# ONE CLASSROOM, MANY NATIONS;

# AS THE CHILDREN OF IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD ENTER SCHOOLS HERE IN RISING NUMBERS, THE COST OF HELPING THEM LEARN ENGLISH IS INCREASING BY ABOUT $1 MILLION A YEAR IN MINNEAPOLIS AND IN ST. PAUL SCHOOLS.IN ST. PAUL, NEARLY ONE STUDENT IN FOUR IS ENROLLED IN A LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY PROGRAM. THAT'S A TOTAL OF 9,465 STUDENTS, AND THE DISTRICT SAYS SEVERAL THOUSAND MORE COULD USE HELP.

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## Body

They come from places most Minnesotans would have to scramble to find on a map: Ethiopia, Slovakia, Ukraine, Liberia, Laos.

They are speaking languages most Minnesotans have never heard of: Mende, Nuer, Tigrinya, Tiv, Oromo, Amharic, Shon.

They are here because of a push and a pull - wars or poverty in their homelands versus the warm Minnesota economy that compensates for bone-chilling cold.

And they are a growing challenge to Minnesota's **schools**.

As the **children** of **immigrants** and **refugees** from **all over** the **world** **enter** **schools** here in **rising** **numbers**, the **cost** of **helping** them **learn** **English** is **increasing** by **about** $**1** **million** a **year** in **Minneapolis** and in **St.** **Paul** **schools**.

Though they were tiny 10 **years** ago, **programs** for **students** speaking **limited** **English** have mushroomed in the two cities. In **St.** **Paul**, for example, **nearly** **one** **student** **in four** is **enrolled** in a **Limited English Proficiency** (LEP) **program** because he or she speaks **one** of the hundred or so non-**English** languages and dialects present in the city's **schools**. **That's** a **total** of **9,465** **students**, and the **district** **says** **several** **thousand** **more** could **use** **help**.

The demand has been growing in the suburbs as well, partly because **many** former **refugees** are moving out of the central cities.

And yet, neither in the Twin Cities nor elsewhere in the country are there effective measures of how well those **programs** have worked. **District**-to-**district** and state-to-state, **schools** are inconsistent in such matters as deciding who ought to be in a special **program** and when **students** are ready to leave.

The array of languages ***schools*** have to deal with is growing, and teacher training has not caught up with the demand.

Consider ***St. Paul*** teacher Claudia Nelson and her 16-pupil class of non-***English*** speakers, including Mexicans, Russians, a Ukrainian, an Eritrean, a Kurd, a Vietnamese and a Hmong.

Each Tuesday, she prepares a different homework packet for each of them because of their varied skill levels.

"And when they are ready to go into another reading or math group, I have to create another group for them," she ***said***. "It gets real interesting."

Remedial vs. enrichment

As the ***numbers*** of kids ***increase***, the bill is going up. In the 1991-92 ***school year***, Minnesota ***schools*** spent $15.8 ***million*** on ***programs*** for ***students*** with ***limited English***. Four ***years*** later, the ***number*** had ***nearly*** doubled to $28.6 ***million***.

***St. Paul*** this ***year*** supplemented the state money with ***more*** than $4 ***million*** from its general fund, spending a ***total*** of ***nearly*** $10 ***million***, mainly to hire 237 teachers and educational assistants.

At the same time, urban superintendents like ***St. Paul***'s Curman Gaines see themselves blamed for low test scores that, in part, are a result of the high proportion of ***students*** with ***limited English***.

Gaines likens it to a track race:

"In a 440-yard race, for example, the runners are staggered to account for the widening of the curve of the track. But in test scores locally or at the state or national level we expect everyone to start and end at the same place."

What ***St. Paul*** spends out of its general fund is roughly equal to the ***cost*** of maintaining all the current ***classrooms*** for the city's kindergartens, for example.

The strain of a greater need for remedial classes at the expense of enrichment ***programs*** last ***year*** finally caused the ***St. Paul school district***, which has the largest ***number*** of non-***English*** speaking ***students*** in the state, to file a lawsuit against the state.

"There is not enough of a tax base in ***St. Paul*** to support the needs of the ***students*** we have here," Gaines ***said***.

