There is a high level of focus on academic standards and testing, but listening to the students, one senses a backlash against this.

**Language barriers**

Teachers need more training in *cultural sensitivity to newcomer students*. There needs to be more teaching of subjects like science, by fluent Hmong teachers teaching the curriculum in Hmong, to newcomer students with limited English ability.

Youth had a great awareness of the problems and a strong willingness to tackle the problems at a peer group level. They were enthusiastic and willing to help the ones who are struggling. Some opportunities do exist outside the schools in the nearby Hmong agencies with youth programs such as Southeast Asian Community Council (SEACC), Asian Media Access (AMA) and Hmong Mutual Assistance Association (HAMAA) where second generation Hmong students do provide after school tutoring to Hmong newcomers on math homework. However fewer opportunities like this exist within the schools themselves. Students spoke about a need to socialize. As one student summed up the discussion ‘communication’ is a key theme at many levels, teacher to student, student to student, parent to youth and schools with parents.



**Limited English Proficiency**

Ranked highest to lowest  
Census 2000

Vietnamese	61%
Hmong	59%
Lao	54%
Cambodian	53%
Chinese	42%
Korean	20%
Japanese	19%
Asian Indian	17%
Filipino	15%

Asian Americans have the highest limited English proficiency (LEP) rates in the metro area.

More than 1 in 3 Asian American children age 17 and under are considered LEP.

A majority of Hmong children (53%) are LEP and a third of Lao and Vietnamese children are LEP.

### ***Failing grades: kids who give up on themselves***

Some students placed the blame partly on the students themselves – students who slack off, kids who don't see the importance of education, laziness, a girl too lazy to get up, students with no motivation.

### **Reasons students gave for staying in school**

Students gave creative answers as to why despite challenges they stayed in school.

*Many of my family did not progress here in America because they did not have education or English skills. I want to progress. (Hmong male)*

*It gets you out of the house. Otherwise I would be home cooking, doing chores. (Hmong female)*

*It gives me an opportunity for a better life. (Hmong male)*

*School lets me follow my interests in science, academic subjects. (Hmong male)*

*Good teachers! (Hmong male)*

*Opportunities here as a freshman. I see school not as four long years of high school but four years of opportunities. (Hmong female)*

*I see school as the ticket out. (Asian club member)*

### **Reasons students gave for returning to school**

Many of the high school student including the teen age mothers and at risk students in the Check and Connect programs said that their future economic well being and self sufficiency is related to completing their education.

*If I get a job I can support my son. (Sia, Check and Connect program)*

Shelly, a participant in the Check and Connect Program, is a Hmong female who has faced enormous challenges, yet has turned her life around. She now realizes that she must stay in school in order to support herself in the future. She weighs the long term benefits for staying in school and views school as a step towards a larger goal. However, returning to school still brings its own set of challenges. It is hard to catch up.

The school helps teen parents by providing day care and by having a single mom parenting class. One student suggested night school classes as an alternative to help students get caught up. Another suggested connecting at risk kids and single mothers in schools to programs in agencies such as the Bridge. However, not all the students seemed to know about the resources available to help them stay in school. Students did not seem to know much about tutorials or state what help they were using.

## Part III: Emotional Support and Newcomers

In addition to the responses to the five questions on the template, several categories emerged that are important either for organizing the data, or for the new light they shed on dropout prevention. Two of the categories - factors outside the school and factors within the school - were used to organize the data in part one. But there were two more categories that cut across the discussions on home and school, the need for **emotional support** and needs of **non-English speaking newcomers**.

### A) Emotional Support

Students stated over and over again the need for emotional support is as important as offering academic support. Both are needed to help students stay in school. Emotional support is needed and especially important to help students who are attempting to return to school be successful. Throughout the focus groups students shared their struggles with emotional problems. Depression was cited as a reason kids dropped out. Kids can be depressed over relationships; kids who can't get dates; kids who feel they are big and ugly. Some students were dealing with high levels of frustration about lack of support at home. Yet there was a lack of comments about counselors or social workers as a source of emotional support.

*Facilitator: No one has mentioned counselors.*

*Group response: They barely exist.*

Due to budget cuts, the few remaining psychologists and social workers are stretched thin and shared between many schools. They only deal with the most severe of cases.

