

2021 NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

Human and Civil Rights Award Winner



Hmong Language and Cultural
Enrichment Program

■ HMONG LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL ENRICHMENT PROGRAM

Pioneering Space Shuttle Challenger astronaut/engineer Ellison S. Onizuka helped inspire Asian Americans to believe their dreams could take flight.

Madison Wisconsin's Hmong Language and Cultural Enrichment Program gives flight to the dreams of diverse Asian communities, powered by education and pride in their identity.

The Madison Metropolitan School District serves children of the Hmong People, comprising Southeast Asian immigrants from Vietnam, Laos, China and Thailand. But disproportionate to their numbers, a staggering 93 percent of these students were not performing at grade level in reading, and 74 percent underperformed in math.

Determined that heritage should not be an impediment to academic excellence, community leaders and educators created the Hmong Language and Cultural Enrichment Program (HLCEP) in 2013, with the goal of incorporating their culture into the learning process.

HLCEP spearheaded a free summer program so that Hmong children could receive training in reading, writing and speaking in their native language. Too often bilingualism is stigmatized as somehow "less American", as opposed to something woven through the fabric of what makes this nation great. HLCEP is dedicated to the notion that a child whose background is uplifted as a source of pride, will be driven to learn and succeed.

HLCEP has transformed into a year-long program, not only tutoring students but engaging with Hmong parents, equipping them with the tools to support and nurture their children's development. HLCEP has worked to educate Hmong parents about advocating for the needs of their child, and therefore contributed greatly to forging a partnership between families and schools of the Madison area. When parents can tell a child to stand up for who they are, it is a powerful catalyst.

The organization deeply values partnership with the community to uplift students and address their diverse needs. HLCEP, engaged with the University of Wisconsin/Madison education majors of Hmong descent to participate in the tutoring program, with the mindset that instruction from cultural peers can help students be the change they seek.

HLCEP received national recognition from the Center for Resilient Cities for being one of only two programs in the United States working to increase students' Hmong language skills and appreciation for their culture.

In memory of the trailblazing space traveler for whom this award is named, the Hmong Learning and Cultural Enrichment Program is teaching on a daily basis that embracing one's culture can help children soar.