Privately, he ***said***, state lawmakers agree. But a political reality is that ***immigrants*** and ***refugees*** don't vote in large ***numbers***, Gaines ***said***. ***That's*** why the ***district*** forced the issue with a lawsuit.

"It hasn't been politically correct to raise these issues before," he ***said***.

The ***St. Paul schools*** officials haven't ***said*** how much money will satisfy them. But they have indicated that the ***increases*** the Legislature has included in its new education bill - while welcome - are not enough.

Existing state funding provides ***about*** half the money for ***limited***-***English programs*** based on a class size of 40 ***students*** to ***one*** teacher. Gaines and other local ***school*** officials had hoped the Legislature would allocate enough money to get the ***student***-teacher ratios down to 25 to ***1***.

That would have allowed ***St. Paul*** to ***increase*** its work force by 142 teachers and educational assistants.

State officials point out that ***St. Paul*** already gets extra money for low-income and LEP ***students*** - up to $***1***,200 ***more*** per ***student*** on average for that combination.

But figures compiled by the Department of ***Children***, Families and ***Learning*** show that in constant dollars, state spending per pupil has dropped. In 1995 dollars, the state provided ***schools*** with $***1***,329 per LEP ***student*** in the 1986-87 ***school year***. By the 1995-96 ***school year***, that figure was $***1***,158.

The education bill passed Monday gives significantly ***more*** money to ***districts*** with the highest concentrations of LEP ***students***. Gov. Arne Carlson has promised to veto the bill for other reasons, but the LEP provisions are unlikely to be changed when a bill is finally approved.

Those ***districts*** with 11.5 percent or higher concentrations will receive $190 extra per LEP ***student***. In 1999, the state will put the additional LEP money together with special funding for ***students*** who are from low-income families and those who are low achievers for a Basic Skills Revenue block grant. That means ***districts*** won't be required to spend the extra LEP money on LEP ***programs***.

And educators ***say that's*** still not enough to hire the staff to provide the kinds of intensive ***English*** training needed by ***immigrants*** and ***refugees*** who, ***more*** often than not, do not have even the most rudimentary ***English*** skills.

Homecroft Elementary ***School*** teacher Nelson and others ***say*** the ***students*** do not get enough individual attention and therefore flounder.

Nelson recalled ***one school year*** when every ***one*** of her ***students*** was on a different page in the math and reading workbooks. All day she would race from ***one*** to the other.

Even this ***year***, she has pupils preparing to ***enter*** the fourth grade that are not even ready for first grade.

"Even native-born speakers are coming to ***school*** with less language skills," she ***said***. "Some of the ***learning*** experience is totally foreign to these kids, and the teacher has to stop and fill them in."

Moving to the suburbs

A few ***years*** ago, the language issue was largely confined to ***St. Paul*** and ***Minneapolis***. But now, browsing through a grocery store in Apple Valley, a shopper can hear flourishes of Arabic, Hmong, Lao, Spanish, Chinese and Russian.

Economic opportunities in outstate or out-of-state cities like Willmar and Eau Claire also attract ***immigrant*** families willing to start at the bottom and work hard.

Compared to the size of ***St. Paul***'s LEP ***programs***, the 400 ***students*** in the Burnsville-Eagan-Savage ***district*** seem few. But the ***number*** has doubled in the past five ***years*** and become ***more*** diverse as well.

"When I was hired eight ***years*** ago, the majority were Southeast Asian," ***said*** Mary Grzesiak, who teaches LEP in two Burnsville elementary ***schools***.

"Now we really have a wide variety; a growing ***number*** of Russian, we have Hispanic, we have Middle Eastern ***children*** and African. We have them from virtually every continent except Australia and Antarctica."

Part of the surge to the suburbs is from secondary migration - people who already live in the United States and move to Burnsville.

"We have families moving from ***Minneapolis*** and ***St. Paul***. They want to buy a house, get away from the gangs, get to safer environment, ***that's*** what they ***say***," she ***said***. "I would expect a continued growth." For the past couple of ***years***, our kindergarten class has been 5 percent LEP, which is kind of amazing."

Grzesiak has 49 ***students***, 12 of whom have finished the formal LEP ***program*** and whose progress she is monitoring. The ***students*** are in mainstream classes for all but a half-hour a day when she tutors them in small groups. In their classes, they're often the only LEP ***students***.