Shelly, a single teenage parent, talked about her anger management issues and how it affects her school performance:

*“When I get mad, man, I stay mad for like a week. So I don't want to go to school.” She added, “I don't think the department of education can help, because this is a psychological thing. The same goes for the schools. Because they educate. They can't help us because we have psychological problems.”*

However, there is hope for this dropout student because she took initiative and got help to deal with and handle her anger:

*Now I am trying to come to school and do a good job. My motivation is to finish school to get independent of my family and my abusive mother.” (Shelly)*

She described the challenges she faces. *“When I come back, I have missed tests. I am behind. Now I stay in school till 7 or 8 p.m. to catch up and get work done.”* She also spoke of the support she gets from a mentor called Sarah at the school.

➤ **Abusive marriages, family and child care**

Students talked frequently and openly about abusive marriages – teenagers mostly Hmong who are often culturally, but not legally married. A female student shared her story. She was married young and by the time of the focus group, she had left an abusive marriage where she was physically and mentally abused. She said this allowed her to go back to school because she was free from an abusive husband who was no longer controlling her. She is on her own and on public assistance which allows her to be financially independent and to have time and space to attend school.

Students stated that it seemed like there are no parents around to help some of the students. Hmong students noted that within their culture where extended family members played a significant part in family life and decisions, extended family members often did not provide help or assistance with their education.

Other challenges are a lack of child care and support. One student has a son who was born prematurely. As a result, this child easily becomes sick. When this happens, the mother is sent home because the day care will not care for a sick child. The husband will not help her look after the child when needed. One newcomer student who is married with children, fears that her social assistance will be taken away from her when she turns 21. She feels it will take much longer for her to finish high school because of the extra time she needs to learn the English language and other course material.

➤ **Teen parents need emotional support**

The school provides parenting classes to help educate young mothers in proper parenting skills. North High School provides day care for the children of their students during the day enabling students to be enrolled. While these services are good the students noted that they are also in need of emotional support as teen parents and students. One student suggested a support group to help single mothers resolve conflicts with school, work, and parenting. Some of these programs are occurring in the schools, but they happen after schools and many of them are not free to stay after school to access these programs.

*5% of 15 – 19 years old Hmong female identified themselves as married vs. .2% of the Minnesota population*

➤ Census 2000

In traditional Hmong society, young women often marry in their adolescent years. In 1990, 54% of teen mothers in Ramsey County reported having been married. In 2000, the percentage dropped to 38.4%.

➤ MOAPP

*Adolescent Sexual Health in the Hmong Population*

Ramsey County Teen Birth Rates by Race/Ethnicity 2000 (15 – 19 years old)

Hmong	116.6
African American	75.8
Hispanic/Latino	87.2
White	26.2



They have other priorities such as helping the family – preparing dinner and other household chores, caring for their child, and work. They also cited lack of transportation as a problem. When transportation is not provided students must walk or find their own transportation home. Given the crime in neighborhoods around North High, the students fear for their safety on the streets. Students preferred that these programs be offered during the school day. But they also know the demands of school schedule and suggested an alternative option, which would develop or encourage a system of one to one tutoring, between students who live in the same neighborhood blocks. Thus, if they needed extra time for help and assistance after school, they could walk each other home.

### **Support for students through the *Check and Connect Program***

In the absence of psychological counseling and social workers, current sources of emotional support are teachers, parents, case managers in outside agencies, and other peers. A good source of help students have come to trust is the *Check and Connect Program*. It's a system that tracks and checks in on high dropout risk students when they miss classes or are not in school.

*I don't feel the school did anything much in terms of encouragement or social support except for programs like Check and Connect. (Hmong female, Check and Connect participant)*

### **Other Sources of Support**

A student who had dropped out and was now back in school spoke favorably about the emotional support she received at the Bridge, a shelter for youth. She said we should connect programs at the Bridge with the school especially for single mothers so that they are connected and get help.

*Communication is the key idea. Reach out to kids who are isolated, kids who are scared to talk.*

As will be described in section three, the Asian clubs are another important resource for emotional support. Asian clubs provide students positive peer support. They are setting the tone for success by showing a strong determination to compete their schooling. There was an understanding of what they were dealing with at home and signs of how they were developing a healthy resistance to negative parental pressures.

### **B) Newcomers**

There was grave concern expressed in the focus groups about the challenges faced by the newcomers who are comprised of mostly refugees from Laos and Burma. Dropping out has already occurred among students in the last wave of Hmong refugees from Thailand, students who have been in the United States less than five years. Often times, these students have witnessed death and violence, loss of home and shelter, and experienced starvation. Their stay at refugee camps may have been short-term or like the Hmong long periods of time, some even their entire lives. Education was not a priority; some refugee camps did not have schools. Most families were focused on day to day survival.

➤ *Teen mothers are at Great Risk to Dropout*

A set of newcomers who are at the greatest risk to not do well academically are teenaged mothers. The struggle to balance family and school life in addition to all the cultural and gender pressures and expectations, as discussed previously, often times overwhelm them.

“I have three children, a husband, and mother in law and father in law to take care of at home. I do not have time to attend after school programs.” (Hmong female newcomer)

This student strives to stay in school and sees school as a priority in getting a better life, but she is realistic about the non-academic demands on her time and energy.

➤ *Problems with the placement of newcomers into mainstream classes*

Newcomer students are eager to learn and to take advantage of the educational opportunity that is now finally available to them. They want to take challenging and mainstream classes, but sometimes they are being placed in classes that are well above their academic and English language abilities – where they struggle, can’t find support and help. This is challenging and frustrating to the newcomer students because they are being forced to learn at the same pace as their advanced English speaking peers.



camp. The school was not supported by the government. Volunteer teachers taught students using their own curriculum and donated materials that were often times outdated.

They face inappropriate placement in science classes that are frequently above their ability level. They express frustrations about some of the chemistry teachers.

*‘Newcomers don’t come prepared. They are placed in classes that are too challenging. They get frustrated.’*

*The new students are frustrated when they don’t understand the teachers or the subject matter.*

There were repeated criticisms about science teachers who were 1) frustrated with the level of the newcomers’ preparation for class and 2) outwardly and shamelessly rude to newcomer students. There were criticisms of teachers who have no understanding of why these students didn’t have the prerequisite knowledge for chemistry. They said teachers made disparaging comments like, ‘Why don’t you know this basic stuff!’

*‘How do you help them prepare for classes in chemistry and physics?’*

*‘It’s hard to understand chemistry if you are an ELL student.’*

*‘Do not try to teach science to newcomers in classes taught only in English.’*

Students questioned why the newcomers with limited English were mainstreamed into science classes without first be given instruction in prerequisites or without being offered tutors that could help in meaningful ways. Students opined that these classes should be in Hmong and taught by Hmong speaking teachers.

The second generation Hmong students want to help the Hmong newcomers. But some of them now do not speak Hmong so communication is an issue. Additionally, some of the second generation Hmong students’ do not share the same cultural norms and traditions as the newcomers do so there are cultural gaps that need to be closed. Students acknowledged that there are some tensions between second generation students being “too Americanized” and the newcomers as “too traditional,” but the care and concern they have for each other are genuine and should be tapped into. Second generation students and their families have found ways in which to be successful in schools. These lessons should be shared with newcomer students when possible.

➤ **Language Barriers: The Need for Interpreters and Instruction in Hmong**

Students who are newcomers to this country stated that they need more support to help them learn the English language. They desire to catch up with their English speaking peers, understand the material, and do well in school. They suggested that perhaps an option would be to bring in more interpreters or hire Hmong teachers to teach these students apart from the mainstream. Minneapolis does have interpreters in the classroom depending on the need and number of students.

*Why is a student placed in a class where they don’t understand what the teacher is teaching?*

Students shared that Hmong students have been leaving the Minneapolis school district in favor of charter schools that cater to Hmong students, language, and culture. They and their parents believe that the students will do better at the charter schools. The students stated that they still believe in public school, but the schools can and should do more to help students. They also felt the public schools had more resources for students.

*‘Promote the message that these students are entitled to be helped and entitled to graduate.’*

## Part IV: Asian Clubs: Peer Support & Safe Place

In the course of conducting the focus groups, students kept on referring back to the Asian clubs as a source of help, support, peer networking, social encouragement, source of information and inspiration. By their words and actions students demonstrated that the Asian Clubs were a very powerful positive resource operating within the schools. The Asian clubs themselves seemed to be helping the students stay in school. The dynamics among the students in the Asian clubs seemed play an important part in the solution. While listening to their peers and hearing from them about their problems they were also learning from them and experiencing the powerful effects of peers supporting peers.