Just how ***many*** non-***English*** speakers immigrate to the state, where they come from, and where they settle, is difficult to gauge, ***said*** Bounlieng Phommasouvanh, LEP education specialist in the state ***Children***, Families and ***Learning*** Department.

"We have had ***about*** a 10 percent ***increase*** (in non-***English*** speakers) a ***year***," he ***said***.

"Some of the factors (that contribute to immigration) are political situations like in Bosnia, in Somalia and Southeast Asia; the former Soviet Union, South America also. Also, we now have a big ***increase*** in the Spanish-speaking population."

Assessing diverse ***districts***

That diversity makes meaningful statewide assessment of how ***school districts*** are serving non-***English*** speakers difficult.

Here's why:

When war ravages an African ***nation*** such as Somalia, ***one*** result can be dozens or hundreds of ***students*** showing up without warning in a ***district*** where nobody speaks the language. The next ***year***, it might be a conflict somewhere else in the ***world*** that sends a new group of ***students*** into ***St. Paul schools***.

Add to that the widely divergent skill level of foreign-born ***students*** arriving in ***St. Paul***.

On ***one*** end of the scale are ***students*** from strong educational backgrounds who grew up attending good ***schools***. But on the other end are ***students*** who may have been born in ***refugee*** camps, whose native language has only recently been written down, and who have never been to ***school***.

"We are trying to require ***school districts*** that receive our funds to submit an annual report. We ask for test scores, drop-out rate, ***programs*** they participate in," Phommasouvanh ***said***.

Since Minnesota ***school districts*** are not required to administer tests that have been specially developed to measure progress of LEP ***students***, it's no surprise that they don't do well on conventional standardized tests.

***Programs*** for ***students*** with ***limited English*** run a gamut but fall generally into three areas throughout the country:

***Total*** immersion ***programs*** like Nelson's TESOL (Teaching ***English*** to ***Students*** of Other Languages), where pupils in kindergarten through sixth grades are separated out to be taught in groups that ***learn*** to read, write and do arithmetic in ***English***, regardless of their native tongue.

***Students*** who understand basic ***English*** and are mainstreamed into regular ***classrooms***, but are often pulled out to work on their ***English***-language skills for up to an hour a day.

Bilingual work, stemming largely from a Latino Consent Decree where pupils are taught the same material alternately in Spanish and in ***English***.

Homecroft Elementary ***School***, 1845 Sheridan Ave., has something for everyone - including an outreach worker and interpreters for non-***English*** speaking parents.

On ***one*** spring morning, Nelson's TESOL class was going through its paces in a routine that most ***students*** that age take for granted.

As a class, they recited the day month and ***year***, what day would follow as well as the ***number*** of days they had been in class during the ***school year***. They gave a weather report and recited typical dining offerings at the ***school*** as a pupil pointed to pictures of cereal, toast, milk, eggs and bacon. Later she read to them a book called, "Ketchup on Your Cornflakes."

"Would you put pickles on your pizza," she asks, trying to catch those who were only moving their mouths.

"Nooooo!" is the cheery reply from everyone.

Later groups of ***students*** gathered around and wrote down the simple sentences she read them, while an educational assistant worked on the alphabet with a girl who had just arrived from Russia.

Next door, ***students*** who are part of the bilingual kindergarten classes taught by Gloria Rosso and Anne Royalty alternate their ***school*** days by ***learning*** the same material in Spanish and ***English***. The teachers encourage parents reading to their ***children*** - even in Spanish. So they send Spanish books home with their pupils.

"We ***use*** the home language to teach content and the ***students*** then are able to transfer that to ***English***," Rosso ***said***.

Rosso, Nelson and other LEP ***program*** teachers acknowledge that assessing the ***English*** skills of these ***students*** is not an exact science. Rather, it's a matter of observation and experience. That leaves lots of room for error in moving ***student*** out of remedial classes before they are ready or keeping them longer than needed.

The measurement will improve next ***year*** through implementation of a national ***English*** competency assessment ***used*** by other ***districts***, according to Luz Maria Serrano, administrator of ***St. Paul***'s LEP ***programs***.

"We are establishing a three-***year*** evaluation process that will give us a better handle on what they are ***learning***," she ***said***, noting that ***district*** standardized tests will be part of the evaluation process.

There is no question that ***St. Paul***'s ***immigrant students*** depress the ***district***-wide scores on the state's basic skills tests in reading and math. But those ***students*** also have ***risen*** to the top.

In 1992, for example, three of the city's six high ***schools*** had Hmong valedictorians. And the ***St. Paul school district*** boasts dozens of outstanding ***students*** who started in its LEP ***programs***.

***One*** is Fong Thao, an Eagle Scout from Hmong Troop 150 and, at age 20, the top ***student*** at Johnson High ***School***. He is now a graduate of Minnesota's most prestigious ***school***, Carleton College, and just finished ***student***-teaching at Como Park High ***School***.

Anecdotes ***about students*** like Thao abound. But there is no substantial evidence that LEP ***programs*** are generally effective at ***helping*** non-***English*** speakers in public ***schools*** catch up.

Politics taints the quest for that evidence, according to "Improving ***Schooling*** for Language-Minority ***Children***: A Research Agenda," which was issued by the National Research Council in January.

Across the educational spectrum, few educators have cared much ***about*** assessment, let alone accountability. Only in the past few ***years*** has the standards movement in the United States prompted places like Minnesota to attempt to gather even the simplest of comparative data for mainstream ***students*** in such basic areas as math and reading.

But the effort nationally has been spotty, highlighted by controversy and confusion.

The criteria for labeling ***students*** still varies from state to state, and even from ***district*** to ***district***. Researchers have difficulty identifying the "best" ***program*** or even gauging progress, because the population of ***immigrant students*** changes so rapidly, and the "mix" is different in virtually every ***district***.

Likewise, determining when ***students*** no longer need special ***programs*** varies. ***St. Paul schools***, for example, pass ***students*** out of LEP ***programs*** based on teacher observation. In Burnsville-Eagan-Savage ***schools***, ***students*** take a written test.

Another sticking point has been the practice of lumping Asian ***students*** together as a single category. That practice downplays the language difficulties of those from places such as Laos and Cambodia and highlights those from

Chinese and Japanese households, who have tended to do better, ***said*** Wendy Walker-Moffat in her book, "The Other Side of the Asian-American Success Story." So Hmong ***students***, for example, may not qualify for special ***programs*** because their racial category overall scores well.

And, contrary to prevailing practice, another study found that 80 percent of Hispanic parents want their ***children*** to ***learn*** in ***English***, rather than in the bilingual ***programs***.

Although the research thus far is conflicting and confusing, continued studies are expected to ***help*** ***districts*** decide which ***programs*** work best and lead to ***more*** effective ***classroom*** teaching. And politically, the ***increasing*** prevalence of ***limited***-***English*** ***students*** in ***classrooms*** across the state means that ***more*** attention is being drawn to the issue.

## Notes

First of three parts. See related stories; "Teachers who speak ***English*** try to bridge language gap" Page 12A and "Homecroft ***School*** a lab for ***English*** immersion" Page 13A in today's Metro Final. A Web site for ***more*** information ***about*** ***Limited English Proficiency***: The National Center for Bilingual Education is at *http*:: *www.ncbe.gwu.edu*

## Graphic

2 Photos:Dawn Villella, Pioneer Press

***1***. ESL ***students*** Gleb Martynov, 9, and Konstantin Kravchnko, 7,

demonstrate for Guadalupe Medina, 8, and other ***students*** what the word

"cuddle" means during their TESOL (Teaching ***English*** to ***Students*** of

Other Languages) class at Homecroft Elementary ***School*** in ***St.*** ***Paul***. The class, taught by Claudia Nelson, is made up of first-through

third-grade ***immigrants*** representing six languages.
2. Guadalupe Medina, 8, shows her class what the weather is like and

what they will have for ***school*** lunch that day as part of their

calendar lesson at Homecroft Elementary ***School*** in ***St.*** ***Paul***. ***Many***

***students*** in Claudia Nelson's class knew very little ***English*** when they

started ***school***.< Graphic:Pioneer Press Graphic

***Rising*** tide of ***limited***-***English*** ***students***
[See microfilm for details]

## Classification

**Language: *ENGLISH***

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