An Asian club and their advisor visits the State Capitol for Asian Pacific American Day.

Asian clubs are school sponsored extra-curricular activity options available to students. The clubs have a teacher advisor and a board of officers made up of students. The clubs do not receive funding from the schools, but are allowed to raise funds to support their activities. On average, Asian clubs raise and spend annually \$3,000 to \$4,000 per club. The clubs are free to use the school to host meetings and activities which are open to any interested student. A particular club's activities or focus depends on the priorities and needs of the students within the school in which it is organized. Activities include – dances, socials, tutoring, educating others about cultural issues via an Asian week and or coordinating college visits. As one Asian club president stated, *“The kids get more interested in school when they have these after school activities.”*

Students articulated the many benefits of the clubs:

- Peer Mentoring – a place to talk to others and share similar challenges and strategies to overcome them
- Peer Support - a source of encouragement to counter a lack of parental support and encouragement
- A Safe Place – to just be yourself, get acceptance & ask questions
- Emotional Support
- Peer Education around life skills for college, homework, teachers, work
- Leadership Development – fundraising skills and program development

## Part V: Recommendations & Conclusions

This report seeks to give voice to the students and their circumstances. The recommendations are a reflection of their ideas, struggle, hope, and interests. From the focus groups it was very clear students see the need to stay in school, do well, and graduate. They understand that their futures are dependent on a good education. Yet there are many barriers and challenges that prevent them from achieving this goal. As a group, Asian Pacific Islander (API) students are doing well when compared with their counterparts and peers. But when they are looked at district by district and ethnic group by ethnic group there is cause for concerns. There is a serious and real risk that should no prevention plan be put in place to target and work with API students, we could see an increase in their dropout rate.

### 1. Students' Voices must be Incorporated into Dropout Prevention Efforts

As the students themselves stated, dropping out is the end result of many contributing factors. Chief among them are academic failure and the lack of emotional and social support from both the school and families. Students are resilient, smart, and resourceful and from the Council's work with them, it has become clear to us that we must tap into their resourcefulness and work with them to develop and implement strategies to address the various problems that lead up to students dropping out of school. The good news is that students are willing to play a part in tackling this issue. The question is are we as adults, educators, administrators, and system people ready to listen and work with them.

#### Student Recommendations



##### **A. Media and Educational Resources need to be in the hands of students**

- Develop videos and visual aids that includes drop-outs telling their stories; target newcomers and parents who do not read or understand English
- Develop peer to peer resource materials with student input and provide opportunities for students to deliver the messages to other students

##### **B. Asian Clubs & Peer Mentoring**

- Leverage and utilize the power of the Asian clubs in prevention work
- Utilize Asian club members as peer mentors for at risk students and newcomers

##### **C. Emotional support**

- Counseling services need to be adequately staffed to serve students
- Early identification system and on-going counseling services need to be in place to provide assistance to at risk students especially teen mothers
- All support needs to be culturally sensitive and culturally competent

##### **D. Inclusiveness**

- Schools must find ways to include the student voice in decision making

- Teachers and staff must be trained and knowledgeable of the needs and backgrounds of their students and adjust their pedagogy accordingly
- A structure for reward and accountability needs to be in place for teachers and staff so as to enforce inclusiveness goals

#### **E. Newcomers**

- Identify and address the special needs of non English speaking newcomers
- Proper screening and promotion plans need to be developed to help newcomers succeed in the schools
- Interpreter services need to be readily available
- Special assistance classes that are usually offered after-school should be held during the school day so as to allow all students to attend

#### **F. Parent education**

- Newcomer parents need more information on the education system in the US and of the things they can do to help and assist their children in learning
- Parents need to buy into the educational system and understand its value – it’s a long term investment and they must stay with their students

## **2. Craft a Dropout Prevention Plan Specific to the Needs and Circumstances of Asian Pacific Islander Students**

A dropout prevention plan specific to the needs and circumstances of Asian Pacific Islander students needs to be developed and implemented. Currently, there are programs available like the *Check and Connect* program, but these programs do not cater to the cultural needs or demands of API students. A clear example is teen-aged mothers and wives. None of the Asian Pacific Islander based community non-profits have programs solely dedicated to drop-out prevention. This issue needs to stand alone and be dealt with directly and not in tangent with other issues like teen-age pregnancy prevention or youth gang violence prevention. Currently, the issues are merged and accountability and successes are harder to measure.

The Council will continue to engage in the shaping of policy through its ongoing partnership with the Minnesota Department of Education Dropout Prevention Initiative. This partnership brings us into contact with educators from St Paul, Richfield, and Brooklyn Center, three school districts with large populations of API students.

## **3. Dropout Prevention, Graduation Rate and Achievement Disparity Plans and Efforts Must be an Integrated and Comprehensive Effort**

The state, county, and local governments as well as school districts are all engaged in their own plans to make sure that students achieve and graduate from high school. The federal government also has its own mandates on accountability and student performance. Proponents of these efforts believe that people with a high school education contribute more to society. “Better educated kids are less likely to commit crimes, clog the welfare system and adopt poor health habits.” [Minnesota Dropout Debate is a Numbers Game, StarTribune, April 1, 2008].

The current trend is to focus on closing the “achievement gap” which refers to the academic disparity that exist between white students and students from other racial and or ethnic groups. One example is the 2008 legislative session working on a bill that would require all districts to develop plans to address and eliminate the achievement gap that exist for their students. A second example is Hennepin County Resolution # 06-10-580 (passed 10/24/06) known as the A Grad Initiative or accelerating graduation by reducing achievement disparities. Their research indicates that an investment in high quality preschool experience for at risk children prepares them to be successful in school and yields a 16% annual rate of return to the children and to the society.

Other trends have been to increase the graduation rate and early childhood education efforts and school preparedness programs. All these efforts are focused on getting kids as educated as possible, but they are often stand alone efforts. They do not work together to complement and support each other, so they are not as effective as they can and should be. Thus, focusing on dropout prevention alone does not resolve the discrepancy that exist between the dropout rate and the graduation rate.

#### **4. Dropout rates need to be understood and analyzed with other available data so as to paint a fuller picture of the needs of the API student**

Dropout rates alone do not tell the story of the challenges, failures, and successes of the Asian Pacific Islander (API) student. With regard to the achievement gap and the graduation rate, the API student consistently lags behind his or her white counterpart.

These differences, in turn, contribute to a smaller share of minority adults with a high school degree. More than 90 percent of the adults in the Twin Cities have a high school degree—the highest rate in the nation. However, fewer than half of Hmong adults have a high school education, and only 57 percent of Mexican adults do. In fact, the Twin Cities ranks 40th among the nation’s largest metro areas in Latino high school educational attainment, a poor showing for a region that at leads the nation overall.

Source: *Mind the Gap*, Brookings Institute

The ramification of these factors reach beyond high school into college and into the type of job and pay rate a person will earn over his or her lifetime. According to Census 2000, 25% of Minnesotans have a bachelors degree or higher compared to only 19 percent of African Americans, 11 percent of Mexicans, 15 percent of Pacific Islanders, 20 percent of Asians. When the API number is broken down into ethnic groups, Pakistanis have the highest percentage at 41 while the Hmong rank the lowest at 5 percent. Educational attainment levels have a direct bearing on earning potential.

What these numbers mean for each of the communities and their impact will have to be looked at more closely. One set of solutions do not work for everyone impacted. The challenge for us as a society is to understand the sum of the parts and to make and invest in the adjustments that are needed to ensure that all of our children do well.

# Appendix

## **A note on the focus groups:**

The three focus groups were with 45 Hmong and Lao High School students in North Minneapolis. Two of the focus groups were held after school with members of the school Asian Clubs at Patrick Henry High School and North Community High School. The third focus group was held during the school day with four Hmong youth who had previously dropped out of school and were now participating in a program for at risk youth at North High School which is part of the Check and Connect Program in the Minneapolis Public Schools.

## **Demographics:**

The two Asian Club focus groups consisted of approximately even numbers of male and female Hmong students. The third focus group had three female dropouts and one male. An important demographic about these students is that there are two distinct sub groups. The Hmong students at Patrick Henry are second generation Hmong American students. They are very fluent in English and most were born here in the US or arrived here during the early 90's as young children. At North High, in addition to second generation Hmong students, about eight of the students were 'newcomers'. They were among the 5,000 more recent Hmong families who came as refugees to Minnesota in 2005, following the closing of the Wat Thamkrabok camp in Thailand. These students still had very limited English skills and had not much prior education in Thailand. In the third focus group, two of the Hmong girls were teen mothers. One had come from a refugee camp at age 17 and had three children.

## **Methodology - focus groups**

The focus groups were structured around five open ended questions developed for the listening groups by the staff at MDE Dropout Prevention Initiative. (See Appendix one.)

The key questions explored were:

1. Background. Have you ever dropped out of school? Circumstances.
2. Reasons for dropping out of school.
3. Reasons for staying in school.
4. Reasons for returning to school.
5. Summary ideas.

The students were not asked for their real names. Names used in the report are pseudonyms. In an effort to hear from every student including the quieter ones and to overcome language barriers, the researchers gave students the opportunity in the focus groups at North High to respond to a sentence completion exercise. Instructions were to complete the sentence "I stay in school because.' They could respond in English or Hmong. This had an unexpected powerful effect on those listening and resulted in a spontaneous expression of support. Some of the students were cheered for their answers.

"I have a dream that in ten years I will be a doctor.' (Hmong male)



“I stay in school to prove my parents wrong.” (Hmong male facing discouragement at home)

“To prove myself to my family.” (Hmong girl, the youngest girl in the family)

“Because I believe in myself.” (Hmong female)

“My parents are struggling. It is to give love back to them.” (Hmong male)

### **Probe questions**

The five key open ended questions worked well. In addition, the facilitator frequently asked probe questions for clarification and this yielded more in depth responses. For example, when a student said ‘conflict’ was a reason for dropping out, he was asked ‘what kind of conflict? He replied ‘Conflict in the home, parents divorcing.’

### **Sentence Completion Exercise:**

The second focus included a large numbers of students needing an interpreter. To help overcome the language barriers, we had students respond briefly to a sentence completion exercise. They could respond in Hmong or English. Students were asked to complete the sentence ‘I stay in school because....’ Here are their responses.

I stay in school because there is nothing to do at home

I stay in school because of education

I stay in school to learn so I can have a better future

I stay in school because I have a lot of dreams to fulfill

I stay in school because I do not like to dropout

I stay in school to help my family

I stay in school because I learn something new

I stay in school because of family and friends

I stay in school because my brother says I better be good

The main theme or idea from this focus group was ‘Make schools more fun.’

The focus groups themselves were an example of how the schools could provide more ways for kids to talk, debate, socialize, and just hang out with each other in less structured ways. We saw the positive effects of a peer group operating among the members of the Asian clubs. They provide an opportunity for leadership to emerge that is conducive to academic success in school.

We asked students what was more important – family, peers or school. Did they think family was more important than peer pressure or did they think it varies with individual students? The students said that all three are important in their own way. Given that all three play a role, we need to construct a comprehensive prevention initiative that positively includes the family, school and peers. All three affect school performance.



## *The Council on Asian-Pacific Minnesotans*

### *Our Mission*

*The mission of the Council on Asian-Pacific Minnesotans is to be an advisor to policymakers, advocate for the community, and a builder of bridges*

#### ➤ Goal 1

The Council actively advises policymakers on the issues pertinent to the community and works with them on addressing those issues

#### ➤ Goal 2

The Council zealously advocates for and believes in unleashing the internal strength and power of the community

#### ➤ Goal 3

The Council builds bridges leveraging assets and linking communities for a common good

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## *Hennepin County Asian Pacific Islander Initiative*

### *3 Objectives to Working with and Engaging the Community*

#### **1. Provide Space for Community Voice**

Three symposia will be convened on the issues that the community has identified – education, employment and health. The symposia will be designed to provide community members with information and to obtain input from the community as to their experiences and concerns. After each symposium, a report of the issue and the findings and community recommendations will be released.

#### **2. Develop Visible and Active Leadership**

A Leadership Council (LC) reflective of and supported by the Asian American and Pacific Islander community in Hennepin County will be created. The LC will help to craft and lead this initiative. The LC will also incorporate a leadership development program in which members will meet monthly for leadership training: samples of training topics are 1) effective public speaking; 2) strengthening advocacy skills; 3) community organizing; and 6) being a part of an effective collaborative.

#### **3. Better Communication and Service to the Community**

Hennepin County has a vested interest in reaching out to the community and to obtaining input and feedback from them about the issues that impact their lives. The symposia and Leadership Council will create a space and place for dialogue and communication to occur between the community and Hennepin County that will produce meaningful results, follow-up, and accountability.